

# ONE COLD HARVEST



**Quatermass** cut a solitary LP for the legendary Harvest label, were lauded in Germany, then fell apart in a grey and austere Britain that has parallels with the present day. But the status of this unusual trio's album steadily grew for collectors, and to mark its reissue, they speak to Joe Geesin

**T**he wave of new bands in the late 60s that blended progressive and hard rock gave the world some highly successful and deeply influential acts that any rock fan could name. But below that premiership there lingers a lot of bands who deserved just as much acclaim, without achieving it. These are the bands only true collectors know. Among them is Quatermass. Their eponymous and sole set, with its distinctive Storm Thorgerson sleeve, is deservedly considered a classic of its era, and Mint condition copies can command up to £200.

With great tracks showcasing explosive and unconstrained performances, Quatermass were an organ-led three piece. But this was a power trio with a difference, and perhaps, in an era where fans were not always ready to accept the unusual, it was the reason why the band did not enjoy the fame it deserved: Quatermass had no guitarist.

Not that you missed the guitar once you heard them. If any outfit was qualified to make music in any way it liked, it was this one: all its members boasted a substantial pedigree. Keyboardist Pete Robinson was a seasoned session musician, bassist/vocalist John 'Gus' Gustafson had played with The Merseybeats and The Big Three, while drummer Mick Underwood, formerly of The Herd, had played in both The Outlaws and producer Joe Meek's house band with Ritchie Blackmore, as well as Episode Six with Ian Gillan and Roger Glover – all of whom were later in Deep Purple.

Taking their name from a much-loved science fiction TV serial, they issued their album on EMI subsidiary Harvest, also home to Purple and Pink Floyd (the latter recorded *Atom Heart Mother* in the same studios at around the same time). The Quatermass album received much critical acclaim, but due to a variety of circumstances the band folded in early 1971, shortly after a US tour. Robinson continued his session work and became a noted soundtrack composer, while both Gustafson and Underwood would later play in different incarnations of Ian Gillan's solo band. Among other sessions, Gus also played with Roxy Music, The Pirates, Hard Stuff, and Gordon Giltrap, while Mick Underwood played with Sammy, Strapps, Raw Glory and Quatermass II (featuring Nick Simper and Don Airey) and is currently touring with his own band, Glory Road.

Two singles (*Black Sheep Of The Family*

and *One Blind Mice*) were issued in Europe, and the former provided yet another connection to Deep Purple, when Ritchie Blackmore urged the band to cover it. The rest of Purple didn't share his enthusiasm, so Blackmore recorded it in December '74 with members of the US band Elf, intending to release it as a solo single. He was still a member of Purple at the time, but the side project led to the formation of Rainbow.

After a couple of CD issues (and an LP reissue or two), Cherry Red overhauled and expanded Quatermass, which now includes a 5.1 surround sound bonus disc. Mick Underwood and Pete Robinson tell us all about Quatermass and the album – as it was then, and how it stands now.

**RC: You met in Episode Six?**

**Pete:** I'd worked in a band with Mick Underwood on a Johnny Cash tour. Episode Six was really Mick Underwood, Roger Glover on bass, Ian Gillan, Sheila Carter and Tony Lander. Deep Purple pinched Ian Gillan, and he said he wasn't going unless his mate Roger came too, and that decimated the band. Mick and the other members of Episode Six weren't particularly interested in carrying on. Their manager, Gloria Bristow, said, "What do you want to do?", and Mick said maybe he and I could get a band going. We jammed together and it went really well. We wanted a singer and a bass player, no guitars – that was a deliberate choice: guitars

make things louder. Which is nice, but we wanted a different sound. Gloria knew John, from The Big Three, we met at The Ship in Wardour Street [Soho, London], and John was a bassist and a singer, which was nice. We had a go, and it was obvious it was going to work; he was astonishing – it was really good. So that's how it started.

