

Leatherface Biography

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"It's all about the sound—you know, making the guitar go aarrrraaaaaarrrgggh." -Frankie Stubbs

It's been said that there is no underground anymore, that as soon as a band get big enough to be influential, the mainstream press swarms all around the band and leaves them an over-exposed mess. Then, along comes Leatherface and blows all that cynicism right out of the water. After sixteen years, a half-dozen studio albums, one live album, two discographies, and countless seven-inches and twelve-inches and compilation tracks on a dozen or so record labels, Leatherface still reigns as one of the most powerful and most influential punk rock bands that are still active. And they're still lodged safely in the underground. So how did they do it?

Leatherface seems to have been built on a series of accidents and coincidences. It was 1988, in Sunderland, England. Dickie Hammond played a Gordon Smith guitar. He wanted to be in a band with Frankie Stubbs, who also played a Gordon Smith. Beyond the fact that they both played on the same type of handmade guitar, they had little else in common musically, so they found a way to play two completely different things and make it sound good. They recruited drummer Andy Laing and bassist Stuart Schooler and started to put melodies to the chaos and chainsaws of the guitars. They practiced in Frankie's roofless garage, when it wasn't raining. They sold enough magic mushrooms to buy Skipper One (their first touring van). It was agreed that they'd all sing. Frankie was the only one who actually sat down and wrote lyrics, though, so Frankie became the singer. His voice sounded like gravel thrown onto the chainsaws of the guitars, but it also had a deep, soulful quality that matched the melodies. And through this, a whole new style of punk rock was born.

Fast forward several years. Leatherface releases the rough and respectable, classic hardcore albums Cherry Knowle and Fill Your Boots. Stu Schooler leaves the band and, after a series of changes, Andy Crighton becomes the bassist. Leatherface signs to a smaller offshoot of a major label (Seed, an imprint of Atlantic), release the immaculate and one-day-to-be seminal album, Mush. The major label, unable to find a college radio hit out of Mush, relegates it to the bargain bin. A shattered Leatherface pulls it together in time to record Minx, then breaks up. Andy Crighton goes on to join the pop-punk legends Snuff. Frankie goes on to play in the bands Pope and Jesse. Dickie forms Dr. Bison. In the meantime, their albums spread gradually through punk communities. Their sound influences a new generation of punk bands like Dillinger Four, Hot Water Music, and Avail. Eventually, Dickie convinces the guys to get back together as a band, but he inexplicably doesn't join the newly reformed Leatherface. Still, Frankie and Andy Laing pick up the reins and steer Leatherface back into the studio. There they record their half of a split album with Hot Water Music for BYO Records. On that split, they include the song "Andy," a touching tribute to Andy Crighton, who committed suicide in 1998. BYO rereleases Cherry Knowle. Leatherface tours the US twice, where they're obligated to open up for the bands that they inspired. Leatherface then records a new album, Horsebox, and BYO also releases The Last: a collection of songs that Leatherface recorded before their 1993 breakup, along with some of Frankie's material from Pope. Again, they tour the US. Again, they open up for bands they influenced. And, all the while, the legend grows.

And now, after all the bruises and broken down vans, the tours and rotating-door bassists, all the lumps and the chainsaws and all the growls they could muster, Leatherface has released what could be their best album yet, Dog Disco. It's got all the elements that have made the legend. From the first notes of track one, the melodies creep out and hook you. Frankie's lyrics are still heartbreaking, still wise, still beautiful. His voice may have gotten raspier, but there's something more to it now. It's still safe to compare him to Lemmy from Motorhead or to Jake Burns, but listen closer. There's a little bit of Sam Cooke in there. A little bit of fat Elvis. The guitars still seem to be coming from two completely different points but racing towards a head-on collision. The album still works as an album, building tension, speeding up, and when it seems that everything will explode, they slow things down enough for you to regroup, to get your wits about you, and then they're off again. Twelve songs later, it's still all about the music—you know, everything goes aarrrraaaaaaarrrgggh.

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