



AND THE BAND PLAYED ON

Saxon have survived the ups and downs of life as stalwarts of British metal, and a recent renaissance has seen them hit new highs. Vocalist **Biff Byford** and original axeman **Graham Oliver** sacrifice Joe Geesin on the Altar Of The Gods

Bastions of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, it is now 35 years since Saxon released their debut album. Widely considered the first true album of the movement, it was the first of a string of classics that featured tracks like of *Wheels Of Steel*, *747 (Strangers In The Night)*, *And The Bands Played On* and *Princess Of The Night*.

Formed in the late 70s as Son Of A Bitch, the band featured singer Biff Byford, guitarists Graham Oliver and Paul Quinn, bassist Steve Dawson and drummer Pete Gill. As Saxon, they soon became part of a metal scene that included Iron Maiden, Samson, Def Leppard and a host of others, their sound characterised (often) by twin guitars, high-energy catchy riffs and hints of their bluesy or progressive roots.

Like many bands, they've been dogged by a shifting line-up, management and label

changes, and the pressures of changing musical fashions, all of which contributed to a decline in popularity in the late 80s. But this was followed by a serious resurgence at the turn of the century.

With guitarist Doug Scarratt, bassist Nibbs Carter and drummer Nigel Glockler (recently sidelined by illness) joining Quinn and Byford, Saxon regained much of their lost ground and continue to produce critically acclaimed albums, and fill venues several times the size of the ones they were playing in the mid-90s. Their differences with Saxon now put to one side, original members Graham and Steve are continue to tour as Oliver/Dawson Saxon to much acclaim, earning good reviews.

The catalogue of reissues and compilations is a minefield, but like many heavy metal bands, Saxon have embraced the vinyl revival; new albums receive a heavy-duty release and many of their

earlier sets have seen a 180g coloured vinyl edition by Back On Black. The European label Night Of The Vinyl Dead has unleashed some very limited pressings too.

A multitude of guest appearances too numerous to list here has most recently seen Biff front The Scintilla Project on their *Hybrid* set. There's also news of more reissues and a DVD with narration from Rick Wakeman; they never stop.

Here vocalist Biff and original guitarist Graham take us through the highs and lows of their heavy metal thunder.

RC: How did your two earlier bands, Coast and Sob, come together?

Biff: We knew each other, we played the same clubs and pubs. I got a call from them [Steve Dawson and Graham Oliver] when their band Sob had lost their singer and guitarist. But I was a bassist. So one week later they called back and touted the idea of

two bassists. I said I was in a band with Paul. They were into Free – that's where Sob came from, their *Tons Of Sobs* album – and we were more into the complicated stuff. Then the drummer left, so we thought "let's do it", but I'd only do it if Paul did too. We did our first gig in Rotherham, with two basses and two guitars, and just ran with it.

Graham: Steve Dawson had a tape of a demo with Biff singing, as they were a rival band, Coast. Biff did not sing live but he had sung a song called Lady on this demo, and as he said, we had both lost members of our respective bands. Also, we had a van but no singer, they had a PA but no van, and Steve really saw the potential in Biff's singing and asked him to join us. We knew Quinny from early days in Pagan Chorus; he was a great player.

Then you changed your name?

Biff: Yes. Son Of A Bitch was nothing to do with Sob; it was to fit in with the punk scene.

Graham: We did a few shows as Sob, but at a gig at Nashville Rooms in London, a guy from Sheffield, Alan Bown, who I think had The Alan Bown Set, suggested we change our name to Son Of A Bitch as it would be more fitting. This was right in the thick of punk. We had the same energy but better playing, and so we took his advice.

When did you give up the bass?

Biff: There was no conscious decision, I had a twin-neck at the time, so could have played bass or guitar. We played with two bassists for a couple of months, it was alright... well, it was a silly idea! Dobby was a bassist and I was enjoying the singing, so I just stopped playing. I was doing alright as a singer.

What kind of material were you playing?

Biff: Both Steve and Graham, and Paul and myself brought in songs that we worked on together... Militia Guard, Judgement Day, Still Fit To Boogie and Backs To The Wall – what later became our first album. We [Paul and I] were more musical, technical, while Graham and Steve were more riff-oriented.

