

## BEHIND THE CLASSICS



Donald "Buck Dharma" Roeser, Eric Bloom, Albert Bouchard, Allen Lanier, Joe Bouchard

**WRITTEN BY:** DONALD "BUCK DHARMA" ROESER  
**RECORDED:** RECORD PLANT, NEW YORK, 1975  
**PRODUCED BY:** SANDY PEARLMAN, DAVID LUCAS, MURRAY KRUGMAN  
**DONALD ROESER:** VOCALS, RHYTHM/LEAD GUITAR  
**ERIC BLOOM:** RHYTHM GUITAR  
**JOE BOUCHARD:** BASS  
**ALBERT BOUCHARD:** DRUMS  
**ALLEN LANIER:** KEYBOARDS  
**DAVID LUCAS:** PERCUSSION, BACKING VOCALS  
**FROM THE ALBUM:** *AGENTS OF FORTUNE* (1976)



## “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper”

### BLUE ÖYSTER CULT

Prior to recording their fourth album, *Agents of Fortune*, Blue Öyster Cult was just that—a cult band. They played hard rock songs with titles like “Career of Evil” and “She’s as Beautiful as a Foot.” They had a mystical logo representing the Greek god Kronos. They were a hirsute, unglamorous bunch. Certainly not a band you’d expect to see in the Top 40.

But “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper” challenged that notion. Written by guitarist Donald Roeser, it combined the group’s mysticism with a beautiful melody, lush harmonies and one of the coolest guitar riffs of the 1970s—and it catapulted BÖC onto the charts. Of the song’s beginnings, Roeser said, “I started contemplating my mortality, and thought, ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be great, even if you died, that your love would survive.’”

Roeser was only 27, but he had a heart irregularity—and death was on his mind. “I was all worried about that,” he said. “It turned out to be not life-threatening but it got me thinking about death. It’s one of the attractions about ‘Reaper’—it resonates with people because they do think about dying. The first two lines of lyric sprung into my head, then the rest of it came as I formed a story about a love affair that transcends

death. I was thinking about my wife, and that maybe we’d get together after I was gone. Once I had the story, I came up with the guitar riff.”

Manager-producer Sandy Pearlman will never forget Roeser’s demo. “I thought, ‘This is one of the greatest songs I’ve ever heard!’” he said. “I immediately recognized the guitar riff was not just box office but also something extremely deep.”

At New York’s Record Plant, the band rehearsed and refined the arrangement of the five-minute song, complete with its tempo-shifting, prog-like guitar break in the middle. After a few takes, they locked into what engineer Shelly Yakus later called “that once in a lifetime platinum groove.” The finished song was a masterpiece and an instant hit.

Of course, nothing boosts a song’s popularity like controversy, and some deemed the tune as pro-suicide. “The second verse is the one that’s caused all the trouble,” Roeser explained. “I used Romeo and Juliet as an example of a couple who had faith to take their love elsewhere when they weren’t permitted the freedom to love here and now. It never occurred to me the suicide aspect of their story would be plugged into people’s take

on the song, making it an advertisement for suicide. The 40,000 number was pulled from the air as a guess as to how many people died every day worldwide, *not* how many people committed suicide.”

The song got another lift from author Stephen King, who quoted from it in his gruesome 1978 opus *The Stand*. While it remained a classic rock radio staple for years, in 2000, the song heated up again when a *Saturday Night Live* sketch featured Christopher Walken as a producer on the “Reaper” session, and Will Ferrell as a fictional band member. Walken’s pleas for “More cowbell!” made the sketch a massive hit, and introduced the song to a whole new generation.

Forty-six years since their formation, Blue Öyster Cult is still rocking with original members Roeser and Eric Bloom, thanks in no small part to the continued fascination with “(Don’t Fear) The Reaper.” “The song has become more like a memorial to people,” Roeser says. “It’s something you play or say when someone passes away. And I’m good with that. I’m going to have it played at my funeral.”

—Bill DeMain