

5. Ninja

You Don't Have to Be Old to Be Wise

Working with Robert was a musical thrill, but being able to absorb his years of *bar-band gigging savvy* was invaluable. Robert had spent 12 years slogging it out in the Boston music scene. He'd played hundreds of gigs, and dealt with scores of rotten bandmates. He'd already made all the mistakes, and learned from them. By working with Robert, I got to skip a lot of that crap.

That was a learning curve I was quite ready to embrace. By 21, I was already getting jaded and disillusioned. I still loved playing — and soon, *making* music, but I'd already learned that everything you have to go through to *play* music — putting bands together, keeping them together — sucked major ass. For what it's worth, *it still does*.

Robert and I were going to put a band together and play original music, but our *goal* was different. This time, Robert said, we were *not* going to slog it out on the ground. He'd had enough of that futility. I didn't have Robert's years, but I'd already tasted that same futility with Silent Rage. His plan was an easy sell to me. Sure, we'd play some gigs. But the real goal was recording.

Robert and I are both very analytical. We got together several times to plot and plan. We discussed what we were going to do, and exactly how we'd go about doing it.

The band would simply be the means to the end of recording a great demo. Thus we'd write songs, rehearse till we got tight as a band, play a few warm up gigs, then go record the demo while we were in top form. Once we had the demo, we'd put together nice-looking press kits and send them out to record labels.

Play That Funky Music

We knew it was going to be a *heavy*, guitar-driven sound. That was what we both loved, plus, that was popular in the mid 80s. However, Robert thought we should be more than a straight-forward metal band. He suggested that we should try marrying heavy guitars with funky, groove-oriented rhythms.

At first, that idea seemed a bit out of left field to me. A few metal bands had done the odd song like that, but at the time, no heavy band had made groove-oriented rhythms their signature thing.

Still, the more Robert explained his vision, the more I realized it would be a big sonic differentiator for us. I trusted Robert's judgment, and had faith in his talent. As long as we had a heavy, driving, guitar sound and guitar hero leads, I figured why not? Hey, I wanted to be original, didn't I?

Robert had already recorded an album of his own original songs in a variety of guitar styles. He'd done that as sort of his musical resume. Those songs, plus a few more we'd write together, became the bulk of our repertoire. We'd arrange our new songs, and rearrange his old ones to fit our groove-oriented format.

If You Can't Rock Me

We still needed a band. That meant finding a drummer and a singer. Robert and I set up shop in my parent's basement. We'd audition musicians, and eventually rehearse there.

Leaving Silent Rage had alienated Steve³, but I was still on good terms with Pete and Stoney. I suggested we should give them a try out. I thought Pete might work out. I didn't think Stoney was what Robert was looking for, but I figured if I asked Pete, and didn't ask Stoney, I'd offend him and lose the friendship. Robert was fine with auditioning them, but he said, "These guys are your friends. If they aren't good enough, we'll have to move on. Are you going to be OK with that?" I was.

Silent Rage hadn't found a new bassist, so neither guy was doing anything. They were happy to audition. I told them both, "I can't promise you'll get the gig, but we'd like to give you the chance."

I don't recall much of Stoney's audition, other than he wasn't right. At that time, his strength was singing covers in his falsetto/head voice. As I'd learned toward the end of Silent Rage when I'd tried to write songs with Stoney, unless there was a vocal line for him to copy, he hadn't known what to do, or how to find his own voice.

Pete fared little better. He was still a powerhouse. He hit hard, and when he played, the room shook. But when he left, Robert told me, "His tempo is all over the place. He can't hold a consistent beat." This wasn't usually apparent when Pete played covers in Silent Rage — or maybe I was still too inexperienced to hear it. Regardless, we passed on Pete, too. It was hard telling my friends that we weren't moving forward with them. I was relieved that neither seemed to hold it against me.

Extreme Measures

One of the biggest Boston bands at that time was Extreme. *Not* the Extreme that you know now. *Pre-Nuno Bettencourt*, Extreme. They'd had a local hit with the song *Mutha (Don't Wanna Go to School Today)*. They were a hard rock band, but the hit song was straight-up pop-rock. There was nothing funky about it. Extreme's guitarist (and I believe *founder*) was a guy named Peter Hunt. Peter was friendly with Robert. Peter was disillusioned with Extreme — and we'd soon learn why.

Robert said, "We're going to jam with Peter, and Extreme's drummer, Paul Geary. They're both kind of thinking of leaving Extreme." I said, "Do you want to work with another guitarist?" Robert said, "I'd work with Peter because he's a good guy. Plus the drummer is very good." I said, "Bring em' on."

Peter Hunt and Paul Geary jammed with us at my parents' basement. It was my first time playing with next-level, seasoned musicians. It was an eye-opener for me. Definitely a step up. But I was ready, and fit in seamlessly.

Peter Hunt was a very nice, laid-back guy. He wasn't the dynamic lead player Robert was, but he was a good, solid pro.

