

Axl: The Lost Years

By 2000, he had become rock's most famous recluse. RS set out on his trail

By Peter Wilkinson

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THE STORY IS TOLD OF A BIRTHDAY PARTY that took place two Februarys ago at a Mexican restaurant in Santa Monica. A few long-haired musicians mingled with some concert promoters in suits, eating mediocre guacamole and drinking Cuervo margaritas. ¶ The gifts piled up and the crowd of about 40 sampled birthday cake, but the guest of honor, Axl Rose, who was turning 37, never showed up. Axl's manager, Doug Goldstein, quieted the room. "Axl's not going to be coming," Goldstein said. "But order whatever you want and have a good time." His story is



DISAPPEARING ACT
In the studio, 1990. After GNR's *Use Your Illusion* tour, Rose would remove himself from public life for several years.

told not because it is considered an example of eccentric or rude behavior on Rose's part. Rather, it is considered emblematic of the way the singer conducts his life – just another night in the off-kilter existence of a man who used to be one of the biggest rock stars in the world. “Not the least bit unusual,” says a friend who was at the restaurant, laughing in there-he-goes-again style. “Typical Axl.” Except for a couple of interviews last winter, timed to the release of a Guns N’ Roses live album, and a 1998 Phoenix arrest, Rose has remained out of public view since 1994. For six years he has been working on the next GNR record, tentatively titled *Chinese Democracy*. None of the original band members plays on it. Most of them hardly speak with Rose anymore. Rose spends most of his time in L.A. recording studios and behind the gate of his secluded estate atop a hill in the Latigo Canyon section of Malibu. His housekeeper, Beta Lebeis, does most of the shopping and driving. Axl reads, works out, kickboxes, plays pinball, teaches himself guitar and computers, and tries to write lyrics.

One can divide the public Axl into two separate periods: before 1993, when the original band was together, and post-1993, after the group’s final recording, “*The Spaghetti Incident?*” an unremarkable collection of mostly punk covers. Wherever he went during those years of his fame, Axl left frustrated, angry people behind. He became buried in litigation. Shelves in the clerks’ offices at Superior Court in downtown Los Angeles and in Santa Monica bow under the weight of the thousands of pages of legal papers concerning GNR and Axl that have accumulated over the years, actions involving claims totaling millions of dollars. This is not to mention band- or Rose-related legal matters in Nevada, Arizona, Missouri, New York, Spain, England and Canada.

The documents tell part of the story of how GNR succeeded and failed, and they give a picture of Axl himself. The image that emerges is one of a complicated man who can be sensitive and funny but who is also controlling and obsessive and troubled, a man changed by fame and wracked by childhood trauma who faces a lonely future surrounded by a small circle of family members and friends. “His world is very insular,” says Doug Goldstein. “He doesn’t like very many people.”

Axl is a man struggling with demons and taking radical measures to overcome them. He became deeply involved in past-life regression, a brand of psychotherapy that exists on the New Age fringe. “Axl,” a friend says, “is looking for anything that’ll give him happiness.”

As successful as he became, friends contend, Axl still feels like a victim, unfulfilled, somewhat lost. “He seemed emotionally reserved and a little bit suspicious,” says the techno whiz Moby, who spent some time with Axl in California in 1997. “He seemed a little bit like a beaten dog.” And Rose, according to those who know him, is hung up on one old girlfriend: the model Stephanie Seymour, now married to the polo-playing financier Peter Brant. Seymour and Axl’s ex-wife, Erin Everly, have both accused Axl of beating them, a charge he denies.

Whether Axl’s emotional and legal troubles contributed to the demise of the original GNR is open to interpretation. There is little dispute, however, about one thing they did cause: a massive delay in finishing *Chinese Democracy*. This work has been six years, a roomful of studio musicians and a rumored \$6 million worth of Interscope/Geffen’s money in the making. It is still not finished and probably won’t be anytime soon. “So many times, I have come down [to the studio], and I had no idea that I was going to be able to,” Rose told ROLLING STONE last November as he played 12 new tracks. “If you are work-

ing with issues that depressed the crap out of you, how do you know you can express it?”

In recent months, though, guitarist Robin Finck and drummer Josh Freese both left the project, as did computer engineer Billy Howerdel. Queen guitarist Brian May spent a week recording with Axl and returned to England. Avant guitarist Buckethead, known for wearing an upside-down Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket on his noggin, came on the scene. But as of now, it seems, there is no “new” GNR.

