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UFO: "We used to take Mandrax as if it were aspirin, we didn't care"

By [Geoff Barton](#)

([Classic Rock](#))

published 25 June 2008

UFO, once the classiest of classic rock bands, tore themselves apart with bitter in-fighting. Classic Rock catches up with them to find they're still nursing old war wounds



(Image credit: Getty Images)

UFO singer Phil Mogg quaffs from his can of Stella and contemplates the questions we've just asked him: Why are his band loved

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by rock's cognoscenti but under appreciated by the public at large? Shouldn't UFO be spoken about in the same reverential tones as the likes of Led Zeppelin, Queen and Deep Purple?

Mogg slumps back on the sofa in the living room of his Brighton home, fixes us with a steely gaze and offers up his best Catherine Tate impression. "Am I bovered?" he responds. "Is this a bovered face?"



There can't be many bands who formed in the 1960s and remain active today with three original members still in their line-up. The Rolling Stones are one... and frankly we're struggling to come up with another halfway decent candidate. Apart from UFO.

Alright, so the UFO axis of Mogg, bassist Pete Way and drummer Andy Parker hasn't been quite as constant over the years as the Stones' triumvirate of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards and Charlie Watts, but UFO's three-way partnership is remarkable all the same. Particularly when you consider their tripped-out beginnings as a space-rock combo and their subsequent transformation into a torrid troupe of coked-out reprobates. A belligerent bunch with a devil-may-care attitude who lost their talismanic guitarist Michael Schenker while they were at the peak of their powers. A volatile collective who were torn apart by bitter in-fighting and yet somehow, against the odds, contrived to become the classiest of classic rock bands.

Pete Way agrees: "Yeah... we play the essence of hard rock, don't we?" There's not a hint of boastfulness in his voice.



Happy daze: UFO in 1976: Danny Peyronel, Andy Parker, Phil Mogg, Pete Way and Michael Schenker (Image credit: Getty Images)

Our original idea for this feature was to concentrate on UFO's early days, their first three albums for the Chrysalis label (*Phenomenon*, 1974; *Force It*, 1975; *No Heavy Petting*, 1976) having recently been re-released. But during the course of our conversations with Mogg, Way and Parker, our story began to veer off in an unexpected direction, becoming as much about the present as the past.

Instead, it became a tale of how three ageing rockers are struggling to come to grips with their uproarious past, and how UFO's power base has shifted in a surprising direction over the years...

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“We didn’t know what we were doing,” says Phil Mogg of UFO’s psychedelic beginnings in the unremarkable North London suburb of Enfield. “We were like kids going: ‘How do we do this? How do we do that?’ You’re plonking around in the garage and you go: ‘How does this work?’ And you can’t quite get there.”

UFO’s roots date back to the late 1960s when Way teamed up with guitarist Mick Bolton in a band called The Boyfriends. Mogg – a drummer who quickly downed sticks to become a vocalist – was next to enter the fray. The fledgling outfit went through a number of names (Acid, Hocus Pocus, The Good The Bad And The Ugly) before settling on the UFO moniker and bringing in Parker to do Mogg’s old job.



UFO released two studio albums and one live set through the little-known Beacon and Nova labels at the start of the 1970s: *UFO 1*, *UFO 2 – Flying* (subtitled *One Hour Space Rock*) and *UFO Live*, which was recorded in Japan. Over in America the band were signed to Rare Earth – believe it or not, a subsidiary of Tamla Motown.

Listening to those records today is a bizarre experience indeed. Bolton’s guitar fuzzes and drones away aimlessly while Mogg, Way and Parker do their best to stamp their authority. But with tracks such as *Treacle People* in their repertoire (sample lyric: ‘*I moved ’round a bit/And started seeing people/And the people that I met/Oh, were all covered in treacle*’) they were fighting a losing battle.

Nevertheless, there were glimmers of the greatness to come: UFO’s version of the Eddie Cochran hit *C’mon Everybody* became a firm live favourite, as did a self-penned song with the unlikely title *Boogie For George*. Additionally, a two-pronged epic called *Prince Kajuku/The Coming Of Prince Kajuku* was a potent mix of Rush-style fantasy (‘*Prince Kajuku’s coming/Feathers in his hair/Tapping on his juju stick/See you down there*’) and cosmically inclined hard blues. The character of the Prince was apparently based on a hippy-dippy UFO roadie who used to shuffle around muttering “peace, man” all the time. Very Neil, very *Young Ones*.



We inform Pete Way that we’ve got all the tracks from *Flying – The Early Years 1970-1973* (a UFO compilation released in 2004) on our iPod.

