

LIFE ON THE RAZOR'S EDGE

Cream's Andy Evans talks to Razorlight drummer David 'Skully' Sullivan-Kaplan, about rock & roll, reviews and racing!

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ince the release of their first album, *Up All Night*, in 2004, Razorlight has been one of the most popular bands on the planet. Their mixture of rock and roll and catchy pop

songs has brought them five UK top-ten singles – including a number one with 'America' in 2006. The band has also notched up four million album sales, and has headlined festivals and sold out arenas all over the world.

The band's notoriety has also been enhanced by their flamboyant frontman, Johnny Borrell, who at times has been the darling of the tabloid press, with his celebrity girlfriends and self-proclamations of his 'genius'.

But Razorlight's adherence to the traditions of rock and roll doesn't stop there. In true Spinal Tap fashion,

the band has had three drummers. *Up All Night* featured the percussive skills of Christian Smith Pancorvo, before he gave way to Andy Burrows, who played on both of Razorlight's subsequent albums: *Razorlight* and *Slipway Fires*. He also co-wrote the hits 'America' and 'Before I Fall to Pieces', and was influential in helping Razorlight to break into rock's premier league.

So when Burrows announced that he was leaving the band with immediate effect in March 2009, it came as quite a shock to Borrell, bass guitarist Carl Dalemio, and lead guitarist Björn Ågren. In the middle of a world tour, a replacement was needed, and quickly; and it came in the form of New Yorker David 'Skully' Sullivan-Kaplan.

But replacing such an influential figure at such short notice was never going to be easy. 'I've been in bands my whole life, but every band I've ever been in,



Indie rock band Razorlight formed in 2002, and are currently working on their fourth album



Left: Razorlight's current line up of
(left to right): Björn Sten Agren,
Carl Dalemo, David "Skully"
Sullivan-kaplan and Johnny Borrell

I started, so it was a different experience to just jump in," Skully says.

"I mean, I had three days to learn the show and off we went – we were on tour – so it was like being thrown in at the deep end, definitely."

Such an arrangement would more often than not have ended in failure, but one of the first things that is apparent about Skully when you speak to him is his passion for music, and ... well for life itself. And it is this enthusiasm that helped him to thrive when others would have struggled. "I went in and was just loving playing the songs. I liked that I had the pressure on. I was enjoying myself, and the guys were really nice, and everyone was really excited and motivated to get going – so I think we hit it off musically and personally."

Skully's sudden arrival in the middle of a world tour also provided him with a lot of unexpected highlights. "Oh man, there's been so many," he says in his laid back drawl. "O2 Arena was fantastic; going to Japan was really exciting for me. We went to Australia, we went to Turkey, we went all over Europe, we went all over the UK, we did loads and loads of things – so many different things!"

But the main highlight for Skully was the fact that – on the back of the tour – he secured a permanent place in the band. Originally he was only supposed to stay until the end of the tour in December 2009, but the musical connection that was created on the road proved to be too strong. Now a fully-fledged member of Razorlight, Skully is clearly loving his life as a full-time member of the group – especially now that they are back in the studio. "Our last gig was around Christmas time, and we took a little time off – and then got in a room and just started working on ideas and seeing how it felt," Skully says. "And now that we're making a new album, being able to incorporate my ideas with the guys and work on new songs together – I mean, that's absolutely huge for me. So I'm really, really proud of that."

Razorlight's new album has been put on hold this summer; though, in order to concentrate on live work. The band played at Sandown Park on 21st July as part of the venue's 'Music Nights' event, as well as performing at Newmarket Racecourse two days later. When these gigs were first announced, their format didn't appear to go hand in hand with Razorlight's raison d'être. A racegoing audience in smart casual dress, drinking Pimms and enjoying picnics, seemed to be at odds with the

supposed ethos of rock and roll – possibly backed up by the fact that the other two acts performing at Sandown Park this summer were Spandau Ballet and Westlife. Skully recognises that the concerts were a slightly unusual departure for the band, but remains unapologetic. "Once you have gone a couple of months without doing any gigs, you start to have withdrawal, and you're like, 'Aaaah, I really wanna play'. So one of the things we like to do is to play all these different, weird events. Last year we played in a quarry in Germany – it's more interesting, and you try a different sort of format."