‘I’LL PUNCH YOUR LIGHTS OUT RIGHT HERE AND right now. . . . I don’t give a fuck who you are. You are all little people on a power trip.” These are not lyrics to a bitter new GNR track about lawyers, perhaps reminiscent of Axl’s old rants on CD and from the stage against reporters and photographers and anybody else who failed to do his precise bidding. These words, the Phoenix Police Department reports, are what Axl shouted at security personnel at Sky Harbor International Airport in February 1998 after a screener asked to search his hand luggage. Threatened with arrest, Axl rejoined, “I don’t give a fuck. Just put me in fuckin’ jail.” He spent a couple of hours behind bars. The matter was resolved on February 18th, 1999, when Rose, via telephone, pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor charge of disturbing the peace and paid a \$500 fine. Lost in the minor hoopla was the matter of what, exactly, Axl was doing at the Phoenix airport. Was Axl coming back from a place where he often goes – Sedona, the New Age bastion in the red-rock canyons 115 miles north of Phoenix, where he sees one of the most important people in his world, a psychic known derisively in the GNR camp as Yoda?

Yoda’s real name is Sharon Maynard. An Asian woman of middle age, Maynard stands about five feet five and has a medium build and dark, curly hair. Since 1978 she has run a not-for-profit business in Sedona called Arcos Cielos Corp., which, loosely translated from the Spanish, means “sky arcs.”

While it is customary for tour employees to submit a photograph for a laminated pass, with Axl other things seemed to come into play. Doug Goldstein is said to gather photos at the singer’s instruction for psychic assessment. In Sedona, some think, Yoda would examine these photos. What does so-and-so want out of Axl? Does this person have his best interests in mind? What kind of energy do they emit?

Submitting a photo to Axl for evaluation by Yoda, some say, coincided with employment in the GNR world. Band members, crew members, record-company executives – everybody did it. The procedure still goes on. Recalls one current employee: “I sent my picture in. Everybody gets a photo made for a pass. People made jokes about auras being read. What’s this for? Nobody really knew. But I don’t know anybody who got canned for anything other than not doing a good job.”

In February 1998 in Arizona, Axl was carrying some presents he’d recently received – “going to the psychic for review,” in the words of one knowledgeable source. One item in Axl’s

Where’s Axl?

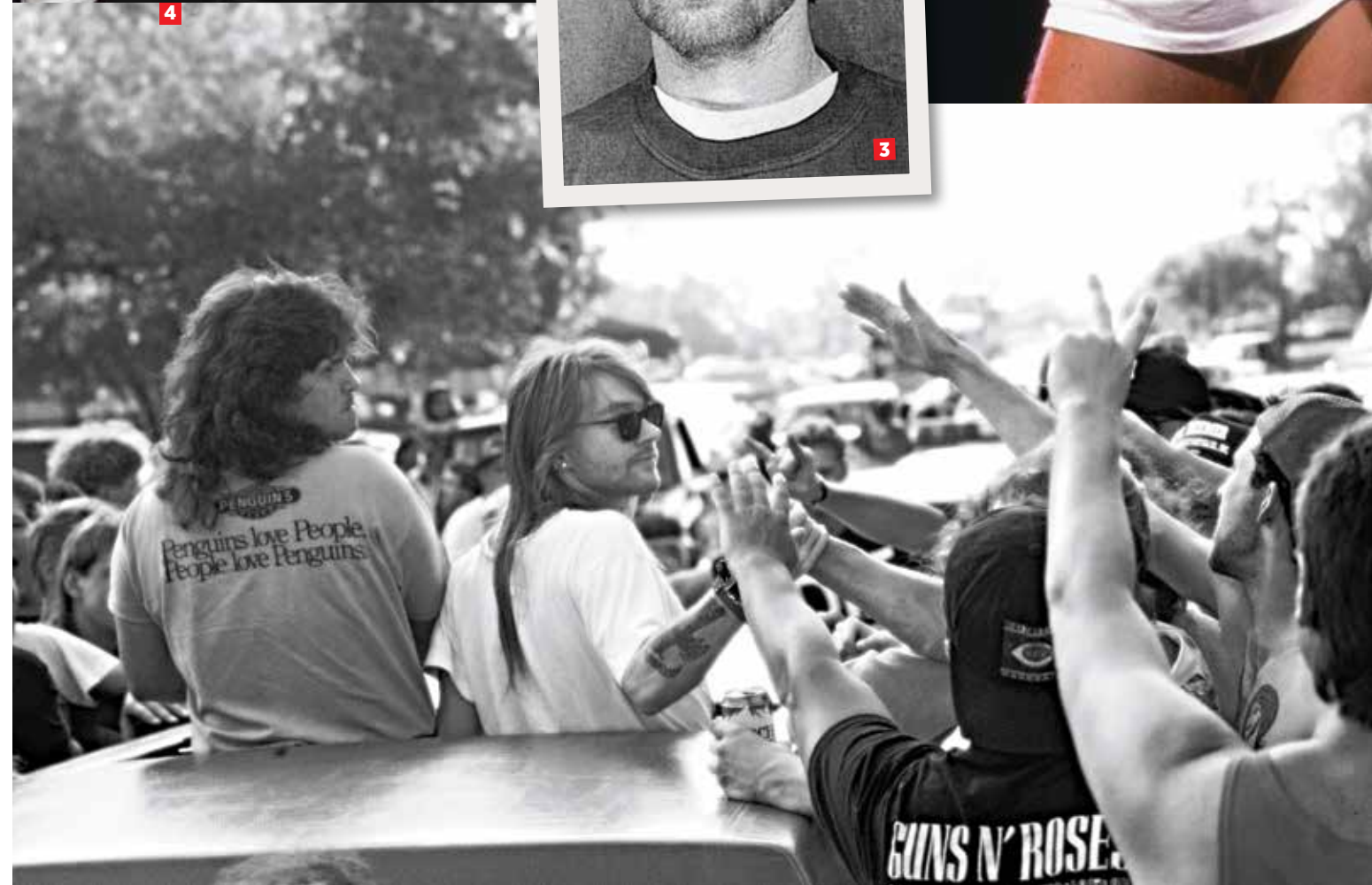
(1) Rose and wife Erin Everly in 1990, shortly before their divorce and legal battle. **(2)** Performing in 1992. Live appearances by Rose would soon become rare. **(3)** Rose’s mugshot after being arrested in Phoenix in 1998. **(4)** Greeting fans in 1992.



