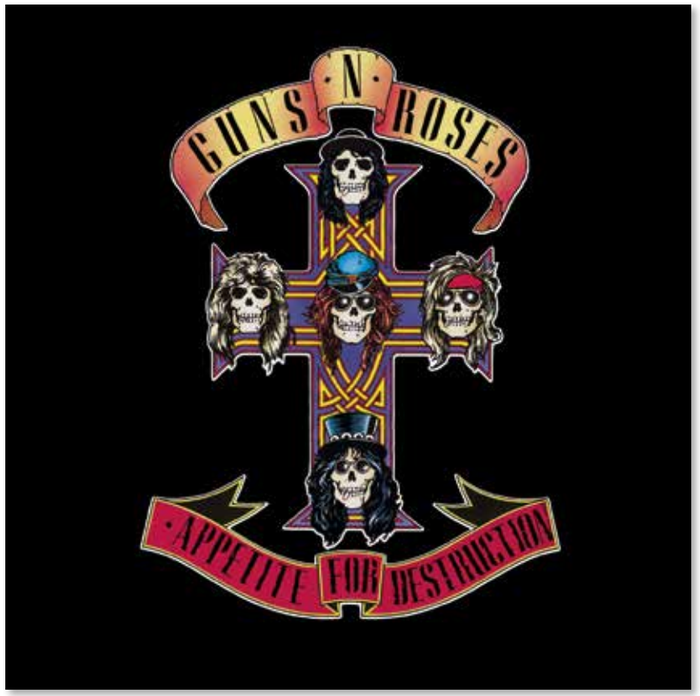
The Ultimate Album Guide

Metal classics, epic ballads and a lifetime of tortured genius – how Guns N' Roses remade rock & roll

DESTROYERS
Axl and Slash in L.A., 1986



Appetite for Destruction

The fusion of punk and metal that blew the Eighties wide open

By Brian Hiatt

Released July 21st, 1987

AXL ROSE WAS LYING NUDE INSIDE A MANhattan recording studio's darkened vocal booth, working out some unorthodox last-minute overdubs. Tape was rolling, and he knew something wasn't right. Beneath him was a 19-year-old stripper named Adriana Smith, who happened to be his drummer's girlfriend. "Come on, Adriana, make it real," Rose barked. "Stop faking!"

On a warm weekend evening in the spring of 1987, a top-of-the-line vocal microphone was immortalizing the sounds of Rose and Smith having sex. She was drunk and giggly that day, but Smith eventually gave Rose what he wanted: She says that her orgasmic moans, heard high in the mix on *Appetite for Destruction*'s final track, "Rocket Queen," are genuine.

That bit of debauchery was, aptly enough, one of the final touches added to *Appetite,* which went on to sell well over 15 million copies in this country alone, becoming one of the best-selling debuts ever. With a ferocious, sexy hard rock that found common ground between Aerosmith and the Sex Pistols, Lynyrd Skynyrd and the New York Dolls, the album looked both forward and backward: The punky rawness of its sound and the pained artistry of its lyrics made it a bridge between commercial Eighties metal and the alternative music of the next decade.

But *Appetite* was also among the last classic rock records to be mastered with vinyl in mind, to be edited with a razor blade applied to two-inch tape, to be mixed by five people frantically pushing faders at a nonautomated mixing board. "We used classic instruments and classic amps," says the album's producer and engineer, Mike Clink. "Our approach was reminiscent of stuff that was done in the Sixties and early Seventies." Adds assistant mixing engineer Victor Deyglio, who was credited as "Victor 'the fuckin' engineer'" for manning the "Rocket Queen" overdubs, "It could almost be seen as the last of one of those types of records, from *Layla* to *Abbey Road* on down. It could be seen as the last great rock record made totally by hand."

Guns saw themselves as reviving rock's vanished rebel spirit. "Me, Axl and Slash, we knew what we wanted since we were 11, 12 years old," says Steven Adler. "And we went balls out for it, and there was nothing or no one that was going to stand in

JUNGLE LOVE The band in 1987

our way. I wanted to be fuckin' Roger Taylor from Queen. We wanted to be like Aerosmith, Kiss, Zeppelin – bands like that."

The classic Guns N' Roses lineup came together for its first rehearsal in a Silver Lake, L.A., studio in May 1985. "The moment that we fuckin' slammed into our first chord, there was something, and we all knew it," says Duff McKagan. "We were only 20 years old, but we considered ourselves real veterans. It felt like, 'This is the band, this is it. This is what we've all been searching for.'" Before rehearsal, McKagan and Izzy Stradlin had helped shape the band's sound by hiding all of Adler's extra drums, transforming his setup from cheesy pop-metal excess to punk-rock simplicity.

Rose and Stradlin already had completed some future Guns N' Roses songs at that point, including the minor *Appetite* tracks "Anything Goes" and "Think About You," along with "Back Off Bitch" and "Don't Cry," which the band didn't release until *Use Your Illusion I* in 1991. They also had an early version of "November Rain," according to demo producer Manny Charlton. "I told [Axl], 'That's a great song, that's got to be on the album,'" Charlton says. "He goes, 'No, no, it's for the second album.' He had his plan. He had it pretty much figured out."

