The Hard Truth About

Guns N' Roses

By Rob Tannenbaum

Finally, some bad boys who are good

A second ago, things were merely tense.

Izzy Stradlin, Guns n' Roses' scruffy rhythm guitarist, is slumped on a dressing-room counter, suddenly draining his second bottle of red wine and fuming the wattage of a portable stereo.

Sitting on a couch, trying to talk above the racket, are Axl Rose, the group's singer; and Slash, the lead guitarist. Slash, whose copper skin is still wet from a postconcert shower, is wearing shorts and holding a bottle of Jack Daniel's, his only constant companion. Axl is wearing jeans, cowboy boots and a T-shirt that says, WELCOME TO DETROIT, MURDER CAPITAL OF THE WORLD. Axl and Slash are getting increasingly angry with Izzy, who grins obliquely and cracks up the Rolling Stones' "Stupid Girl."

At the base of the wall nearest the door, there is a fresh hole in the exact size of Axl's boot. This evening's concert, the last of three mid-August dates opening for Aerosmith at Pine Knob Music Theatre, near Detroit, went so poorly that the band left the stage five minutes early. And when the Guns n' Roses don't play well, trouble ensues. While the band members sit in the dressing room, their sound mixer and a bus driver are being fired for alleged incompentence.

Suddenly, there's an explosion. "Violent mood swings" shouts Izzy, rolling from the couch. A bottle of vodka flies from his hand and smashes against the far wall. "Mood swings!" shouts Axl, leaping from the couch. He grabsh a vase filled with roses and pitches it in the same direction.

Just as quickly, Izzy and Axl are seated again. But all the smashed glass hasn't relieved the tension. The bottle of vodka belonged to bassist Duff "Rose" McKagan, who is now without his favorite liquor and is therefore enraged. Slash, too, is pissed at Izzy, who still won't turn down the stereo.

"This is entertaining," says Axl, watching and smiling. "After Slash and Duff have finished yelling at him, Izzy turns remorseful. "Fuckin' Duff, man. I never like to break his vodka. I know he loves that vodka."

Just another rock & roll band being assholes, trashin' a dressing room?

Not necessarily. For Guns n' Roses, outbursts are not merely the traditional way for a rock star to pass the time between blow jobs. The atmosphere backstage in Detroit springs from the same hair-trigger temperament that makes the Gunners the world's most exciting hard-rock band. They are young, feisty, stubborn, cynical, proud, uncompromising, intense, conflicted and very caged about their faults.

The tension that is part of the band members' daily life permeates their music until it explodes. Except for Steven Adler, their happy-go-lucky drummer, they are willful and combative. "It's cool that the tension is building up, because it's gonna find its release in the music," Axl says backstage. "If we live that long."

If you don't look any deeper than the band members' tattoos, you might compare Guns n' Roses to Poison, Ratt, Faster Pussycat, Mötley Crüe and any other of the dozens of nearly identical heavy-metal bands currently being pushed by the music industry. The Gunners engage in the same antics, revolving around booze, drugs and women; they trumpet their music as "rebellious"; and they claim to play for "the kids."

But Guns n' Roses don't play heavy metal. They play a vicious brand of hard rock that, especially in concert, is closer to Metallica or to punk than to heavy metal. They are a musical sawed-off shotgun, with great power but erratic aim.

Photographs by Timothy White
GUNS 'N' ROSES

— they veer from terrible to brilliant in a typical set, often within a single song.

And more important, Guns n' Roses really do play for "the kids." Metal bands have their images on a fantasy life that has no relation to the daily reality of being a teenager. Kids idolize or envy David Lee Roth, but they have little in common with him. Guns n' Roses are young enough to remember what it was like to be seventeen: Slash and Steven are twenty-three; Duff, the only married band member, is twenty-four; Axl and Izzy are twenty-six. Axl remains obsessed with the contradictions of adolescence: the unfocused rage and predatory doubt, the insecurity and cockiness, the horniness and fear. The Guns' songs don't hide the fact that they're confused and screwed up. "We know we are," Axl says with a nod. "But we're trying not to be."

U2 manager Paul McGuinness has called the Guns' success "the most exciting new thing to happen in our business for a while." They have been embraced by the fashionable, and their concerts are invaded by HICs (the band's sneering code for huge industry guns).

