

# WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE LADYKILLERS?

In an era when men looked like women, it was still tough for female rockers to make it in a male-dominated world. Paul Suter tracks down five women who featured as *Kerrang!* Ladykillers to discuss Eighties attitudes to girls who wanted to rock, and find out what they're doing now.

**IT'S NOT THE EIGHTIES** any more, which for those of us with a nostalgic bent may not be good news. Hard rock and heavy metal is a lot further from the mainstream than it was back then, and the genre has matured, focusing more on talent and music, and less on image and presentation. It wasn't all about 'the look' back in the day, but image did play a big part – particularly for trailblazing girls looking to make it in a traditionally male world.

*Kerrang!* magazine's recurring 'Ladykillers' feature – a chance to talk about girls in rock, but driven by a desire to show pictures of hot girls in bands – was a prime example. And if the music wasn't exactly an afterthought, there's no doubt that the focus was on looks.

**THE STRUGGLES** of pioneering female hard rock musicians 30 years ago influenced how we view women in rock in 2017, and it's clear that we look at female rockers in bands like Halestorm, Within Temptation and Delain in a very different way. It's no longer a novelty to see a girl in a rock band. So how do the ladies who had to deal with the Eighties look back on those times? And do they think their struggles were worth it?

## LEE AARON

**IT ALL STARTED WITH** Canadian singer Lee Aaron. It was 1982. *Kerrang!* was a little over a year old, and Girlschool

and Rock Goddess had already emerged. Then along came this petite teenager from Toronto with a voice that killed and an image that totally overshadowed the "jeans and T-shirt" female rockers we were used to. Lee Aaron's manager had decided to play up the sexy image to try to get ahead, and rock magazines jumped all over it. *Kerrang!* effectively launched her international career with a pull-out centrespread.

**"THERE WAS AN ASSUMPTION THAT ATTRACTIVE GIRL EQUALS STUPID, AND THAT I COULDN'T BE A MUSICIAN IN MY OWN RIGHT."**

**LEE AARON**

**"THAT PIECE** led to a showcase at The Marquee in London and a place on the bill at the Reading Festival, for which I have to be grateful," says Aaron, whose real name is Karen Greening. "If I'd lacked the ability to deliver at

those shows, then my career would have been very short-lived. But for a large part what was really happening then was some extremely exploitative marketing that had nothing to do with the music. The next few years were a huge learning curve for me, fighting to win back some credibility." On a musical level, however, Aaron felt much more comfortable. "I was a core songwriter in the band, so there was always respect from the guys I was working with, and for the most part from other musicians too. They realised that all the sex-symbol crap wasn't important to me. That was more a cultural by-product of the times." But that cultural by-product undeniably had its downside, something Aaron had to deal with on a daily basis. "Jon Bon Jovi, David Coverdale, Dave Lee

Roth... they were all sex symbols. But they weren't treated in a sexist manner and the quality of their music was never in question because of their looks. There was definitely a double standard, and as a woman I'd often feel demoralised by some of the inane questions I was asked. There seemed to be an assumption that attractive girl equals stupid, and that I couldn't be a musician in my own right. Because there were only a few of us girls in that genre at the time, we were all seen as novelty acts."

**IN THE** end it all got a bit tiresome. Lee Aaron wasn't the only good-looking woman in rock and metal. But the initial impetus she gained stuck her with a label that her female successors didn't have to deal with to the same degree. "The 'rocker babe' stereotype became a bit of an albatross, so I made some career diversions – sang blues and jazz, alt rock and even opera. It all seemed to help my credibility. It may have disappointed my harder rock fans, but it kept me inspired to keep creating music that's interesting to me." Over recent years Lee's dipped her toes back into the rock arena with intermittent live shows, and 2016 saw the release of 'Fire And Gasoline', her first rock album in well over 10 years. It's great to see her back. Just don't mention Ladykillers, okay?



Photos: IconicPix/David Plastik; Big Sister Records/Theresa Mitchell



## VIXEN

IT WAS CANADIAN SISTER act Heart that ruled the charts in the mid to late '80s. But Vixen were hot on their heels. Originally formed way back in 1973 in St Paul, Minnesota by guitarist Jan Kuehnemund, the band first had commercial success with their debut album, 1988's 'Vixen'. But hit records and major tours didn't shield Kuehnemund, vocalist/rhythm guitarist Janet Gardner, bassist Share Pedersen and drummer Roxy Petrucci from criticism. "I think being in an all-girl band made it easier to get noticed," notes Janet Gardner today. "And things like the Ladykillers piece were a part of that. But it also made it a lot more difficult to be taken seriously. People would think that we were a gimmick and there was some Kim Fowley-like character behind it all. After all, a bunch of girls wouldn't just get together and play hard rock, would they? What a preposterous idea! And yet that was exactly how Vixen had started, in Jan Kuehnemund's garage in Minnesota."

**SO CREDIBILITY** was always a problem for Vixen, despite their success. Two singles from the 'Vixen' album, 'Edge Of A Broken Heart' and 'Cryin'', made the Top 30 of the Billboard Hot 100 in the US, and the band would eventually sell over a million albums. But the more Vixen achieved, the more the doubters came out of the woodwork to question how they got there. Janet doesn't necessarily think Vixen suffered any more than their male rock counterparts, though. "In the end I don't think we got it any worse than the men with their fluffy hair and bare chests plastered all over the covers of magazines. There were some amazing vocalists and musicians during the late '80s writing great songs, and that era produced some of the best guitarists ever. But when the '90s hit, nobody could get arrested. All that hairspray and make-up seemed to stop people seeing that there were some very talented people underneath the image. There was a stigma attached that was unshakeable."

**STILL, IT'S** hard to deny that the girls did get judged by different standards. While Vixen were determined to stand or fall on their music, how men perceived them certainly influenced the trajectory of their career, however unfair that might be. It was primarily men who bought rock music and it was men who were the music business's decision-makers. It was only Vixen who saw themselves as just another '80s rock band.

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JANET GARDNER**

"**WE REALLY** weren't doing anything all that different from any of the male bands of the time," says Janet. "Just look at a photo of us next to Poison... pretty similar. We really didn't play the female card much. There weren't boobs hanging out all over the place. Most of our songs were love songs, heartbreak songs, similar to what Bon

Jovi and others were doing at the same time. We weren't going for any kind of cheap sell, but on the other hand image was a big part of what was going on at the time and sex appeal was important. I honestly never saw myself that way, so I guess it was

flattering that people thought we had some! I was just happy to be able to do what I love doing at the level we were doing it. I really didn't care why people showed up – I was just glad they were there!"

**WHEN THE** '80s died Vixen's stock fell, but various permutations continued to perform under the name. There was even a brief reunion of the full line-up in 2004 for music TV channel VH1. It didn't last, but in 2012 Vixen decided the time was right again. Sadly, guitarist and founder Jan Kuehnemund was taken by cancer before the reunion came to fruition, but the remaining members decided that they should rally and carry on. Fellow Ladykiller Gina Style (ex-Envy) was recruited, having played with Roxy and Janet before, and the band are back on the road again. "What goes around comes around," says Janet. "Apparently we had fans who missed us and the party rages on! The Vixen Ladykillers are having more fun than ever before!"



Photo: IconicPix/Ray Palmer

