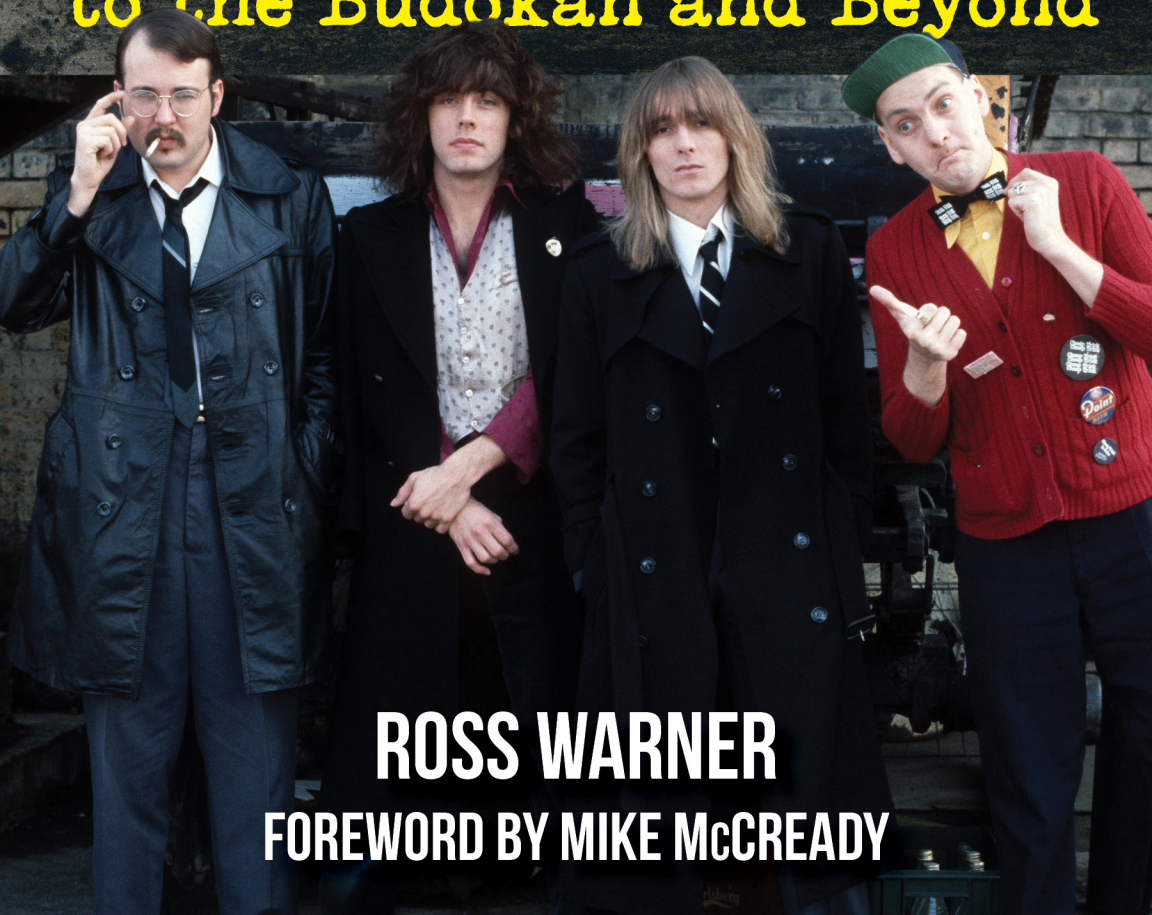


AMERICAN STANDARD

Cheap Trick

From the Bars
to the Budokan and Beyond



ROSS WARNER

FOREWORD BY MIKE MCCREADY

Praise for *American Standard*

“As one who was present when power pop visionaries Cheap Trick could be seen playing taverns in an Illinois college town—three sets, that lineup, that look, those songs, \$5 cover—the band and I go waaaay back. Having borne eyewitness to those days, I can tell you author Ross Warner did his homework in preparing *American Standard*. His vivid telling of the saga will make you’ll feel like you were there yourself.” —Cary Baker, author and music industry veteran

“*American Standard*. How appropriate. I was at the session where the cover for *Heaven Tonight* album was shot. It was a continuation of the graphic theme started with *In Color*—two dreamy guys on the front, two characters on the back. Then I spotted the plumbing fixtures. ‘American Standard’—they’re everywhere in public restrooms. How appropriate for the band we all believed had no top end to their career trajectory. They were, to Epic staff, the American Standard. It was an observation that evolved into an inside joke, and now finds its way into print. And we were right. No record or group breaks itself. It takes a village. Ross’s book tells this story.” —Jim Charne, Epic Records (1973–1979)

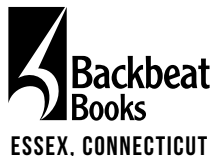
“*At Budokan* still defines Cheap Trick for most of us. This excellent, insightful book puts that fact into context and allows the reader to understand why the live album was so defining and what came before and after. A wonderful, quirky biography of a wonderful, quirky band. As it should be.” —Alan Paul, *New York Times* bestselling author

“An exhaustively researched and endlessly entertaining look at one of America’s greatest rock bands.” —Tom Beaujour, *New York Times* bestselling author (and Rick Nielsen bobblehead owner)