These gigs were also the first opportunity for people to hear the new songs that have been written and recorded with Skully. He believes that people may have noticed some differences. "I think whenever you change a band member, you're gonna get somewhat of a different result – as you could even notice with the original drummer of Razorlight," Skully says. "When he left, and Andy joined, the band's sound changed. I think that's just natural, because – especially

when there's only four people in a group — each person's input is very important."

This difference in approach shouldn't be too hard for the band to cope with, though. Throughout Razorlight's history, their sound has evolved, a fact that isn't lost on their new drummer: "Every album they've done — all three albums — are very unique from one another. A lot of bands just go out there and make the same record over and over again — they do one thing and that's it.

With Razorlight, one of the things I really enjoy about it creatively is that there's no rules, there's no limits. If we wanna explore something that's funky or dancey, that's ok. If we wanna do something that's slow and ballad-like, then we can do that."

But this diversity has sometimes come at a cost. When Slipway Fires was released in November 2008, the reaction from the press was generally negative, and while the first single from the album, 'Wire To Wire', reached number five in the UK charts, the second single, 'Hostage of Love', failed to chart at all. No more singles were released from the album, and rumours abounded that Razorlight were about to split up. But Skully doesn't feel that the negative coverage affected the band. "I think they should be very proud of Slipway Fires because there's some really beautiful music on that, and yeah, maybe it didn't produce as many hits as the second one, but that's sort of irrelevant."

"I don't think you can sit there and listen to the critics. You've gotta make music that is important to you. When you make music, in a way it's a selfish thing because it's your ideas, and you're putting your heart out there, and people can like it, hate it — they can have any number of reactions to it, and you can't really predict that. You can't really pay too much attention to it because you're not writing for them."

This songwriting mindset is obviously the fuel that keeps Razorlight moving forward. "The standard has to be high — the bar is set very, very high, and everyone wants to make something great," Skully says. "When Johnny's writing lyrics and writing songs, I don't think he's sitting there thinking, 'Oh man, I hope this sells millions'. He doesn't care — he wants to write great music." It's probably just as well that Borrell has this attitude, for he remains a controversial figure.

When Andy Burrows left Razorlight, he cited Borrell as the main reason for his departure, describing his time in the band as 'hell'. But Skully obviously has a lot of affection for the lead singer: "Johnny's an incredibly intelligent, thoughtful person, and that spin might not come across in the press. It's very fashionable to hate him sometimes, and I don't know why that is, but that's just the way it is. But he doesn't sit there and harp on it. I don't think he pays any attention to it because we're here to do our thing — make music."

And while this music sometimes divides critics, Razorlight are continually feted by their peers. Some of the biggest bands in history have asked Razorlight to support them on tour, including Queen, The Who, The Rolling Stones and U2. These slots have enabled friendships to be made ("I think Johnny's friendly with Bono and the rest of them"), and



Right: Nighttime concerts at Sandown are a huge hit with the crowds



Left: Razorlight performed at Sandown Park this summer

Skully doesn't think the band gets starstruck anymore. However, he admits that this could still happen to him. "I suppose if you meet one of your personal heroes – that's exciting. Like, for me, if I ever got a chance to support Elvis Costello, I think I might be, 'Wow, I'm excited', because he's a real hero of mine."

"But another one of my heroes is Dave Grohl, and we got to play with Them Crooked Vultures at a festival – and we had a beer, and, you know, it was cool," he says. "I think once you're in it, you just think 'This is another musician who makes great music that I'm really amazed

to meet', but I don't sit there and get all jumbled with my words. I just say, 'Hey, what's up?'"

The encounter with Grohl brings back happy memories for Skully. "My very first concert I ever went to as a boy was Nirvana Unplugged

in New York (the band's famous 1993 MTV performance) – and it was amazing. And I actually got to meet him and he gave me his drumsticks. I'll never forget it. And he was so nice to me, and I told him I was starting to play drums and I really looked up to him, and he sat there and talked to me for a while, and he said, 'That's really great. I'm glad you appreciate what I'm doing. Stick with it, have fun with it.'"

There is no doubt that this is exactly what Skully is doing. His enthusiasm has enabled him to make the most of the opportunity that Razorlight has presented him with, and this positive outlook seems to have been a shot in the arm for the band – at a time when they needed it the most. The marriage between Skully and Razorlight is still clearly in its honeymoon period, and Skully can't wait for the future.

"Just being able to see the world and play music to thousands of people wherever you go, and they love it and they're singing along – I mean, that's a special feeling," he says. "It's exciting. It's an exciting time!"