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bag was a large handblown glass sphere. Axl was apparently worried that the security personnel at the airport might break it, and that led to his outburst and arrest.

How important is Yoda to Axl? One associate says Yoda's influence, while important, is tempered by the force of Axl's personality: "He wasn't turning his life over to somebody with a candle and a crystal. I say that with every confidence. It's just not consistent with who he is. He makes his own decisions."

Still, Yoda showed up on tour. "She came with some of her pals," a crew member recalls. "Funny dudes: Southwestern people with funny shoes. Their look didn't fit in; they were like aliens." During a 1992 GNR swing through the U.S. with Metallica, Yoda apparently became concerned about energy fields around Minneapolis and ordered that a date contemplated for the city not be booked. It was later rescheduled for a different Minneapolis venue. "Axl had trouble," a tour regular says, "in areas of the country that had a strong magnetic-field concentration."

Axl also sometimes took a psychotherapist from Los Angeles, a Victoria Principal look-alike named Suzzy London, on the road. London maintained an area backstage for herself and Axl. He cast her as his therapist, wearing a black miniskirt, in the video for "Don't Cry."

Axl has spoken in the past about his experiences with past-life-regression therapy. Past-life adherents tend to believe

inspiration for the Guns N' Roses hit "Sweet Child o' Mine," sued Axl in 1994, charging assault and sexual battery, Everly sat for a deposition. She testified that Axl believed that she and Seymour were sisters in a past life and were "trying to kill him." As far as her own relationship with Axl went, Everly said, "Axl had told me that in a past life we were Indians and that I killed our children, and that's why he was so mean to me in this life."

Everly was asked, "Had Axl ever told you that he was possessed?"

"Yes," she said.

"What did he say he was possessed by?"

"John Bonham."

Bonham, the rambunctious Led Zeppelin drummer, died in his sleep after a bender in 1980. Rose denies ever saying he was possessed by Bonham.

Once in a while, in a New Age community that embraces a certain number of charlatans, Axl got taken to the cleaners. During his marriage to Everly, Axl went for an exorcism. The exorcism apparently didn't involve the priests and cross-sticks that viewers of prime-time television have come to expect. "Mainly it involved getting some kind of herbal wrap," Axl testified during the Everly case, some "work on my skin." The man who performed this procedure charged \$72,000. Even Axl admitted, "I ended up getting ripped off for a lot of money in the long run."

“He seemed emotionally reserved and a little suspicious,” says Moby. “He seemed like a beaten dog.”

that one lives one's life with different incarnations of the same group of people. Under hypnosis by a past-life expert, the playing field expands. A patient may be able to remember back even further, to a life or lives that were lived hundreds if not thousands of years ago, and discover traumas that occurred then. Some patients may speak in the voice or the language of that long-dead being, whether it be a Roman ruler or a Southern plantation slave. Axl, according to a confidant, believes he and Seymour were together in 15 or 16 past lives.

After a shouting match with Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love backstage at the 1992 MTV Video Music Awards at UCLA's Pauley Pavilion, Axl told a friend that Love was trying to possess him. "He believes people are always trying to find a window through to control his energy," a friend says. How does Axl combat this? "By controlling the people who have access to him."