AMERICAN STANDARD

Cheap Trick from the Bars
to the Budokan and Beyond

ROSS WARNER





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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Donald and Linda, who were both forced to leave the party just a little too soon. Of course, nothing I write (or do) would be possible without my beautiful wife Samantha and our two amazing kids, Aaron and Sarah. You might be from Long Island, Sammy, but you truly are my “Southern Girl.” *American Standard* wouldn’t have been possible without the efforts and cooperation of all those who have written books about Cheap Trick before me. Thanks to Mike Hayes, Robert Lawson, Doug Brod, and Brian Kramp. I also owe an immense debt to Ken Adamany, Bun E. Carlos, Cary Baker, Moira McCormick, Jim Charne, and Tom Beaujour, just to name a few. You were all incredibly patient with my endless questions about this consistently energetic and engaging band.

I’d also like to thank everyone who photographed, wrote about, and interviewed the band over the years. Many of them are no longer with us, so please forgive me for putting you in my book. Hopefully, some people will get to appreciate your work that wouldn’t have otherwise. Lastly, I’d like to thank the band itself for the fifty years and counting of tunes, albums, and tours. I also appreciate them allowing me to ask two questions during their record release in Times Square over twenty years ago. Thanks especially to Rick Nielsen for not completely eviscerating me after my feeble attempts at humor that day in the Virgin Megastore.

ALLLLL RIGHT (whatever town you’re in)!

ARRRE YOOUU READY?

This band, they live inside of your head.

RLW
Stony Brook, New York

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PREFACE

THE THINGS THAT I'M WRITING RATHER THAN THE STORIES I'M NOT TELLING: AN AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are two stories. There's a mythical story you create and kind of make up. And then there's the truth. And the myth and truth become clouded after thirty years. —Bob Kane, 1976

Bob Kane, the self-professed “sole creator” (he had the title made official decades later by DC Comics), spoke these words shortly before revealing that writer Bill Finger was an equal contributor to the creation not only of Batman and Robin but also the Joker, Penguin, and Two-Face. It's difficult not to associate this idea, what Stephen Colbert called “truthiness,” with Cheap Trick. The band created *The Colbert Report's* theme song, after all. The original four members have participated in, to various extents, the previous four books about them (and this one, too), yet they've never endorsed any work as being “official” or “authorized.” That doesn't mean they aren't accessible to interviewers, however. You can currently find Robin, Rick, Tom, and even Bun E. (after his acrimonious 2010 departure) in any number of print and online magazines. After the spread of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, the remaining three “classic era” Tricksters were forced to suspend touring. While the world took a pause and began deep diving (either for the first time or in a more focused way) into books, movies, television, and music, Cheap Trick experienced their latest resurgence. There are now excellent and authoritative podcasts on their individual songs and albums, complete with celebrity guest stars, that sometimes even include the band themselves. Of course, more than one of these retrospective studies were dedicated to the record that made them famous, *Cheap Trick at Budokan*.

The expression “big in Japan” was first used by *Music Life* magazine in the 1970s. *Music Life* played a huge role in breaking Cheap Trick, and the band was bigger in Japan than anyone in 1978–1979. The phrase was later made famous in 1984’s *This Is Spinal Tap*, where a has-been rock act can only get gigs in the Pacific Rim. That scenario didn’t completely apply to Cheap Trick, though *Budokan* became the thing they were, and still are, known for by many. The live album, originally intended for release only in Japan but sold as an import elsewhere, was inducted into the Recording Registry of the Library of Congress on March 25, 2020. They accepted the award virtually, of course, and other subsequent interviews with Rick, Robin, and Tom showed a surprisingly honest band. For a group that has always used more than a little deception with the press, this is hardly insignificant. However, they are still more than a little reticent to speak for a book. Ira Robbins has been writing about them since 1977 for *Creem*, *Crawdaddy*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsday*, and countless times in his own *Trouser Press*. He has come the closest to writing the definitive biography on the band, first in 1978 and then three decades later. Robbins has been one of their earliest champions, and his interviews were included in their 1996 archival box set, Rick Nielsen’s 2012 “Rick’s Picks” exhibit at the Burpee Museum in Rockford, Illinois (where the band is now known as the city’s main export), and the program for their 2016 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction. The complete conversations with Cheap Trick that provided the source material for all those essays were included in Robbins’s 2021 book, *Music in a Word, Volume 2: Fandom and Fascinations*.

When Robbins sat with Bun E. Carlos, Tom Petersson, and Rick Nielsen on April 16–17, 1996, for what became the liner notes to the box set *Sex, America, Cheap Trick*, the band was at one of their many crossroads. For most groups, these “transitional periods” would instead be the end of the road. As the box set was being readied for an August release, the band was embroiled in lawsuits in the midst of parting ways with longtime manager Ken Adamany. Looking back, Robbins says, “What I see now in re-reading this is how my curiosity about specifics, while valuable in a historical sense, kind of missed the point of the magic that bands have, the mystery that allows each listener to impose their own understanding and experiences and values on the music. I now rather regret my efforts to get behind the curtain. With the liner notes in mind, I viewed my role as getting the band’s story out, asking the questions fans might have wondered about, but maybe I didn’t have to work so hard at it.”¹

