

Estranged: The Sonic Biography of Guns N' Roses Through The Timeline of Departing Members

Formed in 1985, Guns N' Roses is an American hard rock band from Los Angeles, California. Throughout thirty six years of activity, they have had many lineup changes and traversed through multiple styles of rock n' roll playing, with each member bringing something new to the fold.

In 2012, Guns N' Roses was inducted into the Rock N' Roll Hall of Fame in Ohio, by Green Day, under the category "performers".

Guns N' Roses began as two separate Los Angeles based rock bands, called Hollywood Rose and L.A. Guns, respectively. When Hollywood Rose and L.A. Guns combined to create Guns N' Roses, the band's "original" lineup that would go on to release their debut album *Appetite for Destruction*, the highest selling debut album of all time, consisted of: lead vocalist and pianist W Axl Rose, rhythm guitarist Jeffrey Dean "Izzy" Isbel, lead guitarist Saul "Slash" Hudson, bassist Michael "Duff Rose" McKagan, and drummer Steven "Popcorn" Adler. Of the five, Rose is the only member to have consistently stayed on for all thirty six years. Together, the band had a typical hard rock sound that took inspiration from the classics: Nine Inch Nails, Hanoi Rocks, Motley Crue, AC/DC, Queen, and the like.

The band's original lineup would go onto release two albums together: *Appetite for Destruction* (1987) and *G N' R Lies* (1988). *Appetite for Destruction*, was initially poorly received, but has since received retrospective acclaim as one of the greatest albums of all time. It combines some of the focal aspects of multiple genres of rock n roll: a glam rock aesthetic combined with a metal sound, rebellious punk-like lyrics, and guitar riffs inspired by the blues.

About Appetite For Destruction (1987)

With over thirty million copies sold worldwide, *Appetite for Destruction* is firmly cemented as one of the highest selling albums of all time. Featuring iconic songs such as "Welcome to the Jungle" and "Paradise City", both of which were instant favorites with the sports industry, the album is a fresh take on the typical rock n roll sound. Rather than having an A side and a B side, the album has a G side and an R side- a Guns side and a Roses side, guns for hard aggressive

music, and roses for ballads. In his dissertation, “PERFORMED IDENTITIES: HEAVY METAL MUSICIANS BETWEEN 1984 AND 1991” Bradley Klypchak describes music from the era, including music from Guns N’ Roses, to be hypermasculine and culturally focused on the idea of rock n roll stars being epitomes of hard living, a theme which *Appetite* employs frequently, some may say to the detriment of musical complexity, but with a straightforward unsaturated rock n’ roll sound that only supported the overall aesthetics and theme of the album. Campbell McGrath writes about the lyrical honesty of the album that underlies some of the R side songs, such as “Sweet Child O’ Mine” and “Rocket Queen” particularly in regards to how admmissive some of the lines are, which served to lend a depth to Guns N’ Roses that could potentially set them apart from their contemporaries.

Lies, Lies, Lies (1988)

G N’ R Lies, the last album to be recorded before Steven Adler was fired due to his drug abuse, sees a partial departure from the heavy sound of *Appetite for Destruction*. The eight track album features three covers of songs by other bands, and an original hard rock song; but the last four songs see a deviation from the band’s debut sound. *Patience*, *You’re Crazy*, the mildly controversial *Used to Love Her*, and the heavily controversial *One In A Million* are all acoustic songs, with the latter three taking on a soft, almost folk-rock like sound with their guitar work and melodies. *Patience* stands out in particular: it is a gentle song both sonically and lyrically, featuring no drums or bass guitar: just three acoustic guitars and warm toned vocals.

Structured as two EPs compounded rather than its own cohesive album, *Lies* helped broach and redefine boundaries for the band. Known to the world at large as reckless, unpredictable peddlers of hair metal and hard rock, Guns N’ Roses’ *One in a Million* came as not so much a surprise but a revelation to the fans of the band, with its blatantly homophobic and racist comments. Lead guitarist Slash, who is notably a part of some of the marginalized communities mentioned disparagingly in the song, later went on to say “I don’t regret doing *One in a Million*, I just regret what we’ve been through because of it and the way people have perceived our personal feelings.” The song was largely condemned across the board, and was omitted from the

compounded release of *Lies* and *Appetite for Destruction* in the super deluxe edition of the band's debut album.

Starkly contrasting the uninformed and aggressive lyrics of *One in a Million*, stood *Patience*, acoustic, simple, honest and emotional, but notably missing any contribution from Steven Adler. Originally, the song was intended to have drums in it; however, Adler repeatedly showed up to recording sessions too inebriated to perform in any capacity, accidentally contributing by omission to the song's gentle acoustic sound. *Patience* is significant as one of the only real hits of the album, not counting the noise around *One in a Million*.

The *Use Your Illusion* Era, and the departure of Steven Adler

For a brief period in 1990, Guns N' Roses' lineup consisted of the original five, plus keyboardist Dizzy Reed. However, before the band embarked on their three year long *Use Your Illusion* tour, drummer Steven Adler was fired. His replacement was The Cult's drummer, Matt Sorum, who featured in the *Use Your Illusion* double album recordings.

