



Alice in Chains drummer Sean Kinney, left, and lead singer Layne Staley take a break backstage earlier this year at a UC Irvine concert. KAREN TAPIA / Los Angeles Times

Digging Out of the Dirt

Tales of drugs and personal torment shadowed Alice in Chains, but the Seattle band has emerged from the 'Lollapalooza' tour with renewed energy and a vow that it *isn't* splitting up

By KATHERINE TURMAN

Even before the final verdict comes in on which band made the strongest showing on the "Lollapalooza" tour, Alice in Chains has won a personal victory of sorts.

In the weeks before the summer's most celebrated tour was launched on June 18, there was widespread speculation that its star attraction—the latest of the visceral, riff-heavy bands from Seattle to hit rock 'n' roll pay dirt—was a shambles.

The speculation about the band's self-destructiveness began even before the group canceled several concerts on its spring U.S. tour and its later European dates with Metallica.

The official reason: the "exhaustion" of lead singer and chief gloomist Layne Staley.

But the cancellations really ignited the rumor mill as fans and industry observers wondered whether Staley hadn't become a living illustration of the band's dark, troubling tales about drugs and personal torment.

Why the cancellations?

"We were pretty much exhausted and Layne bottomed out," said bassist Mike Inez, the most talkative member of the sometimes tight-lipped band.

"We'd been through Europe nonstop, had done work on the ["Last Action Hero"] soundtrack, the U.S. tour . . . and we would have only had one day off to fly from London to Vancouver to

start 'Lollapalooza' if we'd done the Metallica shows. Something had to give."

Still, it's easy to see how those rumors could start. Rolling Stone magazine described the group's current "Dirt" album as "a sustained, unflinching meditation on heroin addiction."

Indeed, lyrics to such songs as "Junkhead" refer to drugs in no uncertain terms.

A new friend turned me on to an old favorite

Nothing better than a dealer who's high

Be high, convince them to buy.

Other songs, though not drug-themed, are no less potent or pointed. In "Angry Chair," singer Staley moans:

*Loneliness is not a phase
Field of pain is where I graze
Serenity is far away.*

Even "Lollapalooza" executive producer Ted Gardner acknowledges that he had some trepidation regarding the band's reliability, but it was quickly put to rest.

"There are those wonderful people in this business called industry insiders who were predicting the demise of the band during the tour, but that obviously has not been the case," he said.

"Due to their manager, Susan Silver, and especially to Layne, who has seen the responsibility on his shoulders and tackled the task admirably, there haven't been any problems with the band. Their performances are beyond people's expectations."

We're not advocating [drug use]. And actually, more than one person came up to me and said they'd quit doing this or that after the release of our album. They said it gave them the strength to quit.'

Sean Kinney, drummer

Whatever the old problems, Alice in Chains has clearly emerged from the "Lollapalooza" tour—which ends with dates Friday and Saturday at the Santa Fe Dam Recreation Area in Irwindale—with mostly positive marks.

"I'm having a great time," said Staley, reporting from the road. "I didn't want another boring old tour. We've made a lot of good friends and we're playing in the sun."

And what about all those people betting that the band's end is just around the corner?

Said Staley: "We're recording another EP, for release around mid-October, and then around Christmas we'll start recording our third album. . . . The band's not breaking up, so that rumor is stumped into the ground."

When bassist Inez joined Alice in Chains in January, replacing tour-weary founding member Mike Starr, it was as if he'd jumped onto a runaway train. But Inez, who met the band while he was in Ozzy Osbourne's band, writes it off as part of the rock 'n' roll circus.

"We're four young guys on the road with the whole world by the balls," he observed. "We're like a pack. Whatever we want, we get. We wake up and we're like, 'What do we want today?' Whether it's food or girls or drugs or whatever, everything is there for you."

For Inez, it's been a whirlwind ride. For the rest of the band, it has sometimes been a tense grind, punctuated by a 1991 Grammy nomination for best heavy-metal performance, movie cameos (in 1992's "Singles") and other perks that come with success.

When the band began in Seattle in 1987, its goal was more modest, according to guitarist Jerry Cantrell: "Let's get a band, let's write some songs, let's play some clubs so we can get beer and women."

When the Seattle music scene began to explode in popularity in the late '80s, Alice in Chains was considered strictly a metal band and wasn't embraced by such alternative hotshots as Nirvana.

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Alice in Chains

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 underground and Mother Love Bone or their fans.