The rest of the *Appetite* songs came together over the next few months. The group's first songwriting collaboration was "Welcome to the Jungle" – Slash played the main riff for Rose while they hung out in Slash's mom's basement. "I picked up my guitar, standing in front of the couch on one knee, and said, 'Check this out,'" Slash says. "And it stuck with him."

Later, McKagan wrote the song's trippy breakdown, and Slash remembers Stradlin putting together the bridge. "Axl was very open," McKagan says. "He wasn't like, 'I'm the singer, I must write all the stuff.' It was serving the music; it wasn't serving the ego. We didn't have egos yet." "Nightrain" combined a joke chorus named after a cheap brand of wine the band favored and a rough riff Stradlin had introduced. "Izzy had this thing where he'd play, like, half the notes," McKagan says. "It was cool, it was his style. Slash and I would have to figure out what he meant to play."

Before signing their record deal, most of GNR lived, rehearsed and wrote songs in a cramped, vermin-ridden rehearsal space with no toilet on the corner of Sunset and Gardner Street. "I can't remember one night that we actually slept quietly there, like, 'Good night, Axl.' 'Good night, Slash,'" says Slash. "It was more like that's where our shit was and that's where you could pass out."

At the time, the band got by with a little help from its exotic-dancer friends. "Strippers were our main source of income," Slash adds. "They'd pay for booze, sometimes you could eat, shit like that. Really a great bohemian, gypsy lifestyle. I have great memories of those renegade strippers that took their chances with us." In that space, McKagan and Adler would hold daily practices of their own – they'd spend hours playing along together to funk tunes by Prince and Cameo ("Word Up!" was a favorite), locking in tight and growing comfortable with swinging rhythms that also reflected Adler's love of Kiss' Peter Criss. McKagan says the groove of "Rocket Queen" owes a particular debt to Cameo.

The band signed to Geffen in March 1986, but struggled for months to find managers and producers who were both willing to handle its extreme behavior and able to understand its musical goals. When one prospective producer, Kiss' Paul Stanley, suggested rewriting the chorus to "Nightrain," Rose immediately rejected him, refusing to even look in his direction. The band's A&R rep, Tom Zutaut, also tried to get Mötley Crüe's Nikki Sixx to produce the group; he wasn't interested, though he'd later regret that decision. Recalls Zutaut, "Whoever they were introduced to, there was always some problem."

As money ran low, Zutaut came up with the idea to raise some funds and aim for some local radio play by releasing "test recordings" from a session with Quiet Riot producer Spencer Proffer and metal veteran Hans-Peter Heuber as an EP called *Live ?!*@ Like a Suicide,* complete with crowd noise cut in from a Seventies live album. The EP included only two original songs, neither of which was as strong as the *Appetite* material. "Part of the idea was to save the best stuff for *Appetite* and to not use it up," says Zutaut.

After months of inaction, the band finally found a manager it could stand in the tough, brainy Englishman Alan Niven. And in quick succession, it found a producer, too: Clink, a recording engineer who combined superb technical skills with an unusual amount of patience. Plus, the group had written one last song: "Sweet Child o' Mine." Slash was fooling around with the song's signature riff one day as a "goofy personal exercise," and Stradlin started playing chords along with it. Unbeknownst to either of the guitarists, Rose was listening from his room upstairs and writing lyrics. Says Slash, "If Axl hadn't been there writing those lyrics, chances are that song would have never existed." (Rose has disputed this version of events.)

The band rehearsed with Clink for weeks. Clink had worked with acts as commercial as Survivor and Eddie Money, and his instincts were to pare the songs down – he wanted to cut the breakdown section of "Welcome to the Jungle," for instance. "And then Slash said to me, 'No, this is a very important part of the song,'" says Clink. "So it was a learning experience for me."

By the time they entered Rumbo Recorders – owned by the Captain, of Captain and Tennille fame – in January 1987, they just had to play the best versions of what they had rehearsed. "The songs were under their skin," says Clink, "and they could play them in their sleep, and that was the idea of rehearsing for that long." The musicians spent just two weeks laying down basic tracks, with Clink splicing together the best takes with his razor blade. The hardest song to record, recalls Adler, was "Paradise City." The double-time part at the end was different in each take they laid down. "I was going, 'Dude, come on, when are we going to end this already?'" he says. "Because we ended it different every time. Depending on how Slash felt. But it came out perfect."

Clink worked 18-hour days for the next month, with Slash overdubbing in the afternoon and evening, and Rose cutting vocals till the sun came up. Slash spent hours with Clink, paring down and structuring his solos until they were as catchy as the vocal melodies. Rose – mostly a high screamer onstage until that point – unveiled an uncanny vocal range, adding a low harmony part to the opening of "Paradise City" and an unearthly, police-siren-like wail at the beginning of "Welcome to the Jungle." "We had to channel all these voices and figure out what worked," says Clink. "With the intro to 'Welcome to the Jungle,' he didn't just open his mouth and that happened: We tried multiple, multiple takes to make sure it was the right growl." The total budget for the album was about $370,000 – an extravagant sum for a debut at the time.

