

# Black Sabbath is back

British quartet can't believe new-found adulation

THOR CHRISTENSEN  
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In its early-'70s heyday, Black Sabbath was the ultimate black sheep of rock.

Critics slammed the British quartet or ignored it altogether. Serious rockers scoffed at its occult-ish lyrics and quasi-satanic imagery. And plenty of heavy metal fans dismissed it as a cartoonish Led Zeppelin imitator.

But a funny thing happened over the last 25 years: Slowly but surely, these demonic outcasts became chic.

Grunge groups such as Nirvana, Soundgarden and Alice in Chains praised Sabbath and adopted Tony Iommi's ominous fuzzed-out guitar style as their signature sound. Thrash bands such as Metallica and scores of death-metal groups borrowed liberally from Black Sabbath classics such as Paranoid, Children of the Grave, War Pigs and Iron Man. Swedish pop band the Cardigans drew attention with its lounge-like covers of several Sabbath hits.

Even the critics started coming around. Rolling Stone — which dismissed every Sabbath album with one star in its 1983 Record Guide — declared its 1971 album, Paranoid, part of The Rolling Stone 200: The Essential Rock Collection in its May 15 issue.

Singer Ozzy Osbourne admits he's confused by all this new-found adulation.

"When Black Sabbath was together, not one (expletive) magazine ever said one nice thing about us — which was fine, because we didn't want to be liked by them," he says, speaking by phone from his home in L.A. "The question I've asked myself a thousand times is 'Why now?'"

Whatever the reason, the adulation couldn't have come at a better time: Black Sabbath is reuniting to headline the Ozzfest '97 tour.

Although Sabbath never officially broke up, Osbourne quit in 1978, followed by bassist Geezer Butler and drummer Bill Ward. The band soldiered on, and made two decent albums in the early '80s with Ronnie James Dio on vocals. But Sabbath lost its bite in recent years as Iommi hired and fired band members as often as he changed guitar strings.

"It was kind of sad for me to see, because in our day,

Tony, Bill, Geezer and myself were the nucleus of something very powerful," the 48-year-old singer says. "... Nobody could touch us. But then Black Sabbath became bastardized so much to the point that it was unreconcilable."

The original lineup did try to reconcile in 1992. But a planned reunion tour collapsed when members fell into their old bickering ways, Osbourne says.

"It's just like any other relationship where you get divorced and then you get really (ticked) off and you unconsciously develop this snide, spiteful manner because you want to hurt each other," he says. "But now, all the (expletive) has settled, and we're wondering why we acted so stupid all those years... We all seem to have mellowed out so much."

But apparently not everything is mellow in the Sabbath camp, since the reunion won't include Ward.

"He just didn't work out. I still have a lot of love for Bill, but I've got no time for people's personal gripes," Osbourne says cryptically when asked why Ward isn't taking part (Faith No More drummer Mike Bordin will take his place).

