

Catherine Wheel

by H P Newquist

The sound a guitar makes is vital to all guitar players. Both in terms of tone and texture, sound gives the guitarist an identity and helps to convey specific emotions. The proper guitar sound can simulate the aggression of a pile driver or it can be as soft and lulling as lips on skin. That's an intrinsic part of the beauty of the instrument.

Most of us have an image in our minds of what certain guitar sounds represent. You can listen to the guitars on a Ministry or Nine Inch Nails album and hear the crunch of ball-peen hammers relentlessly smashing into bone. You can hear bands like Lush or Curve turn layer upon layer of guitar into something vaguely hypnotic and mesmerizing. Bands like The Cult or Pearl Jam rip the rawness out of the guitar and create the emotions and urges that gave rise to rock music in the first place. No matter what the style of music, every band hopes to conjure up some imagery through their own particular and peculiar guitar sounds.

Then there is Catherine Wheel. The sound of their guitars seems to come from deep inside the glass cylinder of a hypodermic needle, waiting to be jabbed down into an open vein. They scream through your body like jagged icicles and make you wonder how such a rush could come out of six strings and pol-

ished wood. Catherine Wheel's guitar playing is nothing short of addictive.

Breaking this chemical music down into its component parts, one finds a throbbing, straightforward bass line played by Dave Hawes, murderous drumming from Neil Sims, and two guitars—one open, pulsing, and sustaining from rhythm guitarist and vocalist Rob Dickinson; the other pounding and nerve-ripping courtesy of lead guitarist Brian Futter. Dickinson's vocals are haunting in a style reminiscent of goth rock or even old Pink Floyd, but he has no trouble pushing them to hard rock realms as the perfect foil to Catherine Wheel's sinister guitar playing.

It's hard to put Catherine Wheel's music into any category. The band members' influences—which range from Jimi Hendrix to Tony Iommi to Neil Young to Talk Talk—don't give an accurate indication of the music they have created. Instead, bits and pieces of their English past all have filtered into Catherine Wheel's two albums: *Ferment* and the just-released *Chrome*. According to lead guitarist Futter, "I started playing at 15 when I bought Queen's *Sheer Heart Attack* and heard the song 'Brighton Rock.' From then on the tennis racket wasn't good enough anymore, so I hassled my parents to get me an Olivetti sunburst. After that, I learned by sheer trial-and-error."

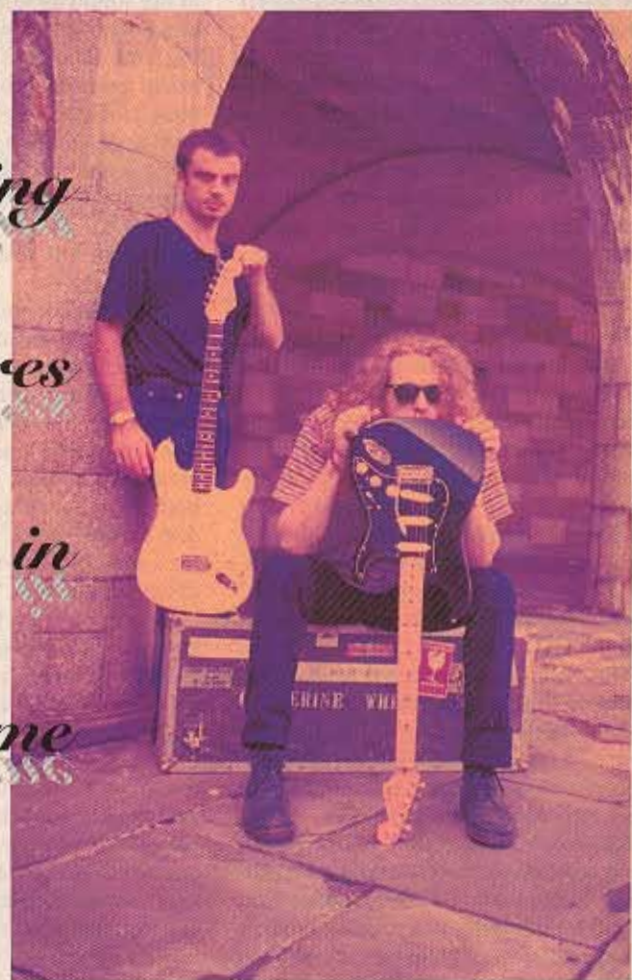
Dickinson chimes in that "Brian was so fast when

spinning

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dickinson & futter

Earl Roberts

I first met him that I used to go 'round his house just to watch him play. And the first band we were in did Deep Purple and Black Sabbath covers and even Rush covers, so the actual technique was important then."

But Catherine Wheel's sound owes no allegiance to fretting fury. "I probably knew more scale-wise when I was 18 than I do now," says Futter. "A lot of our playing now is experimental. Nothing as far as rhythm or lead is worked out beforehand. Rob and I just sit down and work it out together, not knowing what the other is going to play. The first thing we like, we record."

The birth of their haunting sound came about more from the band's personalities than from any specific influence or piece of equipment. Dickinson, in particular, chalks it up to early bouts of stage fright. "We desperately wanted to be in a band that wasn't into technical stuff because there were so many local groups that were quite good technically. We just wanted to write some really good songs that didn't rely on having

to play particularly well. Then when we started doing shows I was really scared to have to sing *and* play guitar up there at the same time. Brian and I felt we could only get on stage and do it if we were surrounded by this huge wall of sound, rather than something that was intricate. We didn't want to have to look at our guitars as we were playing; we wanted to thrash away. I think that the droning or wall of noise we initially had was a result of me having to find something I could be comfortable with when I was singing and playing."