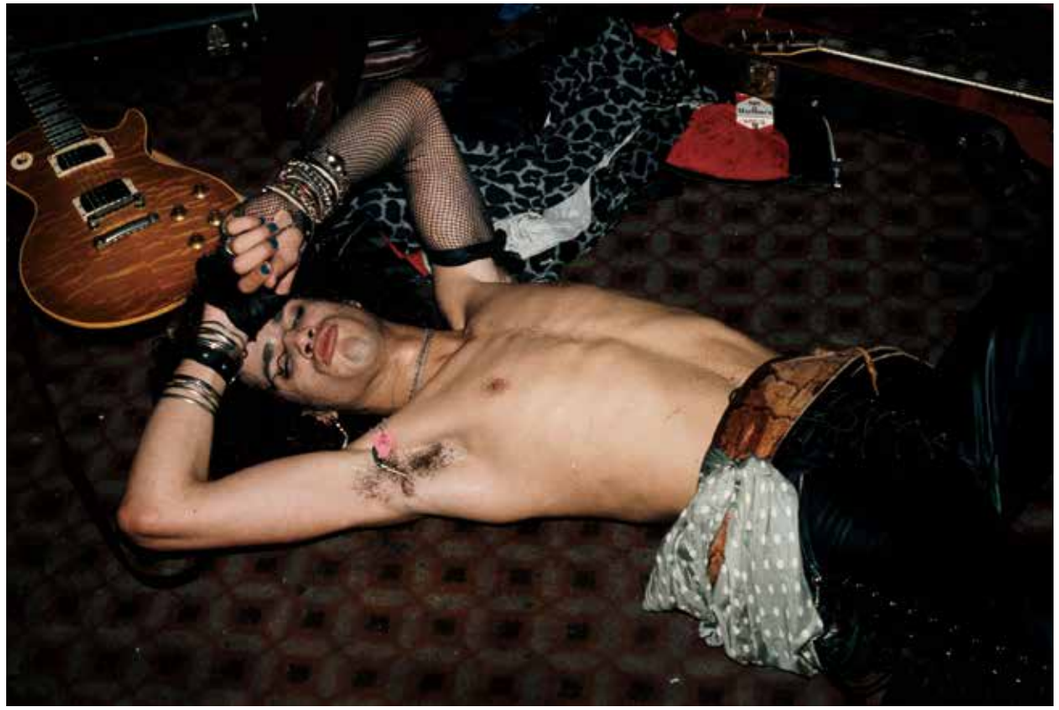
Five months after its release, by December 1987, *Appetite for Destruction* had sold about 200,000 copies, with minimal radio airplay. Geffen execs told Zutaut and Niven that the album had done well for a baby band's debut, and it was time to pull Guns off the road and have them record a follow-up. Zutaut pleaded with company founder David Geffen to use his clout to push MTV to add the "Welcome to the Jungle" video. When the network ended up playing it one time, at 4 a.m. on a Sunday, its switchboard flooded with requests for the clip – and, seemingly, every angry kid in America drove to the mall and picked up a copy of the album. When the "Sweet Child o' Mine" video came out about six months later, female fans came in by the millions. "I remember looking at my monitor and thinking, 'This sucks, this is really ordinary,'" director Nigel Dick says of that shoot. "And there were some girls from the label who were peeking over my shoulder, and one said, 'This is so fucking cool.' I quickly readjusted my opinion."

Though they reigned for the next four years as the biggest band in the world, Guns N' Roses' story got messier from there. After parting ways with the original lineup, Rose labored for years on an album that he hoped would match the band's debut. "It's because of *Appetite* that it [was] so hard for him to let go of *Chinese Democracy*," says Zutaut. "He made it clear that he was trying to put out a record that would change the world as much as *Appetite*, and be better than *Appetite*."

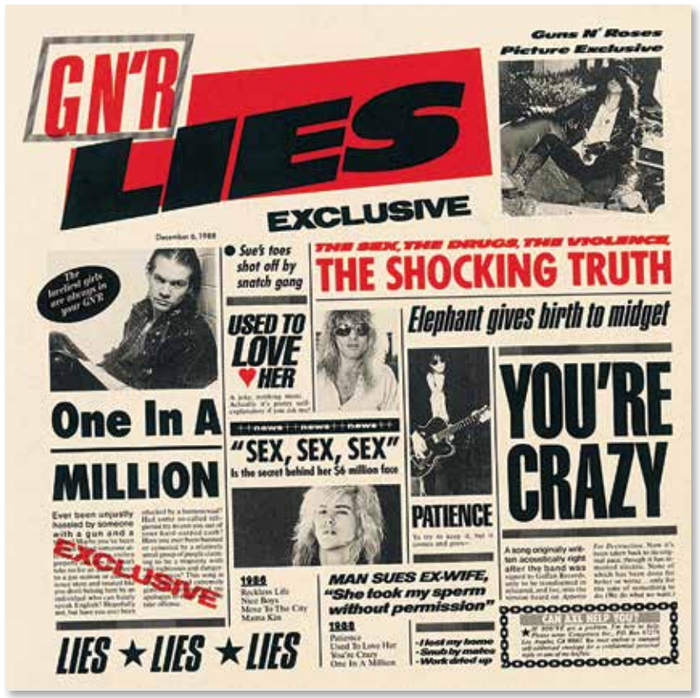
For Slash, the album is purely a point of pride. "When I was a kid, there were these be-with-you-forever albums that represented something in your life," he says. "Whether it was the background music of your childhood or your puberty or whatever – *Dark Side of the Moon* or *Sticky Fingers* or Aerosmith's *Rocks* or *Led Zeppelin IV*. And we made one of those records, which is all I could ever have asked for. It gives me goose bumps. That's something no one ever can take away from me."