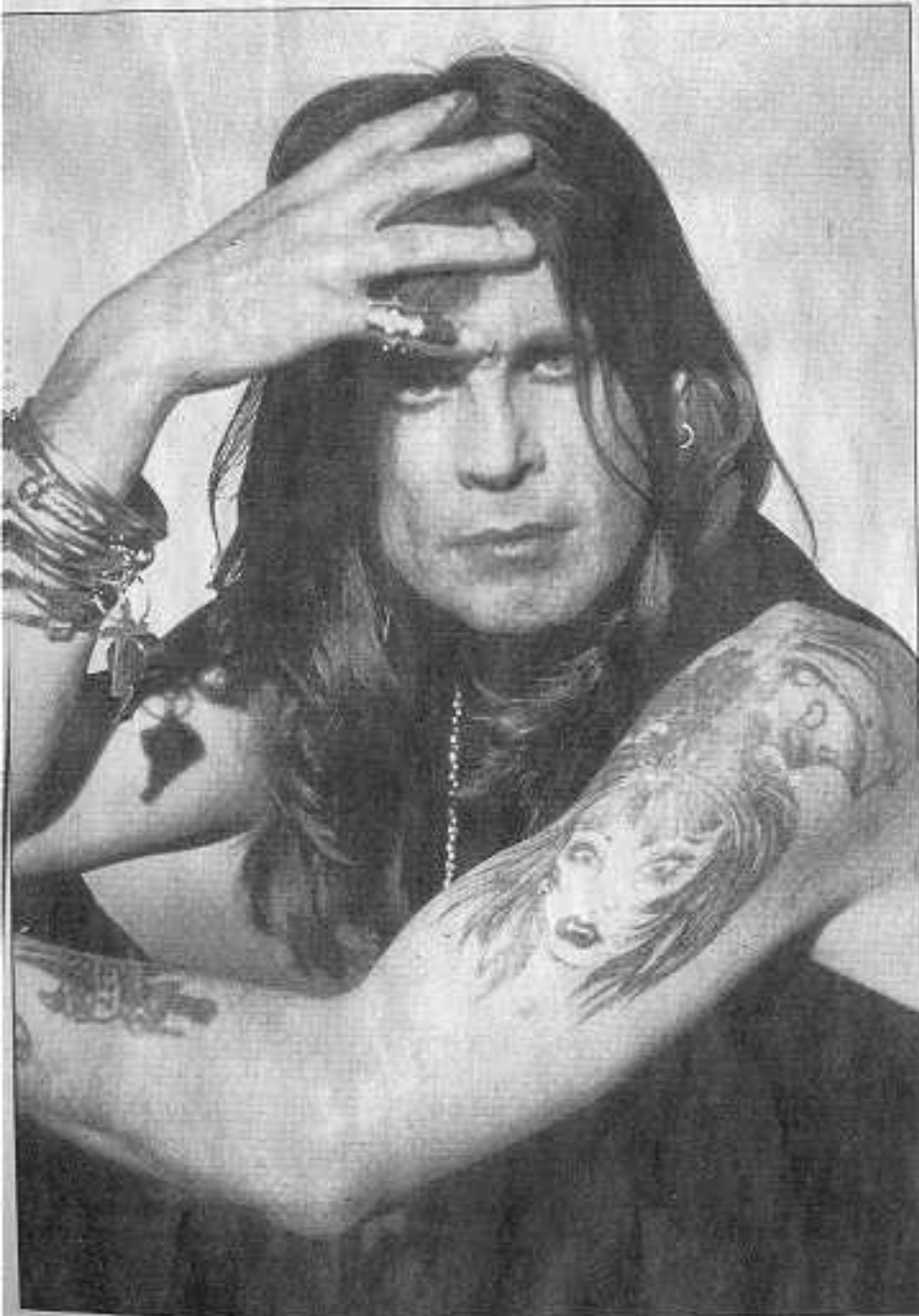
Although Black Sabbath will close the daylong Ozzfest '97, Osbourne will also perform a solo set, including songs from his post-"retirement" album, Ozzmosis.

Four years after claiming he was quitting rock 'n' roll — only to return with his Retirement Sucks tour — the singer blames the incident on bad communication between him and his wife-manager, Sharon Osbourne.

"I was on this long tour and I told my wife, 'I feel like a mouse on a wheel going round and round chasing my own butt,' and she said, 'Do you want to retire?' And in the heat of the moment, I said 'Yeah!'... But I didn't really want to retire. I realized it a day later, but it was too late. She'd already announced it to the press," he says.

"It's fine and dandy to be making enough dough to retire in your 40s. But I just sat at home and watched a few television shows that I'd missed, and thought 'Is this it?' It felt like an empty climax.

"Retirement taught me I had nothing to retire to. I learned that the only time I'll really retire is when they close the lid on my pine box, you know?"



OZZY OSBOURNE: Black Sabbath is reuniting for the Ozzfest '97 tour