

If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It.

WHY DOKKEN STILL RHYMES WITH ROCKIN'

by Dirk Sonniksen

When I got a call about interviewing Don Dokken, leader of the metal band that bears his name, I was a bit startled. After all, I hadn't listened to Dokken in a decade or more and didn't even know the band still existed. For me, Dokken was a barely audible memory from my past. The smell of bong water, my mom finding my weed, and grocery store outings on acid were my memories of the '80s. But what I was to learn was that, but for a short respite, Dokken has continued to produce recording after recording, refusing to fade into heavy metal obscurity like many of their counterparts.

In fact, Dokken has been in business for twenty years and its members have managed to live comfortably by keeping die-hard Dokken fans happy while building a new fan base. The recent kickoff of their tour in Jacksonville, Florida, with Whitesnake and the Scorpions gave Don a glimpse of the weird demographic make-up of the shows. "It's been a 50/50 split. You have people who are in their forties and kids in their twenties. A lot of young girls and young guys, and a lot of them are in the military. I'd hear people talk about how they'd listened to Dokken in grammar school and how excited they were that they were finally old enough to see us play live."

What hasn't changed? Groupies. I wondered—would they all be 40-year old women, struggling to still fit into their faded leather

pants and Dokken t-shirts from the '82 World Tour? Apparently not. While Don admits that an abundance of young babes still gather backstage, his attitude toward them has changed. He got the groupie thing out of his system in the '80s. "You know, besides having sex with them, what are you gonna do, sit down and talk to them? All they want to know is 'What is Gene Simmons like?' I'm here for the music."

What is interesting about Dokken's latest venture, *Long Way Home*, is that while you probably won't find it being played on many stations in town, the viability of the album is worth noting. The band has done away with any petty attempts at grunge imitation like so many of the alternative bands of today. They're not pissed off at their parents nor does the band make any theatric attempts at defending global security. Instead, Dokken has gone back to what it does best—playing straightforward '80s heavy metal without pretense. The most alluring quality of *Long Way Home* is its simplicity and sheer ability to please from beginning to end. Don explains, "I was trying to make an album you can enjoy from start to finish. People wonder why it takes me so long to make a record, but I really want all the songs to be good songs. I don't want to be king of the pop hit."

For Dokken, becoming a pop wonder is unlikely. Eighties metal bands continually take a beating as being campy fodder for older generations—an anomaly from today's angst-filled stoic prodigies of MTV. Don describes it



as an inevitable cycle in the music industry. "As far as videos or airplay are concerned, if you're not System of a Down or Incubus, or some brand new band, they won't touch you."

Today, bands like Dokken have been relegated to the "Where Are They Now?" section of your favorite video music channel, where they are packaged as nostalgia. But '80s nostalgia is certainly on the rise as people stand up and admit their dirty little secret—they still love '80s music. The music of the '80s was about fun, style, having a distinct look and sound—all ideas that seems to have gotten lost in today's corporate backwater of one hit wonders. Of course, what most people remember is the hair. Has there ever been a period with more hair? New Wave bands like Flock of Seagulls and The Cure did it most memorably, but the '80s metal bands got the label: hair bands.

The worst mistake one can make interviewing an '80s metal band is referring to them as a hair band. Such an assumption can provoke a hostile reaction and almost certainly assure a swift ass-kicking. With Don, I approached the subject with kid gloves. I must admit that

while researching for the interview, I did come across some serious lapses in judgment concerning hairstyles in the band's early years. Don's defense of Dokken's hair band association was a kind of categorization of '80s metal. The first group is what I would have once warmly filed as "fag metal," comprised of bands whose names I will omit. Don puts it this way. "We never toured with hair bands. We were touring with bands like Aerosmith, AC/DC, Metallica, Judas Priest. We didn't do the hair scene."

Regardless of what label the band ultimately gets, Dokken is still on the road, pleasing fans old and new. After the American tour, the band heads to Europe, the true birthplace of heavy metal. What happens after that? Who knows? Perhaps a rebirth of '80s heavy metal is on the horizon, and to be honest, nothing would please me more. **TW**

Dokken, Whitesnake, and the Scorpions play the Erwin Center on February 9, 2003. Tickets are available through Texas Box Office at 477-6060, www.texasboxoffice.com.