Their debut album, Appetite for Destruction, which has sold nearly 6 million copies, reached Number One on the Billboard charts in early August, having been released a year before. The album succeeded despite resistance from retail chains (some refused to stock the LP because of its gruesome cover art, which was relented to the inner sleeve for the second pressing), from album-rock radio stations and from MTV. Eventually, the media caught up and helped "Sweet Child o'Mine" become a Number One single. But the early support, the support that forced MTV and radio to play the Gunsers, came from "the kids."

The week of the band's Detroit shows, USA Today published a frightening story that helps explain Guns n' Roses' appeal. According to a survey, nearly one in seven American teens say they've tried to kill themselves. More than half of the guys polled said they find it hard to cope with stress, and a third said they often feel sad and hopeless. "I Want to Hold Your Hand" can't mean much to these kids.

Guns n' Roses have less in common with metal acts than with rap artists like Public Enemy, which project a lethal toughness while urging self-improvement, and black-comedy gore movies like RoboCop. They also bring to mind the early Rolling Stones, who won a similar notoriety for singing about spit and hostility. And if the Gunsers go beyond what the Stones sang about, it's because times are rougher; they are a brutal band for brutal times. Unlike the Stones, they don't keep an ironic distance between them and their songs.

"Our attitude epitomizes what rock & roll is all about," says Slash. "At least, what I think rock & roll is all about, which is all that matters. You know how some bands go out and the whole thing is going completely wrong but they can put on a good show anyway? We're not like that."

He holds up his right hand, which is swollen and welled from smacking his guitar onstage. "We fuckin' bleed and sweat for it, you know. We do a lot of things where other bands will be, like, 'Get the stunt guy to do it.'"

NAME A CITY ON THEIR TOUR ITINERARY, AND GUNS n' ROSES probably have a story to go with it.

In Atlanta, Axl jumped from the stage to grab a security gun who, Axl says, showed a friend of his without provocation. The police held Axl backstage while the rest of the band played "Communication Break-Our attitude epitomizes what rock & roll is all about," says Slash. 'We bleed and sweat for it. We do things where other bands would be like "Get the stunt guy to do it."'down" and "Foxy Tonk Women" with a roadie singing. To avoid a trial, Axl pleaded guilty to assaulting the police and paid a fine.

In Philadelphia, just minutes before a concert, Axl got into a fight with a parking-lot attendant who, Axl says, showed a stuntman Axl's younger brother and personal assistant. Doug Goldstein, the group's tough but temperate and shrewd tour manager, persuaded the police to release Axl in time for the show.

In Saratoga Springs, New York, a local paper reported, "police and security guards are calling it a night they won't soon forget." "There was nearly a riot," Izzy says. "I got off on that kind of vibe, where everybody's just about ready to crack. When there's 25,000 people and they have, like, three security guys. God, it was intense, man. It was just on that facade. Kids. 25,000 people coming down to the stage." When fans began sprinting onstage, the band bailed out. Three nights

ROB TANNENBAUM wrote about Bruce Springsteen and the Range in RS 515.
in one of his Indiana bands, Axl, that his friends suggested he call himself Axl. Years later, before he signed his Geffen contract, he legally changed his name to W. Axl Rose. The initials — W.A.R. — were, he says, merely an accident.

It’s appropriate that Axl has had two different names, because his “mood swings” reveal two distinct personalities. Onstage, releasing years of anger, he’s a remarkably charismatic figure. He sings savagely, abusing his vocal chords and working the crowd with an unequaled ferocity. Offstage, his pale skin and strawberry-blond hair make him appear fragile, almost angelic. This is the Axl who listens to the Raspberries, George Michael and Philip Glass and has written an eight-minute ballad, “November Rain,” about which he says, “If it’s not recorded right, I’ll quit the business.”

Even the other band members describe Axl in terms of a Jekyll-and-Hyde dichotomy. “He does a lot of weird shit no one understands,” says Slash, “but I love the guy. I mean, he’s a real sweetheart.”

“Mood swings” is a term that describes Axl’s behavior. His friends say he has two distinct personalities. Onstage, he is a charismatic figure, releasing years of anger. Offstage, he is fragile and angelic. His friends have suggested he change his name to Axl Rose, which he did before signing his Geffen contract. Even the other band members describe him in terms of a Jekyll-and-Hyde dichotomy. He is both a sweet and aggressive person. His friends say he is a real sweetheart, but he can also be extremely volatile.
accurate of Aerosmith that he had drawn. They played, they fought, they got high, they toyed with the idea of forming bands with names like Heads of Amazon and AIDS. They finally settled on Guns n’ Roses, combining the names of two bands that various members had been involved in, L.A. Guns and Hollywood Rose.