Paul Geary — as history would show — was a terrific drummer. He had no trouble grasping our concept of playing funky grooves under heavy guitars. He actually excelled at that, and sounded awesome.

We ran through our original songs with the Extreme guys and everyone agreed we sounded great. When they left, Robert and I were almost giddy about how good it sounded. We had the two of them back for a second time and it sounded even better.

It was so good that we went on to become a worldwide success — *lauded* for our funky metal sound! Except, of course, *we didn't*. Extreme did. They fired Peter from the band he'd started, and hired Nuno — a truly *monster*, world-class guitar hero to this day.

Extreme also changed their sound from straightforward rock, to heavy guitars with funky, groove-oriented rhythms. *I wonder how they came up with that idea?* Draw your own conclusions.

Robert and I were disappointed, but not derailed. If nothing else, we'd proved the concept that playing funky grooves under heavy guitars worked quite well with our original songs.

Working Class Hero

While all of this was going on, I was still working shit jobs. I was driving for a *very shady* cab/courier service. I would drive around Boston and deliver packages. I'd occasionally drive passengers too, though, illegally, because I didn't have a hack license.

The company was run by a pair of 400-pound, low-life assholes. I'd show up in the morning wearing the yellow, company polo shirt (they made me *buy*), and the required black pants. This was the official look they wanted. They'd assign me some broken down, clap trap car, with the seat springs worn out (from their fat, 400lb asses), and no stereo. It was a brutally hot summer and the cars I got never had air conditioning.

As soon as I knew the score, I started bringing a gym bag with me. Inside, I had a boom box with my tunes, and some lighter clothes. As soon as I drove away from dispatch, I'd pull over, change into a tank top and some shorts. I was running packages into office buildings. Nobody gave a shit what I looked like.

It was lousy work. I drove 8-10 hours a day, with no overtime. Seemed like every Friday afternoon around 4pm — just before I was ready to quit for the day — they'd send me on a Logan airport run. That meant hellish traffic. Basically just a big *fuck you, Dave*. *You think you're getting off at 5pm? Maybe you'll be back by 6:30-7pm.*

The crappy cars were unreliable and would break down. One time, I was supposed to go to a family dinner after work. I got sent to Springfield MA, two hours west of Boston. Normally I wouldn't have minded that. It was all highway, and I'd have been back in time for dinner. But the car broke down outside of Springfield. This was *still* well before cell phones. All I had was the CB radio connected to the fat asses in dispatch. I told them their piece of shit car had quit, and I was stranded. They sent a tow truck.

I waited an hour or two in the heat for the tow truck. It took another couple of hours to get home. Of course I'd already missed the family dinner. I was totally disgusted with the whole situation.

When I finally got home, showered, and had calmed down my father said to me, "When are you going to stop dicking around with these bullshit jobs?" He said "If you go back to school *now*, I'll still pay for it."

I was now 22. Three years had passed since I'd flunked out of UMASS. I'd had no success making my way toward music as a profession.

On the other hand, I'd worked a plethora of truly shitty, manual labor jobs under lousy conditions. I'd now had a *good, long look* at what my life would look like if I failed to make it in music. It was fucking bleak!

I did some quick math in my head. I could go to school for a few hours a day, come home, do my homework in the afternoon, and still play music with Robert in the evenings. I'd been working 8-10 hours a day for the cab company. *Classes plus homework* would probably be half as many hours. At 22, I *finally* saw what I could not see at 18. *I could do both music and school*. Compared to the cab company and similar jobs, *it'd be a cake-walk*. I said, "Dad, you're on. Let's do it!"

Back to School

I enrolled in Middlesex Community College (MCC). I still had no idea what I wanted to do beyond music, so I took a general, liberal arts curriculum. MCC had some great professors and courses. My classes at UMASS had been mostly in 200-seat lecture halls, where the professor lectured. I had a very hard time engaging in those classes. At MCC, classes were 20-25 people, and most professors taught in a discussion format. I found that *very* engaging. I was always jumping into discussions, and getting involved.

I quickly found myself enjoying college. A lot! As I'd figured, it was a cake-walk compared to the jobs I'd been working. I had plenty of time for both school and music. I'd drive to school in the morning, come home in the afternoon, do my homework, and my evenings were mostly free.

My father had purchased one of the first Macintosh Plus computers. The one with the 9 inch, black and white screens. It didn't even have an internal hard drive. It ran off 1.4 MB floppy disks. So instead of my typewriter, I'd write my school papers on the Mac. This seemingly minor development was pivotal in my life.

At UMASS, I'd written papers on my typewriter and it was pure drudgery. I'd type the paper out, then realize I needed to edit it. I *literally* cut and pasted the pieces of paper back in the right order, then re-typed the whole thing. The Mac, of course, had *word processing* with *virtual* cut and paste. It also had spell checking, to catch my errors and typos.

