

Black Sabbath

Iron Man

With its complex, sci-fi storyline and equally weighty sonics, *Iron Man* went on to become so much more than just another Sabbath track – but don't go thinking it's about the superhero...

Words:
Malcolm Dome
Photo:
London Features
International

There's a well-thumbed story that the Black Sabbath song *Iron Man* was inspired by the Marvel Comics character of the same name. But it's not true. Although Marvel had established that superhero in 1963, Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler, who wrote the lyrics for the iconic song, had never even heard of him in 1970.

"My parents never let me read American comics when I was growing up," he says. "I knew about Batman and Superman, but that's about it. For me it was all about the *Beano* and the *Dandy*. So whenever someone's said to me over the years: 'Oh, didn't you write this about the superhero?', I'd just say: 'Sorry, never heard of him.'"

The idea for the song (which first appeared on the second Sabbath album, *Paranoid*, released in 1970), actually started with Ozzy Osbourne.

"I can't exactly recall what Ozzy said, but it was something like: 'Why don't we do a song called *Iron Man*, or maybe *Iron Bloke*'. That got me thinking about a lump of metal, and then putting it all into a science-fiction context. It all flowed from there."

The storyline – a self-fulfilment prophecy, mixed up with time travel – is actually quite complex. It's about a man who goes into the future and witnesses the apocalypse. Going back to his own time, he encounters a rogue magnetic field, which turns him into a mute, steel creature. Unable to talk, he still tries to warn people about the impending end of the world, but is only mocked for his troubles. Angry and bitter, he eventually causes the devastation he'd warned everyone about. Ultimately the would-be hero becomes the villain.

"I was heavily into science fiction at the time," he recalls of more than 40 years ago. "Remember, this was the era of the space race," says Butler. "A lot of the stuff I was writing about was inspired by those sorts of stories. I was fascinated by what might happen to a man who's suddenly transformed into a metal being. He still has a human brain, and wants to do the right thing, but eventually his own frustrations at the way humanity treats him drives this creature to taking extreme action. It's almost a cry for help.

"What I always attempted to do with my science-fiction plots was to make these relevant to the modern world at the time," Butler continues. "So I brought war and politics in. It was also an era when the whole issue of pollution was starting to get attention, and this affected my thinking quite a bit."

Sabbath drummer Bill Ward reckons that, musically, the song was nothing like anything else the band had done up to that point: "For me, this is a special song for the band. It was just so different. As soon as you hear that ominous start, you know something's building. For me, the drumming was a real challenge to get right in the studio. But it's also a drummer's dream to play.

"Technically, we had real problems getting it right in the studio," Ward recalls. "The trouble was that the microphones available to us in 1970

just weren't up to the task of capturing the power and depth of the sound. I played very loud back then, and wanted a powerful bass drum sound; that's what the song needed. Yet all I could get was a dull thud.

For Rodger [Bain, producer] and Tom [Allom, engineer], trying to make *Iron Man* work was so tough. In the end they did an excellent job under the circumstances. Today it would be so easy for a band to get the proper sound on a song like this, because the technology exists."

Over the years, *Iron Man* has become not only one of the cornerstones of the Sabbath catalogue, but also credited as one of the most important songs in the history of metal. For Geezer Butler, it is perhaps the track that best sums up the band.

"I really do feel that when you listen to *Iron Man*, what you're getting is the essence of what made Black Sabbath such a special band," he offers. "It's fairly simple, yet also has a lot of depth. I'm very proud of what we achieved here."

Bill Ward believes that the song's stature has grown over the years, to the point

where it has now gone beyond being just a great Sabbath song.

"In America, if you go to most sports events you'll hear it at some point. It's now a part of the culture of the country. People recognise it as soon as it starts up. It's very musical, but also so theatrical. I think its popularity now is such that, in a way, it no longer belongs to Ozzy, Geezer, Tony [Iommi] and me, it's now everyone's song."

In 2008, *Iron Man* received another boost when it was included in the movie of the same name, based on the Marvel Comics creation. That delighted Butler.

"It was a recognition of just how much the song means," he says with pride. "When you have such a major film using it, then it does introduce it to a new generation, kids who perhaps aren't aware of who Black Sabbath are but who might be tempted to go and check us out.

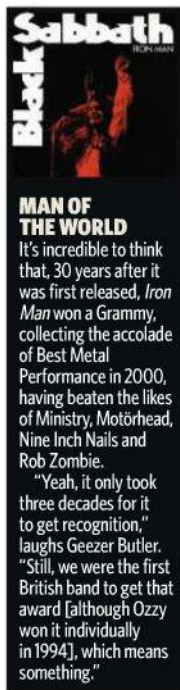
"When you listen to *Iron Man*, what you're getting is the essence of what made Black Sabbath such a special band."

I suppose, because of the film, there's also gonna be those who see a tie-up between what I wrote 40 years ago and the comic-book character. So, here we go again."

Sabbath released *Iron Man* as a single in 1971. Although it reached No.52 in America (nine places higher than *Paranoid*), in the UK it made no impact at all.

"I think it worked best at the time in the context of the album," Ward says. "We never thought of ourselves as a singles band anyway. But, over the years, *Iron Man* has grown and grown. I don't think we believed at the time that it would turn out to be so special. But that's the beauty of what happens: it's the fans who decided this was a great song." 🎧

The Classic Albums series Paranoid DVD is out now on Eagle Vision. Ozzy Osbourne headlines Ozzyfest at London O2 Arena on September 18.



THE FACTS

RELEASE DATE

October 1971

HIGHEST CHART POSITION

Did not chart in UK. US No.52

PERSONNEL

Ozzy Osbourne

Vocals

Tony Iommi

Guitar

Geezer Butler

Bass

Bill Ward

Drums

WRITTEN BY

Iommi, Butler, Osbourne, Ward

PRODUCER

Rodger Bain

LABEL

Vertigo

Black Sabbath: no longer the owners of Iron Man, says Bill Ward.