Use Your Illusion I and *Use Your Illusion II* were released together in 1991, and represent a turning point in Guns N' Roses' sound. Although they still maintained their signature hard rock aggression, the twin albums saw musical diversification from the band, incorporating more classic rock, the blues, Western classical music, and pure punk. Several tracks were composed on piano by Axl Rose, and piano/keyboards were worked into the music by both Rose and Reed, distinguishing the instrumentalization from their first two albums.

Orchestrated by Axl Rose himself, "November Rain" is undoubtedly one of Guns N' Roses' most ambitious songs, and an undisputed highlight of the twin albums. A symphonic ballad, the idea of it was met with slight opposition from Slash and McKagan, who would rather have had a more direct, harder rock n' roll sound; this opposition was reportedly overlooked by Rose. Instrumentally, it features a dominant piano melody, three guitar solos, and a sweeping string orchestration, taking the band in an entirely new sonic direction open to mature instrumentalization beyond the confines of traditional heavy metal. A demo version cut in 1986

by Rose and Stradlin included in the super deluxe version of *Appetite for Destruction* reveals the careful composition of the song, and how long it took to write finalized lyrics for it. In his autobiography, Slash reveals that Rose would spend hours per section to orchestrate the song as perfectly as he could.

Other standouts from the albums would be “Don’t Cry”, a power ballad that received an alternate version with different lyrics and altered meter and melody on *Use Your Illusion II*, and “Estranged” both of which are supposed to come together with “November Rain” as a trilogy. The original features Shannon Hoon, of the band Blind Melon, as a co-vocalist, whose harmony vocals add soul to the song as she sings an octave above Rose. The *Use Your Illusion* albums mark Guns N’ Roses growth, both in lyrical and instrumental maturity, since their early days on *Appetite for Destruction*.

“The Spaghetti Incident?” (1993), and what the band looked like without Izzy Stradlin

“Don’t Cry” was specifically co-written by Rose and Stradlin about a shared experience. Stradlin was notably missing from the music video of the song, later stating that he deemed the music video a “pointless indulgence”. A month after the music video was released, Stradlin quit the band, and was replaced by rhythm guitarist Gilby Clarke.

“The Spaghetti Incident?” was an album of covers, the only album to feature Gilby Clarke and the last album to feature Slash and McKagan. It features punk and glam rock covers, and returns briefly to the hard rock sound of *Appetite for Destruction*. However, the departure of Izzy Stradlin catalyzed a tumult that would signal the potential demise of Guns N’ Roses as they were. The following decade was fraught with disagreements, legal and creative issues, and lineup changes which saw the departure of Slash and McKagan in 1996 and 1997 respectively. With Rose remaining the only founding member, the band saw yearly lineup changes all through the production of the long delayed *Chinese Democracy*(2008).

Chinese Democracy(2008), featuring a Guns N' Roses sans Slash and Duff McKagan

Soon after McKagan left, Matt Sorum stepped back as drummer for the band. While material for *Chinese Democracy* had been in the talks with both Slash and McKagan, leaving Rose to revamp the lineup in order to get to work. Over the years, at some point or the other, the band included at least seven different guitarists, three different drummers, and five different producers that worked over fifteen studio locations, recording material that could span two or more albums. Originally supposed to be released in 1999, it was recorded in 2000, and stagnated in development for eight years. By 2004, Geffen Records had withdrawn funding, stating it was Rose's personal responsibility to finish the album, and by 2005 its production costs had reached \$13 million.

Despite the troubled story of its release, *Chinese Democracy* saw the band move in brand new directions. Guns N' Roses moved into industrial and electronic rock, nu metal mixed with the basics of hard rock. Skid Row vocalist Sebastian Bach described the album as having "the rawness and the power of Appetite for Destruction, but it also has the grandiosity of 'November Rain'." Songs on the album include diverse instrumentation- "If The World" features a flamenco guitar, whilst "There Was a Time" is an orchestrally arranged song with diverse instrumentation.

The album features a heavy piano ballad, Guns N' Roses' foray into operatic rock, called "This I Love". Credited entirely to Rose, who describes it as the heaviest Guns N' Roses song he's ever written, the song features a dominant piano melody, violin harmonies, and an operatic rock guitar solo.

Hard Skool(2022) and another lifetime

Extended play *Hard Skool* was released in 2022, with singles being released in 2021. It sees the return of Slash and Duff McKagan. Categorized as industrial hard rock, the EP and its two new singles revert to the now vintage sonic style of the original Guns N' Roses lineup.

The lyrical material for *Hard Skool* comes from the *Chinese Democracy* sessions, when Slash and McKagan were yet to rejoin the band, and yet carries a sharp similarity to the writing style on *Appetite for Destruction*, which, in spite of its being released when the band was essentially in its infancy, remains a benchmark against which all other Guns N' Roses music is measured against.

Over the course of thirty six years, Guns N' Roses has grown, changed, disintegrated, and reintegrated into one of the most iconic, if not versatile, rock n roll bands in the world. With rumors of a reunion album in the air, their work will continue to contribute to rock n roll as an ever growing, constantly evolving genre of music.