The Mac took all of the drudgery out of writing. When my paper was done, I could print it out on our dot-matrix printer, or even stop by my father's office and print it on a laser jet. When I handed in my papers, they were free of mistakes and white-out. Before my professors ever read a word, *my papers just looked better* than those of my fellow students — 99% of whom were still on typewriters.

In my first semester, all of my papers — *in all of my classes* — were coming back graded A+, A, A-. I'd been a C+/B- high school student, and had flunked out of UMASS, so this was quite new for me. I figured it was probably just a matter of finally being *mentally engaged*, and *ready* to be in college. I was glad my grades were good, and that my father was pleased, but I didn't think much more about it.

Then one day, three of my professors cornered me on campus. They asked me if I'd consider working a couple of hours a week in the school's writing lab, helping the other students learn how to write.

I was taken aback. I'd done literally *nothing*, scholastically, in the three years between UMASS and MCC. I certainly hadn't *written* anything. Yet somehow, I'd learned — seemingly by osmosis — how to write. *Well enough to teach it*. How could that be?

Sure, word processing removed the drudgery from writing. But if that was all it took, everyone with a computer would write well. After some thought, I concluded it must have been that young, English Comp professor at UMASS. The one who'd let me rewrite my papers to get a better grade. I'd only had two or three sessions with him, but he must have subliminally taught me how to organize my thoughts and write. Three years later, I had this skill without knowing it. It was a kick in the head, but a good one. All I thought I'd learned at UMASS was Rush songs.

When I returned to college, I didn't know what I wanted to pursue. Now I'd found it. Or rather, *it found me*.

I accepted the offer to teach in the college writing lab. Doing so gave me a few extra credits toward my Associates degree. I also *took the hint*, and listened to the message that the world, and my professors were sending me: *I was a writer*. Pursue *that*.

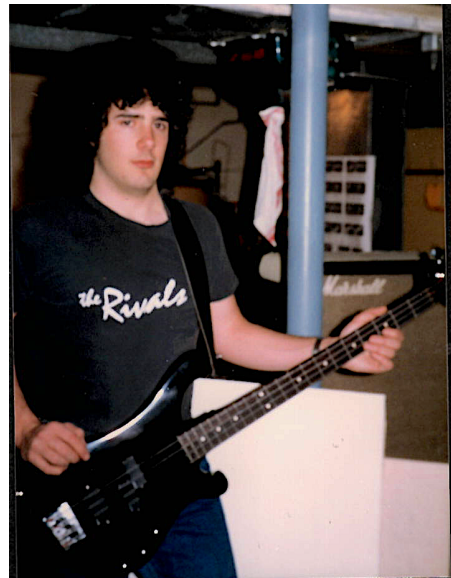
I started tailoring my classes accordingly. I took a Journalism class. They made me editor of the school paper. This entailed organizing each issue, and copy editing articles from other writers. As Editor, I was also free to write anything I wanted in the paper. I wrote concert reviews.

I left MCC after two years with my Associates degree. I'd been on the Dean's list each semester. I soon transferred to Emerson College to pursue my Bachelors degree in Professional Writing. But that's skipping ahead.

Just Another Band out of Boston

We kept looking for drummers and singers. Eventually we found a drummer named Dave. He played our groove-oriented songs very well. Unfortunately, he was less sold on our master plan for conquering the music world by recording instead of gigging. All he wanted to do was gig.

Regardless, Dave liked our music and signed on for the band. We clicked really well musically, but our personalities clashed. I was an overly-serious kid where music was concerned, and Dave was a short-sighted, obnoxious prick. Robert didn't care for him either, but said, "He sounds great. Let's just put up with him till we record the demo." I agreed, but it made rehearsals a bit contentious.



Early Ninja rehearsal, 1986. From top, clockwise: Robert, Dave, and another idiot drummer.

Truly good, male rock singers are extremely hard to find. Even if you were lucky enough to find one, you always had to worry they'd leave your band the instant a better gig came along. Because they *always* did.

Having no luck finding guy singers, we eventually settled on a girl about my age named Regina. She was cute in that 80s, MTV pop way. She had a pop-voice similar to that of Madonna, but she *could* sing.

Regina was easy to work with, but I worried she wasn't the big-voiced, commanding, front-person I felt our music demanded. Once again, Robert reminded me, *stick to the plan*. He said, "Regina's not ideal, but we can work with her. I know a woman named Hope, who grew up singing gospel in church. She has a huge voice. She won't be in the band with us, but I know we can get her for the recording session."



Regina

We began rehearsing two nights a week. Now that I was no longer playing covers, I began developing my own voice as a musician on bass. I was well versed in Rock bass, from Geddy Lee to Steve Harris, but I found my own bass style by locking in with the kick drum, and playing melodies to the kick's rhythmic pattern. I even began playing a bit of rudimentary slap bass, as it suited our funky rhythms. Eventually we worked up nine strong, original songs.

