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ANATOMY OF A SONG

How ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ Saved Thin Lizzy

The 1976 hit, inspired by a tough character called Johnny, brought the struggling Irish band new life

By Marc Myers

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On the verge of collapse in 1975, Thin Lizzy needed a hit. Earlier albums and singles by the Irish rock band had little chart success outside Ireland.

When the band released “The Boys Are Back in Town” in 1976 as a single from their sixth album, “Jailbreak,” the song climbed to No. 12 on Billboard’s pop chart.

Recently, Thin Lizzy guitarist Scott Gorham, band manager Chris O’Donnell, producer John Alcock and engineer Will Reid Dick looked back on the hit’s evolution. Mr. Gorham’s new album with the band Black Star Riders is “Another State of Grace.” Edited from interviews.

Scott Gorham : I grew up in Glendale, Calif. In 1971, my brother-in-law, drummer Bob Siebenberg, suggested I move to London on a work visa. He had just joined Supertramp.

In London, I played in a few groups and then started Fast Buck, a pub band, in 1974. On Wednesday nights, I invited out-of-work musicians to play with us so I could meet more musicians.

Ruan O’Lochlainn was one of those musicians. At some point, Ruan mentioned that an Irish band in London was looking for a guitarist. Fast Buck wasn’t going to last, so I called Chris O’Donnell, the Irish band’s manager.

Chris said the band was Thin Lizzy and that their guitarist had quit. He told me to go to Iroko, an African supper club in Haverstock Hill, where the band would audition me.

The club was staffed by African guys wearing flowery shirts and white trousers. I knew nothing about Thin Lizzy and had no idea what they looked like. Soon, a tall black guy came over to shake my hand and asked if I was Scott. At first, I thought he worked there. But it was Phil Lynott, Thin Lizzy’s leader and bassist.

I auditioned, and Phil hired me, even though he had just hired guitarist Brian Robertson. It turned out Phil wanted two guitarists, in case one of us quit suddenly.

Months after I joined, we recorded the band’s fourth album, “Nightlife.” That was followed by “Fighting” in 1975. The albums didn’t do particularly well.

Our next album was do-or-die. We headed off to Farmyard Studios in Little Chalfont, about an hour northwest of London. We needed to work without distraction.



Thin Lizzy’s hit was about ‘mates getting together to take on the town,’ says Mr. Gorham, here in 1978 (far right) with, from left, Phil Lynott, Brian Downey and Brian Robertson. PHOTO: ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

During our stay there, Phil asked what I thought of a chord progression he played on his bass. I told him it seemed a little simple. He worked on it, and soon he had a melody and lyrics.

He called the song “G.I. Joe is Back.” It was a weird anti-war song. The Vietnam war was over and American troops had been returning home. The song’s melody and chords were good, but the lyrics needed work.

Around this time, I had been with the band at a gig in Manchester [England]. I noticed that most of the 900 people in the audience were young guys.

I told Phil that these boys probably just got off work, they’ve had a couple of pints and they wanted to be taken someplace with the music. Phil liked this idea—that the boys were together.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

What does ‘The Boys Are Back in Town’ mean to you? Join the conversation below.

John Alcock :
Phil had a shoulder bag he carried

around with a notebook that held his song ideas. At the Farmyard, when Phil wasn't playing, he worked on lyrics.

At some point, Phil said he had changed the song to "The Boys Are Back in Town." It sounded less clumsy than "G.I. Joe Is Back," so it wasn't a controversial decision.

With the new lyrics, drummer Brian Downey needed a new rhythm. I suggested a shuffle. Brian was very good at them. His shuffle helped Phil and Scott fall into a groove.

Mr. Gorham: "The boys are back in town" was almost like a soccer chant you'd hear on Saturday night. Mates getting together to take on the town. When Phil finished the lyrics, we tried the song. We took it faster than "G.I. Joe."

The first verse's line, "They were askin' if you were around," is about a character named Johnny who Phil used often in songs. The guy had been away and now he was back in town and ready to tear it up with the old gang.

