



## Halford, Rob (b. 1951)

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With a four-and-a-half octave vocal range, Rob Halford--dubbed "The Metal God" by fans and critics--is one of the most talented vocalists in heavy metal music. Though many of his friends, family members, and fellow musicians have known for quite some time that he is gay, he did not come out publicly until 1998 in an interview that aired on MTV.

Shortly after proclaiming his sexual identity in that interview, Halford was profiled in *The Advocate*, where he spoke openly about his sexuality and his decision to come out in the media.

Halford had met and performed with the queercore band Pansy Division--who encouraged him to come out--at several gay pride events in 1997. Even though he had support from some friends and fellow musicians, coming out publicly was especially difficult because of the small number of gay metal artists who are out.

Additionally, as a recovering alcoholic, Halford did not feel like he was in a place where he could come out publicly until he was more secure in himself.

In *The Advocate*, Halford described a volatile relationship with a lover that was fueled by drugs and alcohol. After a particularly violent fight, he realized he needed to leave for his own safety. As he got into a waiting cab, his lover pulled out a gun and killed himself. Halford points to this event as being the moment that pushed him into recovery.

After twelve years of sobriety, he finally arrived at a "great clarity and . . . great peace" about himself and his sexuality, and so the time was right to come out publicly.

In 1999, the one-man punk band Atom and His Package released the song "Hats Off to Halford" (on the CD *Making Love*, No Idea Records) as a tribute to Halford and his courage to come out in the metal world.

### Early Life and Judas Priest

Born Robert John Arthur Halford into a working-class family in Walsall, England (northwest of Birmingham), on August 25, 1951, Halford began singing in school choirs as a teenager. After leaving school at the age of sixteen, he worked as a lighting engineer in a theater.

Halford plays several instruments, including the guitar, bass, keyboards, harmonica, and drums. Although he has played harmonica and guitar on a few scattered recordings and often composes songs on the guitar, he does not consider himself to be enough of an accomplished musician to play instruments while performing on stage.

In 1973, Sue Halford introduced her brother Rob to her future husband bassist Ian Hill, who was organizing a band and looking for a singer and drummer. Halford joined the new band, Judas Priest, which included K.K.



Rob Halford performing with Judas Priest in Moline, Illinois in 2005. Photograph by Zach Petersen. This image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.0 license.

Downing on guitar and Hill on bass, and brought along drummer John Hinch from his previous band, Hiroshima.

Guitarist and keyboardist Glenn Tipton joined the band in 1974, and they released their first album, *Rocka Rolla*, later that same year. Though the band has undergone several changes in drummers over the years, Halford and Hill, along with the two-pronged guitar attack of Downing and Tipton, would form the musical core of the band until Halford's departure from Priest in 1993.

Priest followed *Rocka Rolla* with several more releases during the 1970s, including *Killing Floor* (1978), which was released in the U.S. as *Hell Bent for Leather* and was the first Priest album to go platinum.

It was also around this time that Halford began to create his famous leather-clad stage persona, which he modeled largely on fashions of the gay leather scene. While this leather iconography was interpreted as gay by those familiar with the leather subculture, many of Priest's fans (as well as critics) interpreted Halford's hyper-masculinized stage presence as confirmation of a macho heterosexuality.

Priest received quite a bit of attention in the U.S. as a result of the single "Hell Bent for Leather," and their success continued to build with the 1980 release of *British Steel*, which included popular radio singles "Living after Midnight" and "Breaking the Law." Popular success continued with the singles "You've Got Another Thing Comin'" and "Defenders of the Faith," which appeared on *Screaming for Vengeance* (1982).

The band's popularity began to wane a bit in the late 1980s--*Turbo* (1986) and *Ram It Down* (1988) were critically low points for Priest--but it picked up again with the release of *Painkiller* in 1990.

Drummer Scott Travis joined Priest for *Painkiller* and is still with the band today.

### **New Bands: Fight, Two, Halford**

Citing personal tensions within the band, Halford left Priest at the conclusion of the *Painkiller* tour in 1991.

However, he did not languish long after leaving Priest. With Travis on drums, Halford formed Fight, a thrash-metal band featured in John Baxter's documentary *Fight: War of Words* (2007). Fight recorded two full-length albums, *War of Words* (1993) and *A Small Deadly Space* (1995), along with the EP-length *Mutations* (1994).

