



Stephen Davis, at home in Milton, Massachusetts, has chronicled one of hard rock's last great bands, Guns N' Roses.

## From Axl to Zep ///

Rock biographer Stephen Davis has seen — and told — it all BY CALEB DANILOFF

TO WRITE ABOUT rock bands, says Stephen Davis, who knows a lot about the subject, is to engage in a continual retelling of the quest saga, one of the oldest forms of literature. “It’s Jason and the Argonauts setting out after the Golden Fleece, or Achilles and Agamemnon going up to Troy for booty and to kick some ass,” Davis says. “The stories haven’t changed, just the names. It’s five guys from nowhere named Axl, Izzy, Slash, Duff, and Stephen finding the pot of gold at end of the rainbow.”

Those five guys he’s referring to are the stars of Davis’s latest book, *Watch You Bleed: The Saga of Guns N’ Roses* (Gotham), which narrates the

rise and fall of one of hard rock’s last great bands and effectively documents the end of an era in rock music. Davis (CAS’70) has been chronicling rock and roll for more than forty years, first as an editor at the *Boston Phoenix*, then at *Rolling Stone*, and now as one of the genre’s best-known biographers.

His writing career exploded with *Hammer of the Gods: The Led Zeppelin Saga* (William Morrow & Co., 1985), which is required reading for any hard rock and metal fan. The bio offered readers one of the first behind-the-scenes accounts of a rock band, from debauchery at 30,000 feet to hotel-room boredom. Davis has since written biographies, authorized

and unauthorized, of the Rolling Stones, Fleetwood Mac, Aerosmith, Bob Marley, Levon Helm, and Jim Morrison.

“In 1968, I was a junior at BU, and the Doors came to town and played at a now-demolished theater on Mass. Ave., called the Back Bay Theater,” he says. “Changed my life. The Lizard King came stumbling out on stage, put on the best show I’d seen anywhere, just a killer rock show. I said, ‘This is the energy I want to be around every day for the rest of my life.’”

Davis’s writing career started at the *BU News*, a predecessor of the *Daily Free Press*, where he became managing editor. He recalls the excitement

and turbulence of life on campus in the late sixties. In 1968, he remembers, he got a call that an Army deserter was hiding in the basement of Marsh Chapel.

“Within twenty-four hours, they had 10,000 students surrounding Marsh Chapel to prevent the FBI from snatching him,” Davis says. “They put up a sign that said *Sanctuary*. Howard Zinn was up there haranguing people. Murray Levin, all these famous professors. It was so exciting. We ran nothing else for two weeks. It was the epicenter for two weeks of the anti-Vietnam War movement.”

The Boston music scene was bubbling just as hard and hot, he recalls, and one of its most famous by-products had strong BU connections. “Aerosmith started playing out in front of the George Sherman Union at lunchtime for free,” Davis says. “They were living on Comm. Ave. but had a friend who was an RA on West Campus and gave them meal tickets. Over the course of two years, one or two members of Aerosmith could be seen at any given time in the West Campus cafeteria.”

In 1975, a publicist friend invited Davis, by that time an editor at *Rolling Stone*, to join Led Zeppelin for two weeks on the road aboard the *Starship*, the band’s private tour plane. The idea was to introduce the British metal group, which had developed a bad reputation at home, to American audiences. With *Rolling Stone* having already assigned a writer to cover the band, Davis secured an assignment from *The Atlantic Monthly*, and he and good pal and photographer Peter Simon (COM’70) set off.

What they came back with became the stuff of legend. “This was a book that outed members of Led Zeppelin as heroin addicts and as people that brutalized other people,” Davis says.

The story was killed by wary senior editors at the *Atlantic*, and it wasn’t

until ten years later — five years after Led Zeppelin disbanded following the death of drummer John Bonham — that Davis decided to turn his notes into a book. “For a while after *Hammer of the Gods* came out, the band said, ‘Who is this Stephen Davis? We never knew him.’ But fortunately, I’ve got these pictures,” he says, as he scrolls through a series of Simon’s unpublished photographs on his laptop, showing the young reporter chatting up lead singer Robert Plant in his L.A. hotel room, in the elevator, on the balcony, with the dusty city spread out below.

When GN’R was burning up the metal scene in the mid-to-late eighties, Davis says, he was more focused on reggae. But when he started looking closely at the band a few years ago, he thought their story had all the classic ingredients: ambition, excess, addiction, discord, and implosion. Big implosion.

“They went from a five-piece classic American guitar band,” he says, “to this bloated show band with twelve to fourteen people on stage, keyboards, horn sections, three girl singers, dancers in bustiers and Madonna clothes. It was like a Las Vegas act.”

Despite all that, he says, their impact on music was undeniable. He decided to tell the GN’R tale unauthorized and flew out to L.A., tracking down former bodyguards, limo drivers, ex-girlfriends. “The best way to write an unauthorized biography is to go to the little people who remember what happened, as opposed to the bombed-out rock stars,” he says. “In fact, it’s better that way. For these people, it’s usually the high point of their lives, so they remember every detail.”

Technically, Guns N’ Roses still exists, although famously reclusive and volatile frontman Axl Rose is the sole remaining

member. The long-awaited GN’R album *Chinese Democracy* — after fourteen years of missed release dates, at a cost of \$13 million — was finally released in November.

Much has changed in the twenty years since Guns N’ Roses’ classic *Appetite for Destruction* was released, Davis says. The five-piece hard rock band, with dual attacking guitars and a rebel frontman, is over. Grunge saw to that. Then came the Internet and the breaking up of albums into downloadable computer files. Even concerts have become passive — and expensive — forms of entertainment, with popcorn and concessions rather than a communion, rooted in rebellion, between artist and audience.

Surprisingly, Davis doesn’t mourn hard rock’s passing. “I think of rock as an ‘ism,’ like modernism or romanticism,” he says. “These artistic movements shouldn’t go on forever. There should be term limits. Modernism lasted about forty years. And hard rock lasted from 1965, with the Stones and the Yardbirds, and pretty much ended with Guns N’ Roses in 1990.”

But if rock is fading as an art form, does that mean rock biography will soon follow?

“No, I’m planning a project on the Jonas Brothers,” Davis says with a wry smile. “I’m kidding. I’m very interested in writing about women now. There’s Carly Simon. There’s Stevie Nicks. I hear Debbie Harry wants to do a book and that they’re looking for a writer. The Blondie story would be a good one. We’ll see.”

**WEB EXTRA**  
See a playlist of Stephen Davis’s all-time favorite songs at [www.bu.edu/bostonia](http://www.bu.edu/bostonia).



Davis (left) with Robert Plant