

Finger buffet: Lzzy Hale channels her inner Joan Jett, backstage at Birmingham's O2 Academy, September 24, 2018.



ON THE ROAD

BAD REPUTATION

Fronted by the iconic Lzzy Hale, **HALESTORM** have spent 21 years building a cross-Atlantic audience for the singer's raw, confessional songs exploring female sexuality and desire. Planet Rock joins the Pennsylvania hard rockers in Birmingham to uncover the secrets that have taken them to the cusp of arena stardom.

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T IS AN UNSEASONABLY warm Monday evening in Birmingham and the weekend feels like it's years away, but inside the O2 Academy's walls everybody is cutting loose. Fists are thrown high in the air and plastic cups of beer are spilled as the crowd moves to a thrashing groove. Further back, older veterans and couples with young children, some in small leather jackets, line the balcony and stairs, craning their necks to get a better look at the band.

In the middle of a UK tour that sold out months in advance, Halestorm are blasting out Uncomfortable from their new album, *Vicious*. Each member of the Pennsylvania four-piece is locked into the riff, but all eyes are firmly fixed on the woman wielding a Gibson Explorer at the front.

Standing tall in studded heels and a tasseled black leather jacket, Lzzy Hale stares down the first few rows like a lion eyeing its prey. "I do it 'cos you fight it," she belts out. "And I know you don't like it when I open up and talk about sex." Far from intimidated, young men and women at the barrier roar their approval.

It's a far cry from the reception Halestorm received at their first show.

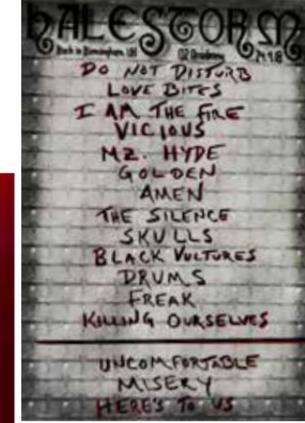
"Honestly, we were quite the spectacle at the time, because I was 13 and my brother was 10," Lzzy explains in their dressing room, a warm smile spreading beneath her tousled black fringe. Reclining on a worn leather sofa, her manner is less fiery than it is on-stage, but she's still pumped up as she describes the fateful events of August 9, 1997. Armed with a Casio keyboard and an original ballad entitled Love Is Power, Lzzy and her drumming brother Arejay took the stage for a talent show at Schuylkill County Fair. The response was somewhat less than rapturous.

"The girl who won first place was a tap-dancing cowgirl," she says. "The eight-year-old girl who came second place was singing a song from Little Orphan Annie. And then there's us at third place."

She lets out a throaty laugh. "Honestly, we have had so many Spinal Tap moments!"

E LIZABETH MAE HALE was always a bit different. She knew it as early as the age of 11, when other girls at sleepovers would fawn over bubblegum hits from Backstreet Boys and TLC, then slam the eject button when Lzzy put on Holy Diver by Dio or Alice Cooper's Love It To Death. At 15, she was already playing rock shows with Arejay and getting into trouble at school for handing out copies of Halestorm's first recordings, a cassette auspiciously entitled *A Forecast For The Future*.

Riders on the 'storm: (main pic) Joe Hottinger and Lzzy Hale trade riffs in front of drummer Arejay Hale; (below, from left) Halestorm tour art, the Brum faithful, Joe crashes out, and L. Hale, Hottinger, Smith and A. Hale get into squad formation.



"It was one of those things where all of a sudden you get into the principal's office and you have to defend your right to rock," grins the now 35-year-old frontwoman. "Everything that made me me was wrapped up in this idea that I could do this music thing. So I really became obsessed with it and it became so much more to me than a career choice, even. It was something that I could say was mine."

"It must have been strange to meet me as a teenager because I would meet people and say, I'm Lzzy Hale... and I'm in a band called Halestorm! We made up cards and would hand them to complete strangers. I was hiding custom picks in shoes in Walmart thinking somebody who buys that shoe will see the pick and look up our band."

Fortunately for the siblings, their parents were more supportive than the school teachers who wanted to know where God figured in their songs. Their mother would book and drive them to shows, while their father, a touring musician himself in the '80s, joined the band on bass for a spell. As memorable a sight

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LZZY HALE

as this hard rockin' family band must have been, what with Arejay performing on a home-made rotating drum platform, it was clear the duo's ambitions extended beyond covering Skid Row and Heart in bars lenient enough to let the underage pair play.

A revolving door of bassists and guitarists came and went until the band relocated to Philadelphia and found their match with guitarist Joe Hottinger and bassist Josh Smith. Hottinger joined in 2003 through an audition; Smith a year later via brazen intimidation.