“Blimey,” he gasps. “Are you feeling all right? We were quite inventive in those days but I don’t know how good we were. Having said that, when I was in Denmark a couple of years ago I went to King Diamond’s apartment. He’s got skeletons in there and everything’s painted black. But I noticed he had a copy of *UFO 1* in his record collection. This Danish guy I was with commented: ‘Of course, all true metal fans have a copy of *UFO 1*.’”

“The really early days I remember quite well – it was so exciting and we were really forging ahead,” says Parker. “It was all silver lamé and hour-long guitar solos. We did the *One Hour Space Rock* album, which was amazing as we managed to squeeze in 30 minutes of music on each side of a vinyl album. It sounded so quiet. You had to crank it up because there was no volume on there at all. But talk about value for money, mate, when most other bands were putting, like, 16 minutes of music per side.”

In October 1971 UFO flew out to play in the Far East. According to a story in *Melody Maker*: ‘The trek – reported to be worth \$15,000 – follows the success of their first album, *UFO 1*, which has sold 135,000 copies in Japan.’



Young guns, Way and Mogg live in London, 1972 (Image credit: Getty Images)

UFO had thought they were opening for Three Dog Night but ended up topping the bill in front of 23,000 people at Hibiya Park, Tokyo.

“It was bizarre,” says Parker. “At the airport we were met by a limo and loads of screaming fans. I remember thinking: ‘Oh my God, we’re these huge stars in Japan.’”

“I was 19, 20 years old,” recalls Way. “Then we came back to Britain and played the Marquee.”

The Tokyo show was captured for posterity on *UFO Live* – and the band certainly put their all into their performance. Just before set-closer *Follow You Home* the MC bellows: “They’re gonna play one more for ya because his [Bolton’s] fingers are so cut he won’t be able to play for a month! Alright? One more!” And it wasn’t even the summer of ’69...

In the event *UFO Live* turned out to be Bolton’s swansong. He was succeeded first by future Pink Fairies/Motörhead guitarist Larry Wallis, then by Bernie Marsden (ex-Skinny Cat and later of Whitesnake, of course).



UFO’s music began to change following Bolton’s departure, becoming less out of orbit and more down to earth.

“Why did we stop playing space rock? Because Phil stopped taking LSD,” Way says bluntly.

“That big fat liar,” Mogg replies, before considering: “Well... there was a bit of that going on at the time because we were playing London’s Roundhouse. They used to have 24-hour gigs there. You’d go in and play in the evening, and you’d come out at about seven o’clock in the morning. Whether it was the following morning or not, who knew? So, yeah... Pete might have a point.”

“We just started listening to different types of music,” Way expands. “I went and saw Led Zeppelin at the Marquee when they were The New Yardbirds and I remember thinking: ‘This is great stuff. It’s about time that we [UFO] moved on.’”

“We just kind of got our act together,” shrugs Mogg. “We were listening to bands like Free and Lynyrd Skynyrd and admiring the way they combined rock and blues. We reckoned that was the sort of stuff we should be playing.



Purloined from the Scorpions: Schenker and Mogg live in Copenhagen, 1976 (Image credit: Getty Images)

“We worked a lot,” Mogg continues. “We did a lot of gigs. Anywhere, anything that came up. Then we met up with Michael Schenker and that’s when it all fitted together, because it was a bit disjointed before that. But with Michael we were off and running.”

According to the well-told tale, Bernie Marsden mislaid his passport on the eve of UFO’s June 1973 tour of Germany. Undeterred, the band fulfilled their live-performance commitments over there by purloining teenage six-string hotshot Michael Schenker from The Scorpions.

However, according to *Classic Rock*’s Neil Jeffries’ sleeve-notes for UFO’s reissued *Phenomenon* album, Marsden elected to stay in the UK because he had scored a job in Wild Turkey, a new band led by founding Jethro Tull bassist Glenn Cornick.

(Marsden also claims to have been the first to spot Schenker's prowess during a UFO trip to Germany earlier in '73.)

"Whatever the truth I think Bernie was relieved to leave because he thought we were a bit too wild," says Way. "Apparently David Coverdale once asked him what it was like being a member of UFO and Bernie replied: 'You would not *believe*...'"



"You gotta understand piss-taking was really rife in UFO," says Parker. "I took most of it, to be honest. [Parker was nicknamed 'No Neck' because his head looked like it was sinking into his body.] To me, Bernie always seemed to be looking for another gig. Whenever there was another band around he'd be hanging out and Pete would say: 'He's doing the hokey-cokey.' He meant it was like a conga line because you'd see Bernie following people around."

"At the time most guitar players were like your Rory Gallaghers, wearing scruffy jeans and stuff," says Way. "But then we came across Michael – this guy who looked like a fucking god, out there with his strange guitar. This tall, skinny, blond guy with a Flying V who played amazingly. 'Oh man,' we thought, 'we gotta have him.'"