Getting their sound in the studio is a completely different story, and fear plays no part of it. "For recording we mix and match our equipment," claims Futter. "We use Fenders, Marshalls,

Rickenbackers; about eight amps and a bunch of traditional guitars. When you're looking for a certain sound and you come to the fifth or final guitar that you've got, you're really bound to get it in the end. It's a lot easier than fiddling around with amp controls and all that." Not that this approach comes cheap. "We even had a 1957 Les Paul Jr. for *Chrome* that we rented so many times we could have bought it by the time we finished because it cost us like 1,200 quid," laughs Dickinson. "But it was such a brilliant guitar."

The evolution of their guitar darkness is rooted in the sonic experimentation that the band does in the studio. "We recorded all our early stuff in Brian's bedroom on a Tascam 8-track, which we used for our two indie EPs," says Dickinson. "So we didn't really do too much layering until we worked with producer Tim Friese-Greene on our first record. He was keen to use effects pedals and a huge array of heads and combos to experiment. That gave us the textural sound of the first record because some of the songs have maybe four rhythm guitars layered together. Once you put more than one rhythm guitar on, the sheer fact that you're never going to play it identically gives you that chorused, sort of ethereal sound."

This ethereal sound made U.K. and U.S. radio staples out of cuts like "Black Metallic" and "I Want to Touch You" from the first album. *Chrome* is a little less layered than its predecessor though, and Dickinson says that they intentionally worked at giving Catherine Wheel a more stripped-down and shimmering guitar sound. "On the new record the idea was to have more impact and not have all the edges rounded off. We wanted it more edgy and aggressive, and we tried to capture that. We didn't do demos, so there was this sense of not knowing exactly

what we were going to sound like or how it was going to turn out. It wasn't actually a dangerous way to record, although the clock was ticking, but it does make you perform your best under pressure."

This statement is supported by Futter: "It's all about performance. Live you perform what you write, so you should do it in the studio as well." But he sees a modern, down side to the fine art of performing and even just jamming. "I've met many guitarists who can't jam with anybody because they're so formal and theoreticized. They're soulless. It's a terrible thing when a brilliant technical player can't sit down with somebody and jam on two chords. You need to be reasonably adept but you need to have soul to your playing."

"You almost imagine that these guys couldn't write a song because they spend so much time learning to play fast or ripping off another guitarist," claims Dickinson. "It seems so redundant. No one can name a song which is considered to be a great, classic song by somebody who is just a technician. They just don't make them." He thinks about this for a moment and then adds an example of what he means. "Our producer did the last couple of Talk Talk albums, where he brought in different guitarists to play over rough backing tracks and do key bits that they'd like. And he said that with some of them, he would ask 'Is there any way you can hit that chord not so cleanly? Can you make it sound not so good?' because he wanted different sounds. And they couldn't do it. They couldn't take a step back, because you can't unlearn what you've learned. We like imperfect but viable.

"We even hate calling individual guitar parts guitar *solos*. If there needs to be an instrumental part it's the whole band working together on a part which doesn't have any vocals—it's not like there's some sort of soloing spot for the guitarist or bass player."

Futter relates a story about how guitarists tend to worship at the shrine of the Guitarist as Show-off. "We ran into it in the Guitar Center in Los Angeles, where guys get dressed up to go to the guitar shop and put their hair up and everything. We were looking around for Les Pauls, trying guitars out playing G to D or something simple. On the other side of the store there's this guy with all his Zoom effects on, and he's whizzing up and down the fretboard and his girlfriend is standing there in her mini-skirt. He's just playing all over the place. Then, when he stopped, everybody in the shop started applauding and cheering. They're clap-

ping for this guy in a store! I couldn't believe it. I was just speechless, it was so funny."

As for their own playing, Dickinson is pleased with the Catherine Wheel signature guitar sound. "We know we're good and we don't have to worry about how we're perceived anymore, which is something we did when we were a new band. We were very much worried about fitting in. But this record sounds like *us*, and I think that's why we're so proud of it."

A stylistic aspect of Catherine Wheel which makes the music even more interesting for guitarists is the band's occasional use of timing detours that throw the listener off balance: segues that come in on the seventh beat instead of the eighth, choruses that begin on the third beat and not the fourth, verses that are sung from the middle of one guitar verse to the middle of the next, disregarding the traditional beat-to-beat match-up. "Why should you come in on eight when you can come in on a much more interesting number?" asks Futter in all seriousness. One song from *Chrome*, "Half Life," mixes 12/8, 6/4, and 4/4 time signatures, which Dickinson claims "really opens up the song by exposing different dynamics that you wouldn't have heard otherwise." Catherine Wheel use their strange meters and timing structures to enhance the liquid relentlessness of their songs which, like that hypodermic needle, keep forcing their way down under the skin the more you listen to them. Songs such as "Strange Fruit," "Crank," and "Kill Rhythm" all grab hold of your conventional beliefs about the guitar and continuously violate them like some nasty habit.

One last fact about the band that qualifies as an interesting Trivial Pursuit question is that Dickinson is the cousin of Bruce Dickinson, former lead singer of Iron Maiden. It's pretty rare that you find relatives in the mainstream of the rock business, so I pass it on as a point of interest. Use it at your next cocktail party.

Now, about the name. Catherine Wheel is not some nod to female folk singers or pop stars with names like Helen Reddy, Suzanne Vega, or Janis Joplin. It is, instead, the European term for a certain type of firework. A Catherine Wheel is a spinning firecracker that spits out sparks and flames as it whirls in a circular frenzy, like some maniacal bottle rocket. It was named for St. Catherine of Alexandria, after the device used to torture her. There's no torture involved in the modern Catherine Wheel, but you can count on hearing the fireworks ring in your ears long after you've pulled the needle out. ●