Before we could gig, the band needed a name. I'd seen some Ninja movies at the time, and I'd even found a cool Ninja magazine at the newsstand. Inside were Ninja stories, and ads for ordering all kinds of cool Ninja gear. I suggested that we call the band Ninja. Robert liked the idea. The name Ninja both sounded cool, and also gave us a theme for the band's forthcoming press visuals.


Powerage

We finally booked a couple of gigs just to test the waters. To see how our songs went over, and make sure we were tight enough to perform in the studio when the time came. We were all itching to play. Especially the drummer. Despite outlining all of our plans and schemes to the band, gigging remained the *only* thing he cared about.

Our first gig was a weeknight at the Rendezvous club in Waltham. The place held maybe 100 people. We packed the club with mostly friends, family, and Robert's guitar students. They all wanted to see what his new project sounded like. This was also the only time my parents ever showed up for a gig.

CATCH THE NEW ENGLAND DEBUT OF

NINJA!



ON WEDNESDAY APRIL 2 APPEARING WITH
BEGGARS' DAY

AT THE *RENDEZVOUS* 596 MOODY ST WALTHAM
RT. 128 TO WALTHAM, TAKE MAIN ST. TO MOODY ST.

We hit the stage in the typical Rock garb of the mid-80s. I was in my spandex and animal print — still looking like I'd stepped off the KISS *Animalize* tour. Robert wore black leather. Regina wore a leather skirt and a leopard top. Photos show the drummer wore a headband. He wasn't wearing *just* a headband, but that's all you saw from behind his kit.

To push the Ninja theme, we'd learned to play the brief, Japanese-sounding passage from the tail end of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. We used that piece as a dramatic intro. Then we launched into our set:

Another Lover

Tell Me that You Need It

Ninja Party (instrumental)

The Girl's Got Money

I'm Gonna Win

Think of Me

The Outlaw

So Hard to Let you Go

(guitar solo)

One Night in the City

As the crowd was mostly friends and family, we got lots of applause, hooting and hollering. They made us feel great.



Ninja live at the Rendezvous, April 1986



Dave, Idiot drummer, Regina, and Robert.

To say we sounded *huge* was an understatement. Another thing I'd learned from Robert was the joy of running amps in stereo. This is something a lot of the pros do. It works amazingly well with big or small amps.

The idea is simple. Instead of using one amp, you run two amps at the same time, in stereo. That is, you run a cord from your guitar into a stereo chorus pedal that splits your signal in two. You then run two cords from the pedal out to two, separate amps, so that what you play goes to both amps. You place the two speaker cabs a few feet apart from each other. That separation, combined with the subtle chorus, creates a huge, sonic dimension. The effect is such that you can run two, lower wattage amps into two speakers, *and it fools the ear*. It *sounds* much *bigger* than a full, 100 watt Marshall stack with eight speakers in mono. The stack is actually *louder* in decibels, but the smaller rig *sounds bigger* due to the stereo effect. I'd use this concept to great advantage in my later years as a guitarist.

When Ninja gigged, Robert used Marshall and Orange 30 watt combos in stereo, and his guitar sound was just massive and magical. Not to be outdone, my bass rig had evolved quite a bit since Silent Rage. I'd managed to acquire a second, Marshall 4x15 Bathtub cab — just like the one I already had. So I, too, ran my bass rig in stereo — about 300 watts per side through a total of eight, fifteen inch speakers.



Stereo Marshall Heaven and Dave's Les Paul

On top of that, I'd also used Moog Taurus pedals — bass synth pedals that provided low end notes below the frequency a bass guitar produces. I got them because Rush had used them to great effect on songs like *Tom Sawyer*.

A few weeks later, we took the show on the road to a club in Marshfield MA — Regina's home town. We rocked the same set to a crowd that didn't know us at all. We still got a great response. We'd proved the concept! *People liked our music.*

I still have a recording of the Rendezvous gig, and whenever I listen back, I think it stands up, and has aged pretty well. Probably because it *wasn't* straight Metal. Music and production styles change over time, but good songs are *always* good songs. They stand the test of time.

What's funny now is that I was so concerned about *being heavy* back then. Heavy guitars, big bass, big drums. Wild guitar solos. We achieved all of that *in our sound*, but we were really just *a loud*, pop band, playing groove-oriented, danceable songs — filled with catchy hooks and choruses. We were targeting an MTV audience.

The Ninja gigs were the apex of my time, skill, and sound as a bassist. They were also my last gigs as a bassist.



Dave and Robert — my favorite picture of us.

Turning Japanese

To set us apart from the pack, we wanted to present the band in a dramatic, theatrical way in our press photos. Huge bands like Iron Maiden and Dio were touring in that era using incredible, Egyptian-themed staging. We wanted to do something similar with our Japanese theme, but obviously on a much smaller scale. Just not so small it would be in danger of being crushed by a dwarf.