Their mindset at the time resulted in unparalleled honesty and evidence of pent-up frustrations. As Robbins put it, “They were unafraid to

air old grievances, get in a few digs and name names of people who they didn't think had worked in the band's interest."² His regrets over pushing so hard to get at the facts are understandable, but the conversations, three 90-minute cassettes' worth, are invaluable in getting a look at the events and emotions of the band during the first twenty-five years or so of their history. Similarly illuminating are the interviews of Nielsen, Zander, and Petersson conducted by translator Steve Harris for Japan's *ROCKIN'ON* magazine during Cheap Trick's return visits to the country in 1988, 1990, and 1994. These interviews, for magazine founder Shibutani Yōichi (also integral in breaking the band), similarly reveal an uncharacteristically forthcoming Cheap Trick. These glimpses into their inner workings and conflicts are particularly valuable for a group where simplification, exaggeration, and fabrication are part and parcel.

The band was introduced to the world with the fictional biography "This Band Has No Past" inside their first album for Epic Records. That's one ballsy way to interject yourselves into the myriad of musical trends that existed in 1977. Like everything Cheap Trick, this approach had both benefits and drawbacks. They were seemingly throwing down the gauntlet to fans, critics, and other bands. The Beatles had broken up seven years earlier, and the Stones, the Who, and Led Zeppelin were seen as dinosaurs of bloated stadium rock by many teenagers bombarded with new flavors like punk and disco. For years, Cheap Trick had to defend the fake biography, and the gimmick people interpreted it as, but folklore and misdirection were already in step with their brand of snarky humor. It wasn't as deep and contrived as people assumed, which could also be said of everything Cheap Trick. They were playing characters on stage, and to a lesser extent with the press, just not the ones written in that Epic bio.

Even though they were announced as not having a past, the four members were actually all given individual backstories as if they were about to embark on a top-secret mission or were beginning a life in the witness protection program. Greenwich Village's Eric Van Lustbader received a sociology degree from Columbia and taught third grade in Brooklyn before beginning a career in writing. Considering that he became a best-selling novelist telling similar stories (about Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne among others), his time at CBS writing about the "band with no past" seems fitting. Even before Cheap Trick's farcical bio, their image already contained more mystery than just where and when they were born or how they got together. Those who witnessed their shows at the very beginning in Illinois and Wisconsin knew the truth. Some writers, like Robbins and future publicity giant Cary Baker, got them to reluctantly open up. So

while the band maintained the fibs for a while, most of the truth eventually got out.

Over the course of almost fifty years, Cheap Trick has endured many of the same struggles with ego and excess that every other band of that era has. But this group has always walked the fine line between parodying those standard rock clichés without embodying them. They always aspired to not be one of those bands they make *Behind the Music* episodes about, which meant keeping their “dirt” to themselves. Of course, when people accused them of being squeaky clean as a result, they would quickly remind you that they just never let it spill over into the show or talked about it in the press. They have always been wary of a book that possibly looks to profit from and control the narrative of their journey. Still, every Cheap Trick fan hopes that they will tell their own story, however unlikely that may be.

Fortunately, even when the band is hesitant to go on record, there is no shortage of people that love to talk about Cheap Trick. Everybody has a story about why this band was and is important. Some became converts from the earliest days in the Midwest, and others did so farther down the line. A few were right there with them when they made magic in concert and in the studio. Some were in the crowd or backstage. Others managed or promoted them. Over the course of almost a half century, many who started in one category went on to another. Some, like the band themselves, went from being outsiders to rock heavyweights. Regardless of their experience with Cheap Trick, all these musicians, producers, record executives, and journalists remain enormous fans of this band.

Cheap Trick projected the appearance of two matinee idols and two goofballs, united in not looking like they were trying to be rock stars. To paraphrase Kyra Sedgwick’s character “Linda” in Cameron Crowe’s 1992 film *Singles*, pretending to *not* have an act may have actually been their act. The satirical and cynical presentation of their music contradicted the reality of hardworking Midwesterners that eventually made it. They were playing close to 290 nights a year to hone their show and sound for crowds that sometimes weren’t sure if they were a comedy act. Their first three albums are now seen as classics, but none were true commercial hits at the time of their release. But between the second and third albums, the band visited Japan, where they’d been cultivating an audience, for five shows. The record *Cheap Trick at Budokan* wouldn’t be issued domestically for about ten months after the Pacific Rim appearances. In 1979, Cheap Trick finally blew up, albeit in the most unusual fashion. The result was both a blessing and a curse for the band. Cheap Trick has been grappling with the effects of the “Budokan Phenomenon” ever since.