After he and Seymour broke up, in 1992, the model began dating Peter Brant. Axl, according to one friend, ordered subordinates to obtain a photograph of Brant's wife, Sandra. Axl intended to take it to Yoda for a specific purpose, according to a former Geffen employee: "Axl wanted to cast a spell around Sandra to protect her from Peter because he felt that she, too, had been cuckolded as he had been, and he had a great deal of sympathy for her." Even by loose New Age standards, Axl has received some bizarre advice over the years. After Axl's ex-wife, Erin Everly, the daughter of singer Don Everly and the

THROUGH A SERIES OF HAIRPIN TURNS AND steep grades, Latigo Canyon Road winds a couple of thousand feet up to the top of an arid hill near the Point Dume section of Malibu. The sun skims and slants and shimmers off the Pacific Ocean and the celebrity homes that crowd the beach below. Axl lives in a Mediterranean-style compound that was valued last year at \$3.8 million, a price tag fairly typical for the neighborhood. He moved into the canyon in 1992, paying a mortgage of about \$15,000 a month. Latigo was going to be the place where he and Seymour would live together as man and wife and raise their children.

Gardeners assiduously tend Axl's four acres, which are hidden from public view by trees and a fence. A lighted star on the side of Axl's house can be seen for miles by drivers on the Pacific Coast Highway. Axl's neighbors on the hill include the beach-volleyball star Gabrielle Reece.

The sound of falling water soothes the grounds, which also contain a tennis court and a pool. When Axl throws a party, the court doubles as a parking lot. The house itself is stocked with religious artifacts from Latin America, including Axl's vast collection of crucifixes. Axl plays pinball on the machines in his game room. Since the demise of GNR, he has shared the Latigo Canyon estate with tanks full of snakes and spiders and lizards, and with various friends, family members and live-in help. Axl's sister Amy Bailey, who used to run the GNR fan club,

FLASHBACK

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An Evening With Axl Rose

In 2000, the obsessive artist gave a rare look into his world and let 'Rolling Stone' listen to the work in progress that became 'Chinese Democracy'

IT IS 2 A.M. IN A DIMLY LIT RECORDING STUDIO deep in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley. Sitting back on a couch in the control room is a once omnipresent rock figure who has been out of public view for most of the past decade. The music he's been playing on this long night has been the focus of his obsessive perfectionism since 1991, when Guns N' Roses last released an album of new material. But in late November, Axl Rose played nearly a dozen tracks from the long-in-the-works Guns N' Roses album for ROLLING STONE and gave his first substantial interview in more than six years. He was only an hour late to do so.

Occasionally getting up to whisper details about what still must be done to complete the tracks - "I gotta put some guitar here" - Rose comes across as intense but hardly humorless as he speaks at length about his music and the fate of his former bandmates. At 36, Rose looks a bit older and more solidly built than the lean rock god of his "Sweet Child o' Mine" days, the result perhaps not just of the passage of time but of his kickboxing regimen and a lifestyle that's said to still be largely nocturnal but zealously healthy. He's dressed tonight in Abercrombie & Fitch, with his reddish hair intact and cut to a Prince Valiant-ish midlength. Having failed to deliver a new album by the end of the 20th century, is Rose ready to commit to releasing a record sometime during the 21st? "Yes, I think that would definitely be the right time," he answers, a slight grin coming to his face.

The new Guns N' Roses album is tentatively titled *Chinese Democracy* and is loosely scheduled for summer 2000. Rose confesses to being stung by skeptics who doubt what he can do. "There is the desire definitely to do it, to get over some of the hump of the people that are trying to keep you in the past," he says. "There are people that I thought I was friends with who are all of a sudden in the magazines, going, 'They'll never get anywhere

without Slash.' Thanks a lot. Like, I made this happen, you know? I basically figured out a way to save my own ass. There was only one way out, and I found it. Otherwise, you know, I believe my career was just going down the toilet. I figured out how to save my ass and then tried to bring everybody with me."

From time to time, Rose paces the studio where he has spent the past year recording and rerecording material (his workday tends to start around midnight and run through the early daylight hours). "What we're trying to do is build Guns N' Roses back into something," Rose explains quietly as he stands in front of a sunken isolation booth. "This wasn't Guns N' Roses, but I feel it is Guns N' Roses now."

Throughout the night, Rose seems anxious to finally have his say but wishes he could wait until the new album is released and can "speak for itself." Addressing the absence of his old band members, Rose suggests he simply needed to take control to survive. "It is the old story that you are told when you're a kid: 'Don't buy a car with your friends,'" he says. "Nobody could get the wheel. Everybody had the wheel. And when you have a bunch of guys, I'm tell-

ing you, you are driving the car off the cliff. The reality is, go buy those guys' solo records. There are neat ideas and parts there, but they wouldn't have worked for a Guns N' Roses record."

