

Smoke on the Water

**The
Deep Purple
Story**

Dave Thompson

ECW Press

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Absolute Beginners

They were the war babies, a generation conceived while German bombs rained down on British cities and young marrieds snatched just a few days together before the men went back to the battle. None were old enough to retain any but the most fleeting memories of the war — a child born in 1941 was barely four when the fighting stopped. They were sufficiently aware to be conscious that something momentous had suddenly happened, but young enough to file it away among the favorite toys and elderly aunts that crowd every childhood mind.

It was only later, as relatives' talk and schoolteachers' lessons took their place alongside those filings, that anything more than experience became a part of the memory. And later still, as short trousers gave way to long ones, and the opposite sex started looking more cuddly than stuffed bears and zebras, before the sheer magnitude of all they had lived through struck home — the bluster and the blackouts, the fear and the fires, the restrictions and the rationing. And now the sense that England's pleasant green had turned to featureless gray, as though some higher power had mockingly decreed that winning the war was only the first step. Winning the peace was something else entirely.

That was the task the war babies faced — how to win the peace. Through the last years of the '40s, when the winters were colder and the meat rations shorter, they simply accepted life as it was laid out before them. Into the early '50s, too, adolescence stretched out like a looming no-man's-land, the final rite of passage before they stepped into their father's shoes and followed him to the office. But first, two years serving in the armed forces.

National Service, the compulsory induction of every able-bodied school-leaver into one of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, was introduced in 1948, in part to halt a massive upsurge in juvenile crime in the immediate postwar period; in part to ensure that Britain, so unprepared for Hitler in 1939, would never be caught napping again.

When the United Nations waded into Korea in 1951, National Servicemen supplied nearly 60 per cent of Britain's infantry force; when Britain marched into Egypt in 1956, the conscripts were in the frontline again. Everywhere that Britannia was perceived to be under threat, a fresh crop of eighteen-year-old boys was draped in green and dispatched to serve their nation — with their blood, if they had to. And there was very little they could do to prevent it, or even postpone it.

Maybe that's why rock'n'roll was so important to these youths, fourteen, fifteen years into a life that seemed to have been mapped out before it had even begun. The sounds that filtered out of the transistor radio, pressed tight to one ear beneath the bedclothes, had an unpredictability that wasn't simply exciting, it was liberating. No one had ever heard anything like it — no one had ever sung anything like it; and how satisfying it was, after a hard day's obeisance to a crinkled adult world, to simply let rip with the feelings you really felt meant something.

By the end of the decade, the vampiric shadow of two years of compulsory square-bashing was finally lifted, and National Service was consigned to the history books. In the meantime, rock'n'roll proved a potent antidote to the fears and uncertainty those words invoked. Rock'n'roll and, alongside it, the unexplored possibilities of being young.

But it wasn't only the energy and escapism of rock'n'roll that appealed. It was the sense of illegality as well, the knowledge that the older generation — anybody from an elder brother up to a grizzled great-grandmother — hated it with a passion they had hitherto reserved

for the likes of Hitler and rickets. Rock'n'roll was unsafe, corrupting, evil, and American, and it was difficult to decide which offended them most.

For many kids, even hearing the new rebel yell was a battleground that only added to its outlaw allure. The BBC, the state-sponsored broadcaster that held a monopoly on British radio until as late as 1973, barely even registered the latest youth fad, and the family wireless was rarely tuned to anything but the Beeb's own brand of entertainment — light orchestral music, live dancing contests, prewar comedians, and mind-broadening lectures. Which is where the transistor under the bedclothes came in, furtively tuning in to the unregulated Radio Luxembourg that beamed in from the European coast, crackling with the atmosphere and fading with the wind.

That's where the new music held sway and that's how it traveled, on barely tolerated (but legally untouchable) waves of sound, from the heart of the Grand Duchy to the souls of English youth. It was years before the young minds that devoured the noise from Luxy came to realize they'd absorbed the sounds of the BBC, too, and years before they came to appreciate precisely how valuable that overspill was.

Fresh down to London from the Welsh town of Brecon, where he was born on November 30, 1945, Roger Glover was ten years old when rock'n'roll hit, and as smitten by the bug as any of his peers. Even at that age, he had no time for Sam Costa and Archie Andrews, Nat Gonella and His Georgians, Celia Lipton and Dorothy Carless, and all the rest of the BBC brew. But four decades later, he recalled, "Growing up in the '50s in England, we had the BBC, and they played every kind of music there was. And, though we complained about it, in retrospect that was a great education. Without the BBC, we'd not have heard gospel music and classical music, folk, blues, and jazz. They'd dip into everything and it wasn't done with any style or anything. But in retrospect it wasn't so bad, because you look at kids growing up now, they get force-fed a particular subgenre of music, and that's it. They don't have the wide overview. They're very channeled."