**Mick:** I'd done a residency with a singer called James Royal, and we did two weeks at Hachets in the West End; that's when we met – after that season when we supported Johnny Cash, which Pete was on. Then we parted company. I got offered a few things, including Episode Six, and Ian [Gillan] and I were talking [about] other things, doing something a bit heavier, then Roger and Ian got the Deep Purple gig. Gloria wanted us to go on and I suggested Peter on keyboards, and Gloria knew Gus, so it really was out of the ashes of Episode Six. The three of us, we had something special. I think Episode Six ended up recruiting some other people, briefly.

**Quatermass was a radically different direction to Episode Six.**

**Pete:** To be honest, I've never heard Episode Six's stuff, but I'm sure it wasn't what Ian or Roger were best at doing, and I think, from what I can gather, it was a little constricting for Mick in terms of what he really liked to play. So by the time we got together, I was all over the place [mimes wild keyboard-playing]: it was like, at last we can thrash



The Quatermass no-guitar experiment: from left, Mick Underwood, John Gustafson, Pete Robinson



about. It was a breath of fresh air for us all. **Mick:** Episode Six was more of a covers band. They did some good covers, but yes, Ian, Roger and I were into the heavier stuff. I remember playing at a youth club at about the age of 14. The sports master said I should go because I wanted to play drums. There were about eight guitarists strumming along, with no drummer. A girl there said I should meet her boyfriend, Ritchie [Blackmore]; Ian, Ritchie and myself all lived about a mile from each other. I went to his place, and we played in a band called The Dominators. We'd just play, me and him, and we did the odd little gig. It was unbelievable even back then. And after little while the parents were saying "the drummer's too loud", and I was required to leave. But by that time I could be play a bit better. I was being



Bonham. Suddenly John never came along to a gig. We wondered where he'd gone, and he turned up in Led Zeppelin. Steve Hammond and I became really good friends, and that's how he came in to write some of the Quatermass album. He had an aptitude for great, solid songs. **Mick:** Zeppelin, obviously, I'm a huge fan. Deep Purple at the time; they'd done well with Hush in America, but over here they weren't doing much until In Rock came out; they didn't have the writing ability before then. Jethro Tull and The Nice, bands of that era I liked, and Brian Auger too.

#### How did you get signed to Harvest?

**Pete:** I don't think we were. Well, we thought we were a Harvest band at the time, but it turns out we were only leased, which was

## “My Christmas dinner on tour was a cheese sandwich”

taught by Jim Marshall (founder of Marshall Amps). I then played with other top local bands until I went pro.

#### Who did you feel were your contemporaries when you started Quatermass?

**Pete:** Keith Emerson, and certainly Jon Lord. I love Brian Auger. Jon and Brian were the two organists about which I'd think, "How do they do that?" And the guy from Soft Machine, Mike Ratledge. In terms of bands, I suppose The Nice. I always liked organ trios: when I first heard Brother Jack McDuff, I thought, "I want to do that," as he used bass pedals and a guitarist. When I joined Chris Farlowe & The Thunderbirds in 1967, that was a three-piece. I'd replaced Pete Solley, who'd gone to join The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown. When Carl Palmer left, in came Steve Hammond on drums, then John

a shame. We were kids, we were lured by a £1,000 advance, and if we don't sign we don't get anything. So we signed our lives away. We ended up on the worst record deal of anybody ever. And that existed up until just a few weeks ago, when BMG relented and gave us a bit more than the 1 per cent we used to get. Well, 1 or 2 per cent, it was crap. So, although we were on Harvest, we were only leased by Edwards and Coletta, and Air London.

**Mick:** I only found out about that recently, I just knew about Air London, which got sold around a bit.

#### That was your management?

**Pete:** Gloria Bristow was our personal manager; Air London looked after the records.

**Mick:** There didn't seem to be a lot of looking after anyone much!

#### Did that affect support from the label?

**Pete:** We got quite a lot of support from Air, because of George Martin: it was his company. The song Laughing Tackle, I wanted to use big strings on, and George had to sign it off. He said, "Strings? How many we talking about?" and I replied, "At least 30." He wanted to see the score and I lied that it was at home. I had to rush home and scribble out this score. He saw it the next day and thought I knew what I was doing; I can't imagine that happening now. We had over 30 strings.

