



Life in the Fast Lane

Warrant vocalist **Jani Lane** had it all. The talent, the hit records, the adulation. Yet even all this wasn't enough to keep his demons at bay. *Howard Johnson* investigates the troubled life and sad death of an '80s rock legend

Operator: What room number is the patient in?
Receptionist: Room 118.
Operator: Room 118. Are you there?
Receptionist: No, I'm calling from the lobby. I work at the front desk.
Operator: Okay. So what's the problem? Tell me exactly what happened.
Receptionist: Okay. The housekeeping, when they were about to clean the room, they knocked on the room door three times and he didn't open the door. They finally opened it and one of the housekeeping checked the guy, like, "Maybe he'd dead," because, his eyes...
Operator: Do you know about how old, approximately what age the patient is?
Receptionist: Maybe like 50.
Operator: Okay. Male or female?
Receptionist: Male.
Operator: So do you know if they're conscious? You don't know?
Receptionist: No. Because when we opened the door they didn't go closer.
Operator: So you guys don't know what's going on there?
Receptionist: No, because...
Operator: You have a defibrillator?
Receptionist: Uh...
Operator: A shock box for the heart. Do you guys have one?
Receptionist: No.
Operator: Okay. Paramedics are on the way, okay? Just stay on the line, I'll tell you exactly what to do next. Does anybody there know CPR or first aid?
Receptionist: No.
Operator: Is there any way you can transfer me to the room? Is there anyone there that's willing to go into the room and see if we can maybe do CPR? Or do you think the patient has already passed away?
Receptionist: I think he passed away, because when they checked the guy, like, his eyes were open and his mouth, he wasn't breathing.
Operator: Was there an odour? Was he stiff?
Receptionist: The guy? The room? Odour?
Operator: Was there an odour? Did it smell?
Receptionist: No. They didn't, like, really go inside, so housekeeping think he's dead.
Operator: Okay, well, tell you what ma'am, if somebody is willing to go there and go check it out, then give us a call, okay? We're on our way. You don't have to. But if this person needs help, if we need to do CPR, it would be nice to at least know if we can help him. If not, if he's passed away, there's nothing else we can do."

ROOM 118 AT THE Comfort Inn on Ventura Boulevard, Woodland Hills in California looks like any other low-to mid-range hotel room in America. I know, because I've seen inside it. Not that I've ever been there myself. But such is the nature of social media these days, and the general fascination for ghoulishness, that you can

"enjoy" your own whistle stop, iPhone-filmed tour of this nondescript place on *YouTube*. Why the interest? That's easy. Jani Lane, best known as lead singer in American rock band Warrant, died in this very room. At around 5.30pm on Thursday

11 August 2011, 47-year-old Lane was pronounced dead at the scene by Fire Department paramedics. He was found in the room with a half-empty bottle of vodka and prescription medication. But the autopsy that was carried out on the body the day after his death proved inconclusive. Just under two months later, on 7 October, the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office Assistant Chief, Ed Winter, confirmed that toxicology tests showed Lane died as a result of "acute ethanol intoxication." That's the medical way of saying Jani Lane drank himself to death.

THE RESULTS, though clearly tragic, didn't come as a surprise. Lane battled alcohol addiction for years. His sister, Vicky Oswald-Lee, was in no doubt what had killed her brother when she gave an interview to website *Radar Online* the day after his death. "He was a heavy drinker," she said. "Alcoholism isn't something he chose. It's something he fought everyday and it just won." Lane wasn't known as a man with a huge appetite for drugs. As the singer himself once said of his time in Warrant: "I

didn't tolerate any of that. But drink till you puke, pass out, get up and do it again." This ongoing battle with the bottle would appear to explain the bizarre note found on the singer by law enforcement officers at the Comfort Inn. It simply read, "I am Jani Lane" and included a phone number. Lane had not carried formal ID for some time,

the inference being that if he were ever incapacitated by drink, this note might be the best way to alert someone.

