

## Remembering the good old days of Knightshade

Knightshade was the hottest band in town in 1987, and went on to support big-name acts including Deep Purple and ZZ Top. Wintec journalism student Ben Telfer caught up with the band's frontman.

HAMILTON, November 3, 1987. The start of what will be an oppressively hot summer in the city.

The Hillcrest Tavern, or the "Hilly" as it is affectionately known, is steaming, despite every window being open. The bar is packed with students and cheap beer flows as swiftly as the Waikato River.

All eyes are on the velvet curtains concealing a makeshift stage in the corner of the room.

A couple of burly roadies do some last-minute work on a drum kit; then the screech of a Fender Stratocaster cuts through the smoky fug.

The curtains go back and drummer Alan Grady belts out the opening bars of Out For the Count. Lead guitarist Rik Bernards joins in with some heavy riffing as 200 drunken voices join in ...

Out for the count for the last tiiiiime/Out for the count, you're no longer miiiiine!

This is Knightshade, the hottest metallers in town - and about to get hotter.

In the same month as their appearance at the Hilly, the band is nominated for Best New Band at the New Zealand Music Awards, their debut album Out for the Night enters the national top 40 and they play to sell-out crowds in the country's leading nightclubs.

"This is the biggest year we have had so far," said Bernards at the time. "We are more experienced now and channel our energies so that the work we do gets results."

Back at the Hilly gig, singer Wayne Elliot, dressed in leather, launches into Blood and Money as the noise level lifts again.

The next day Waikato Times reviewer Max Christoffersen, a DJ at the student radio, writes: "The band has more credibility and credentials in terms of experience, perseverance and sheer talent than any other rock band in NZ; arguably the finest line-up of individual musicians in the country."

The band that would become Knightshade was formed in 1982 in Te Puke. In those days they were called Clearlite and fame and fortune wasn't on their minds. "The band just came together with some mates wanting to play music," says Elliot, now 48, "but we soon realised that people liked this, so we decided to do it more."

As well as Bernards, Elliot and Grady, the line-up comprised bassist John Bell and guitarist Gavin Lind. Their first gigs were at surf-lifesaving clubs and taverns at coastal towns during the summer, but out



PICTURE: Nick Eggleston

**RIGHT NOTE:** Wayne Elliot has happy memories of his days as frontman of Knightshade.



**THEY ROCKED:** Hamilton band Knightshade in 1987. From left, Gavin Lind, John Bell, Wayne Elliot, Rik Bernards and Alan Grady.

Elliot says he had to get away from the music scene, "to get my head together".

"We were having a practice one day and I said 'I don't want to sing any more'. No one really talked about it - we just went our separate ways."

An argument with the band's label Mushroom Records

of necessity - to buy more gear - they started to play at larger venues and moved to Hamilton, changing their name to Knightshade.

Elliot says the band's fans were largely longhaired "westies" and tertiary students. A fan club had more than 800 members.

He says the dedication was overwhelming. "The fans wouldn't just turn up at a city you were playing at, they'd turn up five or 10 weeks in a row."

Twenty years after his review, Christoffersen, now a tutor at Wintec, remains enthusiastic. "When Knightshade were at the peak of their game, they really were impressive. The crowds were a mix of students and old die-hard rockers both male and female and everyone enjoyed the power, whether they played their own songs or the note-perfect covers of Van Halen's Eruption or AC/DC standards.

"The style contrasted quite radically with the emergence of the Flying Nun bands of the time which were typically more song-orientated than performance-orientated. So seeing Wayne and co bouncing around the stage like Hamilton's equivalent of David Lee Roth was quite an experience for those who thought stagecraft meant you knew where the amplifier 'on' button was."

Over the next few years, the band also supported some big-name international acts, including Deep Purple, ZZ Top, Bon Jovi and Guns 'N Roses.

But success is fickle in show business and in 1994 the band buckled under the weight of record company conflicts and personal problems.

contributed to the split.

Elliot says the company wanted the band to tour Australia and the US without releasing any material in advance. "We wanted some sort of profile."

These days, Elliot is a computer technician at Wintec. The leather duds have gone and so has the shock of wild head-banger hair. But you can still see the likeness to the young man in Knightshade's Out for the Count video.

He says he's proud of what he and a bunch of mates from Te Puke achieved on the New Zealand music scene at a time when many artists were struggling.

"I would love to be releasing material as we were in '87 the way people do now," he says. "If I had what they have now 15 years ago, I could have made my whole album at home."

He says he has only happy memories of the band. "I played with some amazing people, made some great friends, had some great experiences and hopefully made a few people happy along the way listening to our music."

Christofferson agrees.

"They had that elusive balance of raucous rock with melodies that kept you going in the carpark of the Hilly after the gig was done.

"They knew how to rock."