The lines in the second verse—"And that time over at Johnny's place / Well, this chick got up and she slapped Johnny's face"—was an extension of the Johnny character.

It was actually about a real guy who used to come to our gigs. He was a member of the Quality Street Gang, a group of rough guys in Manchester who ran clubs, bars and car lots.

The reference to Dino's Bar 'n' Grill in the third verse had to do with Los Angeles. As a kid, Phil loved "77 Sunset Strip," the early '60s American TV detective series that aired in reruns on Irish television.

For Phil, that show was the epitome of Hollywood. When we were in L.A. on our first American tour in 1975, Phil walked the Sunset Strip in West Hollywood looking for No. 77. That number didn't exist.

When he asked a parking attendant, the guy pointed across the street at Dino's Lodge, which appeared on the show's opener. Phil added "Bar 'n' Grill" to Dino's because it sounded way better than "lodge" and more American.

Mr. O'Donnell: At the Farmyard, the band recorded demos of their new songs. Then we listened back. I stopped them on "The Boys Are Back." I thought it was a smash. The two guitars playing harmony in the middle and end didn't exist yet. But the song was everything I'd hoped for.

I wanted John to produce because he was 6-foot-4 and had a commanding presence that the band would respect. He also helped design Ramport Studios, where he wanted to record.

Mr. Alcock : I loved Ramport. The space was owned by the Who and built in an old church hall with high ceilings and no carpeting. You'd get a lot of bounce in your sound there. I wanted to

capture Thin Lizzy's live sound. They were always playing gigs and came across great on stage.



'On stage, your eyes were glued to him. The guy had this magnetic quality,' says Mr. Gorham of Phil Lynott, shown performing with the band in London in 1976. PHOTO: ERICA ECHENBERG/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Will Reid Dick : John and I placed mics about a foot away from Scott and Brian's guitar speakers for that big live sensation. We also placed mics at the other end of the room, to pick up the depth and dimension.

John wanted a wall of guitars behind Phil's vocal. He had Scott and Brian overdub their guitar parts to thicken them up. I pushed the volume as much as possible.

Mr. Gorham: Phil said we needed a guitar harmony bit in the middle and at the end. I had Brian Downey's driving shuffle in my head so I added a rolling riff on there. Brian Robertson played harmony behind my melody and he added a logical ending.

Mr. Alcock: After we had all the instrumental tracks, Phil came in and recorded his lead vocal. Then he recorded his "Boys are back in town" chant in the chorus. It sounds as if two guys in the band are singing the line followed by the other two echoing it. But it's really just Phil singing all the parts.

At the end of the song, Phil decided to whisper, "The boys are back in town." This happens when the song is quiet, just before the guitars come back again and before the fade-out.

Mr. Gorham: I knew there was something special about Phil from the moment I shook his hand. On stage, your eyes were glued to him. The guy had this magnetic quality.

As Phil tried to emulate Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison and his other heroes, he became increasingly dependent on alcohol. He turned to heroin by the early 1980s. By then, he'd often become sick and less dependable. Thin Lizzy broke up in '83.

In late 1985, I had done some recording and wanted a critique from Phil. One morning in early December I went over to his house. He answered the door in his bathrobe. He gave me a big hug.

I played him my tape and he took out his acoustic guitar and played along. Phil said we had to start writing songs again and that we should get the band back together.

He was in terrible shape. I gave him a look like, “Hey, you’re not ready.” Phil saw that and said, “I’m gonna clean myself up now. It’s gonna be great.” I gave him a hug and left.

At the end of December, Phil’s roadie, Big Charlie, called to tell me that Phil was in the hospital. On Jan. 4, I was in the basement cleaning up when the phone rang.

My wife picked up. I heard her gasp. When she got off, she told me it was Charlie. Phil had just died. I couldn’t believe it. I sat down on the basement stairs. Then I cried my eyes out.

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