

THE OPINION: TOM SCAVINIO INTERVIEW

In 1975 a young woman walked into a guitar shop in New York. She didn't buy anything, simply looked at the price of a Gibson Flying V and walked out. Her name was Susan Bekker and the owner of the shop was Tom Scavinio.

Thirty-five years later the same woman walked into a meeting room at Sony's headquarters on Madison Avenue, New York. "I nearly fell through the floor when I saw her," says Scavinio slumped on a leather couch in his own office in upstate New York where he lives with his wife of thirty years, Sheila. "I recognised her straight away, not just from the photos and the old news articles, but from that visit. I knew then there was something not quite right about the whole set up."

Scavinio is back in the US following a traumatic six months on the road with Toten Herzen, the first legs of their Malandanti world tour. Already he has endured arson, riots and the usual in-band tantrums and disputes. He initially agreed to manage the band to guide them through their comeback in 2013. "I was curious, I always liked them in a way. Even in the '70s, if you could see through all the hype and the headlines, they were four individuals determined not to be pushed around. They were uncompromising in a way that really wasn't contrived. I don't know about their manager, but they seemed to be an honest bunch of people."

It was the reason, other than curiosity, he decided to give up his role at Sony to work with them. What Scavinio didn't know in 1975 was how similar he was to the band's manager at the time, Micky Redwall. "He ran his own business and organised rock nights. I ran my guitar shop and organised rock nights. We held them at a bar called the Saturn Tavern on 58th. It's gone now, but it was a decent place to go, reasonable fees to host a show now and again. We had people coming down there, big people from the New York Dolls, Debbie Harry before she made a name for herself. Sometimes bands from out of town might show up. We had Sammy Hagar in there one night, John Paul Jones showed his face when Led Zeppelin played the Garden."

Micky Redwall's rock nights never attracted the same level of star or even star-before-they-were-a-star, but unlike Redwall who went on to guide one of the stand-out rock acts of the 1970s, Scavinio disappeared into the corporate landscape of Sony in-house management. "It was tedious, working behind the scenes for people who themselves worked behind the scenes. Rob Wallet was with the band that day in New York and we shared the excitement of being involved in something that was different, adventurous."

Adventurous and different could be euphemisms in hindsight. The journey Scavinio found himself on ended in recriminations when he left the band after their six comeback concerts. He had the physical and emotional scars. (The physical scar still hasn't healed.) He also has a different memory for each member of the band. "Susan was fine, challenging, but she knew what she wanted and you could talk to her. She was hard to manage because of that single-minded ambition, so the trick was to make her see alternatives, present them as a choice, but in reality there was only one sensible option.

"Dee Vincent was and still is a menace. I love her personality and outgoing nature, and she has a wicked sense of humour, but professionally she's very lazy which leads to a certain kind of stubbornness. You can tell her to do something and she'll simply ignore you. You can't manage someone like that.

“Elaine Daley is a sealed container. To this day I have no idea who she is or how she thinks. She tended to go along with things, but there was never any personal feedback, whether you were doing a good job or whether she was unhappy. It was impossible to know.

“Rene van Voors . . . working with Rene was like working with Jacques Derrida, a total contradiction, questioning everything, always finding a flaw or something to twist around until the most mundane sentence no longer made any sense. If ever I had a headache at the end of the day, it was down to him.”

Sounds rough, so why does Scavinio persevere with it? “There have been times when I felt like walking away. I did in 2014, but then you end up with this enormous hole in your life and the only way to fill it is to go fishing. I don’t fish. I need to be involved in something and you’re never bored managing Toten Herzen.

During the recording of the Malandanti album Scavinio, along with the band and Alien Noise Corporation, the band’s management, were walloped with a \$120 million lawsuit. Thanks to a Dee Vincent interview with Hullabaloo magazine US singer Rose Pursey took legal action in California and won after Vincent refused to show up in court. Only a freak bolt of lightning came between him and financial ruin. “They offered to pay my alleged share of the costs, but even they would have been pushed to pay that much money.”

Alien Noise, established specifically for the band’s comeback, is financed by Marco Jongbloed’s millions from his own telecommunications business. Jongbloed, former bass player with Bekker’s original Dutch band After Sunset, is a good friend of Scavinio. They’re roughly the same age and share the same determination to see the Toten Herzen project succeed. “If it doesn’t we’re all ruined.”