"I was in another band at the time when I first saw Halestorm play at the old Grape Street pub," recalls the bassist, whose neat shirt and Martini-dry wit convey the air of an upscale bartender. "Lzzy hops off stage during a song, comes right up to me in the middle of the room and stares at me like she's singing through me," he says, his eyes widening at the memory. "So I was like, What the fuck is this? It was very unexpected and something I had never seen around Philadelphia." ➔

SANDRA SONRENSEN



Double vision:
Lzzy applies
her warpaint.

◀◀ “We were trying to work out how we could get him in the band,” chips in Hottinger. “I’d call him and say, We need you to fill in for a show, can you do that? We’ll give you 20 bucks and a smack on the ass!”

“Fifteen years later and I’m still the temporary bass player!” laughs Josh.

The pair and Lzzy crack up, before Lzzy regains her composure and the tone of her voice shifts to cards-on-the-table seriousness.

“Just to clarify from my perspective – and Arejay will tell you this too – we never felt like this was a four-piece,” she states. “As Josh so eloquently described it, we were aggressive teenagers. Our attitude was we’re going to intimidate you into submission or otherwise. We had a hard time finding people our own age with a similar drive, and it really wasn’t until the four of us were jamming for the first time that my brother turns to me and says, ‘Oh my God, this is our band.’ And we still have that dynamic now.”

With the band line-up solidified, Halestorm were cooking on gas. They were spotted shortly after, in 2005, at a residency at legendary Greenwich Village hangout Don Hill’s, leading to a deal with Atlantic Records. Both 2009’s self-titled debut and 2012’s *The Strange Case Of...* received heavy rotation on

American airwaves and went gold, tapping into a renewed appetite for raucous and catchy hard rock after successive waves of grunge and nu-metal. Their second album also spawned the single *Love Bites (So Do I)*, which won a Grammy award for Best Hard Rock/Metal Performance in 2013.

“Arejay goes running up for the mic, I’m chasing Arejay and the guys are running after me shouting, ‘Don’t fall!’ because I’m wearing a dress,” recalls Lzzy of their win over fellow nominees Iron Maiden, Megadeth and Anthrax. “It was total chaos!”

The gong now holds pride of place on the mantelpiece in Lzzy and Joe’s shared home in Nashville, Tennessee – right next to that third-place trophy from the Schuylkill County Fair.

The band subsequently warmed up arenas for Megadeth, Disturbed and Shinedown, and have also proven they’re unafraid of preaching to the unconverted by



Game of cones:
Lzzy gets her point
across, loudly.

“blowing a few cowboy hats off” when touring as main support for country megastar Eric Church in 2014.

Soon their close rock’n’roll pals included Cinderella’s Tom Kiefer and late Pantera/Damage Plan drummer Vinnie Paul. Their first encounter with the latter at a festival in Dallas circa 2009 also proved an induction into rock’n’roll debauchery.

“We see Vinnie in full snakeskin outfit: hat, shoes, jacket, everything,” Hottinger recalls with a chuckle. “Like a man-snake, surrounded by his whole posse. He starts singing a song from our record at us and goes, ‘I got three of yer records: one in Vegas, one in Dallas and one in my limo! You’re comin’ with me, we’re goin’ to the Clubhouse!’”

On arrival at the Pantera man’s strip club, Paul ordered the DJ to play Halestorm’s first single, *I Get Off*, detailing the gratification a woman gets from exposing herself to a voyeur. And then the strippers came out.

“The funniest thing is in my naivety. I knew I was kind of writing a sexy song,” Lzzy giggles. “But it doesn’t click until you watch a stripper dance to it that, Oh yeah, this is totally a stripper song!”

VISITS TO STRIP CLUBS aren’t the everyday stuff of Halestorm tours. Over the course of a highly regimented schedule of soundchecks, busy meet-and-greets and grabbing a bite to eat from catering, today the loaded beer fridge in the band’s dressing room receives little attention – unlike the stack of tour posters atop it, patiently awaiting signatures.

When Joe is not warming up his favourite guitar – a sparkling, glitter-finished number affectionately dubbed ‘Stripper Farts’ – he can be found drawing up set lists on his iPad, swapping songs in and out to keep it interesting for fans that follow the tour. Typefaces are lifted from the iconic bands of each city the tour hits, with tonight’s design taken from – what else? – the gothic font of Black Sabbath’s eponymous debut. Joe pushes his Jesus locks out of the way as he shows us set lists for Sheffield (Def Leppard) and London (Sex Pistols).

