

REO Speedwagon

The REO Speedwagon Story (Continued from page 4)

with Leka behind the board. But by their second time in the studio, the band had learned a little about the nature of record production, and slowly began to take control of their musical direction. In other words, "We started sneaking into the control room," says Gratzner. "In short, we ended up mixing that album ourselves. Imagine, ten hands on the board."

"R.E.O./T.W.O." launched the band on their first national tour. By the time the rear wheels on their ancient limousine had spun off at four o'clock one sub-zero morning, leaving REO to contemplate a dark cornfield from the comfort of a ditch, the hard work had paid off. In 1973, in St. Louis, REO sold out its first 12,000-seat date.

Such success necessitated a new form of travel, discovered when the band tried to stuff eight members of their entourage into a chartered six-seat Cessna, while the pilot, "this ultra-straight guy with a skinny tie and suit jacket," according to Richrath, recoiled in horror. "But after a few nights with us, he quit his job, bought his own plane, let his hair grow long and joined up with us." Piloting such REO crafts as "The Flying Turkey" and "The Flying Tuna," the pilot soon developed a propensity for flying with the stick in one hand and a Heineken in the other, as well as executing three-point landings — wheel, nose and wing, onto the grass beside the runway.

But such road adventures did have a serious purpose. As the band's manager, John Baruck, explains, "Fortunately, Epic gave us money to go on the road in the early days so we could keep playing and build our base. It was a strategy of divide and conquer — go into a market and win it over. We've played every nook and cranny and small town in America, playing for the kids who would eventually buy the records." While Azoff moved to Los Angeles and started working with such acts as the Eagles, Baruck remained in Champaign, overseeing REO's career. An original partner in Front Line Management, Baruck later moved to his own company with REO in 1977.

Meanwhile, musical differences had begun to emerge between Cronin and Richrath during the recording of the band's third album in Los

Angeles, and an amicable parting of the ways was worked out so that Cronin could pursue a solo career. "Gary was 20, and I was 19," recalls Cronin, "and we both knew exactly where we wanted to go, and we were immature and wouldn't compromise."

Singer Mike Murphy was recruited from the Champaign bar scene, and his vocals were overdubbed onto 1973's "Ridin' the Storm Out" in place of Cronin, who was also air-brushed off the cover and replaced with Murphy. Nonetheless, tapes of Cronin's performance on the album (which was produced by Bill Halverson) survived, emerging later on "Son of a Poor Man" on the band's "A Decade of Rock and Roll" anthology.

While Cronin honed his songs opening dates for Linda Ronstadt and the Eagles in the midwest as a soloist, REO recorded their fourth album, "Lost in a Dream," again with Bill Halverson. This time, the album became a "stand-off" between Richrath and Murphy. "He did his songs, and I did mine," says Gary.

Meanwhile, the group's many hard-core fans throughout the midwest kept asking: "Where's Kevin?" Says Alan, "Pretty soon we found ourselves asking the same question."

At one stop on their tour, a fan handed Richrath a bulky letter before he hopped on a plane. Murphy, who had more than a passing interest in fan mail, sat next to Richrath so he could see the letter, which was from a small town in Ohio. The message Murphy and Richrath read was brief: "We demand to have Kevin Cronin back!" Attached were 2500 signatures.



The original REO Speedwagon in 1971. From left: Terry Luttrell, Neal Doughty, Gregg Philbin, Alan Gratzner, Gary Richrath.



During the recording of 1975's "This Time We Mean It," Murphy left the band. At the same time, Cronin was wondering what he was doing as a soloist. "I thought rock 'n' roll was a good medium for me, and I thought I should get into a great rock 'n' roll band. So I thought — REO Speedwagon."

Richrath had been thinking the same thing. When the band finally contacted Cronin backstage between sets at a Chicago club where he was performing and asked him to rejoin the band, Kevin hardly paused before replying, "What took you guys so long to ask?"

The day after, Cronin was on a plane to Los Angeles, where the band had relocated. "We had no idea what would happen," says Cronin, "so we had a rehearsal. It was just like when I joined the band the first time. We rehearsed and it sounded great. Within a week and a half, we were on the road again."

In retrospect, Cronin feels that "it took being away from each other for a while to make us see that we needed each other." Richrath,

however, sees it a bit differently.

"Kevin used that break very well," says Gary. "He wrote some killer tunes while I was doing one-nighters."

That material emerged on the band's 1976 "R.E.O." album in signature tunes like "Keep Pushin'," "(I Believe) Our Time Is Gonna Come" and "Breakaway," but during the album's recording the band made another discovery. "We had all this really strong material and were a killer band live, but somehow that never came across on our records," says Cronin. "We would work with these really well-known producers, but the albums never sounded like what REO was really like."

"I kept saying all along that the band didn't need a producer, because we knew what we wanted our records to sound like. Certain producers may be great for other people, but I always thought that the best producer for REO Speedwagon was the band itself."

"You Get What You Play For" was the obvious solution — a double-record live album produced by Richrath and Cronin with John Stronach. The album not only encapsulated the vibrant concert experience that had made REO heroes in America's heartland, but became the band's first gold album after its release in 1977, eventually going platinum.

That year proved to be a watershed one for REO. Bass player Greg Philbin left the group, and was replaced by another veteran of the Champaign bar circuit, Bruce Hall, who had co-written "Lost in a Dream." His reaction when the band called was the same as Cro-

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