How influenced were you by the punk explosion?

Biff: We weren't really, not consciously; we were more into gigs, and the tracks being played at The Roundhouse [Camden].

Signing to Carrere, chiefly a disco label back then, was a brave move. How did it come about?

Biff: Well, we'd sent this demo tape to EMI, but sadly, a deal didn't happen. If two guys at EMI hadn't left, who knows what would have happened? To tell the truth we couldn't get arrested at the time. We weren't aware of any scene [that Carrere was involved in]; they offered us an advance and a two-album deal, so we took it.

Graham: Claude Carrere said that when he heard Frozen Rainbow and the guitar solo – which was mine, so I was chuffed – he decided to sign us. Freddie Cannon had just

left EMI [where he was commercial director] to go with Carrere [as UK MD] and he took our demo from EMI to Claude, so that's how we ended up on Carrere.

Was your new name, Saxon, a marketing ploy?

Biff: The record company didn't like the name Son Of A Bitch. It was too narrow: it only worked for the kids. We were under contract, which was hard to get. Son Of A Bitch was a silly name anyway. You won't get airplay or get noticed in the US with a name like that. It was a singles market: if you didn't have a hit and get on *Top Of The Pops*, you wouldn't make it.

Graham: When we flew to Paris to sign the deal with Carrere in 1978, it was their distributor in the US that said we had to change the name. Freddie Cannon came up from London and we met him at the Newcastle Station Hotel at 1am after a gig at The Doggy Club a few weeks later. It took until 5am to come up with the name Saxon.



Biff: The first suggestion for our name was Anglo Saxon. I think it's why there was interest in Germany, because of Saxony.

Your debut LP is considered the first NWOBHM album. Were you aware of any kind of movement at the time?

Biff: I don't know. We'd had bits and pieces in the press, then this two-page spread in *Sounds*, saying we were the link between punk and metal, and it said The New Wave Of British Heavy Metal. It wasn't until we did [second album] *Wheels Of Steel*, when Maiden were signed too, that any kind of scene galvanised.

Did your friendship with Motörhead help?

Biff: It definitely did; they helped us no end on tour, opened our eyes, introduced us to a wider audience. They came to see us live, we went to see them; great times. We weren't jealous of each other. We're still friends – we were going out with them last January, we've played with them before, it's a great package for fans.

One show a couple of years back, Motörhead's drummer Mikkey Dee got onstage to play with you and you said that "he's now playing with a real metal band".

Biff: There's lots of humour, pisstaking! We're close friends.

You appeared on Top Of The Pops; did that surprise you?

Biff: The first time was for *Wheels Of Steel*. We got this phone call: it had gone into the charts at No 31 or something and we needed to play *Top Of The Pops*. We did it a few days before, in a studio on our own. It was bizarre, really: lip syncing, no audience. We wanted to play live but couldn't get all our gear in. A bit scary to do, but we did it in 15 minutes.

What do you remember about playing Donington in 1980?

Biff: I didn't know what Monsters Of Rock was at the time – it was our first festival. We'd sold 150,000 copies of *Wheels Of Steel*. We just decided to do our [usual] show, and have a great time. I was shit scared! The dressing room was miles away, you had to get driven from there to the stage, and in front of 60,000-70,000 people. It was all a bit daunting, but I think we were the band of the day because we weren't established like the others were.

Did Spinal Tap's Harry Shearer tour with you to find inspiration for the movie?

Biff: I don't remember... I know he spent some time with Steve. We had Motörhead's bus. It wasn't a sleeper, there were no beds; we stayed in hotels and drove to the gig the next day, so he probably spent time with Steve at the hotel. I know Steve showed him stuff like the stance, playing with one hand.

Graham: Our then-manager Nigel Thomas had connections. He got Ridley Scott to do the *Power And The Glory* video. He asked us on our *Denim & Leather* tour if we minded a guy travelling on the road with us for a week, as this guy was making a film comedy about a band, so we agreed. As it turned out it was Harry Shearer, who nicked Steve [Dawson]'s image.