As for his reputation as a recluse locked away at his Malibu estate, Rose says, "The reality is that I'm not clubbing because I don't find it's in my best interest to be out there. I am building something slowly, and it doesn't seem to be so much out there as in here, in the studio and in my home. So many times, I have come down here and I had no idea that I was going to be able to. If you are working with issues that depressed the crap out of you, how do you know you can express it? At the time, you are just like, 'Life sucks.' Then you come down and you express 'Life sucks,' but in this really beautiful way." DAVID WILD



OUT OF THE SHADOWS

"What we're trying to do is build Guns N' Roses back into something."

and half-brother Stuart Bailey have stayed in the house at one time or another. Beta, who formerly worked as a nanny for Seymour, taking care of her son Dylan, doubles as chauffeur. She also travels with Axl; it was she by his side during the contretemps at the Phoenix airport in '98. "Beta moms him," a friend says. "She's as close as he's ever had to a real mother."

David Lank, a running buddy of Axl's from Indiana and an occasional GNR collaborator, bunked at Axl's place in Latigo Canyon for a while. Sabrina Okamoto, who served as the GNR tour masseuse, then worked for Axl after Guns split also stayed a time on the property. "When his friends were in need, he often was there to bail them out," a former associate says.

Axl throws a costume party every Halloween for friends and their families. Enormous pumpkins ring the swimming pool, and spiderwebs hang in the trees. Specially built mazes and forts rattle with squealing children. Almost as excited as a child, Axl himself has been known to dash around and toy with every attraction. One past guest gets the impression that Axl is trying to re-create his own childhood, albeit one better than his actually was. The Halloween scene in the past few years hasn't been what it once was. "His parties have been getting smaller and smaller," recalls one recent guest. "The ever-shrinking universe."

Last Halloween, Axl appeared outfitted as a pig, scaring a few of the children in attendance. Guests helped themselves to pasta and barbecued chicken; the loud rock & roll made conversation difficult.

Axl usually sleeps during the day and works at night. Beta or her son drives Axl to Rumbo Records in the San Fernando Valley. More and more, lately, Axl conducts most of his other business over the telephone.

Much of Axl's nonmusic and nonspiritual business concerns legal strategy. Besides his dispute with Everly, other matters have dragged on: He has ended up in court against Seymour; the band's original drummer, Steven Adler; the replacement guitarist Gilby Clarke; and various companies that did business with the band. Lately, Axl has been using threats of legal action to limit what people say about him. A few days after I talked with Alan Niven, GNR's former manager, who was fired in 1991, Doug Goldstein called me, threatening to sue Niven for allegedly breaching a confidentiality agreement. Niven later received a letter from Axl's personal lawyer in Los Angeles, demanding he contact ROLLING STONE and attempt to withdraw his comments. Failure to do so, Axl's lawyer warned, would result in "swift and sure legal action."

IN THE EARLY NINETIES, AXEL DEMANDED AND WAS granted sole control of the Guns N' Roses name. As to precisely where and when this happened, memories are fuzzy and contradictory, perhaps lost in the mists of rock & roll tour memory. Axl, backstage somewhere, is said to have basically issued an ultimatum: He'd get the name of the band or he wouldn't perform. Papers memorializing this transfer were drawn up, and guitarist Slash and bassist Duff McKagan signed them. What would it matter, really? Axl, Slash and Duff would always be, it seemed, the inseparable three. Money was everywhere. Guns N' Roses grossed \$57.9 million right out of the gate, in the four years from 1988 to 1992, according to documents produced during the Adler litigation. Overhead was enormous – expensive video shoots, first-class everything on the road, all the clichéd rock-star excess – but a \$57.9 million gross in that time span for a relatively new band is almost unheard of in rock & roll history.

After a 17.5 percent commission to management, Axl and his bandmates divvied up the money according to a specific formula, which Axl described once in court. During pre-production for *Appetite*, Axl said, "Slash devised a system of figuring out who wrote what parts of [a] song or part of a song. There were four categories, I believe. There was lyrics, melody, music – meaning guitars, bass and drums – and accompaniment and arrangement. And we split each one of those into 25 percent. . . . When we had finished, I had 41 percent, and other people had different amounts."

Axl, with Slash, had always controlled most of the band's affairs. By this time, Axl had full control. GNR began work on an album of original material, drawing from a Geffen advance thought to be around \$10 million – Madonna kind of money.

GNR released their fifth record, "*The Spaghetti Incident?*," in November 1993. It sold well, but nothing like *Appetite* or the *Illusion* records. The band began to unravel as Axl spent more time in court. He and Seymour argued violently at home in Malibu and broke up. Axl was devastated; he had wanted to marry her. "The split had an enormous effect on him," a friend says. "That was the first time in his life he had stability. And then he had nothing."

