

BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Clockwise from back: Roger Glover, Ritchie Blackmore, Ian Paice, Jon Lord, Ian Gillan

WRITTEN BY: RITCHIE BLACKMORE, IAN GILLAN, ROGER GLOVER, JON LORD, IAN PAICE
RECORDED: THE PAVILION AND GRAND HOTEL, MONTREUX, SWITZERLAND
PRODUCED BY: DEEP PURPLE
IAN GILLAN: VOCALS
ROGER GLOVER: BASS
IAN PAICE: DRUMS
RITCHIE BLACKMORE: ELECTRIC GUITAR
JON LORD: ORGAN
FROM THE ALBUM: *MACHINE HEAD* (1972)



“Smoke on the Water”

DEEP PURPLE

It's the riff that will not die. It's the heavy metal version of “Chopsticks.” Metallica's Lars Ulrich dubbed it “the riff of life.” Some kid somewhere at this very moment is plonking out those opening notes: “Dun-dun-duun ...” It's a riff so ubiquitous it's easy to forget there's an actual song attached to it—one that took Deep Purple into the Top 5 in 1973.

Before there was smoke, there was fire. On December 4, 1971, the five members of Deep Purple were in the ballroom of Switzerland's Montreux Casino watching a concert by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. During the encore, a fan shot a flare gun at the ceiling. Sparks ignited a canopy hanging from the balcony, and the flames spread quickly. The audience of 3,000 panicked. There were only two ways out—through the front door or through a plate glass window at the side of the stage. As Zappa urged calm, the balcony collapsed. The band smashed the window and helped fans to safety. Amazingly, there were no fatalities—though the ballroom burned to the ground.

Deep Purple fled to their nearby hotel. They'd escaped the fire, but lost their recording studio—the ballroom had been

rented for a month to cut their new album. Singer Ian Gillan recalled, “We sat in the restaurant of the hotel and watched the flames racing into the sky, fed by the wind from the mountains. Later, as the inferno waned, we looked out across Lake Geneva and saw that it was covered with a layer of smoke. Roger [Glover] came up with the title ‘Smoke on the Water.’”

Two days later, Montreux Jazz Festival director Claude Nobs (“funky Claude” in the lyric) loaded the band into another recording space—a local theater called Le Pavillon. As neighbors complained about the noisy rehearsals, the band managed to cut one track, dubbed “Title #1,” based on a caveman-simple riff, sliced out on Ritchie Blackmore's Stratocaster. “The police were outside with a whole fleet of cars,” Blackmore recalled, “and they kept hammering on the door. But we didn't want to open up until we knew we had gotten the right take. Finally, we got it with no mistakes—and they kicked us out.”

Resettled at a nearly empty Montreux Grand Hotel, the band set up amps and mics in hallways and stairwells. Glover and Gillan finished the lyrics to Blackmore's tune and “Smoke on the Water” was born.

Slotted in as track five on their *Machine Head* album, the group hadn't a clue they were sitting on a smash. They hardly even played the song during their tour the following year. “Lazy” was released as the first single, but failed to chart. Finally, in a half-hearted attempt to revive the album's sales, an edit of “Smoke on the Water” was sent to radio in early 1973. By summer, it was in heavy rotation on FM, eventually climbing to No. 4 on the charts.

Since then “Smoke on the Water” has taken on a life of its own. A staple at sporting events, on ringtones and on PlayStation games, it's also been featured in TV commercials, two episodes of *The Simpsons* and numerous movies, including *School of Rock*. But most important, it's been passed down among guitarists as rock's most essential lick. Even nonguitar players can fake it—or try.

In Montreux, a monument was erected along Lake Geneva honoring Deep Purple, their signature song and its opening notes. Of the song's enduring appeal, Blackmore has said, “It's lasted so long because it's very simple, very catchy, basically incorporating four notes. It's got tons of personality.”

—Bill DeMain