What Spinal Tap moments of your own did you have?

Biff: Every band does – we had plenty. I went to the movie's premiere with Iron Maiden, and I didn't see anything of us in there – apart from Steve, of course.

Graham: I did tell Harry about our show with Motörhead at Hammersmith when they had been testing the dry ice and the stage was wet. I used to run on from the wings playing the A-chord intro to *Motorcycle Man*, slipped flat on my back and carried on playing. My tech Rob Price ran on and picked me up and I never stopped playing. This ended up in the movie, as did other bits from our shows. We met Harry a while ago in London, and he remembered the gigs in Leicester and Cardiff, and travelling on our bus. He's written the foreword for our book.

Tracks such as *Wheels Of Steel*, *747* and *Princess Of The Night* have become like anthems. How do you feel about them now?

Biff: I think they *are* anthems! There are some fantastic songs from the time, by us, Whitesnake, Iron Maiden. We were all young and naïve, we just wrote songs. Albums two, three and four (*Wheels Of Steel*, *Strong Arm Of The Law*, *Denim And Leather*) are our Holy Trinity. I don't know why they're so popular, but they belong to the audience now. It would be against the ethos if we didn't play them. It's all about the time, not just the songs. Us and Maiden were a breath of fresh air.

When Pete Gill left, how did Toyah's drummer Nigel Glockler fit in?

Biff: Pete was acting a bit strange then, I don't know what happened. He called the manager and said he couldn't do the *Denim And Leather* tour. Someone said he'd hurt his hand. The management knew Nigel, they'd worked with him in Krakatoa. We auditioned six drummers and Nigel was the most dynamic. He had to learn the set in two days. Pete came to see us at Sheffield, I don't know what happened; Nigel became a full-time member.

How do you feel your sound developed during the Carrere years?

Biff: Not much at all, really; we just wrote the same way. We were concentrating on our writing and we left the production up to the producers. We didn't have mainstream producers. The label couldn't afford people like Martin Birch and we just ended up using the producers who were supplied.

Wasn't it the *Strong Arm Metal* compilation that upset your management?

Biff: Yes. They just put that album out without telling us. Our manager, Nigel Thomas, wanted us off Carrere anyway and to go to EMI. He wanted to break America. Carrere didn't pay an advance on the compilation so Nigel said it was time to go. *Crusader*, our last Carrere album, was distributed by EMI, so EMI was the obvious choice.

Why did EMI put you on Parlophone?

Biff: I have no idea. The story goes that it was because Iron Maiden were on EMI. Parlophone was just across the corridor – it was a bit more arty. But I really don't know why we were put on it.

Although more commercial, *Innocence Is No Excuse* was a good time for the band?

Biff: It did ok sales-wise and we got airplay too. The band weren't as heavy from the guitar point of view, but the rest of us were the same.

While you were recording *Rock The Nations* in 1986, was that the first time since the band formed that you'd played bass, Biff? Haven't you written songs on the bass since?

Biff: Yes. I still play it a lot when writing. I was playing and writing on the bass a few weeks ago. It keeps me in touch with my musician side, and if I'm writing with Paul or Doug [Scarratt, current guitarist], and Nibbs [Carter, bassist] isn't around, I pick up the bass.

Is it true that Elton John loved playing on *Rock The Nations*?

Biff: He only really played on one track, Party 'Til You Puke, which was a good rock'n'roll number. Northern Lady was more of a jam: we sampled him live. He was playing along to the song, the engineer recorded him and we looped it. He's a good lad, Elton.

Graham: We were recording in Wisseloord

Studio, Hilversum, Netherlands, and Elton was recording next door. Our producer Gary Lyons had the idea of Elton playing piano on Northern Lady. Gary asked him and Elton replied: "I thought you would never ask!" and immediately had his piano brought from Studio Two to Studio One. He heard the track one time and after a quick run-through, more or less nailed it in one take, which was amazing to watch. He was a real rocker for sure. It was kinda like a jam. Party 'Til You Puke was done tongue in cheek. It was done in the new way, digitally, and moved around, but for the most part Elton's parts went straight down.