A version of this piece appeared in RS 1032, August 9th, 2007

"'Dark Side of the Moon,' 'Sticky Fingers,' 'Led Zeppelin IV.' We made one of those records."



SLASH AND BURN
"Sweet Child o' Mine" began when Slash was fooling around with the signature riff one day as a "goofy personal exercise" and Stradlin started playing along. Unbeknownst to either guitarist, Rose was listening from upstairs and writing lyrics.


GN'R LIES
EXCLUSIVE
Guns N' Roses Picture Exclusive
THE SEX, THE DRUGS, THE VIOLENCE,
THE SHOCKING TRUTH
Sue's toes shot off by snatch gang
USED TO LOVE HER
Elephant gives birth to midget
One In A MILLION
"SEX, SEX, SEX"
Is the secret behind her $6 million face
YOU'RE CRAZY
PATIENCE
MAN SUES EX-WIFE, "She took my sperm without permission"
LIES ★ LIES ★ LIES

GN'R Lies

The tossed-off record that engulfed the band in controversy

By Greg Milner

Released November 29th, 1988

In early 1988, during a break from touring, Guns N' Roses booked a couple of days in the studio to knock out a few acoustic songs. "We figured [it] would be good for B sides or whatever," Duff McKagan recalled. Instead, the session became the root of their next release, the EP *GN'R Lies*.

One of the songs the band cut that afternoon, the tender ballad "Patience," written by Izzy Stradlin and Axl Rose, showed a deepening sensitivity. Others were sharper-edged: Stradlin brought in "Used to Love Her," a tongue-in-cheek misogynistic country song, and *Appetite for Destruction*'s "You're Crazy" was remade "a lot bluesier," according to Slash, "the way me and Axl and Izzy originally wrote it." But Rose's contribution, "One in a Million," with its vicious lyrics about "niggers" and "faggots," proved to be the rare Guns N' Roses song that could shock Guns N' Roses. "I cringed," McKagan recalled.

To fill out the release, the band included four songs from *Live ?!*@ Like a Suicide*, the "test recording" they'd made with Quiet Riot producer Spencer Proffer shortly after signing with Geffen Records, in 1986. Between songs, rapturous crowd noise – taken from the 1978 Texxas Jam music festival – was added for comic effect.

When *GN'R Lies* was released, its liner notes flagged "Used to Love Her" as "a joke, nothing more." But no one was laughing. "We've had three recent murders where men have killed their wives, and this song was playing during that time," a town councilman in Brookhaven, New York, claimed. "It could be a connection." The response to "One in a Million" was even worse. The band got bumped from a June 1989 benefit concert for AIDS research at Radio City Music Hall.

Some later insisted Rose was adopting a persona, but the singer admitted the lyrics were autobiographical, reflecting his experiences in L.A. after relocating from Indiana. Still, he did bristle at being called a racist. "If you don't have a problem with black people, then don't call them niggers," said Vernon Reid of the band Living Colour when they shared a stage with GNR opening for the Rolling Stones in 1989.

"The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not judge,' and I guess I made a judgment call, and it was an insult," Rose told Rolling Stone in 1992. "I can understand how people would think that, but that's not how I meant it."

YOU'RE CRAZY
Rose in Brooklyn, 1987.

Use Your Illusion I & II

The band was falling apart, but its creativity was at a peak

By Kory Grow

Released September 17th, 1991

In April 1990, the classic lineup of Guns N' Roses played its final show. The occasion was the nationally televised Farm Aid concert, a disastrous set that included, among several bizarre highlights, Steven Adler drunkenly belly-flopping in the general direction of his drum set only to miss by four feet, and Axl Rose ending the live broadcast with a climactic "Good fuckin' night." It was the mark of a band breaking apart.

Amazingly, though, the imploding GNR were in the midst of an artistic surge. One of the songs played at Farm Aid (in a version hampered by Adler's inability to learn it) was "Civil War," a sweeping epic that would eventually open the second disc of the massive 30-song, two-and-a-half-hour opus they were hard at work on throughout 1990 and '91. Slash would later liken *Use Your Illusion I* and *II* to the Beatles' White Album (though "maybe not as good"), a titanic mix of gritty ragers, passionate rock-opera ballads and self-indulgent screeds – from the failed-relationship triptych of "Don't Cry," "November Rain" and "Estranged" to the rock-critic indictment "Get in the Ring" to the misogynistic double-header of "Bad Obsession" and "Back Off Bitch." "Thirty-five of the most self-indulgent Guns N' Roses songs," Slash said. "For most bands, it would take four to six years to come up with this much stuff." Like the White Album, it was brilliance created amid collapse.