We brainstormed and sketched ideas for staging the Ninja concept. Eventually we decided on a central, Japanese, Torii gate. These tall, red gates represent many things in Japanese culture. Most commonly, they symbolically separate the divide between the secular world and the Sacred Shinto Shrine area.

Accompanying — or rather, *guarding* — the Torii gate, we'd have a pair of Komainu lion-dog statues. These statues guard the entrances to shrines and temples in Japan. We couldn't have real statues, but Robert knew a guy who could airbrush very realistic, 3D-looking statues on large canvas screens we'd place on either side of the gate.

The clincher, of course, was that in front of the staging, we ourselves would dress like Ninjas. We ordered Ninja suits from the magazine, some throwing stars I sewed onto my guitar strap, a Ninja sword, and a fighting staff.

We had to build everything else ourselves, and the biggest challenge was the Torri gate. It had to be big, but it only had to be convincing from the front. We'd build the sides from wood beams — like a 2x4, but much longer. We'd decorate the beams with some cool, crown molding trim. We make the horizontal top of the gate from two pieces of sheet plywood. To support the massive structure assembled, we used a pair of two-hole concrete blocks. We filled one hole of each block with cement, then sank the support beam into the cement. We'd paint the gate glossy red, and the concrete blocks black. Built this way, the Torri gate would be easy to assemble, disassemble, and transport.

Once we'd figured it all out, it was off to Home Depot. We purchased the beams, the molding, and a big, 4x8 sheet of plywood. When we got it out to Robert's mom's Dodge Dart, we realized the plywood sheet wouldn't fit *in* the car, and was too big to hang out of the trunk. We had a little bit of twine — far *too little* to do the job, but we strapped the sheet of plywood to the roof of the Dart.

As we drove out of the Home Depot parking lot, we each stuck an arm out the window, and held onto the plywood. That was easy enough — until we hit the highway. At highway speed, the plywood sheet started *generating lift*. The few loops of twine were not enough to keep the sheet resting *on the roof*. It was now *flying* an inch or two above the roof! We were now holding onto it for dear life. If the plywood flew off the roof while we were on the highway, it could easily cause real damage and injury. Rob pulled into the slow lane and we crept home at 30 mph, laughing our asses off.

Long after Ninja was done, my mom used the Torri gate as *decor* in her backyard garden. I think it survived 30 years of Boston winters before finally falling apart.

Going Through Changes

With two gigs behind us, it was time to focus on recording our demo. As soon as the drummer realized we wouldn't be seeking more gigs, he left to go play in another band. He'd put in months of rehearsals, learning the songs, creating his own, inventive drum grooves, yet he didn't want even the *potential* payoff of playing on the recordings. He just left. Drummers.

With the drummer gone, and no gigs on the horizon, Regina was next. I felt bad about that. Regina was a nice girl who caused no trouble. But the live Rendezvous tape confirmed her voice just wasn't right for the demo.

Once again, it was just me and Robert. And once again, we needed a drummer.

Brief Rendezvous in Purgatory

One day, I went down to the same Rendezvous club for an open jam. Stoney was going to be there with Matty, the guitarist in his new cover band, Purgatory.

Jams are always a binary experience. They're either fun, or they totally suck — and it's *not* a 50-50 proposition. Maybe one jam in ten *won't* suck. You get up on stage with other players and *jam* for a song or two. In this context, *jam* usually means playing songs everyone knows or can get through. In the rare cases when you get to play with experienced players, you can sometimes *truly jam* in the traditional sense of the word — improvise something on the spot, and take it for a ride. When that clicks, it's a blast.

Unfortunately, good jams are rare because jams draw beginners like a turd draws flies. Beginners cannot *jam*. For example, *all* beginner guitarists can *only* do two things: they can solo badly over 12-bar blues progressions, and they can play the handful of songs that they know. For some reason, that's always: *Hey Joe*, *Mustang Sally*, *Sissy Strut*, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*, and *Sweet Child o' Mine*. These jams are torture, and most good players avoid them.

That said, I figured if Stoney and his guitarist were there, it had a chance to be fun. I found Stoney and Matty sitting in a booth. Matty bore a striking resemblance to Butthead, but he was friendly enough.

After a few beers, we were ready to jam. The drummer on stage was a guy named Pete2. He had long, red hair down to his elbows and looked very much the rocker. I realized we'd been in some classes together at MCC, but we'd never spoken.

"What should we play?" I asked. Pete2 said, "You guys know any Maiden?" We did! Matty said, "*Hallowed be Thy Name*?" I said, "Sure," and Pete2 agreed. Stoney said, "I don't know that, so I'll sit this one out."

Hallowed be Thy Name is a seven-minute, Iron Maiden opus, with lots of stops, starts, twists, and turns. *You either knew it, or you didn't* — and if you didn't, you couldn't fake your way through it.

We assured each other that we all *really* knew it, but the three of us had never played together. Getting through the song without a singer seemed challenging. If we couldn't follow the lyrics in our heads, it was gonna be a train wreck.