Destiny marked a low point in comparison, didn't it?

Biff: There'd been some line-up changes. There wasn't any chemistry in the band and we were on a downward spiral. It was a wake-up call; I took control of the band after that, and we got ourselves back writing together.

After the EMI deal ended, you signed to Virgin Germany via CBH. How did that come about?

Biff: We had a three-album deal that EMI didn't renew. We had a break and weren't doing a great deal. I was renovating houses and selling them, and we did a live album. I was living in Lincolnshire and this promoter, Reiner Hansel, drove there, pulled up, and said that Virgin Germany wanted to sign us, and I said yes. We went back in the studio and it all really started again; *Solid Ball Of Rock* was a key album.

New bassist Nibbs Carter had settled in by then.

Biff: His first studio album was *Solid Ball Of Rock*, but he'd done a couple of tours with us, a couple of live albums. He wasn't really a songwriter back then, but a great musician. It definitely helped settle the band, he brought a quality to us as a unit.

A few covers aside, was Bram Tchaikovsky's *Solid Ball Of Rock* the only time you deliberately used an outside writer?

Biff: Yes. The studio where we recorded *Solid Ball Of Rock* was owned by Bram; he used to be in The Motors. He said he had two songs for us. *Solid Ball Of Rock* was a rock'n'roll number, written about Jerry Lee Lewis. Paul and I made it ours: we transposed it into a full-on rock song. I've always been an Alex Harvey fan and we used Faith Healer as the template for the intro. I love the Sensational Alex Harvey Band, I used to go and see them in the 70s.

As covers go, our version of Christopher Cross' *Ride Like The Wind* [on *Destiny*] was a good version; the video on YouTube gets lots of hits. *Destiny* didn't have many great songs of our own. I wrote Requiem about Phil Lynott, but didn't want to mention him in the song. Graham wanted to throw in Jimi Hendrix. From a fan's point of view, it's about rock'n'roll – a celebration of all those we've lost.

Graham: When we heard Bram and Micky's

[Broadbent] demo of *Solid Ball Of Rock*, Nigel [Glockler] and I had been listening to Deep Purple's *Perfect Strangers*, and loved how, after the Hammond groove, Ian Paice comes in on the cymbal on the opening track. We thought that, along with Biff's idea of the Alex Harvey-type intro, would be great to open the song.

This was the first time since the early Saxon albums that we really worked as a collective and brought out the best ideas from each other. Paul Quinn remarked that my solo on *Altar Of The Gods* was the best guitar solo on the album, which was very pleasing.

The UK *Forever Free* album had a different sleeve to the European edition...

Biff: Yes, it featured biker Space Marine from the Warhammer 40,000 tabletop war game. It was also licenced for UK release by Warhammer. Our manager was into Warcraft and gaming, I think he wanted to blag a load of free figures!

The 90s saw Saxon become much bigger in Europe and develop a heavier sound. Did they go hand in hand?

Biff: The heaviness was kinda intentional. There were all these European power metal bands writing about battle, swords, and I thought, "Hey, we're Saxon, we did *Crusader*, let's get back to that." So we did with *Dogs Of War*, *Killing Ground*, and it worked. We'd gone too far down the rock'n'roll route; needed to get back to our roots, we'd lost our heaviness.

How did Steve Dawson's and Graham Oliver's departure affect the band?

Biff: When Graham left we were [in the process of] reconnecting with our roots. It always affects songwriting when someone integral leaves. Steve and I wrote most of *Innocence Is No Excuse* together. The chemistry after he left was not good.

You later played with drummers Jorg Michael (Stratovarius) and Fritz Randow (Eloy), how did they fit in?

Biff: Fritz was great, his playing fitted in, but he wasn't a songwriter. He started drinking again, which was quite sad. He was a nice guy. We got Jorg in to that one album, *Lionheart*, and tour, but he wasn't used to playing live.

In 2001 you covered King Crimson's *In The Court Of The Crimson King* – one of your more audacious covers...

Biff: It was my idea, it was from my and Paul's love of prog. Most people cover 21st Century Schizoid Man. I love the voice on *Crimson King*, a lot of young fans thought it was our song.