OVER TWO years before his death, on 17 June 2009, Lane was taken into custody after hitting a parked car

in the same Woodland Hills area where he would later die. He showed "signs of intoxication" and refused to take a sobriety test. Lane pleaded no contest to the misdemeanour charge of DUI (driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs), but then twice failed to show up in court for appearances to prove to the judge that he had completed alcohol rehabilitation classes and performed community service. A warrant was subsequently issued for Lane's arrest. The singer was taken into custody a second time on 9 May 2010 when the black Infiniti sedan he was driving hit a parked car. On 19 July he again pleaded no contest, and this time was sentenced to 120 days in jail. He also lost his driving licence for three years and was ordered to complete a 30-month alcohol education programme. It was tough sentence. But not even this wake-up call could save Lane from himself.

THE REASONS why people drink are many and varied, of course. But Lane's sister Vicky was convinced that the desire to fight the addiction left him the day his

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Warrant at the height of their fame, 1990

Photo: IconicPix/William Hames

mother Eileen died seven years previously, in 2004. "He would get clean and sober and then fall off the wagon," Vicky explained. "Mom would always talk him into going to rehab and hospitals. I think when she passed that desire to stay healthy died too." Bobbie Brown, one of Lane's three wives and the girl he first charmed after she appeared as a sexy waitress in Warrant's infamous 'Cherry Pie' video back in 1990, isn't so sure of that. "He desperately wanted to be sober," she told website *Legendary Rock Interviews*. "But he constantly doubted himself and was never, ever really aware of just how talented he was. He never believed he was worthy of the adoration he received."

AND WHAT adoration.

History has now claimed that the mid-'80s Sunset Strip hair metal revolution revolved around Guns N'Roses, Poison and Mötley Crüe. But Warrant were every bit as central to the story. Let's not forget that the band's 1989 debut album, 'Dirty Rotten Filthy Stinking Rich', sold over two million copies, while the ballad 'Heaven' rose to Number Two in the US singles charts. The band's follow-up release, 1990's 'Cherry Pie', also went double platinum and the title track spawned one of the most famous videos of the MTV era. What is perhaps less well-known, though, is that it was Lane alone out of the five-piece band who wrote all of Warrant's material. This is highly unusual for a rock group, where guitarists are often the main songwriters. But then again, Jani Lane was no ordinary rock frontman.

LANE WAS born John Kennedy Oswald on 1 February 1964 in Akron, Ohio, a massive 2,368 miles from Los Angeles. His father Robert and mother Eileen were John F. Kennedy fans, but within a month of John's birth had a change of heart and swapped his middle name to Patrick. The youngest of five children, John grew up in Brimfield, to the east of Akron, and started playing drums aged just



Jani and first wife Bobbie Brown attending the 18th Annual American Music Awards at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, 28 January 1991

"I'D WAKE UP IN A HOTEL OR ON THE BUS
SOMEWHERE ONLY TO BE TOLD THAT JANI
HAD GONE AND NO-ONE KNEW WHEN
HE WAS COMING BACK."
ERIK TURNER, WARRANT GUITARIST

six after being encouraged by his brother, Eric, who was 13 years his senior. According to Lane himself, The Beatles' 'Rubber Soul' was the first record that turned him on. Eric, meanwhile, was "an exceptional guitarist," he said, who "thought it would be pretty cool to have a little jamming buddy."

LITTLE JOHN proved to be a natural musician as well, and by the age of 11 he was out in the clubs, performing as a drummer under the name Mitch Dynamite. Soon he was playing professionally on the circuit in his first band, Cyren, at just 15 years old. "When you walked into his room when he was just learning to play acoustic, you felt he'd been playing for a long time," said Oswald's teenage friend and fellow budding rocker Randy Arehart. "He also played piano and he was a most

incredible drummer." But the young John Oswald was an outstanding athlete, too, playing quarterback in American football. He was recruited by the prestigious St. Vincent-St. Mary High School, which superstar basketball player LeBron James went on to attend. John was also keen on musical theatre, taking lead roles in shows like *Oklahoma* and *Arsenic and Old Lace* while in high school. And as if he hadn't been blessed enough, he was also an outstanding scholar, coming

in the top two percent in the country when he took his college entrance exams. With a partial scholarship on the table to study musical theatre at Kent State University in 1982, John's dad was all for his talented boy going to college and getting a degree. The trouble was, John was determined to make a go of it in music and had already made up his mind to move to Florida with his band at the time, Dorian Gray. According to the aspiring musician, the fight with his father got physical and because of the severity of the clash, "I didn't return home once for the next three years."

THOSE THREE years were spent playing drums and providing backing vocals in a Florida covers band

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