Teresa Ensenat was in Geffen’s A&R department when she heard about the Gunners in the fall of 1985. Because the band didn’t have a place, it took Ensenat and Tom Zutaut, her A&R partner, several months to find them. Eventually, they found the band living in what Ensenat calls “this shit” — a tiny, seedy studio apartment on Sunset and Gardner. “A fucking living hell,” says Izzy. There was no bathroom, shower or kitchen. By stealing hammers from a construction site, they built a loft that slept no more than three at a time.

“I’d fuckin’ girls just so I could stay at their place,” Slash says. There were parties in the parking lot next almost every night, which brought a constant procession of girls, drug dealers and cops through the studio. If they had enough money to buy a hamburger, they burned Steve’s drumsticks for firewood. (Even after they decided to sign with Geffen, in the spring of ’86, they pretended to be undecided, just so competing labels would continue to take them out for meals.) Axl was banned from the Rainbow, an L.A. club, for two years because of obnoxious behavior. “We would just go out, humiliate, pass out flyers and just make everybody in the room know we’re here,” he says. They lived like vermin, they later found out, they didn’t perceive sex, they didn’t do.stereotypes. “I was like, just the complete opposite of what the Eighties was all about,” says Slash.

Guns n’ Roses didn’t have a manager pushing them to record companies. The labels came to them, and the band wasn’t interested. “Rock & roll in general has just sucked a big fucking dick since the Parrots,” says Izzy. Even after signing with Geffen, Guns n’ Roses couldn’t find a manager or a producer. “People were very afraid of this band,” says Ensenat. Tom Werman, Motley Crue’s producer, “came down to our rehearsal, covered his ears and left,” says Duff. The band broke up briefly, then got together again and agreed to record with Mike Clink, a quiet young engineer best known for his work with Heart and Eddie Money.

Zutaut invited Tim Collins, Aerosmith’s manager, to see the Gunners play in L.A. When the band members came back to his hotel room, Collins checked into a second room to get some rest. In the morning, he learned that they had ordered $450 worth of drinks and food on his bill. He decided not to manage them.

Club acts for L.A. shows routinely read, “FRESH FROM DETOX, OR ADDICTED: ONLY THE STRONG SURVIVE.” Their drug problems — some were involved with heroin — were common knowledge. Says Slash, “There was a point there where I fuckin’ stopped playing guitar and didn’t even talk to my band except for Izzy; cause we were both doing it. I didn’t come out of the apartment for about three months, except to go to the market. The one thing that really stopped me was the phone call from Duff, saying, ‘You’ve altered yourself from everybody. Since they’re the only people I’m really close to, that really affected me, and I finally quit.’

Without the band, Slash says, “I’d probably OD or something. I’m not into ‘life for life sake.’” Asked if the band can survive drugs and personality conflicts, he responds, “I don’t know what kind of priority is that?” Mick Jagger, Slash suggests, “should have died after Some Girls, when he was still cool.” The guitarist says he could die in a heavy-metal AIDS epidemic, which would also strike several other well-known L.A. bands, “since all we all for are sex and chicks.”

“I’ve got a bad drinking problem,” he says. “It’s the only thing that brings me out of my shell enough to be able to socialize.” Slash doesn’t get drunk until after the shows, but he drinks steadily all day long, and his hands shake. “I’m an alcoholic in the sense that I need to drink all the time,” he says, “but I don’t have a physical dependence on it the way some people do.” One of the Gunners’ favorite stories is how Rick Nielsen of Cheap Trick invited them to his house, then issued a tequila challenge to Slash. The story ends with Nielsen drunkenly assaulting the band and Izzy licking Nielsen in the balls. “I didn’t fuck him hard,” Izzy says, shrugging.

Another of Aerosmith’s problems was beautiful. Their tour concentrated on outdoor shows, nightclubs that seat about 15,000, and it’s here where you start to see the audience.

The sheds are set out in the suburbs, where the kids can’t damage too much property. For a couple of hours, the only supervision is the security guard, who has nice haircuts and thick arms. You can get a big, warm, flat Miller Lite for $3.75. If you have proof you’re over twenty-one or if one of your feet touches the ground. The guys in the audience wear black T-shirts depicting the last band to play at the venue, and their dates wear K-Mart knockoff of the clothing L.A. models wear in music videos.

