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The most expensive album never released

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Guns N' Roses started recording *Chinese Democracy* in the mid-Nineties. But a decade and \$13m later, Axl Rose still has to deliver

IN THE HALCYON days before international terrorism cast an influence over contemporary songwriting and long before file-sharing ransacked the music industry, I interviewed Matt Sorum in Los Angeles. Sorum, a drummer who had recently left Guns N'Roses, then the most successful rock group in the world, was, at the time, nursing his bruises.

As we chatted, Sorum did his best to explain why he had fallen out with Guns N'Roses's enigmatic and volatile lead singer Axl Rose, a frontman with a reputation every bit as controversial as that of Mick Jagger or Jim Morrison. Rose, now five years into the recording of a new Guns N'Roses album, their first release since 1993's *The Spaghetti Incident*, had become a near-recluse at his Malibu mansion.

Guns N'Roses had fallen into disarray. While Rose held on to the bandname and had started work on a new album, called *Chinese Democracy*, Sorum had left in 1997 alongside the rhythm guitarist Gilby Clarke and bassist Duff McKagen. The lead guitarist, Slash, had quit in 1996.

It has now been a decade since Guns N'Roses first started recording sessions for the elusive *Chinese Democracy* — Axl Rose refuses to conclude his efforts with a release. This despite an ever-changing roster of studio musicians, engineers, producers, consultants and executives who have rung up a white elephant costing around \$13 million. The Howard Hughes of rock, now 43 and holding on to probably the most expensive album never made, has spent much of the last decade in isolation, amid rumours of weeks spent in regression therapy.

During this period, his forays into live performing have only served to further illustrate a siege complex. "I have traversed a treacherous sea of horrors to be with you here tonight," he told an audience at Las Vegas on New Year's Day, 2001. Eighteen months later, at the London Arena, Rose raged against "the large number of people who have tried to prevent me from making this work".

Sorum, who left for a one-off payment of about \$125,000, was furious. He had recently been credited as an "additional musician" on a concert album, *Live Era*. "Additional musician? Suddenly I'm the tambourine player," he said, angrily. He suggested we drive to Malibu to confront Rose. Later he changed his mind. Had we made it over the electric fence, he said, we'd have to escape armed guards to reach the front door.

BACK ON the stroke of midnight on September 17, 1991, Guns N'Roses, a five-strong cast of rebels, were crowned the biggest rock band on Planet Earth. Thousands of record stores, both in America and across Europe, stayed open to reap first night sales of the two volumes of *Use Your Illusions*, the band's first new material since its 1987 blockbuster debut, *Appetite for Destruction*, a record that sold over 15 million copies. The gambit immediately set a world record. For the first time in rock music, two records from the same group entered the US Billboard charts at Nos 1 and 2.

At the centre of their success was Rose, then 29, the brash frontman who, at the age of 17, had fled an abusive stepfather at home in Lafayette, Indiana, to seek a rock career in LA. At 29, Rose was already accumulating the riches — and clichés — of any archetypal rock star. His April 1990 marriage to Erin Everly, daughter of Everly Brother Don, lasted only three weeks. "Sorum and I treated each other like shit," Rose said, afterwards. "Sometimes we treated each other great. But then there were other times when we just f***d up each other's lives completely." A subsequent relationship with the model Stephanie Seymour would also dissolve in acrimony. Rose has been single since.

Yet with two best-selling albums in the charts, the group set off on a two-year world tour. When they returned triumphantly to Los Angeles in the summer of 1993, to release *The Spaghetti Incident*, its five members decided to disband for a break.

The group soon gathered at an LA studio, the Complex, to begin work on songs that their record company, Geffen, hoped to release the following summer. Rose, though, was worried. Over the previous two years, heavy metal had fallen to Nirvana, Soundgarden and Pearl Jam. Rap acts dominated the charts. Dance music was in the ascendancy. Rose who had until then, participated in an equal songwriting partnership with his four bandmates, took charge of the sessions.