The band began seriously considering a follow-up to *Appetite for Destruction* in the summer of 1989, during a fruitful writing session that took place in Chicago. Izzy Stradlin, who had recently sobered up and often traveled separate from his bandmates, was especially productive. "Izzy has brought in eight songs – at least," Rose said in 1990. "Slash has brought in a whole album. I've brought in an album. Duff [McKagan] knows everybody's material backwards. So we've got, like, 35 songs we like, and we want to put them all out, and we're determined to do that." Discussing his newfound sobriety, Stradlin reflected, "I just reached a point where I said, 'I'm gonna kill myself. Why die for this shit?'"

The Chicago meeting spawned, among other songs, "Estranged" (about Rose's divorce from Erin Everly, daughter of rock & roller Don Everly), the rocker "Bad Apples," the bondage jaunt "Pretty Tied Up" and "Get in the Ring."

GNR began work in earnest in January 1990, a little over a year after the release of *Lies*, with an attempt at recording "Civil War," a tune they'd sketched out in 1988 and later donated to a compilation benefiting Romanian orphans. Immediately, Adler's drug problem became an insurmountable obstacle. Addicted to heroin, he began nodding off at his kit. "I said to Slash, 'Dude, I'm so sick that I can't do it right now,'" the drummer once recalled. "And he said, 'We can't waste the money. We got to do it now.'"

After consulting with lawyers, the bandmates put Adler on probation, and within a matter of months, they'd kicked him out altogether. "He was so messed up he couldn't pull off the drum tracks," Slash said. "And he would lie to us [about getting clean]. We'd go over to his place and find drugs behind the toilet, under the sink."

Nevertheless, the band pushed forward. It solved the drummer problem by recruiting Matt Sorum, of British hard rockers the Cult. "He was fucking amazing," Slash wrote in his autobiography, recalling a Cult show he attended in April 1990.

Around the same time, Rose brought in keyboardist Dizzy Reed. Reed had known the group since its earliest days, when a band he was in practiced in a space next to GNR's studio. In early 1990, he called Rose in a panic. Reed, who'd previously auditioned for GNR, told the singer he'd soon be homeless; Rose offered him a job. "They fucking saved my life," Reed said. Reed would become the only musician other than Rose to stay in the band in the years leading up to its current reunion.

With the new lineup in place, work continued more smoothly. The first tune they recorded with Sorum was a cover of Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," for the soundtrack to the 1990 Tom Cruise racing movie, *Days of Thunder*. "We would get to the studio at noon," Sorum recalls. "We were serious about the work ethic. We'd cut a song and then take a break at one of our favorite bars for a drink or two and then cut another track or two. We never did a lot of takes of a song. We'd get it in two to three takes." (They also recorded a number of covers during the sessions, some of which showed up on *"The Spaghetti Incident?"*; among them was a version of Wings' James Bond anthem "Live and Let Die," which Rose once called "Welcome to the Jungle 2."

> **"We were serious about the work ethic. We never did a lot of takes. We'd get it in two or three."**

Digging deep into their history, Guns revived several holdovers from the *Appetite for Destruction* days, and earlier. Even though Slash would later say the bass-thwacking rocker "You Could Be Mine" was too reminiscent of *Appetite* to fit the mood of the *Illusion* albums, it would eventually appear in the 1991 movie *Terminator 2* and be released as a single. There was also the punky, two-and-a-half-minute "Perfect Crime," which Stradlin had brought to their first-ever preproduction session.

Then there were Rose's ballads, ostensibly kept off *Appetite* so as not to soften Guns N' Roses' image. Rose once claimed that "Don't Cry" was the first song he'd written for the band. "It was [about] a girl that Izzy had gone out with," Rose said, "and I was really attracted to her, and they split up. I was sitting outside the Roxy, and I was really in love with this person and she was realizing this wasn't gonna work – she wanted to do other things, and she was telling me goodbye and I sat down and just started crying, and she was telling me, 'Don't cry.' The next night, we got together and wrote the song in five minutes."

The band ultimately put different versions of "Don't Cry" on each of the *Use Your Illusion* discs, an original version on the first volume, retelling Rose's story, and an "alternate lyrics" take done impromptu in the studio, in which the breakup is dealt with more forcefully. "I prefer the new version because the original is kind of like a nostalgia piece for me," Rose later recalled.

Another song Rose had been holding on to since at least 1986 was "November Rain." In 1988, he effusively told Rolling Stone about how proud he was of the track, threatening, "If it's not recorded right, I'll quit the business." The singer would later explain that "November Rain" was "about not wanting to be in a state of having to deal with unrequited love." In the years leading up to the *Illusion* sessions, they'd demo'ed it with guitar and solo piano – one version was 18 minutes long – but the song didn't come into its own until Rose workshopped it in the studio, carefully creating tones to replicate a full symphony on his keyboards.