"Though the band will argue this isn't, they were a full-on glam band, Poison Jr.," noted Jeff Gilbert, who booked some of the group's shows in its early days and now a senior editor at Seattle magazine the Rocket.

The band's sound eventually evolved in a heavier direction, Gilbert said, and it was that sound that got Alice signed to Columbia records in April, 1989. The band released an EP, "We Die Young," in June, 1990, followed by a full-length album, "Facelift," that August.

Gilbert believes that Alice earned the respect of its Seattle peers with the February, 1992, justice EP "Sap," and that respect is cemented by "Dirt" the following September. Tours with everyone from Megadeth to Van Halen and hit singles such as "Man in a Box" quickly established the

band as a front-runner in the new breed of introspective, dirge-making hard-rock groups.

But with the success came the darker aspects that are chronicled on "Dirt." Though the band is far from the level of a Guns N' Roses, the hoopla surrounding Alice in Chains is nonetheless unceasing, and the band members find it both amusing and unnerving.

"It's a weird feeling to go from nobody to everybody," mused guitarist Cantrell. "You're known on a two-dimensional level. People yank on your hair, not realizing you're a real person."

As for the band's focal point, well, it's hard getting to know the real Staley. Unlike most singers, he often leaves the talking to others, contingent upon his ever-changing moods.

Earlier this year, Staley sat backstage with drummer Sean Kinney in a UC Irvine locker room in the midst of a headlining tour that would be aborted several shows later. He simply nodded during an interview in which the

duo were by turns evasive, humorous and forthright.

Staley, with his close-cropped, dirty-blond hair hidden by a baseball cap, adopted a mysterious, mischievous grin in lieu of speaking. He did chime in regarding a negative review of "Dirt."

"They said I was whiny," the skinny singer moaned, adopting an irritating, nasal whine. "Say it isn't so."

Though Staley is the co-author (with Cantrell) of many of the band's more drug-referenced lyrics—"God Smack" and "Sickman," to name two—he merely nodded in agreement as Kinney elucidated the band's state of mind.

"We're not advocating [drug use]," Kinney said wearily. "And actually, more than one person came up to me and said they'd quit doing this or that after the release of our album. They said it gave them the strength to quit."

In a more recent phone interview, however, Staley proved more forthcoming, saying he isn't at all surprised at the speculation inspired by the lyrics.

"I figured as much. People decipher our lyrics and take things too literally," he said. "It won't change the way I write, though."

And is Staley's temperament as dark as his lyrics would suggest?

"Most definitely, at least from noon to 11 p.m. It's a product of our generation. People are angry," he said. "But I seem to do OK between 11 and midnight."

Although some critics may complain about a lack of range and



TAMMY LECHNER / Los Angeles Times

Layne Staley: "People decipher our lyrics and take things too literally."

depth in the band's music, reports from "Lollapalooza" suggest that Alice has performed with a crowd-pleasing intensity and power. It draws some of the best applause of the entire show with its slow, contemplative hit "Rooster."

Ironically, given all the attention on drugs in the group's lyrics, "Rooster," a song about combat and survival, has become Alice's best-known work. It was written by guitarist Cantrell for and about his Vietnam-veteran father, whose nickname is Rooster.

"Vietnam is something he never talks about," Cantrell said. "I asked him about it once and he said, 'That's dead, son, let it lie.' When I wrote it, I was getting this vibe,

thinking about him and what he's lived through—two tours of duty in Vietnam, he's been a prison guard. I was thinking about the things he might have thought and felt there. It was pretty close. It hit home to him."

But Cantrell is quick to point out that it's wrong to think of all the songs on the album as "personal diaries, or tales about our personal horrors."

"It's a dark album, but it's not meant to be a bummer," Cantrell continued. "Those five songs on the second side, from 'Junkhead' to 'Angry Chair,' are in sequence because it tells a story. It starts out with a really young, naive attitude in 'Junkhead,' like drugs are great, sex is great, rock 'n' roll, yeah! Then as it progresses, there's a little bit of realization of what it's about . . . and that ain't what it's about."

Inez, still flush with the excitement of being the new kid, is anticipating studio work with his new bandmates.

"The thing I respect about Alice in Chains is their honesty," said the upbeat bassist, who tends to vacillate between being an observer and a band member in his references to the group.

"It's like, 'Yeah, we're not perfect, take it or leave it. Here's some cool music, listen to it. If you like it, you like it.' We're the wrong guys to be role models." □

Katherine Turman writes about pop music for Calendar.

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