I first heard Cheap Trick when the studio version of their *Budokan* classic “Surrender,” appeared in *Mad* magazine’s *Up the Academy* film in 1980. If you’ve never heard of it, look it up. The movie was so reviled that one of its stars, Ron Leibman, had his name removed from the credits and promotional material and *Mad*’s publisher William Gaines paid \$30,000 to remove the magazine’s name from the film when it was released on VHS. Gaines also responded with a handwritten apology to every person who wrote into *Mad* to complain. The director, Robert Downey Sr. (his son, the future Academy Award winner, appears as an extra in a few scenes), in 2008 called it “one of the worst fucking things in history.”³

Fortunately for Cheap Trick, “Surrender” didn’t appear on the soundtrack album, and their association with the project was fleeting. But if you saw the movie on HBO, you got to hear it. This ten-year-old wasn’t cool enough to have seen *Over the Edge* two years earlier, where the song and three other Cheap Trick classics appeared, so this was my first exposure to the band’s unmistakable sound. Six years before his tragic passing in 2020, Mike “McBeardo” McPadden (author of the books *Heavy Metal Movies* and *Teen Movie Hell*) cited *Up the Academy* as his favorite use of music in film. He wrote, “Power pop’s most resplendent declaration of adolescent bafflement over the behavior of the folks in charge, ‘Surrender’ by Cheap Trick provides a perfect background narrative to the comical upstart kids in *Up the Academy*—or any kids anywhere, at any time, period.”⁴

However, the most prominent use of Cheap Trick in a film is one their music doesn’t even appear in: Cameron Crowe (instrumental in keeping Cheap Trick’s legacy alive) and Amy Heckerling’s *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*:

Can you honestly tell me you forgot? Forgot the magnetism of Robin Zander, or the charisma of Rick Nielsen? How about the tunes? I Want YOU to Want ME. The Dream Police, da-da-da-da-da-da-da. Your mommy’s all right, your daddy’s all right/They just seem a little bit weird.

The impassioned case made by *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*’s Mike Damone, portrayed by Robert Romanus, perfectly states the case for the greatness of Cheap Trick. Sure, he’s trying to scalp tickets to fund an abortion when he delivers those lines, but that’s beside the point. Mike Damone’s impassioned parking lot testimonial stayed with me (as it did countless others) when I also saw it on HBO for the first time. This was why I reached out to Robert Romanus, who recited that timeless dialogue, as soon as I started this book. I knew he was an actor reading Crowe’s

words and following Heckerling's direction, but I needed to begin somewhere. Along with an autograph, he very kindly wrote back, "Sorry pal, everything I know about Cheap Trick you've already quoted." I thought about his character's onscreen description of this quirky yet powerful band. Damone was right, it was about their stage presence and catchy songs. They could arguably still have made the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame if they'd done nothing after 1979, but they wouldn't have had the same impact.

After the *Budokan* hysteria faded, the band got back to what they'd always done. They played show after show at whatever venue would have them. They headlined, opened, and became part of "package shows." They changed lineups, but were never content to simply be a legacy act. They keep releasing new music to this day. That's what keeps them going, according to the remaining three original band members that first took the stage fifty years ago. It seems like they keep coming back, but they've also always been here. As Alice Cooper said, they have become "America's House Band."⁵ As musical trends come and go, Cheap Trick has seemed both behind the times and ahead of the next big craze. They've even periodically intersected with whatever trend was currently popular.

Unfortunately, everything about the band (the fake bio, the image, evidence of their musical influences) would also work against them. This, like everything Cheap Trick, was amplified and exacerbated after *Budokan*. The adversity they endured during the 1980s would have ended most bands. They scored very few hits on the charts, but their reputation took tons of them. Even when the songs weren't up to earlier standards and when different producers couldn't deliver a strong album, they always sounded like Cheap Trick when they were on stage. As Rick Nielsen told *Time* magazine in 2013, "We play as much as we can. If we waited for a hit record to tour, we would never have toured. No record? We go on tour. New record? On tour. Hit record? Flop record? Always tour."⁶ The band's philosophy on survival sounds eerily reminiscent of one of Ray Liotta's best quotes from *Goodfellas*, if you replace with going on tour with "Fuck you, pay me." For Cheap Trick, playing the next show really was as inevitable as paying Paul Cicero his cut from the Bamboo Lounge.

Even though everything would change (albeit in time-release fashion) after their Japanese shows in April 1978, they would remain frozen in many minds as the band they heard and eventually saw from *Budokan*. The characters that boarded that fourteen-hour flight to Japan were more colorful than anything in a true crime podcast. What you are about to read is a combination of truth and fiction. In other words, it's completely Cheap Trick.

ROBIN: He is impeccable and has a nice smile. Nick Kent of the *New Musical Express* (NME) hailed him “a veritable vision of physical perfection with looks so exquisite, photographs don’t do his angelic visage—perfect cheekbones, stunningly genteel eyes topped off with swathes of blond hair parted off-centre to the left—justice.”⁷ He is nicknamed the “Man of 1,000 Voices” due to his ability to perfectly inhabit the countless characters in Cheap Trick’s songs. He is even rumored to be a descendant of Lon Chaney. Even the band’s hometown music mag says, “He is a throaty singer who looks and sounds too British to be from the Midwest. It’s astounding that one as pretty as he can come off singing up such a storm.”⁸