**Mick:** The strings session was superb. There was support at the time of recording; that was a big session. I saw Pete's score, there was one part, where it was just squiggles. He just explained it to them and they had to improvise. It was a *huge* session, strings, basses all there. Fantastic. They knew what they were doing. A fabulous session to watch.

#### What else can you remember about the sessions?

**Pete:** Panic, really! But we were in Abbey Road 2, Pink Floyd were in there for a while, and I think The Beatles were around too, because all their stuff was parked at one end of the studio. It was a time when you'd record three tracks in three hours, very different from today, where you spend weeks on a song. Back then if the keyboard wasn't loud enough, you'd go in and do it again, playing a bit louder – none of this fiddling about, it was just the feeling of it. I had a terrific time; it was new to all of us. We'd recorded stuff before, but not as a unit.

A couple of times we couldn't get into Abbey Road, so we went to Advision. We recorded Laughing Tackle there and we loved how it sounded, so we did another version of Black Sheep Of The Family, which became the one on the album. We weren't really ready initially. It was the first thing we tried, it just wasn't gelling. We changed engineers and we got the wonderful Jeff Jarratt. It was a lot of fun.

**Mick:** I can remember doing the drum solo at Advision. I don't remember it being tough – Quatermass was a natural band. I was talking to Gus at the playback and it was all a bit cosmic. We worked with the bass and bass drum; it was complicated and we didn't rehearse, it just happened. It was the same for me with John McCoy in Gillan: we didn't work it out, we clicked. It's complicated but it fits. I don't remember any traumas, it was free flowing. The album was the bones of what the band did live.

#### What did you make of Ritchie Blackmore's version of Black Sheep Of The Family?

**Pete:** Yeah, it was alright. It was different enough from ours. Yeah, I liked it. I'm sure Steve, wherever he is, bless his heart, would be very happy with it. Gus and I recorded it again live; an interesting version.

**Mick:** Ritchie's version was different to ours; I played ours to him in the studio when he was recording with Deep Purple, and he loved it. So not only do I get the credit for putting

Gillan's name forward to Deep Purple, but some blame me for Blackmore's interest in the track and that then screwing up things a few years later! [When Blackmore left Purple to form Rainbow.]

#### Your album sleeve was designed by Storm Thorgerson. What was he like to work with?

**Pete:** We never really met him. I think he may have shuffled in one day, had this idea, then went away. They came up with the template for that design. We all signed it off right away, we liked it. There was no back and forth. I think the name Quatermass was in a font that was a bit too gothic, we preferred the straight-edged simple font, but that was the only change we came up with.

**Mick:** I remember the photo session in Hampstead, dodging all the traffic.

#### You went on the road?

**Pete:** We lived in Germany and went round that country forever, honing our craft, as most bands did, like The Beatles in Hamburg. Germany I remember a lot, I have wonderful recollections of Munich, Berlin, Hamburg, it was great. I don't remember much about the UK tour, apart from being freezing most of the time.

**Mick:** We didn't really tour here, it was just a couple of gigs. I think we supported Deep Purple in Liverpool. We toured Germany and Sweden. They liked us in Germany. We did lots out there, TV and bits. It was tuppenny gigs here, but you go to Germany

and they organise a tour for you. I think the Germans understood us more than the UK.

#### How about the US tour?

**Pete:** That was an eye opener. We arrived in Chicago in November, freezing beyond comprehension, and we played in this place that was an old prison – might have been called The Crypt or something – and it felt like it. There were 10 bands on the bill! We went from there to New York, played Fillmore East, then Texas, ended up in San Francisco, the Fillmore West; magnificent, just iconic places. We finished the tour in Los Angeles, arrived on Christmas Eve, 85 degrees, and thought "I like this." We played The Whisky A Go Go until New Year's Eve, doing three shows a night. I loved LA and three years later I moved there.