Pete2 counted it off, and sure enough, it sounded great from the jump. The song starts slow, with a tolling bell (simulated by me banging a full, E chord on my bass) and a quiet guitar part. As soon as the crowd recognized the song, they started cheering. As the song unfolds, it gets louder, faster, and more complex. We sailed through each tricky change. We had big grins on our faces — realizing that we all *really did* know the song inside out — even without vocals. By the song's grand finale, the crowd was singing the final choruses. *Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. Hallowed be thy name. Yeah, Yeah, Yeah. Hallowed be thy naaaaaaaaammmmme.*

Ah, the 80s! It was a blast.



A few weeks later, I got a call from Stoney. Purgatory needed a new bassist. I was still 100% committed to Ninja, but the rehearsing and gigging part of the band had wound down. As long as I was still pushing Ninja as my main thing, I figured I might also enjoy gigging covers again with another band. Stoney was always fun, and I had enjoyed playing with Matty, so I said I'd come down and check it out.

Purgatory rehearsed in a barn a half mile from where I lived. It was a barn, but it had been repurposed — at someone's substantial investment — into a dedicated, *truly awesome* rehearsal space. There was plenty of room. A stage with a drum riser, a good PA. It was a very impressive place to play.

I set up, and we rocked out a few cover metal standards. It sounded good. Matty was fine with me, but the drummer was aloof. I always felt he was tolerating my presence begrudgingly. I tried to keep things *light*. Purgatory wasn't my main musical outlet. My only goal with these guys was to have some fun.

I started rehearsing with them a couple of times a week. Given the music I'd been playing in Ninja, playing covers again with these guys was just something to do. It was fun, and didn't take much effort on my part. It wasn't serious. At least to me.

Purgatory was looking to add more songs. I'd been playing more and more guitar all this time, so I suggested it might be cool if Matty and I swapped instruments for two songs I felt I could both play and sing pretty well. AC/DC's *TNT*, and Accept's *Balls to the Wall*. I loved (and still love) the German metal band, Accept. At that age, I could do a pretty fair impression of Accept's *very unique* singer, Udo Dirkschneider. Bon Scott was a comparative piece of cake. So mid set, Matty and I would switch instruments and I'd lead the band through *TNT* and *Balls*. It sounded pretty good, but I don't think the drummer was on board.

I rehearsed with that band maybe 10 or 15 times and never got out of the barn. My cup of coffee in Purgatory.

Fleetwood MA

We still needed a drummer. Oddly enough, independent of me, Robert somehow found Pete2 — he of the Iron Maiden jam. I'd only played with Pete2 that one time, but I didn't think he was the right drummer for our session, so I hadn't mentioned him.

When Robert suggested Pete2, I said, "Yeah, I know him. He's a decent metal drummer, but I don't think he's the guy to play (our) syncopated grooves." Robert went and worked out Pete2 to show him the songs and see if he could handle them. He came back convinced that Pete2 could do the job. We never rehearsed as a group, but Robert had a few sessions with Pete2.

The time finally came to record. Robert had worked in many studios around Boston, and he'd determined the best place for us to record would be Fleetwood studios in Revere, MA. The plan was to record two songs: *The Girl's Got Money*, a pop single that was one of Robert's songs, and *One Night in the City*, probably the best song Robert and I wrote together, and one that featured my busiest bass work.

It was such a different world back then — pre-digital, and pre-home recording. Everything was analog. You recorded to 2-inch tape, and you only had 24 tracks to record on. Each tape reel cost \$200 and gave you 30 minutes of recording time. Fortunately, we'd only need one reel. The studio cost us \$40 per hour, plus the fee for the engineer who knew the gear and ran the mixing board. *Every minute you weren't productive cost you money.*

Robert and I were splitting the costs 50-50. We figured we'd need about \$4000 to record two songs. That was a lot of money for me at 22 — especially since I'd gone back to school and wasn't working.

I'd sold my old Dodge Dart earlier, and had been driving my father's hand-me-down Audi 5000. The seven year-old Audi was a nice car in great shape, but anytime something went wrong, it was too costly for me to repair and maintain. Plus, it wasn't nearly big enough to transport my huge bass rig.

I sold the Audi for \$4000, put \$2000 away in the bank for recording, and spent the other \$2000 on a huge, green, 1973 Dodge extended van. The stories I could tell about that van would fill its own chapter. Instead, I'll just say it could haul all my gear, *and then some*.

As I had the van, it was my job to collect Pete2 and his drums on the first day of our recording session. That morning, I packed my bass rig into the van and headed out to pick up Pete2.

I rang the doorbell, and Pete2's mom answered. I said, "Hi. I'm Dave. I'm here to pick up Pete2. Is he ready to go?" She looked at me like I was from Mars. "Pete!" she yelled. "There's a guy here to see you." She turned back to me. "He's still sleeping. He'll be down in a minute."