In addition to grappling with the logistics of Toten Herzen Scavinio has watched his wife Sheila fight and defeat cancer. The recovery raised eyebrows and like everything associated with Toten Herzen became the subject of conspiracy theory. Scavinio is understandably cagey about discussing the issue. “People do recover from cancer, it’s not like she came back from MS or something incurable. I don’t know what the fuss is about.” He avoids eye contact when discussing Sheila, the same apparent discomfort he displays when discussing other aspects of the band’s paranormal reputation.

“I’ve never actually seen anything unusual with these guys. If you read the old stories from the ’70s they were attacking people, feeding off people, sleeping in tombs and all that bullshit. All I’ve ever seen is a bunch of people who don’t drink much, don’t smoke, don’t do drugs. Yes, they’re up all night, but that doesn’t make them vampires. Yes, they have unusual teeth and red eyes, but so does half the heavy metal fraternity. They’re in better shape than ACDC, I’ll tell you that.”

The band recorded Malandanti in Cumbria, in the English Lake District, and became suspects when five men were murdered, their bodies found in Red Tarn at the foot of Helvellyn. Scavinio co-operated with the British police, but no charges were brought. And none brought following the climactic video shoot against the instructions of the National Park authority. “Bureaucracy is there to be ignored. I won’t be held accountable for that. No damage was done and the publicity for the National Park was enormous.” Honister Pass has become a pilgrimage for Toten Herzen fans and one more location in the band’s mythology.

It's hard to reconcile Scavinio's pragmatism with the band's extreme reputation, but his influence does appear to have steered them through a difficult comeback. Brought up in Brooklyn, his father a cab driver and his mother an assistant hotel manager, the Scavinio household avoided flamboyance.

"I had my mom's business ambitions levelled out with my dad's world weariness. He saw every type of human being in his cab, every complaint, every success story, he heard of people falling in love, splitting up, foreigners, New Yorkers. He told me every solution to every problem will eventually pass through a cab and he was probably right. My mom saw a lot too, the same problems, the same solutions, thousands of people passing in front of her year in year out. In that situation you learn to understand the world one person at a time."

Did that upbringing teach him how to manage Toten Herzen? "The ambitious, the quiet, the awkward, the puzzling, yeah. Even the weirdo, the individuals who thought they were Batman, but needed a cab to get home to Queens."

Scavinio's patience has been tested by the band's fans. Described by Dee Vincent as nutters and murderers, Scavinio has seen the figures, the insurance claims and costs for damage. The insurance premiums to cover a single Toten Herzen event can swallow over ten percent of the takings, which in the modern music industry where concert receipts are the lifeblood of a band's existence, can be financially debilitating. "It frustrates me, but what frustrates me more is the way the band refuse to take responsibility for it. I said to Rob Wallet they're nothing without the fans, without the bullshit, so it's a difficult issue for them to deal with, but I wish they'd make more effort. No one's suggesting they turn into The Osmonds, but a quiet word now and again, a hint, a subtle threat, something to defuse the situation when things get tense."

Does he think the rivalry with Belarussian band There Will be Blood comes at a bad time? "Not really. It's not like soccer where two sets of supporters come together. Perhaps if the two bands ever play the same city on the same evening there might be risk of open warfare, but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. If you ask me, before that happens one or both bands will be long gone."

One part of Toten Herzen that is long gone is their publicist Rob Wallet, sacked for reasons which are still vague and which Scavinio refuses to clarify. "It was an internal situation, there were, I believe, personal issues involved, but I was surprised when they kicked him out. There was no indication the problems ran so deep. I wish they'd told me in advance, but in retrospect they haven't really missed him. And from what I gather he's doing rather nicely for himself, got a big pay-off, enough to buy a boat in Monaco. I can't afford a boat in Monaco, so maybe I should get myself sacked. Not sure what you have to do to get sacked by this band, so he must have done something fucking awful."

By leaving, Rob Wallet won't see the conclusion to what he started when he persuaded the band to make their comeback in 2013. The end of Toten Herzen, for whatever reason, musical differences or unwelcome sunlight, is something Scavinio refuses to acknowledge. "There's no exit strategy I know of. No talk of a final album or a farewell tour. If the rumours are true and they are immortal the farewell tour is a long way off. I'll be long gone."

So he's not a vampire either? Scavinio laughs for the first time and shakes the couch. "There are times when I wish I was, but the thought of biting into some ugly bastard's flesh to stay alive doesn't fill me with much enthusiasm. I'd be the first vampire to starve to death."