**Mick:** The Chicago gig was a major venue. Gary Moore was there too, with Skid Row. You'd get to a venue and the first thing you see is a huge dustbin full of ice and beer for you. That first gig was paralytically cold. The Hawk had struck – that was the wind off of the lake that could freeze a tank. The venues were wonderful. At one point, we got locked out of our hotel because someone hadn't paid the bill, but the overall tour was great. The Whisky A Go Go was good; half our gear went missing, but we got it back. We didn't have the tour back-up. We had the back-up with Gillan [10 years later], but the venues were awful. We played a church with Gillan, and Bernie Tormé was in tears; complete opposite to the Quatermass tour.



#### Didn't the band split soon after you all returned to England?

**Pete:** We did. I think it was combination of things. There was austerity: the three-day week in 1973, the oil shortage, and, in comparison to America, it was just miserable in the UK. In the US, everything was in colour, and you came back to England and everything was grey. There were so many bands scrabbling for attention. I think we got lost in the mix, there was really no support by then. [Gustafson and] I had just got the gig to do *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and as a result of that I started doing recording sessions, John and Mick too, and we were making more money in a week than we did in months with the band. There didn't seem to be any support from the management.

**Mick:** I agree totally. I don't think we did any other gigs. We'd just come back from a US tour which was potentially fantastic but the back-up was pathetic. My Christmas dinner on tour was a cheese sandwich. We did both the Fillmores, going down really well, yet we were hanging on by our fingernails.

**Pete:** After Quatermass, John did some stuff with Roxy Music, and was doing the session circuit. And I ended up working with Shawn Phillips, and on the 1974 tour we got John to come too. John and I had a drummer called Barry De Souza. We went out to Sweden quite a lot because our producer was from there and got us to play on records over there.

**Mick:** I ended up playing in a three-piece, Peace, with Paul Rodgers. It was very fundamental rock; I'd always loved Paul. That finished because Free re-formed, I did an album with Paul that never got released, some of those tracks Free then recorded. Then I made a real big mistake; I formed a band myself, Sammy, with some good people. We had an album out on Philips. I was the first to leave my own band! We did the album over a weekend, and I got Ian Gillan to produce a single we did, bless him. The guys were great, but we didn't have the writing power or resources, and I was on the bounce. Then I joined Strapps and played some sessions.

#### Why didn't Quatermass release a second album?

**Pete:** The last thing we recorded was One Blind Mice, and someone in Germany got hold of it and put it on the CD and you can even hear the crackle from the record. That was the one track that we had that was an original multitrack. It was to be the first track on the new album. Anyway, it sounds terrific. But for various reasons, it just fell apart. It collapsed like a flan in a cupboard.

#### How do you think your album stands up today?

**Pete:** Some of it sounds as fresh as things do today. The organ sound puts it in a time zone. There are some Spinal Tap moments on there too – you know, monolithic – but that's how it was then. I don't think anything's happening like that today, maybe mercifully! The people I've played it to have reacted very strongly to it, saying how good it is that I'm putting it out, because there's nothing like this at the moment. And coupled with the Sphincter

Ensemble things that we're putting out, it might be an encouragement for people to go and jam, and not just play 12 bars. Just do whatever happens. You know, *listen* to each other.

**Mick:** I think with what Pete's done, it's fabulous, he's brought it forward compared to then. It is fresh, it has a lot of power, I love the drum sound. The remix and rebalance is astonishing. Brilliant job.