Lawsuits flew back and forth. Seymour charged that Axl had beaten her. Axl alleged it was she who had attacked him. According to Seymour's version of events, after an argument in their kitchen, Axl shattered some bottles on the floor, grabbed Seymour by the throat, put her in a headlock and then dragged her barefoot through the broken glass "while repeatedly hitting her about the head and upper body and kicking her in the abdomen." Axl's story was that Seymour grabbed his balls and he was just defending himself.

Erin Everly, long gone from Axl's life, soon joined the fray, filing a suit of her own in 1994. In a deposition, Everly's roommate, Meegan Hodges-Knight, Slash's former girlfriend, recalled some disturbing encounters with Axl.

"I'd wake up to Erin saying, 'Please stop. Don't hurt me, don't hurt me,' and Axl screaming at her," Hodges-Knight said. "Then all of a sudden he'd come out and he'd, like, break all of her really precious antiques, and she would be, 'Please don't break them, please,' and trying to get them back from him. He'd push her and break everything that he could get his hands on."

"I remember sleeping and waking up to crystal flying over my head, shattering on the floor."

Sometimes, Slash was there when Axl went off on Erin.

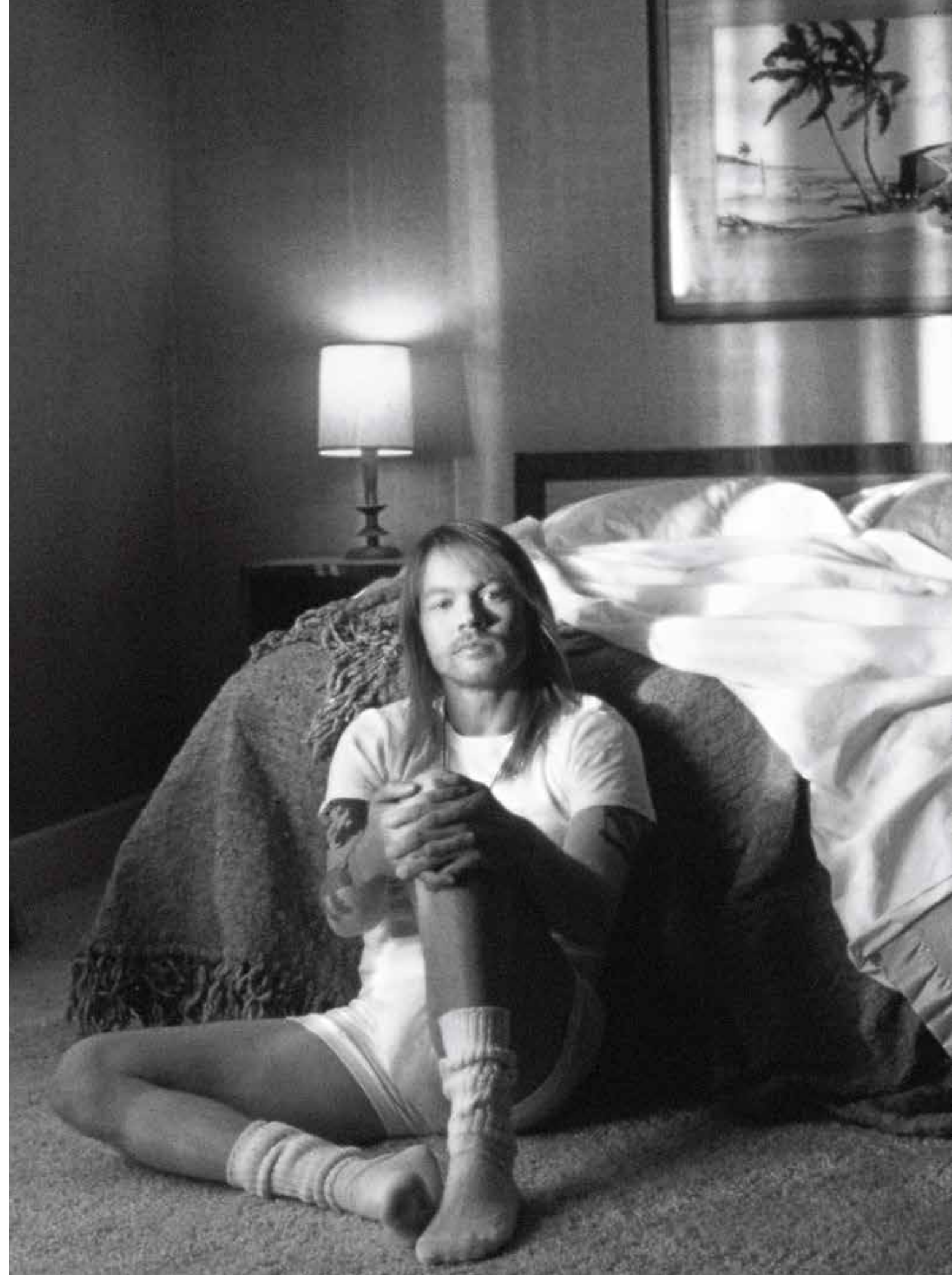
"I remember asking Slash to do something or I was going to do something," Hodges-Knight remembered. "I said, 'I have to do something,' or something like that. And he said, 'No, you're going to make it worse.'"

