

VIBE



Johnny Kelly

PLAYING THROUGH THE PAIN

By Andrew Nusca

Johnny Kelly stepped outside, took a deep breath, and thought about lighting a cigarette. He wouldn't, of course. He couldn't do that to himself. The day after the death of close friend and longtime bandmate Peter Steele, lead singer and larger-than-life frontman of Type O Negative, Kelly promised the doctor he would quit, and he couldn't turn back now. Steele's sudden death at age 48 made Kelly think of his own mortality. And besides, lighting up reminded him of his father's emphysema.

But Kelly still needed a moment to think, and the only way he could do so was to leave the funeral parlor and get some air outside.

In a moment, he would change out of the suit he was wearing, which sagged around the shoulders from overuse. Then he would get in a car, head to the airport,

and board a plane bound for Los Angeles, across the vast country and far away from this place.

Steele's funeral was one of ten Kelly would attend in the span of a year and a half. He never thought he'd lose his father, grandfather, and bandmate in the same short span of time.

But he couldn't think about that now. He had a job to do. He had to be the drummer in a rock band.

The gig: Arizona radio station KUPD 98 FM's annual UFest. The band: heavy metal outfit Danzig, with which Kelly has played since 2002. The occasion: the premiere of Danzig's newest album, *Deth Red Sabaoth*, the first studio material from Danzig in six years.

"It was kind of weird at first, going through the motions," Kelly says. "Do I cancel it? Do I get into it? Take the blow,

and I'll process this thing that happened later on? I really wasn't sure, and I really didn't have much time to think about it. It was really one moment to the next — a rollercoaster."

In two weeks, Kelly was supposed to have joined Steele in the studio to write Type O Negative's follow-up to 2007's *Dead Again*. Now Steele was gone forever.

"Peter was sober, eager, and anxious to get to work," Kelly says. "I was really excited just to see what we could come up with, having him working at 100 percent. It could have been really impressive. We might not have sold a million records, but artistically, it could have been a really good record."

Back at UFest in Phoenix, Paige Hamilton and the rest of Helmet take the stage. The crowd roars.

But Kelly is still thinking about Steele. Type O Negative had signed a new record

Photography By: MAURICE NUNEZ

QUICK LICKS

Transcription by John Natelli

“Deth Red Sabaath”

Kelly’s deep feel on *Deth Red Sabaath* provides the perfect swinging propulsion underneath the sludgy guitars and evil crooning of this raw, time-warping return to form. The album opens with the howling “Hammer Of The Gods” — vintage Danzig, recalling images of sleeveless shirts and abused amps, perhaps the taste of one warm beer too many (whether in a good or bad way depends on your perspective). With Kelly’s right foot relentlessly pounding out his sinister

♩ = ca. 133
@ 0:07

The image shows three staves of musical notation for a drum part. The first staff is in 12/8 time and starts with a double bar line and a half rest. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns with asterisks and flags above notes. The second staff continues the notation with letters 'L R L L R L L R L L R' below it. The third staff continues with letters 'R L R R R L R R R L R' below it.

groove, he literally inserts crash cymbals wherever he randomly

sees fit, creating a fittingly anarchic vibe for the mayhem

being carried out by the rest of the group.

deal just two days before he died.

“Peter was a smart guy, a smart songwriter,” he says. “At times, some of what Peter wrote was just impulsive, on half a bottle of Jägermeister. I was looking forward to having Peter really apply himself.”

Kelly stops. He realizes he’s thinking too much again.

Glenn Danzig had told him not to overthink things. It was a constant reminder when Kelly was in the studio recording *Deth Red Sabaath* earlier in the year.

“Glenn’s still a very punk rock guy,” Kelly says. “His whole approach to things really is punk rock, which I admire in a way.”

At the time, the ex-Misfits frontman’s shoot-from-the-hip approach to recording was slightly jarring to Kelly.

“I was kind of stressed out a little bit, because you have to come up with something right on the spot,” Kelly says. “But that’s the challenge. What can you really do? You’ve got to go with what you feel instinctually, and hope that what you feel works.”

But Kelly liked having that mindset. He liked having the opportunity to prove to himself what he was made of.

“Everything happens so quickly, you don’t get a chance to think about what you just did,” Kelly says. “When I heard some of the tracks back, I’d say, ‘Who’s playing drums on that?’ And Glenn would say, ‘It’s you!’ And I’d say, ‘I don’t even remember playing that.’”

At UxFest, the industrial pop punks in Powerman 5000 have begun tearing through their 1999 single “Supernova Goes Pop.” Frontman Spider One’s platinum spikes of hair gleam in the sun as he

bounds around the stage.

Elsewhere, Kelly thinks about Type O Negative and what could have been. After years of substance abuse, Steele was eight months sober. He had been preparing to move closer to the rest of the band, from Scranton, Pennsylvania to Staten Island, New York. The place he picked was only a 10-minute drive from where Kelly and Type O Negative guitarist Kenny Hickey lived.

The band never got the chance to play Madison Square Garden. Still, it was a good run, Kelly thinks to himself. Not bad for a few guys from Brooklyn. “We took 15 minutes [of fame] and stretched it out to three hours,” he says.

Now, with Steele gone, Kelly can’t imagine playing as Type O Negative ever again. “We’ve been through a lot together, the four of us,” he says. “Now here I am, 17 years later ... not only have you lost one of your friends, but you’ve lost your band. What are you going to do now? You try to take stock. What am I qualified to do? What do I want to do? What do I need to do? There’s the turbulence that comes with that. It was losing family, and also how you earned a living.

“It’s pretty safe to say that Type O is finished.”

It’s getting late, and it’s almost nightfall. The jocks from KUPD’s morning show, “Holmberg’s Morning Sickness,” just finished a brief, bizarre set spoofing Lady Gaga and Rage Against The Machine.

Danzig will go on any minute.

Kelly thinks about the gig he’s about to play, and Danzig’s cross-country *Blackest Of The Black* tour that’s scheduled to

follow. If he can get through this, perhaps he can overcome his existential crisis and find his footing.

“Once I get in my office, everything is cool,” Kelly says. “If I play more, I’ll feel better. I’ll be able to bounce back from it easier, I think. The times when you’re sitting at home, and the TV is on, and you start thinking about it ... those are the dark moments. But you take the blow, shake it off, lick the wounds, and get back to work. For me, getting back to work is playing rock and roll.”

The lights go up.

“And then it was show time,” he says. “I had my usual couple of Coronas, the intro tape went on, and I said, You know what? This is what I’ve wanted to do my whole life. I’m wired for it. Even though I lost something, I really shouldn’t lose everything. It really is what makes me happy.” ■

VITALS

BANDS Type O Negative, Danzig

CURRENT RELEASE *Deth Red Sabaath* (Danzig)

AGE 42

BIRTHPLACE Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York

INFLUENCES John Bonham, Bill Ward, Tommy Lee

WEB SITE danzig-verotik.com

GEAR

DRUMS Pearl

CYMBAL Sabian

STICKS Ahead

HEADS Attack

PEDALS DW

HARDWARE Pearl

ELECTRONICS Ddrum, Roland