

Nielsen latest eccentric on rock scene

By Doug Weil

Although there appears to be no logical explanation for it, the music business attracts and cuddles more than its share of freak personalities. Alice Cooper comes quickly to mind as do many others—Keith Moon, David Bowie, Bette Midler, Dr. John, Johnny Rotten and yes, even Elvis Presley was "weird" when he started out.

Take away the musical abilities of these persons, drop them back into the mainstream of the everyday world and surely

recent Omaha show. Like birds perched on a power line the picks are tucked into the wires running up and across the stand before him. He snatches a pick, runs off a lick or two and then effortlessly flicks it 30 rows back into the crowd, like a Yankee Stadium souvenir. Another time he gave a worthy halftime twirling exhibition spitting the plastic piece high into the air, deflecting it upward again with the face of his guitar before finally swinging away. 35 rows back.

But none of his childish antics take away from his musicianship. He never

As he settled down at one side of a folding Samsonite cafeteria-style table he remarks that he and the band are ready for some time off from the road.

On the road

"We've been on the road ever since our first album came out in 1976. We played until Oct. 1 and we'll have about four days off before starting our next album."

Nielsen and the band have been together nearly four years. This follows a long history of bands he and bassist Petersson played in during their high school days.

"We were a carport band," Nielsen said. "Our parents couldn't afford garages. As a matter of fact, my parents were very old. I was the first test tube baby but I never had any publicity. My parents couldn't afford that either." He laughed and joked that he was going to exploit it now that "the English kid is in all the newspapers."

Nielsen glared when asked about the influences that inspire the band's music.

"I like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, except they don't have any guitars." He seems willing to leave his answer at that. It is a question he has grown tired of answering. Then suddenly, he continues, "I listen to the radio a lot. Obviously I can't say I never heard of the Beatles. At the time I liked the Rolling Stones better because they were rougher and tougher. People were able to understand their anger and their fascination with drugs, sex and rock 'n' roll."

Nielsen chose to ignore Cheap Trick's own emphasis on sex and other adolescent games as he discussed the band's music.

Trite, but it sells

"You can write about just anything," he said. "There are all kinds of things to write about without getting into the typical crap that most bands do—'Rock 'n' roll, we're gonna get high, get some girls, come on backstage, I'll give you my key... C'mon to me that's real trite but God it sells. Like crazy."

As Nielsen talked it seemed impossible he was the same maniac who nearly ravaged the Music Hall stage only 30 minutes before. He is relaxed, clear-eyed and very curious.

Asked about that stage personality—the clothes, the hair, the gestures—Nielsen said he was only being himself.

"I'm comfortable. I mean, I've got good-fitting clothes. Really, I don't like to think about my clothes so I can think about music which is more important to me. I get up in the morning—sweater shirt, pants and hat. Next morning—hat, pants, shirt and sweater. Yeah I like variety."

Cheap Trick's latest album, *Heaven Tonight*, is their third release and is doing moderately well on the national charts. Critics have been unanimous in their praise of *Heaven Tonight* and their second album, *In Color*. Still, the band lacks a reputation and the accompanying mass following. Nielsen acknowledges the problem.

Don't make it sound like we haven't sold any records because we are doing all right. Yeah, the critics have been great, but we haven't had the luxury of a hit single. That really makes a lot of difference."

Hit material?

It is not a situation where Cheap Trick lacks hit material. Their two last albums together had at least a half dozen songs suitable for single release. So, what is the problem?

"The problem is our record company doesn't give payola." Epic Records, he explains refuses to dole out money, or as is the case sometimes, drugs to radio station program directors and disc jockeys in exchange for playing a certain record. Nielsen said that is not the only problem.

"We're also on the same label with Boston. Right now they have an album out and that is where all the publicity dollars are going."

And as Cheap Trick plods along, taking their show to yet another city they each know they are a band just waiting to happen.