It took several minutes for a bleary Pete2 to come downstairs. When I saw him, it was obvious he'd had a very late night. "Time to go to the session, Pete." "Right, right," he said. After about an hour, I finally got Pete2 going, we loaded his huge drum kit in my van, and headed out.

We arrived at Fleetwood, unloaded and began setting up. Robert was already there getting his preliminary guitar sounds.

The first, *and hardest* thing to achieve in most recording sessions is getting a good drum sound. It goes beyond setting up the drums and mic'ing them. If you're smart, you spend a few hours before the session — when you're *not* on the clock — getting the drum kit ready for recording.

Ideally, you want new drum heads on all the drums, and you want to break them in for a few hours. Whether you change the drum heads or not, you have to actually *tune* each drum — both the top, and bottom drum heads. That alone is a tedious, time-consuming task, and many drummers don't know how to tune their own kits. After tuning the heads, you then have to kill any unwanted noise the kit's making.

For example, it's quite common for rack toms to vibrate and *ring* out sympathetically when you hit a different drum. It's equally common for a snare drum to make a pinging sound instead of just a *crack* sound. If you record with that pinging sound on every snare hit, it's very hard to fix it later in the mix. It's far better to just address those issues before you record. To do that, you deaden the snare drum head until the pinging goes away. Ringo Starr famously recorded with a tea towel over his snare drum for this reason.

There are many ways and products for deadening drum heads. Drummers never have any of them available when they need them. The down and dirty way is to duck tape bits of folded paper towel to the drum heads.

Once you deaden all the *tuned* drum heads, it's also wise to make sure that the actual snares on the snare drum don't rattle when they're not supposed to. It's also wise to check if the kick drum pedal squeaks. John Bonham's kick drum pedal squeaked on many Zeppelin tracks, but mere mortal drummers won't get away with that.

As you can probably guess, Pete2 had done exactly *none* of this prep work. He set up his kit, and had played for about a minute when Robert realized we needed to tune and deaden his kit. Fortunately, Robert knew how to do all of this.

I learned three more lessons: 1. How to tune and deaden a drum kit. 2. Tune and deaden the kit *before* the recording session. 3. Never trust a drummer to *ever* be prepared, to have what he's supposed to have, or to do what should be obvious. I carried these lessons forward with me on future recording sessions.

Robert and I spent *several, on-the-clock/meter-running hours*, tuning and deadening Pete2's drum kit. While we worked on his kit, Pete2 stayed completely in-character. He stretched out on the studio couch and slept. Drummers.

Once we got the kit sorted and mic'd up, we were ready to record. Since the advent of multi track recording, unless you're recording the whole band *live* — the initial idea is always to just get/record a good, clean drum take with nothing else. You add guitars, bass and vocals later.

It took the whole first day to get the drum sound. To his credit, once awake, Pete2 didn't need many takes to get good drum tracks for both songs. I drove him home that evening and, thankfully, we were done with him.

Me and the boys are playing. And we just can't find the sound.

The most disappointing aspect of the Ninja recording sessions *for me*, was our inability to capture my monstrous, live bass sound. Recording bass guitar can be tricky. Most producers want the bassist to go directly into the mixing board — preferably with a Fender Precision (P-bass) guitar. This produces a very reliable and flexible bass sound. Sometimes bassists do that, *and* record the sound of the amp and speaker, then blend the two sounds together. Guys like John Paul Jones used that technique a lot, and it's great for some kinds of bass sounds.

The issue with that approach comes when the bassist has a more distinctive, *lead* bass tone that's part of the band's sonic signature — beyond just holding down the bottom end. A good example of this is Geddy Lee. His bass lines *and his tone* drove many of Rush's songs. I had modeled my live sound on that approach. I'd created a big, ballsy, twangy bass sound in my live rig that was perfect for our songs. We just couldn't capture it.

We tried mic'ing one of the cab's speakers. When that didn't work we changed the mic. *Tick tock, tick tock — the meter's running.* That didn't work. Try something else. Try . . . *my bass, direct. Tick tock — more money leaving our wallets.* No matter what we tried, it just wasn't translating on tape.

After about an hour, the engineer suggested I use the studio's P-bass and go directly into the board. I resisted. The song, *One Night in the City*, was *driven* by my *lead* bass lines.

Finally, Robert said, "Look, I know you don't want to do this, but we can't keep spending time on this. You should probably just use the P-bass and we'll do our best to make it sound good in the mix." *Tick tock, tick tock.*

Eventually, I had to give in and play my parts on someone else's bass, and with none of my own gear, and thus none of my own sound. That was a bitter pill to swallow — and pay for!

Once we'd recorded drums, guitars, and bass, we brought Robert's friend Hope in to sing. She was as good as advertised. She had that big, churchy, gospel voice that Regina never had.

The rest was down to mixing the two songs. The engineer and Robert led the way on that. It was my first time in a real studio and I was just trying to take it all in. I had some input on my bass sound — but as it wasn't *my* bass sound, I was still disappointed.