"It seemed like a dictatorship," said Slash, recently. "We didn't spend a lot of time collaborating. I didn't know where it was going." By the end of 1997, Rose's bandmates had resigned, leaving him in charge. In another career, in IT, for example, if Bill Gates left Microsoft, his departure would immediately fuel industry-wide concern. Yet in the case of Guns N'Roses, the exodus of four key personnel triggered few alarms at Geffen. One ruling presumption was that Rose would, if left to his own devices, deliver another masterpiece.

Tom Maher, a manager once connected with the band, told me how he organised for the group to be counselled by their peers: Keith Richards and Aerosmith's Steven Tyler. "But even that didn't work out." Maher laughed loudly, remembering the incredulity of having Richards and Tyler take on the guise of peacekeepers. "I mean, if you're not gonna listen to Keith or Steve, who are you gonna listen to?" In hindsight, the group's uncertain future was in tandem with downsizing across the music industry. Geffen's founder, David Geffen, took retirement and the label's corporate parent MCA was sold to Seagram. Amid the sea-changes, label executives decided to leave Rose alone to write a record.

Since the mid-Nineties, a number of producers — Sean Beavan, Moby, Roy Thomas Baker, have been hired to help mould Guns N'Roses studio sessions into a cohesive record. From the Complex, Rose moved to another LA studio, Rumbo Recorders, and continued to amass a seven-strong cast of leading session musicians. Fragments of songs were recorded and scrapped. More fragments were recorded. More were scrapped.

The British producer Youth (real name Martin Glover), who has previously worked with U2, spent several months in 1997 in Los Angeles with Rose. "I got him singing," says Glover. "He hadn't been singing for around 18 months. I think the record had turned into a real labour. He was stuck and didn't know how to proceed, so he was avoiding it."

Glover continues: "He had some brilliant ideas, but they really were just sketches. He really wanted to leave the past behind and make a hugely ambitious album, like Led Zepellin's *Physical Graffiti* crossed with Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*. But Axl was deeply unhappy. I sensed he was clinically depressed because he only worked from 9pm to 9am. He was living a hermit lifestyle. In the end, he told me he wasn't ready. He was trying to get to some spiritual level that would make him happy. By the sounds of it, he still hasn't got there." Glover laughs when I tell him that *Chinese Democracy* has something in common with Brian Wilson's *Smile*, an ambitious suite of songs conceived in 1966, but released only in 2004. "It's different from *Smile*," says Glover. "For a start, it is much more expensive."

Recording continued after Glover left, and the fragments began to amount to a small library. In the last few years, insiders have indicated that *Chinese Democracy* has grown to 60 songs, all at various stages of completion. By early 1999, though, Rose had become a hostage to his own perfectionism. In January that year, Seagram announced a corporate shake-up. The label was merged into a larger division, Interscope Records. Overnight, Rose lost many of his key allies, former Geffen staff who had defended his lack of productivity for years. New executives, less sympathetic, set a March deadline. It was never met, and Rose set a pattern for what has followed: bouts of activity, followed by long periods of stagnation.

Later that summer, however, *Oh My God*, the first new Guns N'Roses track since 1993, appeared on the soundtrack to an Arnold Schwarzenegger film. A perplexing statement accompanied its release. "Emotionally the song contemplates several abstract perspectives drawing from personal expression as well as from the film and its metaphors," said Rose, loftily. "The appropriate expression and vehicle for such emotions and concepts is not something taken for granted." He signed off: "Power to the people, peace out and blame Canada." The song, like its press release, was a shambles — a collage of screams and shrieks. It was panned by critics.

For fans, however, Rose seemed to be on the brink of delivery. In late 1999 he invited the rock journal *Rolling Stone* to preview around a dozen tracks. A release was scheduled for summer 2000. Then abruptly, nothing. Two musicians frustrated by the project left to start another group. Another two replacements — Buckethead, a virtuoso guitarist who wears a face-mask and a KFC bucket on his head, and Brian Mantia — were hired. Buckethead, who has since left the project, was, at one point persuaded to stay on longer after Rose met his demands for a chicken coop to be built in the studio. Another producer, Roy Thomas Baker, decided that many songs needed to be re-recorded.