Hodges-Knight testified that Axl kicked Everly with his cowboy boots and dragged her around by the hair one night while she was wearing a see-through tank top and panties, threw a television set at her (it missed) and spit on her. "That pig," she said. "He spit on her."

Everly herself claimed Axl sexually assaulted her. An unreleased version of the video for the GNR song "It's So Easy," directed by Englishman Nigel Dick, features Everly in bondage gear, with a red ball in her mouth, as Axl screams, "See me hit you! You fall down!" The singer, according to a former associate, went to some lengths to gather up the few existing copies of the tape after Everly went to court against him.

Both cases were eventually settled. Seymour's lawyer, Michael Plonsker, won't

ON AN ISLAND
In 1994, as Guns N' Roses were beginning to unravel





ME AGAINST THE WORLD

“They would work on something, and then they’d put it aside and go back to it a year, six months later,” Moby recalled of working with Rose on *Chinese Democracy*. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it never came out.”

comment except to say that the suit was resolved “amicably.” Despite their claims of injury and abuse, neither Erin Everly nor Stephanie Seymour ever filed criminal charges against Axl Rose in connection with the events described.

Izzy Stradlin’s replacement, Gilby Clarke, meanwhile, left the band. And rejoined. And left again. After failing to receive royalties he claimed were due him, Clarke sued in 1995. He says he didn’t want to go to court but decided he had to because nobody in the GNR camp would call him back. GNR countersued. The matter was settled with an undisclosed payment to Clarke.

Unsure of Axl’s intentions, Slash and Duff drifted into other projects. Slash, Duff and drummer Matt Sorum participated in numerous sessions for the new record. Complementing this ensemble were the loyal GNR keyboard player, Dizzy Reed, and Axl’s old friend from Indiana, guitarist Paul Huger. Slash and Duff didn’t click with him. “Nice enough guy,” says a friend of the three musicians. “But they’re Guns N’ Roses, for God’s sake – great band, great players. He’s not that good. Doesn’t have the chops.” In 1996, Slash walked away. Sorum was fired. Duff hung on until the end of 1997, then quit in disgust. “The record wasn’t going anywhere,” says a GNR source. “Duff reached a point where he said, ‘I don’t need this in my life anymore. This is too insane. This is rock & roll. It’s supposed to be fun.’”

Slash is angry, now, about giving up rights to the GNR name. “I was blindsided by it, more or less a legal faux pas,” he complained to the Internet news service Addicted to Noise in January 1997. “I’d be lying to say I wasn’t a little bit peeved at that.

It’d be one thing if I quit altogether. But I haven’t, and the fact that he can actually go and [record a new GNR record] without the consent of the other members of the band. . . .”

Slash continued, “Axl’s whole visionary style, as far as his input in Guns N’ Roses, is completely different from mine. I just like to play guitar, write a good riff, go out there and play, as opposed to presenting an image.”

The relationship between Axl and Slash remains deeply fractured, though Slash has never closed the door on getting back together. The two men have not spoken to each other in four years. When work was under way last year on a long-overdue live GNR double album, *Live Era ’87-’93*, Axl and Slash interacted only through their respective managers. “It was all very odd,” says a source. “Slash and Duff would get together and work on it, and Axl would be sent CDs. He never came to the studio when they were there. It was done in shifts.”

Finally released last November after long delays, *Live Era* was not the blockbuster everyone had hoped it would be. Sales have been underwhelming: 403,000 units as of early April. Promotion of the record was limited to television and print advertising. There was barely a peep from any of the old band members – following, some believe, an Axl decree.

For the new record, Axl hired a legion of talented players from across the popular-music spectrum: Tommy Stinson, the former Replacement; Dave Abbruzzese, Pearl Jam’s former drummer; Robin Finck of Nine Inch Nails; Dave Navarro, former Jane’s Addiction guitarist; Josh Freese of the Vandals; and

Zakk Wylde from Ozzy Osbourne’s band. They jammed at the Complex in L.A. and at Rumbo Recorders for months at a time, usually at night. Axl brought in a showroom full of guitars and effects. “It’s a musical-instrument convention,” one observer says. “He has more knobs and keyboards and strings and wire and wood in there than you could possibly imagine could even be manufactured.” Of Axl’s guitar setup, Abbruzzese recalls, “You could hunt buffalo with his rig. It had a lot of lights, a lot of blinking lights, a lot of things that you stepped on. It sounded like a freight train that was somehow playable.”