At the end of the day, we had our two-song demo. I wasn't that happy with the finished product, but given our budget, it was as good as we could make it at that time under the circumstances.

Performers and Portrayers

Because of all the advance planning, the day of the Ninja photo shoot went off without a hitch. Robert had finagled the use of an Emerson College theater for free, and everyone showed up reasonably on time. Robert had also arranged to have one of his former drummers bring his massive, black drum kit down and pose as our drummer for the photos.

While the drummer set up his kit, Robert and I put the staging together. Everyone got into costume, and we were ready to go. We dimmed the lights, and the photographer began shooting. This was pre-digital, so *real film*.

The pictures came out pretty damn cool. The best ones — the ones we used in the press kit — showed the big, red Torri gate, complete with glowing candles on the sides. Centered under the gate was the drummer at his kit wearing a Ninja mask. To the left and right of the gate were the large screens showing the lion dogs. In front of those were Robert and I decked out in full Ninja suits and masks. Hope was in the center. Not in Ninja wear, but trying to look hot and sexy in an 80s rock n roll way. In some of the photos, one of us was spinning the fighting staff, the other was wielding a Ninja sword.





Dave and Robert as Ninja musos!

If we'd only known we needed to be both Ninjas *and turtles*, we might have been stars.

Press Kits

The next step was to create press kits containing the demo cassette and our photos. Most bands used the black and white 8x10 glossy band photo. Of course, we were doing everything far more grandiose. We attached our best photos to red paper, under which was a fantasy story we'd created for the band.

Instead of sending everything in plain envelopes, we used black, 9x12 envelopes, with slices in them that let the red paper, and part of the photo show through under a clear, protective sheet. The idea was that the package would be *eye-catching* among a slew of other manilla envelope submissions from other bands. Similarly, our cassettes were red plastic for the same reason. To stand out in a sea of black cassettes. I don't recall how much each press kit cost us to make, but it wasn't cheap.

Sadly, in the pre internet era, it was almost impossible to know where to send the press kits. Robert bought a Music Industry book that contained the (supposed) addresses of all of the prominent record labels and music managers in the music business. As it was a printed publication, there was no way to know if the addresses were current. Even if they were, there was no way to know exactly *who* to send the packages to at those addresses. To me, it felt like a shot in the dark, and it was.

No one came for miles around and said Man, your music is really funky

We prepared and sent about 50 press kits out into the abyss. We might as well have flushed them down the toilet. We didn't even receive rejection letters. We got literally *nothing*.

It's hard not to look back and wonder *what might have been* if we'd had the internet, social media, email, and the ability to directly connect with the people and companies we wanted to hear us. Digital photography, phone cameras, and above all, home recording. On the other hand, I've had all those things now for decades now, and it's still quite hard to get your music heard.

As someone who later produced four albums, I listen back to the Ninja demo and cringe. The *songs* were good, but the production sounds stiff and awful. These days we could have gotten so much better results, for way less money, and without the pressure of recording with the meter running. That's the beauty of home recording. I recently asked Robert if he might still have the master tapes. If so, we could have remixed and remastered the tracks. We could have fixed the bass and drum sounds, and made them sound great. Unfortunately, the masters are long gone.

I still have the live recording to remind me of what we *really* sounded like. John Entwistle of The Who once griped, “We never captured the *real* sound of my bass, or The Who *as a band* in the studio.” I guess that puts me in good company. But all these years later, the studio recordings still leave a bad taste in my mouth.

Got to Give it Up

It was time to reassess everything. I’d spent the last six years playing bass in bands. Ninja was the culmination of that effort. I’d had the thrill of working with my musical mentor — a great guitarist and songwriter. We wrote songs I was proud of. We’d given it our all. Ninja was *by far* the best music I’d made since I started. We put everything into a calculated gamble that hadn’t worked.

For the first time since I’d started playing, I didn’t see where to go next musically. Neither Robert nor I had the heart to put Ninja back together just to slog it out in bars. That was an obvious dead end. I was tired of bands. I was tired of idiot musicians.

For every 40 minute set a musician plays on stage, there’s *hundreds of hours* of work behind the scenes. Finding the right players, dealing with their personalities, trying to keep them together. Rehearsing. All that work for a 40 minute payoff on stage. It just didn’t seem worth it anymore.

Further, now that I was back in school on a professional career path, it finally sank in that I *really had* wasted three years. It wasn’t the end of the world, and I wouldn’t have had it any other way, but now I wouldn’t graduate college till I was 26. I suspected that still being in school at that age was going to be tedious. It was.

It was time to stop. *I had taken my best shot, and failed.* I didn’t get the outcome I’d wanted, but I felt OK about stopping because *I had* taken my best shot. I’d always love music, but it was time to stop pursuing it as a career. It was time to grow up and get on with my life.



Ninja live band 8x10. Idiot drummer, Regina, Dave, Robert