In 1955, Bill Haley rocked around the clock and Britain's teenagers — the word was not new, but its meaning certainly was — swarmed to the cinemas to see him. In 1956, Elvis Presley scored with "Heartbreak Hotel," and Lonely Street had never sounded so sexy before. By 1957, Britain's

own first rockers and rollers were making their way up the charts, and the skiffle boom was underway — proto-folkies with a Woody Guthrie bent, predating the DIY ethics of punk by twenty years not simply by teaching themselves to play their instruments, but by teaching themselves to make them as well.

Stick a broomstick in a tea chest, arm it with a tight, strong string, and presto, you had a bass guitar. With thimbles on your fingertips and a washboard by your side, suddenly you were a percussionist. Not everybody did it; not everybody even liked it. But, again like punk two decades hence, skiffle wasn't simply the latest musical craze. It was symbolic of something else, a sense that, for the first time in a long time — certainly since before the war, and possibly since before time began — the present was no longer the blank state of stasis you ground through while waiting for the future. The present was suddenly a pleasure in itself.

Roger Glover was lucky. His parents moved to London to take over as landlords of a public house, the Richmond Arms on the Old Brompton Road, in Kensington, and live music was one of the venue's staples. "Skiffle bands used to come and play in the saloon bar," he remembered. "I'd get out of bed and creep downstairs to listen to them."

Other kids had to go further afield in search of such grand entertainment and, having got there, they made sure they found it. The cities erupted. Where once red brick and gray men held sway, and the sidewalks rolled up when dusk came to call, there now flashed a sea of color and kids. Pounding beats and exotic smoke, tailored suits and haute coiffure — the world that director Julien Temple conjured in *Absolute Beginners*, of garish neon and switchblade glint, may have been more *West Side Story* than West End London, but still the streets of Soho exuded everything a teenage heart could desire, from the jukebox pounding at the 2 I's Coffee Bar, to the promise-packed notice boards in the paper-shop window: "Established band seeks ambitious singer," "Guitar for sale: 10/- ono," "Pop group manager needs up-and-coming talent," "Discreet French-style massages."

The streets were paved with magnets. For the wilder kids, simply breathing the air and tasting the fruit was enough. For the ambitious ones, there were the crowds draped outside the gold-plated portals of the agents and talent spotters, busking whatever instrument they could play,

or simply hanging around and looking cool, hoping the Great Man might spot them and whisk them to fame. For the serious ones, there were the late-night dives that stayed open all day, where earnest jazzmen and bohemian folkies gathered to plot the overthrow of rock. And for the practical ones, there were the music stores just a few short blocks away, crowding round the junction of Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road, and straggling up Denmark Street — the home of the hits.

Twelve years old, Richard Harold Blackmore was one of the serious ones, journeying into the city every day he could to soak up the atmosphere and dream, his nose pressed against the glass of his favorite guitar emporiums. He came in from Heston, although his soft accent revealed more exotic, west-country origins. He was born in Weston-Super-Mare on April 14, 1945, but moved away when he was two, to a suburb of the West London suburbs, close enough to Heathrow Airport to hear the Comets streaking overhead, but still awaiting the umbilical line of the Underground railway to connect it to the world.

At that age, of course, all he could do was look, but even before he borrowed his first-ever guitar, the instrument captivated him. By the time he persuaded his parents to buy him one of his own, £5 for a black Framus acoustic, he'd already convinced himself that he was destined to play, and the year of classical lessons that were thrown in with the gift — the one condition laid down by his rock-loathing father — quickly convinced other people as well.

Blackmore accepted the lessons and did well at them. But he hankered for wilder sounds as well and, with the guileless optimism of ambitious childhood, he decided to chase his dream from the top, opening the phone book and looking up the address of his own favorite guitar player, Big Jim Sullivan. It turned out that the star of singer Marty Wilde's rocking band lived just a bus ride away in Hounslow, and so, while other would-be ax idols took their lead from the great American guitarists of the day and dreamed that one day they might actually see them playing in concert, Blackmore was knocking on his hero's front door, stars in his eyes and guitar in hand.

Sullivan wasn't immediately impressed by his young visitor, not on the first visit nor, apparently, on the multitude that followed. But he never did turn the boy away. "I think he used to get fed up with me

hanging around, but he taught me a lot,” Blackmore later reflected, with lesson one coming more or less the first time Sullivan heard the boy play. Any guitarist, Big Jim told his student, could parrot the solos others had recorded. But a great guitarist created his own.