Axl was distracted by events tragic, potentially tragic and strange. His mother, Sharon Bailey, died in May 1996 at the age of 51. Wildfires nipped at the edges of Axl’s Latigo Canyon property the same year. The following May, Axl’s old friend and songwriting partner West Arkeen died from a drug overdose at the age of 36. A frequent visitor to the studio says, “When Stephanie’s birthday came around, Axl seemed to shut down for weeks. A lot of this record is about Stephanie. She was his perfect woman, at least his image of what she should be.”

Axl was usually all business in the studio. Excessive use of drugs or alcohol was frowned upon. Axl composed at the piano. The other musicians contributed ideas and riffs, but Axl was clearly in charge.

When Zakk Wylde arrived at the Complex, where Axl was re-

ing as you thought it was,” says a source. “When you have a support system and decisions are made communally and quickly, things move. There’s energy. It becomes alive, it becomes real. Once you’re on your own, you drive it yourself, you make all the decisions yourself. You sit and worry about it.”

Axl himself, friends say, seems healthier, less angry – and still a maze of contradictions. He likes to think he makes all the decisions in his life, yet he listens carefully to New Age counselors. He feels like the world revolves around him, but he refuses most requests to speak publicly about himself. He believes in justice, but he doesn’t believe he has to be fair. He can be an incisive observer of human weakness in his songs, yet when it comes to his own conduct, he has little perspective.

“Axl’s really easy to hate, and he doesn’t understand why,” a friend observes. “He lives in a fantasy world, a parallel universe. He’s self-centered, like a child, but not so naive. When he calls, all he wants to talk about is his record and how Interscope can’t fix things for him.”

“A family is what Axl wants more than anything in life,” another friend says. “He wants to find within himself the ability to show affection.”

On September 22nd, Axl issued a statement, his first in years. The document was by turns bitter (Axl referred to Matt Sorum as a “former employee”), funny (“Power to the people,

“Axl’s whole visionary style is different from mine,” says Slash. “I just like to play guitar.”

hearing, he was slightly surprised. “There were never any melodies,” Wylde recalls. “There were never any lyrics.” The music Wylde heard during a period of several months sounded like “Guns on steroids.” Wylde felt sorry for Axl. “The poor fuckin’ guy’s got every fuckin’ cunt trying to sue his ass,” Wylde says. “I’d be on the phone with him. He’d be telling me about all these strategic moves his lawyers were making. I was listening to him playing *Axix & Allies* on the fuckin’ phone.” Wylde left to record with his new band, Black Label Society.

“I found it difficult to chart a linear development of the songs that they were working on,” recalls Moby. “They would work on something, it would be a sketch for a while, and then they’d put it aside and go back to it a year, six months later.

“He became a little bit defensive when I asked him about the vocals. He just said that he was going to get to them eventually,” Moby continues. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the record never came out, they’ve been working on it for such a long time.”

I asked Moby whether Axl seemed at peace. Moby thought carefully. “He seemed like he had an idea of what being at peace would be like, and he was working toward that.”

Musically, at least, Axl seems to have what he wants: complete control. If the new GNR record becomes a spectacular hit, the six-year delay in making it and the millions spent on it won’t matter. Axl will have proved his doubters wrong and probably will have also ended any hope of getting the original band back together. But there is such a thing as having too much control.

“One of the aspects of being a megalomaniac is the discovery that sometimes being in a decisive situation is not so appeal-

peace out and blame Canada,” he signed off) and incomprehensible. Axl announced, “OH MY GOD etc. deals with the societal repression of deep and often agonizing emotions – some of which may be willingly accepted for one reason or another – the appropriate expression of which (one that promotes a healing, release and a positive resolve) is often discouraged and many times denied.” Whatever that means. “The appropriate expression and vehicle for such emotions and concepts is not something taken for granted.”

Axl, in recent months, promised, through his manager, to take time from his recording schedule and pen exclusively for *ROLLING STONE* his version of how and why Guns N’ Roses broke up. Months went by, and this missive never materialized. Then, days before this story went to press, Doug Goldstein proclaimed, “Good news!” Axl was ready to hand over a 10,000-word-plus essay. A day later, Goldstein withdrew that promise and ended all communication with *ROLLING STONE*.

David Bowie exiled himself to Berlin in the 1970s, and Berlin motivated him. Working with Brian Eno, Bowie made three of his best records. After the Doors tour of 1970, Jim Morrison retreated to Paris to try to dry out, write poetry, walk the streets and consider new challenges. For Axl Rose, the arc of his fame remains stuck, languishing near its 1993 high point. Self-imposed exile seems to have failed him. Unlike Bowie or Morrison, Axl Rose did not seek a new environment for inspiration or salvation. He only looked inward. He went home, retreating to an airless room from which he has yet to emerge.