Though Aerosmith was the headliner on the tour and was applauded enthusiastically, the kids seemed to regard the band as history, a band they knew from the radio, like the Doors or the Grateful Dead. Their response to Guns ’n’ Roses set was much more powerful and demonstrated an unusual emotional connection with their songs and attitude.

“The sincerity of the band shows,” says Slash. “That’s why the crowds are so fuckin’ violent. Not to say that I condone crowd violence, but it’s part of the energy that we put out.”

“At times, like in Philadelphia, it could have turned into a riot,” says Axl. “It’s great watching ‘em go crazy and beat each other up, but I don’t want to see people get hurt.”

“I don’t even mention anything like that, but I guess we are playing with fire,” says Duff. “I would seriously hate for anything to happen, but we’re not the kind of guys to really change our ways.” It seems that a violent incident is inevitable, the same way the Stones were forced to train an incident like Woodstock. Duff says he watched that movie [Gimme Shelter] probably a hundred times,” says Axl.

Like a number of current rappers — to say nothing of TV, movies and most of society — Guns’ n’ Roses isn’t a lot of vague and contradictory signals about violence and drugs. But Axl and Slash argue that their lyrics don’t advocate certain behavior, they only describe it, and often in grim, distressing terms. Slash cites “Mr. Brownstone,” an ugly depiction of gradated heroin addiction that he and Izzy wrote, on acoustic guitar one night while stoned. “So there’s a bunch of kids standing out ‘cause we said [herein] was cool,” says Slash. “And we never said it was cool. We misunderstood it, and it pisses me off. We never made any messages, but it’s an image. And to see it that seriously, then that fuckin’ me up. Because then it’s my fault. And it’s Izzy’s fault, and it’s Duff’s fault, and it’s Axl’s fault, and it’s Steven’s fault. I don’t want to be a part of fuckin’ up kids’ lives.”

By the end of the year, Guns ’n’ Roses will release a new album: four tracks from Lies 1985: Life a Suicide, their 1986 indie EP, and four new acoustic songs, including “I Used To Love Her, but I Had To Kill Her,” a track sure to incite controversy. The song is “a joke,” says Izzy, who co-wrote it with Slash. “It’s been around for 10 million years or something. I mean, I don’t advocate it, I understand it. But I don’t treat women any differently than I treat men.” [Cont. on 164]
CENT. FROM 64] Sleas is less cavalier, and more articulate, when grappling with the question of responsibility. Here's the conflict: On the one hand, Guns n' Roses didn't get there where they are by acting responsibly or claiming to be anyone interesting. On the other hand, the kids who constitute the majority of their audience put the Gunners at the top of the charts, and believe in the band and don’t have security men to protect them or tour managers to police—basically, they are the kids most susceptible to a disaster. So Sleas is apprehensive about the kids' reaction to "I Used to Love Her": "If some guy goes out and kills his girlfriend," he says, "that’s gonna fuck me up. I know it. It’s serious. It’s affecting the lives of people you don’t even know, which is definitely a scary thing, to have that much power."

ON AUGUST 20TH, GUNS N' ROSES played at Castle Donnington, in Derby, England, with Iron Maiden, David Lee Roth and several other bands, in the ninth annual Monsters of Rock Festival. During "It's So Easy," many in the crowd of 107,000 began to slam-dance. Three times, the band members say, they stopped playing in order to calm the audience. At the same time, they enjoyed the rabid response. After they left the stage, they learned that two fans had been crushed to death during their set. In a creepy parallel to the Stones' Altamont show, Guns n' Roses' video crew had taped the incident.

Anticipating a wilder response when they headline next year, they are trying to design barricades that will reduce the risk of a fatality. But as Duff says, "We’re not the kind of guys to really change our ways." They will continue to play concerts with festival staging (which increases the chance of additional injuries) because, they say, shows with assigned seating are too dull—"like driving 55 instead of 150 on an open streetway," Axl says.

"I don't know really what to think about it," Axl says a month after the Castle Donnington show. "I don’t want anybody to get hurt. We want the exact opposite." He does not feel that the Gunners' emotional performance—"just on that fucking edge," in Lay's phrase—make them responsible for the deaths. "We didn’t tell people to smash each other," Axl says. "We didn’t tell people, ‘Drink so much alcohol that you can’t fucking stand up.’ I don’t feel responsible in those ways.

If Axl seems upset but not quite distraught, it’s because he believes that Guns n’ Roses did all they could to prevent the deaths. Leaving the stage, he told the crowd, "Have a good fuckin’ day. And don’t kill yourselves.