Blackmore was still learning his instrument when he joined his first band, but, practical beyond his thirteen years, he had no intention of continuing his education in public. He turned instead to the ubiquitous tea-chest bass, the sonic foundation of the 2 1’s Coffee Bar Junior Skiffle Group — named for, but never actually performing at, that most legendary of Soho learning centers. The group lasted six months, until skiffle itself had faded from view, and he returned to his first love.

Blackmore left school at fifteen in 1960 and found a job at the airport, learning to service radio transmitters, his eye for the task honed by the time he’d spent in the school science lab electrifying his guitar and building an amp from an old valve radio. It wasn’t a job he was especially desperate to pursue, but the wage packet financed his love of music, and it paid for a new, “real” electric guitar, a Hofner Club 50.

Now he was ready to step out with his instrument. One of his old school friends, Mick Underwood, had recently taken possession of a drum kit and, together, they formed their first band. The Dominators took their place on a local youth club circuit that was already creaking beneath the weight of so many bands.

For reasons that have never been understood, the extremes of West London were a fertile breeding ground for so many of the musicians with whom Blackmore’s path soon crossed: Ian Gillan lived in Hounslow, Nick Simper was born in Southall, Mick Waller was from Greenford. Without ever straying more than five miles from the Blackmore home, you could have formed the most spectacular band in the world, simply by following the sounds of the rehearsing hopefuls. And you’d have had your choice of guitarists as well — though they never knew one another at the time, Jimmy Page, too, hailed from Heston.

Bassist Nick Simper, on the other hand, was constantly bumping into Blackmore. He was seven months younger than the guitarist (he was born on November 3, 1945), and his first band, the Renegades, debuted on the circuit around the same time as the Dominators. Although the two bands never shared a bill, they often said hello.

Simper's own career moved slower than Blackmore's, edging from one short-lived group to another until finally he found one, he later laughed, that was proficient enough "not to have Coke bottles thrown at them." That was the Delta Five, a cover band that, according to legend, opened for Jerry Lee Lewis at the Hanwell Community Centre during the Killer's 1962 U.K. tour — his first visit since being drummed out of the country four years earlier, when details of his marriage to a thirteen-year-old cousin aroused one of those periodic witch hunts to which the British media is so prone.

Blackmore, by this time, had moved on through his own succession of local bands — the Satellites and Mike Dee & the Jaywalkers among them — before 1962 brought him his own taste of minor stardom as one of the Savages, the ultratheatrical backing band for arch-showman and rockabilly ghoul "Screaming Lord" David Sutch.

It was not the first time Blackmore had tried out for the band. The previous year, as rhythm guitarist with the Satellites, he found himself competing with his own lead guitarist, Roger Mingay, for the same vacancy. "Ritchie Blackmore, who could have only been fifteen at the time," Savages drummer Carlo Little recalled, "came along with his girlfriend and his dad. We heard about seven or eight blokes, but it was a toss-up between Ritchie and Roger Mingay. Roger just had the edge, because he was older and more experienced."

Mingay had long since moved on, and his replacement as well when, at long last, in May 1962, Blackmore got the call he'd been waiting for. He was a Savage and, nightly, was to have his normally reticent stage demeanor trashed and trampled as Sutch, having already dressed the musicians in whichever outlandish costume took his fancy, insisted they act the part as well.

Clad in nothing more than a loincloth, Blackmore quickly became accustomed to being dragged to stage center, often by his guitar neck. Quickly, too, he began developing moves and routines that were as flamboyant as Sutch himself, a talent that the singer, speaking shortly before his death in June 1999, recalled with a delighted cackle: "When Ritchie first joined, all he wanted to do was play his guitar. [But] you could tell he was dying to join in with the madness and, by the time he left, he was an absolute wild man."

For many bands, the guitar-playing alone would have been enough — Blackmore’s specialty, as Carlo Little put it, saw him executing “devastating runs up and down the guitar [that] left people gasping for breath.” Soon, however, Blackmore was throwing himself across the stage as dramatically as Sutch.

Blackmore did not necessary relish his time with Sutch. Looking back, he told journalist Dave Ling, “The hungry days were mostly nice times, but I often played with musicians I hated, too. Some of them were real snobs who only wanted to see the negative sides of playing rock’n’roll. This was really bad when I played with . . . Sutch. One half of the band consisted of rock’n’rollers, the other half were jazz soloists. They drove me nuts.”

However, Blackmore later acknowledged, and Sutch readily confirmed, that much of his future stagecraft was learned at the Lord’s knee. “The breaking guitars, the catching fire to amps, all that was just a part of the Savages show,” said Sutch. “Years before anyone had heard of Pete Townshend and autodestruction, Ritchie would be out there smashing things.”

Nick Simper, too, caught Sutch’s eye. Though Simper never formally joined the Savages, there were several occasions when, having misplaced his regular bassist, Sutch asked him to stand in for a show. “That was a great lineup,” Sutch reflected. “It was the start of Deep Purple. Ritchie and Nick, they didn’t play together very often, but when they did, you could tell they had a spark going. I wasn’t at all surprised when they formed a band together.”