RICK: He’s a ringer for Huntz Hall’s Horace Debussy “Sach” Jones from *The Bowery Boys* films of the 1940s and ’50s. It’s an obscure reference, but that’s Rick. Hall appears in the back row of the cover collage for *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Of course, Nielsen would know that. Cheap Trick will most often be compared to the Beatles, but their sound is more reminiscent of early Who, the Yardbirds, and the Move, Roy Wood’s band before Electric Light Orchestra. With Rick there are multiple levels to everything if you want to do the research to find them. He wears a black baseball hat with the visor upturned. When it falls down, as it does countless times, he immediately flips it back up and often decorates it with a row of guitar picks. The hat is for Hamer guitars, but has a Point Beer button over the logo. Rick wears two or more guitars at once until he gets big enough to have them make him custom ones with multiple necks. He never stands still and is constantly flicking guitar picks or catching them on his tongue. His feet are adorned with black hi-top Asics Matflex sneakers (the kind wrestlers wear), and he wears a Bing Crosby-style sweater with various badges, hand-knit dolls of himself, and even teabags affixed to it. Much like his guitars, the sweaters will eventually be created just for him. He usually has something with a checkerboard pattern, like a guitar strap, in his wardrobe. He wears a bow tie that will also bear the Cheap Trick logo later on. He’s a pitchman like a NASCAR driver, but the band is the only brand he truly promotes. He is described as the wild man of the group, but only for his self-professed ability to drink more beers than anybody else. His official bio says that he abandoned plans to be a cartoon character in order to join the band, although you could argue he became one regardless. He runs his mouth, but makes fun of himself as much as he does anyone else. His parents run a music store in Rockford, which might be the source of his encyclopedic knowledge. He’s the oldest member of Cheap Trick, and if you look closely, you’ll see a wedding ring on his left hand.

TOM: He is, along with Robin, the band's other sex symbol. His bio describes him as wide-eyed and otherworldly. It goes on to say that he creates auras wherever he goes. He holds the distinction of being the inventor of his own instrument, the twelve-string bass, which he made because he wanted to get the sound of a twelve-string guitar from a bass—it's that simple. Hamer has produced a custom model for him. Ira Robbins, who calls Cheap Trick "the best band in America" in both *Crawdaddy* and his own *Trouser Press*, says that "it's the creative bass playing of Tom Petersson that most defines the Cheap Trick sound and raises the group way above the rest of the hard rock contenders."⁹

Last, but not least, BUN E.: His full name is Bunezuela, and he is allegedly from South America with ancestors that worked on the Panama Canal. (This, of course, sounded better than being the record-collecting son of a roofer in Rockford, or so Epic thought.) Like the band itself, no exaggeration was really needed. The image of a drummer wearing a tie and glasses was unusual enough. However, this one was pounding the skins ambidextrously even though he was left-handed. The mustache and lit cigarette anchored to his permanent smile provide a striking contrast. Almost every bio of the band depicts him holding some white-collar occupation. Most also get weirdly specific and focused on his receding hairline or weight. The most frequent descriptions are that he looks like someone's dad, a teacher, or an accountant. No member of the band has received more different characterizations, including those of his deadpan expression while hitting his drums. This was the result of drumming for Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, who wouldn't stand for anything else. What follows is just a sampling of the many roles assigned to the mercurial Brad M. Carlson, more commonly known by his stage name, assembled in chronological order and taking us up to the present day:

"Looks similar to an incompetent gangster that Humphrey Bogart would beat up." (*St. Joseph's News Press*, December 10, 1977)

"A living, breathing caricature, Bun E. Carlos looks like a small egg with moustache and wire-rimmed glasses perched on a larger egg wrapped in jacket and tie and Archie Bunker white shirt." (*Ottawa Citizen*, June 3, 1978)

"The only drummer in rock who wears a tie to work." (*Baltimore Sun*, June 16, 1978)

"A reclusive Panamanian multi-millionaire on a walking tour of his banana plantation." (*Crawdaddy*, August 1978)

“Second string consular official in some inconsequential dictatorship.” (*Newsday*, December 12, 1978)

“Youthful Orson Welles.” (*Calendar*, February 18, 1979)

“Looks more like your neighborhood pizza chef than a rock ’n roll Drummer.” (*Washington Post*, March 30, 1979)

“Mr. Sauv , 1942.” (*Leader-Telegraph*, May 24, 1979)

“Perseveres as the emerging Coolest-Guy-in-Rock ’n’ Roll. Bun’s mastered that cool beat we really wanted from the ’50s (definitely not Fonzie’s uncool deus-ex-machinations), as he flails away at his kit, while he’s still wearing his John Lennon specs, and his hippie mustache, and his totally neat sport coats, letting Rick Nielsen use & abuse his self-image so that it comes out irredeemably . . . cool!” (*Creem*, May, 1979)

“Shanghaied from a Phillip Marlowe mystery.” (*New York Times*, May 26, 1979)

“Pouting, over aged cherub with fashions from the ’40s.” (*Canada Star-Phoenix*, June 6, 1979)

“Football player or professor of Far Eastern Culture at a major university in another lifetime.” (*Messenger Press*, November 15, 1979)

“Caricature of a sleazy CIA agent planted in some South American banana republic.” (*Memphis Press*, December 21, 1979)

“Looks like death warmed over, the type of fellow you would not like to meet in a dark alley, or anywhere else for that matter.” (*Calgary Herald*, July 31, 1980)

“A rotund chap, balding and mustachioed, who would not look out of place running a Radio Shack in Omaha.” (*Berkeley Gazette*, November 8, 1983)

“He wore glasses, a beard, and a sloppy outfit that looked like he just came from a pickup basketball game.” (*Allentown [PA] Morning Call*, May 4, 1991)

“Guy who you’d walk right past in the grocery store. The guy who bogarts the beer. Ultimately, pretty cool.” (MTV’s *Beavis and Butthead*, July 12, 1994)