"We listened to Elton John for inspiration for the drum fills and overall tone," Sorum says. "I vividly remember sitting with Axl listening to [John's] 'Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me' and Axl pointing out the style of the tom fills."

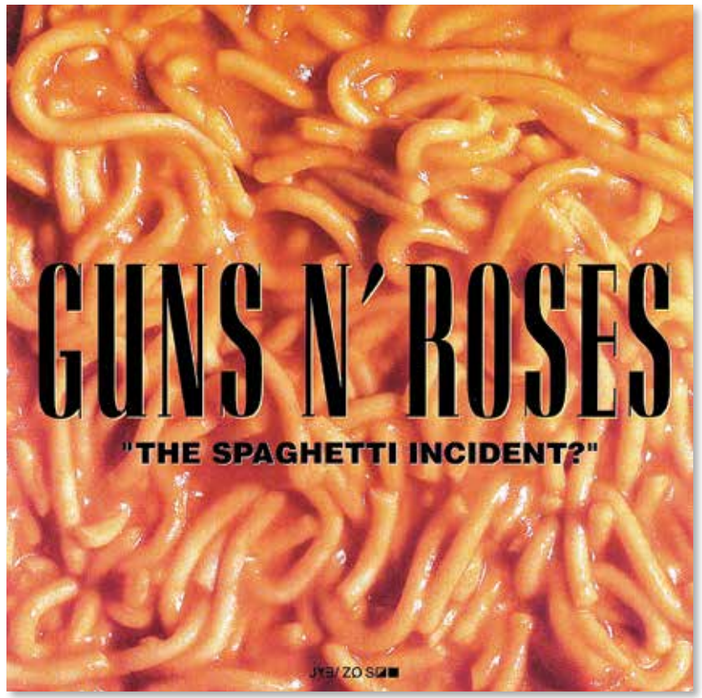
For the spoken-word sections of the uptempo rocker "The Garden," Guns N' Roses turned to an old friend. Shock rocker Alice Cooper had taken the band out on his Nightmare Returns Tour in 1986, and Rose, Slash and Stradlin accompanied him on a 1988 rerecording of his hit "Under My Wheels." A couple of years later, Cooper got a call from Rose at two in the morning.

"I'm used to doing things in an hour," Cooper says. "I know Axl likes to take his time, but if you can't get a vocal like that in an hour, there's something wrong. So I told him upfront, 'I have a tee-off time tomorrow at seven. We're doing this in about an hour.' I did it in two takes. I don't know how long it took him to do all of his takes, but it ended up sounding really, really good."

In an omen of the darkness surrounding the band, police discovered a dismembered arm and head in the dumpster behind the studio where GNR were recording. Stradlin would reference the incident in the sinewy "Double Talkin' Jive." "Izzy had gone back to Indiana, and when the police found the body parts, he flew back out and sang the opening line and the final vocal," Sorum recalls.

When they were released in September 1991 – a week before Nirvana's game-changing LP *Nevermind* – the *Use Your Illusion* albums were immediate hits, selling more than 14 million copies combined. "There's a ton of material we want to get out, and the problem is, how does one release all of it?" Slash said of the unusual twin-disc offering. "You don't make some kid go out and buy a record for $70 if it's your second record."

The gambit made history: No other artist had put out two records on the same day and claimed the top two spots on the *Billboard* album chart before. "We poured everything into those albums," Sorum says of their creation. "The music was all that mattered."



'The Spaghetti Incident?'

The band let loose on a covers LP full of punk-rock favorites

By Christopher R. Weingarten

Released November 23rd, 1993

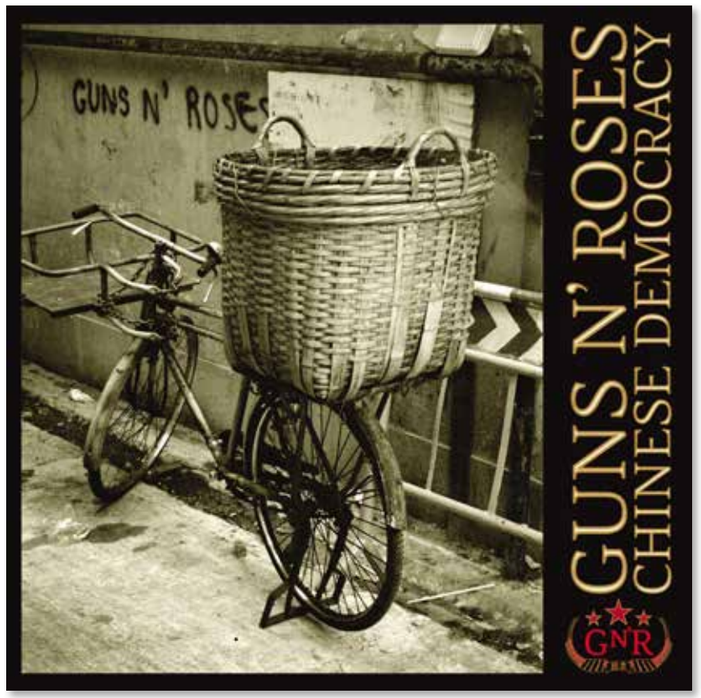
THE "USE YOUR ILLUSION" SESSIONS WERE arduous for Guns N' Roses. So, as they ground out eight-minute epics like "Estranged" and "November Rain," they often recharged by knocking out fun punk covers like the Stooges' "Raw Power" and the Damned's "New Rose." Slash later said it was a way "to alleviate the pressure of making the *Illusions* records." In late 1993, those covers were collected on *"The Spaghetti Incident?,"* the final GNR release to feature Izzy Stradlin, Slash and Duff McKagan. "I went back to Indiana and painted the house," Stradlin, the first to leave the band, said of his departure. After the split, the remaining members had new guitarist Gilby Clark rerecord Stradlin's parts on the covers they'd already laid down.