**Had you listened to the album much since the band folded?**

**Pete:** Maybe once or twice in 30-40 years.  
**Mick:** I listen to it a bit, it's a milestone for me, [in terms of] playing. It's coming out of sessions and bands I was with, not working to a particular formula. It was a bit more loose. I learned a great deal doing that album, and playing with Gus and Pete. We play Black Sheep with my current band Glory Road, and I want Gemini in the setlist. Black Sheep goes down brilliantly at gigs.

**What did you think of the Quatermass II project?**

**Pete:** Well, it was a different enough band, guitar based; like the IRA and the Real IRA!  
**Mick:** It was a working title while we were rehearsing and getting set up. I didn't want it to be called that. I found it uncomfortable. Apart from Gus writing a few tracks, it was fuck-all to do with Quatermass.

**What led to the remaster of the album?**

**Pete:** I met Mark Powell of Cherry Red through a friend, Michael Hoenic, who had a band called Agitation Free. Cherry Red had done a remaster of an album he'd done with Agitation Free, and he thought Mark might issue an improvisation that I'd done with a group of musicians, among whom was John Gustafson, in 1972. I played him the track and he said "This is great, who's on it?" When I said I was in Quatermass with John, he said he remembered them. Mark said it should be reissued and I told him that I wanted to remix it in 5.1. I have my studio set up for that as I do film music. Unfortunately all the original multitracks were lost. Repertoire, a German label, had wanted the masters to do a CD a few years ago and the record company sent them everything, which got put on a shelf, forgotten about, and lost. What was left were some stereos, some four tracks, safety copies of overdub stuff we did; it was all in a really bad condition so Michael came to my studio in LA and it took us nine weeks to reconstruct these tracks to a mixable condition. So it all took nearly five months. But it's done and I'm really pleased. Even the stereo sounds night and day from the original.

**Mick:** I first heard about it when Pete phoned me to say it was going on and John was involved, and to get me involved. He did the extra tracks. Lovely. I'm happy with it, it goes so far back. But that was the first I heard about it. When I heard the [first] playback in December 2012, I was stunned.

I was sitting in the prime seat for the 5.1, which I didn't know much about. The mix and sound... what he'd done was gobsmacking, especially the 5.1. It's how it should have sounded originally, if we'd had that technology back then.

**How did you choose what extra tracks to put on?**

**Pete:** I wanted some extras for the punters and there were some outtakes but they really weren't any good. I found a rehearsal tape, like a bootleg, which was interesting, then John Gustafson found a cassette of a live thing we did in 1974 with Shawn Phillips and that sounds astounding. No one had ever played it. It was done as a board mix, it was 14 minutes so I edited it down to six, put that on. One Blind Mice we'd done, it was a single, meant for the second album.

**Mick:** One Blind Mice was the first recording we'd done for the projected 2nd album, at Air Studios. Unfortunately, the album didn't get any further.

**Are you surprised by the album's legacy?**

**Pete:** Well yes, in a way. I bring the album out to show my mates what we looked like 40-odd years ago, and we have a jolly good laugh. But you wouldn't play any of it – that was the time then. It wasn't until Mark Powell said I should take a look at

Facebook and there's a core fanbase. I was very surprised, and encouraged.

**Mick:** Totally, yes I am. But it deserves it, in my own opinion. I'm really proud of the album.

**You know copies change hands for up to £200 now?**

**Pete:** You're joking. I don't think we saw a hundred quid for doing it! I don't even know how many it's sold over the years.

**Mick:** Where's my money?! Everyone's made money out of it except us!

**Is there anything left that's worth releasing?**

**Pete:** No. Believe me, I went through every single piece of material. Some things weren't very well played or recorded and aren't worth putting out. I think that everything that's on this record is it. There's still more from that Shawn Phillips tour, the same song, but that was me and John, not the core Quatermass. That was a really good example of the last thing that John and I really did together. I'm very positive about this record, This is a nice set: a DVD, a CD, a booklet, and I want to do a limited vinyl release, that would be lovely. It'll be a replica of the original with a gatefold and booklet. I'm so proud of it. 

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