Fight toured the globe, playing small venues as well as larger stadiums. Fight's stripped-down stage was certainly a change from Judas Priest's pyrotechnic performances. While many of Fight's fans were fans of Judas Priest, Fight also appealed to an audience more interested in the head-banging thrash scene than in what they were hearing on commercial radio.

In *Fight: War of Words*, Halford commented that he was energized by this new audience's enthusiasm, as well as by Fight's level of musicianship and performance. Fight was ready to play anywhere they could plug in their amplifiers.

Halford joined guitarist John 5 (then John Lowery) to form the industrial band Two. In 1997, Two released *Voyeurs*, which was produced by Trent Reznor (of Nine Inch Nails) and Dave "Rave" Ogilvie.

Two represented a departure from the genre of heavy metal, allowing Halford to experiment with a variety of musical ideas, tones, and styles.

In an interview with *Chaos Control Digizine*, Halford described the freedom he experienced as an artist

with Two, which was "popping around all over the place musically." Gay pornography director Chi Chi LaRue directed the video for Two's single "I Am a Pig," which featured gay and straight adult-film actors.

Halford returned to the metal genre after his stint with Two, as he formed the band Halford in 1999. Critics and fans praised *Resurrection* (2000), as well as *Live Insurrection* (2001) and *Crucible* (2002).

In 2003, Halford appeared in the film *Spun* (directed by Jonas Åkerlund), playing a clerk in a sex shop.

### **Return to Judas Priest**

Halford rejoined Judas Priest in 2003, and Priest released the *Metalogy* box set in 2004. In July 2003, the band released *Angel of Retribution*. The world tour that accompanied the release marked the band's thirtieth anniversary.

In June 2008, the band issued *Nostradamus*--a two-CD release based on the life and prophecies of Nostradamus. This latest CD is a bit of a departure for Judas Priest, who incorporate synthesizers, woodwinds, and orchestral strings on *Nostradamus*.

In *Guitar World*, Halford noted that, while he was writing *Nostradamus* with Downing and Tipton, he listened to classical music and operas to put himself in the right frame of mind for the project.

Halford continues to record and tour with Judas Priest, and he is also working with the band Halford, which is scheduled to release a CD later in 2008.

In addition, he voices the character of General Lionwhyte in the action adventure video game *Brütal Legend*, which is scheduled to be released by Double Fine Productions in 2008.

Offroad, Halford splits his time between residences in Phoenix, San Diego, Walsall, and Amsterdam.

### **Heavy Metal Homoeroticism**

Although heavy metal is infused with homoeroticism, Halford is the only mainstream metal artist who has come out as gay.

At first glance, it may seem that homophobia is more prevalent than homoeroticism in heavy metal. Among male metal artists, there is a lot of macho posturing with phallic instruments, and women (both backstage and in the audience) often serve as sexual objects exclusively for the gratification of the male performers.

However, it is important to keep in mind that some metal performers--most notably those androgynous "glam metal" rockers (e.g., the "hair bands" of the 1980s like Cinderella, Mötley Crüe, and Poison)--significantly challenge heterosexual notions of masculinity.

Even in the early, pre-leather days of Judas Priest, the band members wore flamboyant outfits that could be described as more feminine than masculine. When he first joined Priest, for example, Halford would borrow his sister's clothes to wear on stage with Priest.

Later, when the leather look became more prevalent in the metal scene (largely thanks to Halford), it was often interpreted as an extreme affirmation of masculine heterosexuality. But the gay-inspired look was more likely intended as performative masculine drag or as indicative of a queer leather subculture.

Halford has glbtq fans, and they understand the queer subtext of his performance art. In *The Advocate*, Halford described meeting a fan who told him that, while watching Priest on MTV when he was 13 years old, he realized he was gay because he was turned on by Halford in his leather.

Still, metal is viewed as a largely heterosexual musical genre. In a 2007 interview with *Spinner*, Halford commented on his status as an out gay metal artist: "I'm invisible, really, in the gay community, and that's just because of where I do what I do--metal. Obviously, there are . . . gay, bisexual, lesbian metalheads. . . . But for all intents and purposes, I'm the invisible metal man in [gay] culture."

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