A major influence on the emerging LP was Michael Monroe, former frontman of Finnish glam rockers Hanoi Rocks, who was in Los Angeles to record blues harp and saxophone on the *Use Your Illusion* track "Bad Obsession." When Axl Rose told him he'd never listened to Seventies CBGB band the Dead Boys, Monroe dubbed him a cassette and the pair blasted it while driving around Hollywood. "When he heard 'Ain't It Fun,' he called Slash and said, 'Let's put the band together tomorrow – we gotta record this song,'" Monroe recalls.

"Ain't It Fun" was especially significant for Monroe, who had briefly lived with Dead Boys frontman Stiv Bators before his death in 1990. Monroe and Rose recorded their slow-swaying cover, surrounded by candles, face to face. "In some places he sounds so much like Stiv it was not really a duet – it was like a trio," says Monroe. The song became the album's first single.

"The Dead Boys were kind of becoming a footnote," says founding member Cheetah Chrome. "Having your song on a Guns N' Roses record is a considerable chunk of change." Rose even joked that he wanted to call the LP *The Pension Fund*.

Instead, its odd title was a reference to GNR's legal battle with former drummer Steven Adler, who was suing the band for contributing to his drug addiction. "Steven kept his blow in the refrigerator. So his code word for his stash was 'spaghetti,'" McKagan recalled. "So then I'm in court, with a jury and the whole thing, and this fuckin' lawyer gets up, and with a straight face says, 'Mr. McKagan, tell us about the spaghetti incident.' And I started laughing."



Chinese Democracy

The long and winding road to Axl Rose's grand statement

By David Browne

Released November 23rd, 2008

WHAT WAS AXL ROSE THINKING? IT was December 2006 and GNR were booked for a series of West Coast tour dates early the next year. A decade and a half had passed since their last album, but a Guns show was still a must-see spectacle and tickets sold quickly. Now, though, the singer was pulling out. The reason: "Because of the scheduling of these particular shows, valuable time needed by the band and record company for the proper setup and release of the album *Chinese Democracy* would have been lost," Rose wrote in an "open letter to our fans." "To say the making of this album has been an unbearably long and incomprehensible journey would be an understatement."

It was becoming an old story. By the mid-'00s, *Chinese Democracy* was already the most legendary album never made. "People were reading me the riot act," recalls Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal, who joined the band in 2006. "I'd get e-mails at Christmas and New Year's from drunk fans venting. They just wanted the album."

Another two years would pass before *Chinese Democracy* became a reality. Rattling off the issues that played a role in its 14-year gestation, Rose listed: "building my studio; finding the right players; never did find a producer; still don't have real record-company involvement or support; getting it out and mixed and mastered." But that list only told part of the story. Musicians, managers, songs, producers, recording locales and release dates came and went. By the time the LP finally arrived, it wasn't just an absurdly overdue follow-up to *Use Your Illusion*, it was a final monument to an era when artists spent years obsessively creating over-the-top rock albums.

When GNR congregated at the Complex studios in L.A. in 1994 to start work on a new record, warning signs were already flashing brightly. Members were struggling with drugs and alcohol, and no clear direction emerged from the early sessions. "After collaborating," Slash said of Rose in 1995, "he'd sit back in the chair, watching. There'd be a riff here, a riff there. But I didn't know where it was going." Soon after, Slash, drummer Matt Sorum and bassist Duff McKagan would depart the band. "Guns had been paying rent on studios. . . . from 1994 to 1997 and still did not have a single song," said McKagan.

SCREAMING INTO THE VOID
Rose in New York, 2006

In the wake of that collapse, Rose gained ownership of the band name and put together an odd-lot lineup that included Nine Inch Nails guitarist Robin Finck, former Replacements bassist Tommy Stinson, ex-Devo drummer Josh Freese and, eventually, others like eccentric guitarist Buckethead, who played with a fast-food-chicken container on his head and insisted on recording his parts inside a chicken-coop setup.