Blackmore remained with Sutch for six months, and when he departed, in October 1962, he didn’t travel far. Across the string of now-classic singles, ignited in 1961 by the shock-horror rockabilly of “Til the Following Night,” Sutch worked with maverick producer Joe Meek, the mastermind behind what emerged as among the most exciting slices of vinyl in British rock history. As of late 1962, however, Meek’s schemes were on hold as he sought out a new drummer and guitarist for the Outlaws, the studio house band that, more than any other, brought a distinctive instrumental glow to the best of Meek’s period recordings.

The musician grapevine put him in touch with the first half of the required combination, drummer Mick Underwood; he, in turn, naturally

recommended his best friend, Ritchie Blackmore. By year's end, the pair had made their first appearance on record — and scored their first hit single, as Mike Berry's "Don't You Think It's Time" powered to No. 6 on the U.K. chart.

Had he lived, and had that life only conformed a little more to the music business norm, Joe Meek would today be ranked among the greatest producers of the rock'n'roll age. Instead, though a devoted cult following still bestows that lofty title upon him, his greater reputation is as a sad and lonely man whose creative genius, sparking across some still unmatched music, was undermined at every step of the way by his unpredictability, his stubborn selfishness, and, ultimately, his self-destructiveness.

Even Meek's most indulgent biographers acknowledge that there are great swaths of Meek's catalog that they find utterly unlistenable; even his greatest fans will swear they could happily die tomorrow if it meant they would never hear some personal nightmare recording again.

What these otherwise reasonable viewpoints overlook, however, is the very thing that made Meek so important — the sheer unpredictability that was the nature of his game. For it was not the wavering of genius, nor the arrogance of ego, that prompted Meek to make some truly dreadful records. Rather, it was the same relentless drive and fervent imagination that also allowed him to make some great ones. It was just that sometimes the experiment failed.

And so, for every "Ain't Necessarily So," there is an "Early Bird"; for every "She's Fallen in Love with a Monster Man," there is an "I'm Not a Bad Guy"; and for every John Leyton, there was a Tony Dangerfield. But, in every instance, it was not the end result that mattered. It was the loving labor that went into the creation. Not for him the comfortable, well-equipped surroundings within which the other producers of the age did their jobs. Meek worked from home, from a sprawling warren of junk-piled cupboards that even he referred to as "the bathroom." Wires trailed wildly across every surface, and a visitor who managed to remain undetected while Meek worked his magic was as likely to see a musician striking an ashtray with a signet ring, as strumming a guitar or playing the drums. If he couldn't create the sound he wanted by conventional means, he looked for the unconventional.

The Outlaws were one of the few oases of normalcy within Meek's empire, a tight band that could play anything he threw at them, and play it well. Over the next two years or so, as the last gasps of the original rock'n'roll boom faded from memory in the face of a new onslaught launched by the Merseybeat of the Beatles, Blackmore played on more sessions for Meek than even he can remember. Meek himself disdained the new-fangled beat groups — was, in fact, one of the multitude of London-based producers and A&R men who turned away the then-unknown Fab Four when they first came knocking at his door.

He had long since forgiven himself that particular indulgence, but he certainly knew which way the musical breeze was blowing. The Outlaws, though they could (and did) turn their hand toward any style Meek asked of them, were responsible for the torrent of bouncing beat-styled singles that poured out of Meek's Holloway Road lair, a litany of crackling 45s by everyone from North London beat merchants the Honeycombs to a then-unknown and unsung Tom Jones, from John Leyton to Glenda Collins.

There were weeks when Blackmore and the band found themselves playing up to half a dozen sessions a day, simply waiting around the studio while Meek ushered in another young hopeful or old pro to record. And, when they weren't in the studio, the Outlaws were out on the road, backing one or another of Meek's protégés or, for a few weeks during 1964, accompanying the legendary Gene Vincent as he undertook another of his periodic comebacks.

The band recorded in their own right as well, making a glorious chain of singles under Meek's tutelage that included a positively violent rendition of Jerry Lee Lewis' "Keep on Knocking" — subsequently termed, by British DJ John Peel, the first heavy metal record ever made. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't — released all but simultaneously, the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" has been tarred with the same pioneering brush.

Not that such plaudits made much difference to the Outlaws. They broke up in spring 1964 and Blackmore moved on to the Wild Boys, the backing band assembled to accompany Meek's premier protégé, Teutonic bleached-bombshell heartthrob Heinz. There he continued playing on hit records, but suddenly Meek was no longer the only producer who sensed something special in Blackmore. Another freelance operative,