“Frumpy uncle.” (His Own Words, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 1998)

“Blue Collar Blacksmith.” (*Chicago Tribune*, April 14, 2003)

“As cool as the lead on a ’70s cop show.” (*PopMatters.com*, November 11, 2008)

“A hotel desk clerk in a Mickey Spillane novel.” (*PopMatters.com*, August 8, 2014)

“Slightly hungover manager of a rinky-dink grocery store.” (*Road to Rolling Stone’s 500 Greatest Albums of All Time*, March 12, 2017)

The true testament to the band’s music is the number and variety of bands that now claim them as a central influence. There are as many as, if not more than, the ones that inspired Cheap Trick to begin with. This really began in their third decade, the ’90s, as music became raw again and the kids from the ’70s were in their own bands. One of those groups is Pearl Jam. Guitarist and songwriter Mike McCready has been an unabashed fan since childhood. Rick Nielsen has pretty much been his musical role model. He’s played on stage with Cheap Trick, and Nielsen has sat in with Pearl Jam. On March 25, 2016, Cheap Trick played his fiftieth birthday party in Seattle, right before they were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. If you’re looking for evidence of Cheap Trick in McCready’s songs, look no further than 1996’s “Hail, Hail.” His birthday party featured Eddie Vedder singing “I Want You to Want Me,” but Robin Zander tackling that Pearl Jam original would be really something. When Pearl Jam closed their show at Chicago’s United Center on September 5, 2023, with “Surrender,” McCready was sporting a vintage 1970s Cheap Trick satin jacket.

What follows is a book not just by me, but also by (and for) fans of Cheap Trick. It may be impossible to explain at every step of the way what the band was trying to do, what the effects were, or why it mattered. What counts is that it did matter and still does. That’s why I wrote this book and why you will hopefully enjoy it.

If nothing else, Eddie Vedder and I have one thing in common. We both get to say the following words: *Mr. Michael McCready.*

FOREWORD

When I first discovered Cheap Trick, I was just beginning to play guitar. Bands like KISS, Cheap Trick, Aerosmith, and Queen were everything to me. *Heaven Tonight* was my first real exposure to them. Songs like “Takin’ Me Back,” “California Man,” and “On Top of the World” colored my world with wonderful ideas of what it’s like to be in a band, and they influence me to this day. In my mind, “Surrender” is *the* anthem for the youth of my generation! I remember getting chills and feeling that “We’re all alright” when I first heard it on the radio, and every time I hear it now, it puts me in the best mood.

My junior high school band Warrior played “Clock Strikes Ten” and Cheap Trick’s cover version of the Beatles’ “Day Tripper.” In 1978, I even dressed up as Rick Nielsen for Halloween. I made a fake checkerboard Fender Explorer guitar in my dad’s woodshop to go with the costume. I don’t know if Rick likes the fact that I was him, but I hope he knows it was out of extreme reverence! That’s how much I love them.

The reason I throw out so many guitar picks is because of Rick Nielsen! He’s not only an amazing showman, but he’s also an incredible songwriter and guitar player, steeped in the Beatles and the Move. Tom Petersson is still one of the coolest, grooviest bass players around. You can hear echoes of his twelve-string bass in Jeff Ament’s playing in “Jeremy.”

Cheap Trick is the hardest-working band in America. They constantly tour to a legion of solid fans. “Big Eyes,” “Downed,” “Southern Girls,” “Dream Police,” “Way of the World,” “Voices,” “He’s a Whore,” and “Elo Kiddies” are all wonderful to see live. Robin Zander’s voice has gotten stronger every year I see them. This constantly amazes me because singers often lose something about their voice as they get older. [This doesn’t seem to have happened to Eddie Vedder, thankfully—R.W.] Robin adds

power and incredible feel and tone every year they tour. Bun E. Carlos is a fantastic drummer with a super original style. That style, plus some, has been turned over to Daxx Nielsen on drums, who totally kicks ass.

My wife Ashley surprised me and got Cheap Trick to play for my fiftieth birthday! The fact that they would do that is amazing. I will always be grateful and stunned when I think about that day. It was a dream come true! I have always loved them and looked up to them as a band. Now I am grateful to be able to call them friends!

—Mike McCready
April 2023

1

ONLY ROCK AND ROLL COULD BRING THEM TOGETHER

This is a band with many myths. Some are half-truths and created by others, but retellings have kept them all alive. Cheap Trick nurtured some of these folktales, which often mutated over the years. The fictional biography that accompanied their first album stated that “this band has no past,” even though they very much did. Songwriter/guitarist Rick Nielsen and drummer Bun E. Carlos first crossed paths at Guilford High School in Rockford, Illinois, while playing in local bands the Grim Reapers and Paegans, respectively. In 1966, the *Rockford Register-Star* profiled the rock scene that was suddenly all the rage among teens. “‘I used to think it was all a lot of noise, but over the last few months it has gained my respect,’ said Ralph Nielson [*sic*], an oratorio singer and owner of Ralph Nielson Music House on 7th Street. His son plays in a group, the Grim Reapers, and Nielson has seen how they discipline themselves to practice.”¹ This would just be one of the millions of times that Nielsen’s name would be misspelled even though his father’s music store would eventually have advertisements in the same local newspapers, with the proper spelling.