The new crew returned to the studio where the original GNR cut much of *Appetite for Destruction*. What began was a grueling process of endlessly recording and discarding songs, in various locales. One Geffen executive suggested a list of producers and supplied Rose with a batch of CDs of their work – only to learn that Rose had plowed over the discs with his car. "We were on our own schedule," said Freese. "There was no real big consequence if we were late or if he didn't show up one night. It didn't matter."

Rose's interest in electronic music led to a brief, fruitless collaboration with dance-music star Moby. Similarly, the GNR camp reached out to Youth, the British producer and bassist for Eighties post-punk band Killing Joke. They began meeting sporadically at Rose's studio – a converted pool house next to his Malibu home.

Despite the creative frustrations Rose was enduring at the time, Youth says the singer was "in a fairly good place. He'd come off all the addictions and chemicals. He was working out and had a housekeeper who was overseeing his health regimen." Over the course of 18 months, the two worked on what amounted to four or five CDRs filled with song ideas, only one of which, "Madagascar," made it onto the finished album. "I don't think he had the vocabulary to really articulate what he wanted at the time, and that's why it took so long," Youth says. "But he wasn't resting on his laurels." When the work with Youth stalled, Rose reached out to Marilyn Manson and Nine Inch Nails collaborator Sean Beavan, hoping to continue in the same vein, and many of the vocal parts he recorded with Rose eventually ended up on the album.

As the years ground on, *Chinese Democracy* was becoming mythic. Rose would play supposedly finished tracks for people – including Rolling Stone in 2000 – and hint at a release date, only to withdraw the songs and cancel the album. In 2001, the band's original Geffen A&R man, Tom Zutaut, returned to try to help Rose focus, to no avail. Next in the producer's chair was Roy Thomas Baker – a logical choice given his work with Queen. ("[They] had all kinds of different-style songs on their records, and that's something that I like," Rose once said.) According to Stinson, Baker made the band re-record all their songs "three or four different times.... We kept redoing this and that. It ended up coming back down to the same fucking songs that they were 10 years ago, except that now they were a superdense mishmash."

Although the album had rumored working titles like *2000 Intentions,* it was now named after "Chinese Democracy," which drummer and co-writer Freese called "a really dumb, simple, dirty guitar riff." Describing the title, Rose was typically enigmatic: "Well, there's a lot of Chinese democracy movements, and it's something that there's a lot of talk about, and it's something that will be nice to see. It could also just be, like, an ironic statement. I don't know, I just like the sound of it."

To mollify fans, Geffen released a live album of old material and a hits package, but in 2004, the label stopped footing the bill for recording the album, which was now being co-produced by Rose and engineer Caram Costanzo. "There's none of us that could have ever gone to him and said, 'Dude, I think you're taking too long,'" Stinson said. "That wouldn't have made sense. He had to do what he had to do to make it the right record, and only he knew in his head what that was going to be."

Thal witnessed this obsessive-compulsive attitude when he tried to learn some of the new material to play live. In doing so, he got a glimpse of the GNR camp's worries about unfinished tracks leaking online. "The only way I could learn the music was listening with headphones on the road manager's laptop," he says. "I would listen once through and make notes to myself and write out parts in music or tablature while the band waited in the next room. I pretty much had a good half hour to listen to half of *Chinese Democracy,* get it down and go out and play it." In studios in L.A. and New York, Thal played on a number of songs, rarely seeing Rose. As a result, "Shackler's Revenge," to take one example, opens with Buckethead riffs before switching to Thal solos.

Finally, in the fall of 2008, and after a reported cost of at least $13 million, *Chinese Democracy* arrived. The sprawling 14-song maelstrom was like nothing GNR had done before. Tracks like the title song, "Scraped" and the school-shooting-themed "Shackler's Revenge" were unrelenting hard rock. "If the World," perhaps the band's most experimental piece of music, was laced with Buckethead's acoustic-guitar solos and hints of blaxploitation-era wah-wah guitar. "Catcher in the Rye" and "Street of Dreams" (originally called "The Blues") evoked the FM-radio grandeur of Queen and Boston. "It was experimental and definitely not formulaic," says Thal.

"No one could say, 'You're taking too long.' He had to do what he had to do."

Against these varying musical backdrops, Rose's lyrics were shot through with Rose's anxieties and frustrations. "Sometimes I feel like the world is on top of me/Breaking me down with an endless monotony," he unloaded in "Scraped," while "Sorry," which sported harmony vocals from Sebastian Bach, included lines like, "To hell with the pressure, I'm not caving in." It's telling that the album's most hopeful song, "This I Love," was written during the early days of GNR, and that Rose had to be convinced to resurrect it.

The drama didn't end there. Dr. Pepper had promised a free soda to everyone in the country if *Chinese Democracy* came out in 2008. When the company's server crashed because too many fans went online to claim their prize, the campaign fizzled. It proved a fitting metaphor for Guns N' Roses' challenged comeback. Rose later sued his manager at the time for failing to properly launch the album (they settled), which was met with mixed reviews and modest sales. Yet, defiant as ever, he stood by the torturous creation. "It's the right record, and I couldn't ask for more," Rose said soon after its release. "Could have been a more enjoyable journey, but it's there now. The art comes first."