Yet, while not evident in Birmingham, the pleasures of the flesh are a feature of many Halestorm lyrics, and nowhere has Lzzy been more candid about her own sex life than on their latest album’s centerpiece, *Do Not Disturb*. Propelled by a slithering bass groove, the song recounts a threesome the singer had in Holland – one of many such encounters, she assures us – laden with tongue-in-cheek hooks like, “I love your accent, I wonder what it’ll sound like when you come.” ➡➡

← As a songwriter raised on Mick Jagger boasting about getting his rocks off and Robert Plant begging somebody, anybody, to squeeze his lemon, Lzzy understandably sees no distinction when it comes to writing lyrics about her own pleasures.

“In my experience girls think about sex just as much as, if not more than, guys,” she says nonchalantly with an arch smile. “But with songs like I Get Off I started getting approached with, ‘This is really weird.’ And I’m like, Well, why is it weird? Screw it, I’m gonna do it anyway! And truly, it’s just an extension of me and I think anybody who has met me or spoken to me, even online, understands that.

“It’s a big reason why I decided very early on to be open with our fans, because it’s honestly easier. It’s easier to be unapologetically myself than to try and put up this facade. And, if anything, the whole rock star and being cool thing, the reason that I got into rock music is because I wasn’t cool.”

As if to emphasise this point, Arejay makes his entrance into the dressing room carrying a pressed white shirt and a pair of bright green shorts emblazoned with red popsicles. They are one of several retina-damaging outfits that he wears on-stage during this tour. As Lzzy’s longest-serving partner in rock, it seems an appropriate moment to ask him if his big sister is right about being uncool.

“I don’t think either of us were ever cool,” he chirps, hanging the clothes on a nearby mirror. “But if being cool is trying your hardest to be the best person you can be, then, heh, yeah.”

Whatever one might think of these self-effacing statements coming from a group endorsed by Ronnie James Dio, Joan Jett and Smashing Pumpkins’ Billy Corgan, there is a grain of truth in there. What you see with Halestorm is, in fact, what you get, and it is their quiet determination that has assured their steady ascent and place in the hearts of fans around the world. With talks in play for an arena tour in their own right next year, the road ahead is still wide open.

“I think it comes down to, Can you make a moment?” muses Hottinger of their appeal. “Something where people go, ‘Fuck yeah!’ That goes beyond genre and language. Just, ‘Fuck yeah!’” He pumps his fist in the air and smiles.

“That’s all that matters.”

THE SHOW later is full of such moments. Lzzy opens with a rousing a cappella of I Get Off that is equal parts Tina Turner and Ronnie James Dio, slipping seamlessly into Do Not Disturb’s lascivious grind. Arejay later produces comically oversized sticks and lays into a drum solo that is so Spinal Tap you half expect him to go the way of all Tap sticksmen and spontaneously combust.

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They stretch I Miss The Misery into a smoking blues jam before inviting opening riff-rock duo Rews on-stage to close the evening with a huge singalong of Here’s To Us. As the crowd disperses, multiple Lzzy Mini-Mes, dressed in leather jackets and sparkling shoes, give their ecstatic smiles.

“That to me is probably the coolest,” says Smith back in the dressing room as Arejay pushes liberal plastic cups of Jameson into open hands. “We had some openers in Ireland who had female singers and they both said the same thing, that they started singing because of Lzzy. It’s crazy to see these people you’re influencing. But it’s funny, too, because that dates us a little bit, like, Oh shit! We’re old!”

“I’m super proud that I’ve been in this band longer than I haven’t been in my life,” muses Lzzy. “My little brother and I talk about this a lot lately, that this is kind of our legacy, man, and I don’t really see an end in sight. We’ve

probably had twice the career that a lot of bands have had and we’re still moving forward.”

Bus call isn’t for another 20 minutes, but there is a small crowd of fans still waiting outside the back of the shoebox-like venue and it will take the band that time to make their way the 15 feet or so from the Academy’s load-in doors to the coach.

It is now past midnight. Lzzy wraps a scarf around her head, lipstick still immaculately in place and says, “The way I see it, everybody feels that electricity when you get up on-stage and people are listening to you. I still do, every time. What matters is what you do with it.”

She smiles, then turns and strides towards her people. As the four musicians spend their last minutes chatting to new fans and embracing those recognised from previous shows, you can sense an excitement that has propelled them this far and will no doubt keep on pushing them to higher ground.

Only a fool or a Schuylkill County Fair judge would bet against them.



HALESTORM’s current album *Vicious* is out now on Atlantic Records. The band are on tour in the US through to December 16.



Brum enchanted evening: Halestorm bid Birmingham farewell.