Cheap Trick’s yearbook photos and pictures printed in the local papers hardly suggest the distinctively visual group they’d become. Rick had mop-top hair and cuffed jeans, accompanied by a look of apparent embarrassment for being so trendy. The goofy facial contortions and bug eyes would later become his distinctive look. Before growing his trademark mustache, Paegans-era Carlos wore a pair of giant glasses under a head of floppy brown hair, making him look like Rich Sommer’s “Harry Crane” in the middle of *Mad Men*’s seven-season run.

In a macabre nod to their name, the Grim Reapers (which also featured Tom Petersson on bass) were on the 1967 bill with Otis Redding the day his plane went down in Lake Monona near Madison, Wisconsin. Ken

Adamany was the Grim Reapers' booking agent for the show, and even owned the venue. Redding was only twenty-six, and Adamany, already a rising star in the local music scene, wasn't much older. After the news of the crash spread, the police asked Adamany to keep the doors open, and he began refunding tickets. The Grim Reapers ended up performing to a stunned and mournful crowd.

The Factory in Madison later became the site of Cheap Trick's business offices after Adamany became their manager. In 1968, America endured one of its most turbulent political and social years, and Madison, notoriously progressive, was no exception. However, Nielsen and Petersson went to England, where all their musical idols were. Nielsen had *Melody Maker* air-mailed to Rockford for about a hundred dollars a year until he could check out the scene in person. Petersson recalls, "At that time, the Beatles' *White Album* had just come out, and then The Stones' *Beggars Banquet*. So we bought them there and we had to buy a turntable to listen to it in our crummy little room, but it was the greatest thing I had ever heard. . . . We were just dumbstruck honestly."² Nielsen confirms that they stayed in a "crummy room" at the Inverness Court Hotel in Bayswater, where they were completely blown away by those albums, heads full of acid.³

Brian Kramp's ultra-comprehensive *This Band Has No Past* (Jawbone Press, 2022) provides a forensic chronology of how "The Tricktastic Four" were formed through the evolution of bands who changed names and players regularly. Upon their return from England, the Grim Reapers released a 1968 cover of "Hound Dog" with the you-can't-get-more-Midwestern-titled-than-that "Crusin' for Burgers" on the flip side. Adamany was able to drum up some label interest and was selling singles, mostly in Wisconsin and Illinois. He arranged for the group to sign with Epic (Cheap Trick's eventual label), who re-released the single. Epic wanted the band to change their name to something more upbeat, so they became Fuse. Their lone album was recorded in 1969, the same year Rick and Karen Nielsen were married. The self-titled *Fuse* never got much traction, and Nielsen and Petersson are pretty dismissive of it in interviews. Once Cheap Trick blew up in the '70s, copies of the record began showing up among collectors, much to the band's collective embarrassment.

Fuse later mutated into Nazz, formed in Philadelphia. They were notable as Todd Rundgren's first band, which took its name from the Yardbirds' 1966 song "The Nazz Are Blue." Rick's friend Mike Myers, also in the second incarnation of the Grim Reapers, traveled to England with Rick and Tom. Myers accompanied Nielsen on a trip to Philadelphia to sell Rick's 1959 Les Paul Sunburst to his favorite guitarist, Jeff Beck,

after seeing one of the Yardbirds' roadies drop one at a Chicago show a few weeks earlier.

Nazz, which also featured Robert "Stewkey" Antoni (who sadly passed in 2023) and Thom Mooney, would also alternately play gigs as Fuse. To confuse matters further, Fuse morphed into Sick Man of Europe, which included drummer Brad M. Carlson, who adopted his new stage moniker.⁴ He was a Paul Bunyan fan since childhood and subsequently nicknamed "Bun." Tom began calling him "Bunny" in Philadelphia. Carlos said, "I adopted a stage name so the band didn't sound like a bunch of Swedes. I changed Carlson to Carlos. If I would have known we were going to be famous, I never would have picked Carlos."⁵ However, if Ringo Starr did it, who was he to say no?⁶ Petersson, like Keith Richards, eventually added an extra "s" to his own name to give it more stage presence.

The naming of the band, like everything in their origin story, has always been of dubious provenance. The most common telling is that it originated from Nielsen and Petersson's experience at a Slade (other times Mott the Hoople) show, where they noticed that they were "breaking out every cheap trick in the book." Original vocalist Randy "Xeno" Hogan told Mike Vanderbilt of *Chicago Reader* in 2016 that it came from Rick's description of a guitar riff as a cheap trick. The band's name, like everything else about them, wasn't really meant to be understood anyway. They left clues, but also their share of red herrings, in their interviews. Rick told Stephen Demorest for England's *Sounds* in 1978, "I make up different stories every time," before offering up two stories about the origin of the name involving a Ouija board and aliens in flying saucers.⁷ In fact, Rick Szeluga, not Petersson, was the band's bassist when they adopted the name. This makes the story of being inspired after another band's concert even more suspect.