CENT. FROM 99] to suggest that she did any work for Levy. But in April of that year, the bureau overheard the following:

LEVY: I'm giving you a $500,000 bonus today.

ESPOSITO: Oh, wonderful.

LEVY: Aren't you glad? Because you worked hard last week.

ESPOSITO: Fantastic.

LEVY: You're a good girl.

ESPOSITO: Yes, a good girl.

LEVY: Miss Big is very happy with you. Levy is very happy with her own dividends. But the FBI's Ferris is presenting a different view in his affidavit: "Vincenzo Gigante has developed a stronghold on Morrie Levy's recording industry empire, in fact naming Levy into a source of ready cash for the Genovese LCN [La Cosa Nostra] Family and its leaders."

Father Louis Gigante told Rolling Stone's Whitey that he is not aware of a business relationship between Levy and his brother, Vincent. "I know Morrie intimately. We became very, very, very close." In the 1970s, Levy arranged for Tito Puente and other Latin artists to perform at religious festivals that Father Gigante staged in the执业elocked South Bronx. Father Gigante was also with Levy the last time the record executive was approached by the FBI.

On February 26th, 1975, Levy, Father Gigante, record producer Dr. Nathan McCalls and a woman friend of Levy's, identified as Christie, were leaving Jimmy Weston's, a Manhattan jazz club. As Gigante told it, several strangers began to flunk with Christie. Levy took offense, and a fight ensued. Two of the men turned out to be plainclothes police detectives, and one of them drew a gun. McCalls allegedly held the gun and pointed it at Levy. According to police, four gunshots were fired—three at Levy's head and one at the back of his head, which had literally exploded. Police found him slumped in a lounge chair in front of a switched-on television. The rear door was ajar, and keys were in the lock. McCalls had been dead for at least a week and was badly decomposed, all the more so because someone had sealed the windows and turned on the heater. No suspects were apprehended.

LEVY predicted for more than a year that he would win his case. He seemed perfectly shocked to have been shot. Shortly after his indictment, Levy said he planned to sell Rosette and his farm and move to Australia. He recently sold his record labels and music-publishing companies for a reported $16.5 million. But right now, Australia doesn’t figure in his plans. For the first time, Levy speaks of the possibility of going to prison.

"I can’t go no place till all this is behind me," Levy said on a recent afternoon at his farm. "If they’re gonna continue to hassle me, I’d just as soon move on. But right now I’ve got my other problems. I’ve got to win my appeal or serve my time."

He grew reflective. "The music business was a beautiful business," he said. And he, Morris Levy, was the last of a breed. "You and the government will finish killing me off. The government doesn’t like the music business. It uses it to be Horatio Alger stories; now they want no-talent burn. Stick your head up above the crowd, you get it chopped off."

CENT. FROM 412 'News,' author, professor Jack Gladney attempts to calm his obsession with the fear of death through his work in the Department of Holocaust Studies.

In his case, Gladney finds a perverse form of protection. The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can never quite make it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstruosity of Hitler himself. He feels that Hitler is not only bigger than life, as we say of some famous figures, but bigger than death. Our sense of fear — we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work. I brought this conflict to the surface in the shape of Jack Gladney. I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is about there. I tried to relate it in White Noise to this other sense of transcendence that he just beyond our reach. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.

When I thought of an apocalyptic feel about your books, an intuition that our world is moving toward greater randomness and dissolution, or maybe even eatercity. Do you see this as irreversible?

It could change tomorrow. This is the shape my books take because this is the reality I see. This reality has become part of all our lives over the past twenty-five years. I don’t know how we can deny it.

I think White Noise is a paranoid book at all. I think it’s a clearly defined, reasonable piece of work which takes into account the enormous paranoia which has ensued from the annihilation. I can say the same thing about some of my other books. They’re about movements or feelings in the air and the culture around us, without necessarily being part of the particular. The paranoid means, what I sense is suspicion and distrust and fear, and so, of course, these things inform my books. It’s my idea of myself as a writer — perhaps mistaken — that I enter these worlds as a completely rational person who is simply taking what he senses all around him and using it as material.

You’ve spoken of the redemptive quality of fiction. Do you see your books as offering an alternative to the dark reality you depict?

Well, strangely, in theory, one is one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world. We seek pattern in art that eludes us in natural experience. This pattern may be nothing more comforting than it is, but it is not.