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Classic Tracks: Blue Oyster Cult's "(Don't Fear) The Reaper"

Jun 1, 2009 12:00 PM, By Jeff Forlenza

It still ripples through our culture. Released more than 30 years ago, Blue Oyster Cult's "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" has become a touchstone. It is still heard on classic-rock stations, in movies (*Halloween* and others) and even in videogames (*Rock Band*).



Blue Oyster Cult, circa 1976, from left: Allen Lanier, Eric Bloom, Albert Bouchard, Joe Bouchard and Donald "Buck Dharma" Roeser
Photo: Sandy Speiser

And who can forget *Saturday Night Live*'s "more cowbell" skit, which parodied a behind-the-scenes look at the track's production.

Appearing on BOC's *Agents of Fortune* album, "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" peaked at Number 12 on the *Billboard* Pop Singles chart in October 1976 — surprising for a hard-rock band known for its literate lyrics. But like a velvet hammer, "Reaper" is paradoxically soft and powerful. It's built around an immediately compelling guitar riff. The vocals speak of bravely facing one's mortality.

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Blue Oyster Cult got their start in 1967 in upstate N.Y. when guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Donald "Buck Dharma" Roeser and drummer/vocalist/songwriter Albert Bouchard started a band. They met up with Sandy Pearlman, who was a contributor to the rock magazine *Crawdaddy*, and he became the band's manager, producer, lyricist and mentor. Pearlman created the band's name and signature icon (a cross merged with an upside-down question mark). He also came up with stage names for the bandmembers; only Buck Dharma kept his nickname.

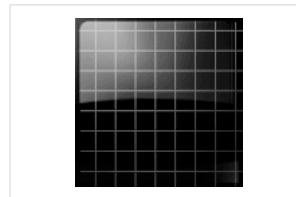
The band recorded their first demos in a New York City 8-track jingle studio owned by David Lucas. Pearlman brought those demos to his friend Murray Krugman, who was a product manager at Columbia Records. Krugman arranged an audition with Clive Davis, who signed them to a record deal in 1971. BOC's Columbia debut was based on the demos recorded at Lucas' studio. The next two albums, which achieved Gold Record status, were recorded in Columbia/CBS Studios. During this time, the band became famous for their live shows — even sharing the stage with Black Sabbath on the notorious "Black and Blue" tour — but they had yet to score a hit single.

The band wanted more autonomy on the choice of recording studio for their fourth studio record, *Agents of Fortune*, and chose to work at Record Plant New York City. "Cheap Trick had been there, Aerosmith had been there, Blondie was there," recalls Roeser, who

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still tours with BOC. "We felt that we needed to access this pool of success and talent so that we could sell some records."

Before heading into the Record Plant, each member of the band acquired newly affordable "pro-sumer" TEAC 4-track recorders to aid in their songwriting. Using his TEAC 3340S reel-to-reel and a couple of mics, Roeser recorded a demo of "(Don't Fear) The Reaper" in his spare room.

Roeser was thinking of his own mortality when he wrote the song. "It's a song about fate," he explains. "The idea of the song came from a worry that I wasn't going to live long. The riff came out of the ether; it just came to my fingers. Then the first two lines of the lyrics came the same way. I recorded some of the vocals, and then the idea of the song came to me. That was my first experience with multitrack recording. It definitely changed the way Blue Oyster Cult wrote and arranged songs. Once we started writing songs using the multitrack recorders, our demos got more fleshed-out and thought-through."

Pearlman, who currently teaches at McGill University in Montreal, noticed the change in the band's songwriting and arranging. "In 1976, a whole bunch of cheap, but fairly decent, multitrack recorders were available," he says. "The members of the band began making more elaborate home demos. One of these demos was Buck Dharma's 'Reaper.' I heard that demo, and I thought, 'This is one of the greatest songs I've ever heard!' I immediately recognized the guitar riff was not just box office but something extremely deep."

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brianmoore 08/31/2009 03:03 PM

This particular song is, without a doubt, the iconic wonder-hit that to me defines BOC. It contains the essence of all of their potential as a band and as what some of us dream of being part of one day. History!

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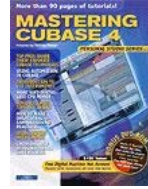
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