The name, and the attempts to decipher it, suited the band perfectly. They wanted to grab your attention but also make you wonder if something deeper was going on. Record companies told them the words "cheap" and "trick" would make them difficult to market. Carlos told *Classic Rock Revisited*, "These people would all be sitting there telling us how to make ourselves famous and we would just be sitting there going, 'Uh huh.' We were laughing our asses off at the same time. We kind of knew the music had to do the talking."⁸

The drummer was Cheap Trick's archivist from the very beginning. He kept all the photos, articles, and recordings of the band, which are thankfully now available online. His trademark candor and wit often cut through many of the band-reinforced legends that have been recycled for

fifty years, including the band-naming story. He told Tom Houston of *Legendary Rock Interviews* in 2012: “Here’s how it happened, we were sitting around in the garage where we rehearsed one day and we agreed that we needed a name . . . well, what should we call ourselves? We didn’t want to be like Yes and all the bands with big capes and lasers and all that crap so we came up with the word ‘cheap.’ ‘Cheap this, cheap that,’ and I think that Rick said ‘Cheap Trick’ and everyone said ‘yeah that sounds good,’ so we just went with it.”⁹

Carlos still credits Nielsen for the band’s name, but only disputes the many tall tales Rick uses to explain it. The drummer also told Ira Robbins that Nielsen toyed around with “T-Rick” for a bit as well.¹⁰ Bun told Job Wright that they were mostly poking fun at the artifice of the prog rock bands. “Back then, we just took our own personalities and we expanded on it . . . there were bands like Starcastle and we were cringing seeing these guys. Our reaction to that was us going, ‘We are not all going to get matching capes. We are going to look like ourselves and look good doing so.’”¹¹

Ken Adamany was quickly becoming a legend in the Midwest. Bill Elson, who worked with KISS and then Cheap Trick through American Talent International, remembers his growing reputation:

BILL ELSON: He was famous because he was the only guy many of us know who had a car phone in 1964. A phone call from Ken Adamany while he was driving wasn’t exactly like sitting down to lunch with Colonel Parker, but it was a big deal because the phone was essentially a radio. In retrospect, it was a manifestation of Ken’s either innate or latent sense of marketing and promotion because a guy with a car telephone and said he had a band you should get dates for, you’d listen to him because he had to be the shit. . . . When the operator was on the line and wanted to know if you would take a call from Ken Adamany, it further enhanced the magic of it all. He was the only guy I knew of that sent out postcards with the schedule of his bands’ appearances, with different postcards for each group.¹²

The earliest incarnation of Cheap Trick looked like quite an odd combination, just not the one that would seemingly be everywhere in 1979. Hogan wore a purple jacket with bananas on it, and Nielsen still had his hair, then wrapped in a scarf. Eventually he opted for a beige cap, which became his trademark black baseball hat, but at one point he opted for a Buster Keaton-style boater with suspenders. Tom also had a scarf on his head and even wore whiteface makeup for a short period with his dark curls exposed. Guitarist Zal Cleminson of the Sensational Alex Harvey Band,

another huge Cheap Trick influence, had the same look. Carlos often tells the story of the band having to practically fight their way off the stage in Macomb, Illinois, as a result of Petersson's short-lived fashion experiment.

Carlos was a collector and historian from the beginning. He pretended to write for *Hit Parader* to meet Jeff Beck backstage in 1965, interviewed Pete Townshend in 1968, and taped Jimi Hendrix, Cream, and the Stones when they swung through town. The drummer possesses more than a whole basement's worth of live tapes, including the largest known collection of Cheap Trick's music anywhere. "Bun E's Basement Bootlegs," once a fan-club-only limited series of CDs in the early 2000s, resumed production in February 2023, and are now accessible via YouTube. In 1973, Xeno sounded eerily reminiscent of Steve Marriott, then in Humble Pie. Cheap Trick also played some of Marriott's songs from the Small Faces, along with "Down on the Bay," by the Move. They did some Who, Bowie, Velvet Underground, and Slade. Their cover of Bob Dylan's "Please Mrs. Henry" from *The Basement Tapes* (based on Manfred Mann's Earth Band's version) was already a showstopper. There were also a few originals sprinkled in. "Ultramental," a wordless composition from Sick Man of Europe, would become the middle part of 1979's "Dream Police." Before their cover of "Dancing in the Street" you can also hear the riff from another future classic, "Surrender."

Carlos said in 2016, "I like the Move and Family; there were all these goofball English bands from 1968–1972 that we all dug that nobody ever heard over here. In England it wouldn't surprise anybody but over here it would. In 1973, we started playing David Bowie tunes [like 'Suffragette City'] and no one had ever heard of him. People would come up to us and request that song, play that 'Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am' song' (laughs). People told us it was the greatest song we ever wrote (laughs)."¹³

Robin Zander replaced Hogan in October 1974. He had previously been one-half of acoustic duo Zander and Kent, with Brian Kent Beebe. He was actually slated for the job before Hogan but was unable get out of his commitment with Beebe, performing at piano bars in the Wisconsin Dells. Zander was already famous for his uncanny covers of Lennon, Jagger, Dylan, and Neil Young, and Carlos recruited him after the Paegans dissolved. The first show by the classic Cheap Trick lineup was at the Pewaukee, Wisconsin, junior prom in 1974. All of their individual influences came together to form an increasingly distinctive sound.

Zander's "Man of a Thousand Voices" nickname came from his ability to inhabit countless eccentric characters behind the microphone. All of them came from cover songs until Rick started writing his own material.