Once more, though *Chinese Democracy* seemed to hint at a conclusion when a little after 4am on New Year's Day, 2001, at the House of Blues in Las Vegas, Rose unveiled his latest line-up and a batch of new songs. The warm reviews seemed to buoy Rose's confidence and he took his band on the road. On their return, there was another period of hard labour. Monthly studio costs escalated towards a staggering \$244,000. But Rose still seemed unhappy, eventually firing Baker and ordering songs to be recorded yet again.

Paul Buckmaster, a British arranger worked with Guns N'Roses throughout August and September 2002. He met Rose in July at LA's Village Recorder studio complex. "Axl was supposed to be there at 3pm, but turned up at 5," says Buckmaster. "He was apologetic and ran me through four songs that he wanted to put strings over."

"Axl seemed quite upbeat; he'd recently returned from Malaysia or Indonesia and was carrying pairs of those baggy trousers that you see people from those countries wearing and started giving them out to people in the studio. At other times, his humour was sarcastic. We'd be listening to a guitar part and he'd say, 'That's not nearly loud enough'. Anyone else would have said that it was the loudest guitar sound ever recorded." Buckmaster immediately set about organising a 32-piece string section, featuring ten first violins, eight second violins, six violas and eight cellos. Recording began on September 13. Rose, though, was absent. Like many others on the project, Buckmaster has yet to hear if his contribution will see the light of day.

Another former Guns N'Roses employee remembers Rose developing a more grandiose vision. Rose, he says, began speaking of releasing not one album, but a trilogy. He also planned a career-saving surprise.

AT THE MTV music awards show in 2002, Guns N'Roses provided a showstopping finale. With minutes before the end of broadcast, a screen lifted to reveal the new look Guns N'Roses, led by Rose, his hair in dreadlocks. The musicians burst into an old hit, *Welcome to the Jungle*, before introducing a new song *Madagascar*. By the time Rose had finished, though, he was out of breath. He departed with a cryptic message, "Round One".

Round Two has yet to materialise. A knock-out blow, equally, seems a long way off. A post-MTV tour was cancelled midway in late 2002. By now Interscope wanted to wash its hands of the whole affair. To recoup some of its eight-figure investment, the

company issued a *Greatest Hits* compilation in March last year. It has proved to be an unpredicted bestseller, with sales of 1.8 million copies. Rose’s audience obviously eagerly awaits new music.

Ten years after sessions first began, Rose continues to work on *Chinese Democracy*, this time in a San Fernando Valley studio. Merck Mercuriadis, the chief executive officer of the Sanctuary Group, Rose’s management company, recently reported that the album was close to being completed. Mercuriadis compared Rose to Peter Gabriel and Stevie Wonder, artists who have “throughout their careers consistently taken similar periods of time without undeserved scrutiny as the world respects that this is what it can sometimes take to make great art”.

Rose’s problem, though, seems to involve not just art, but obsession. “For someone who has achieved unprecedented success at an early age, it can be quite daunting to come up with a sequel,” says Mark Farrell, an LA-based psychiatrist. “How do you come up with something to beat what you’ve done before? That thought alone can be paralyzing.”

The vision — or folly — of Axl Rose’s *Chinese Democracy* remains unrealised. More tellingly, Rose has also outlasted seismic changes in the boardrooms of the music business. In 2005, four major corporations, all reeling from internet piracy, are ever more beholden to the bottom lines of cost and reliability. Guns N’Roses once satisfied all these criteria. Rose, however, burdened by dark clouds, and the immensity of his own ideas, no longer does.

LOST IN MUSIC

Brian Wilson’s Smile, his answer to the *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, was conceived in 1966 but shelved because of a drug-induced mental breakdown. It was finally released in 2004.

Def Leppard: In 1984, drummer Rick Allen lost an arm in a car crash. The band spent three years perfecting a drum set suited to his needs for *Hysteria*.

The Stone Roses: While the Manchester band released their seminal debut in 1989, it took them five years to record the follow-up, *The Second Coming*.

Brahms: So overawed by the music of Beethoven was the composer that his first symphony took him 21 years to write. Begun in 1855, it was completed in 1876 — the psychological strain evident in the work’s tragic introduction.

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