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Photo by Mark Billingsley

Lead guitarist Rick Nielsen is the band's focal point as the hard touring Cheap Trick gains a loyal cult following.

six of seven would quickly be escorted to the loonybin of their choosing. Not quite all there.

Now, another name can be added to the list—Cheap Trick, lead guitarist and stage performer extraordinaire Rick Nielsen.

Nielsen and his Cheap Trick sidekicks—bassist Tom Petersson, vocalist Robin Zander, and drummer Bun E. Carlos—deliver a slick brand of stylized power pop music thought to be extinct since the decline of the Who and the disbanding of the Beatles. And while the music hints of other days, it is truly Cheap Trick's own inspired creation. Most of all, their music is simple. Nothing more complicated than titles like "Come On, Come On", "Hello There", "Southern Girls", "Big Eyes", "You're On Top of the World", and "Stiff Competition". There is, of course, a healthy preoccupation with sex.

One of a kind

But back to Nielsen. As a freak personality, he may have no active rival. To be sure, his appearance is one of a kind. Nielsen's crewcut head, bent-brim skull-fitting baseball cap and pop-eyed peepers conjures up images of a shorn Marty Feldman ready for a sandlot encounter.

His clothes are even stranger. Dressed in a lived-in, white short-sleeved shirt and dark olive green workpants, Nielsen appears nondescript enough. Topping off his casual look is a red, button-down, rib-knit sweater emblazoned with Cheap Trick buttons and stickers. A Cheap Trick bow tie (patent pending) is the finishing touch.

Onstage, Nielsen transcends his simple facade. Thanks to extra-long cable, Nielsen and one of his array of 15 guitars covers the full breadth of the stage.

Action. Among his stage antics are up-raised thumbs and menacing "get ready to rock" sneers aimed at spectators closest to the stage. Nielsen also leaps atop a glass-floored platform; he is shadowed by the flashing lights from below and paled by the spotlight from the balcony. He writhes and twists around finally raising the guitar above his head in mock musical victory.

But the real showstopper is the guitar pick sideshow. Nielsen went through ten to fifteen dozen picks during the band's

misses a note and regularly discovers notes other guitarists have never even thought about. At one point in the concert Nielsen returned from a backstage visit with three guitars slung over his small frame. After some nifty soloing on each guitar he raised it high above his head and flung it stage right (hopefully) into the hands of one of the band's roadies.

Members enthused

The members of the band seem just as enthused with Nielsen's antics as so the 2,500 spectators crammed under the Music Hall's roof. Petersson, who looks like a cross-cloning of Mick Jagger and Joe Namath peers toward Nielsen and beams a cover boy smile. Zander, who is obviously in love with his tailored Brooks Bros. white suit, dances and dips to avoid Nielsen's cable as the guitarist darts across the stage perimeter. And all the while, Bun E. Carlos chainsmokes his way through the theatrics with the expressionless scowl of a businessman campaigning for election to the Board of Regents in 1969.

Petersson knows it, Zander and Carlos know it. All of them are talented musicians but Rick Nielsen is the main attraction—this year's model. A Cheap Trick cult following is developing around Nielsen. Many have taken to dressing like him, minus the tailfin-era hairstyle.

Backstage, Nielsen is decidedly less manic than onstage. An ivory-complected girl pushes her way toward Nielsen who is silently sipping a Fresca. Her prominent cleavage, neatly displayed in a skin-tight, black silk pullover, makes first contact with the guitarist. With an out-of-breath starlet moan, she asks, "Could I have your autograph?"

Nielsen smiles easily and suddenly his eyes appear normal while everyone else gawks bug-eyed. "Sure, what's your name?"

She purrs. "Make it to a devoted fan." Nielsen catches her drift and questions the sexual innuendo. "And what is the difference between a devoted fan and any other fan?"

She smiles the smile that tells it all but Nielsen declines saying he has an "important" backstage appointment.