Since drummer Nigel Glockler returned in 2005 for his third stint, Saxon have enjoyed a renaissance around the world...

Biff: There's been a resurgence over the last seven years, especially in the UK, but we've worked hard. There's been lots of changes with our new manager, we talked about it and agreed the only way to get back in the UK was to do small gigs; we played King Tut's in Glasgow, for example – the kind of venues we'd played in the early 80s.

Since 2007's *The Inner Sanctum*, you've regularly put five or six tracks from the current album in your set; when you toured *Killing Ground*, you only played one or two. Does that indicate fresh confidence in your material?

Biff: Yes. Back then we relied more on the older tracks, we were insecure. That's changed now, we're more confident in writing great tracks. We're all the same: us, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden, Motörhead; you've got to stop trying to compete with yourselves, and go with the merit of what you're currently doing.

Over the last seven years your albums have



Clockwise from left picture: Graham Oliver, 1985; in Jersey 1980 (from second left) Oliver, Byford and Steve Dawson with air/road crew; Biff and Graham; Oliver, Nigel Glockler and Paul Quinn



SAXON UK Discography

SINGLES

1979	Carrere SAM 109
7/79	Carrere CAR 118
11/79	Carrere CAR 129
1979	Carrere CAR 143
6/80	Carrere HM 5
6/80	Carrere HM 6
6/80	Carrere CAR 151
6/80	Carrere CAR 151 T
9/80	Carrere CAR 165
9/80	Carrere CAR 165 T
11/80	Carrere CAR 170
11/80	Carrere CAR 170 T
1981	Carrere SPC 8
4/81	Carrere CAR 180
4/81	Carrere CAR 180
7/81	Carrere CAR 204
7/81	Carrere CAR 204 F
10/81	Carrere CAR 208
4/83	Carrere SAXON 1
4/83	Carrere SAXON P 1
4/83	Carrere SAXONT 1
7/83	Carrere CAR 284
7/83	Carrere CAR 284 P

<i>Big Teaser/Stallions Of The Highway</i> (12", promo only)	£12
<i>Big Teaser/Stallions Of The Highway</i> (some in p/s)	£6/£3
<i>Backs To The Wall/Militia Guard</i> (some in p/s)	£6/£3
<i>Wheels Of Steel/Stand Up And Be Counted</i> (p/s)	£5
<i>Big Teaser/Rainbow Theme/Frozen Rainbow</i> (reissue, p/s)	£5
<i>Backs To The Wall/Militia Guard</i> (reissue, p/s)	£5
<i>747 (Strangers In The Night)/See The Light Shining</i> (p/s)	£4
<i>747 (Strangers In The Night)/See The Light Shining</i> (12", p/s)	£6
<i>Suzie Hold On/Judgement Day (live)</i> (p/s)	£4
<i>Suzie Hold On/Judgement Day (live)</i> (12", p/s)	£6
<i>Strong Arm Of The Law/Taking Your Chances</i> (p/s)	£4
<i>Strong Arm Of The Law/Taking Your Chances</i> (12", p/s)	£6
<i>Wheels Of Steel/747 (Strangers In The Night)</i> (double A side cassette)	£2
<i>And The Bands Played On/Hungry Years/Heavy Metal Thunder</i> (p/s)	£3
<i>And The Bands Played On/Hungry Years/Heavy Metal Thunder</i> (picture disc)	£5
<i>Never Surrender/20,000 Ft</i> (p/s)	£4
<i>Never Surrender/20,000 Ft (remix)/Bab-Shoo-Ap/Street Fighting Gang</i> (double pack, gatefold p/s)	£6
<i>Princess Of The Night/Fire In The Sky</i> (p/s)	£4
<i>Power And The Glory/See The Light Shining (live)</i> (p/s, some with poster p/s)	£3/£5
<i>Power And The Glory/See The Light Shining (live)</i> (picture disc)	£6
<i>Power And The Glory/See The Light Shining (live)</i> (12", p/s)	£5
<i>Nightmare/Midas Touch</i> (p/s)	£3
<i>Nightmare/Midas Touch</i> (picture disc)	£5