"When Michael plays, when he really plays, he's a fucking genius," says Mogg. "He really can rock."

By this time UFO had secured a major record deal with the Chrysalis label.

"One of the reasons they wanted to sign us was because we had a very strong following in Germany," says Way. "We were playing to 1,000, 2,000 people even though we were kind of unknown."



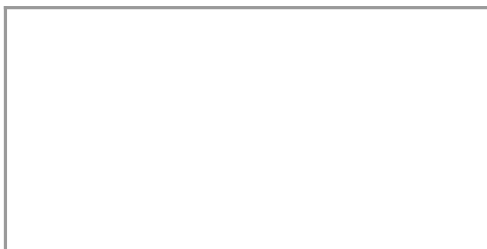
Suited and booted - "Phil always made an effort to look good" (Image credit: Getty Images)

UFO's first Chrysalis album, the aforementioned *Phenomenon*, wasn't a big seller. But that all changed with *Force It*, the follow up. Reviewing it in the August 9, 1975 edition of *Sounds*, I wrote: 'Already an American chart-breaker and packaged in a clever double-entendre Hipgnosis cover, *Force It* is a raucous, pounding album, the sort that will shake those delicate china ornaments on your mantelpiece apart and then progressively reduce them to fine dust.'

About this time it became obvious that UFO weren't your typical British rock band. They weren't denim-clad, greasy-haired grebos who took fashion tips from their road crew. Instead they looked very cool, almost like a slick 'n' streamlined American combo in some respects.

UFO also had attitude in abundance... And a seemingly bottomless pit of self-confidence.

"We were bigheads. We were good. We always thought we were the bee's knees," says Mogg. "Come on, here we go, bring it on' – that was the general attitude. I think we had a grim determination. A desperate, desperate determination to succeed. Because if we hadn't we'd all be down the Khyber."



“We were very vain,” confirms Way, “and we really lived for it.”

“We made an effort,” states Parker. “Phil had a lot to do with it. The first time I met him he had a real style about him. He just looked good. He had these suede trousers with criss-cross laces up the side. Stuff that guys wouldn’t normally wear, but he wasn’t afraid to.”

“When you are a man, sometimes you wear stretchy pants...” Mogg quips, offering up a line from Jack Black’s *Nacho Libre* movie.

“But the space rock thing also helped because we kind of glammed up a little bit for that,” adds Parker. “We didn’t look like one of the crowd and that was important back then.”

As major success beckoned UFO embarked on an extended period of – to use Way’s understated expression – “misbehaviour”.

“A bunch of nurses used to follow us around,” he says. “They used to give us Mandrax – sleeping tablets, downers – and we used to take them as if they were aspirin. That was a good time, a very good time, because we didn’t really care.”



(Image credit: Getty Images)

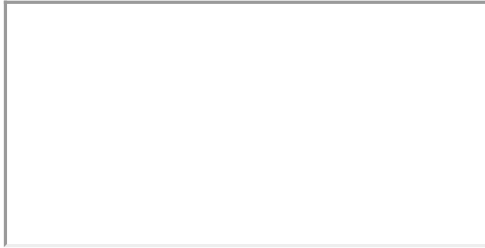
UFO appeared on BBC TV’s *The Old Grey Whistle Test*. “I remember it vaguely,” says Way. “We played *Doctor Doctor* and something else. But I got banned. I was doing some blow and they weren’t best pleased. I offered the host some coke. It wasn’t Whispering Bob, it was someone else. The zip of my pants broke as well, during the performance...”

When UFO's career began to take off in the States – *Force It* reaching the heady heights of No.71 in the chart over there – “we were like kids in a candy store,” says Mogg.

“We were, like, bathed in beauty,” he continues. “I must admit I didn't mind the knock on my hotel door and the voice that went: ‘Hi, my name's so-and-so.’ I'd say: ‘Oh, go away.’ She'd say: ‘But you haven't looked at me yet.’ I'd say: ‘What's your arse like? Stick your arse up to the spyhole in the door.’ And she would. I'd be thinking: ‘I don't fucking believe this.’ Bearing in mind we've gone from the Marquee into that kind of situation.”

“We played the Fillmore East,” Way recalls. “They confiscated all the drugs and booze from the audience before the show. Someone opened the door to our dressing room and said: ‘Hey, this is all the stuff we've impounded – do you want anything?’

There's piles of grass, hash, booze. It's like Aladdin's cave. And we go: “Well, *maybe*...””



Michael Schenker was no slouch, either. Overcoming his innate shyness and his limited grasp of the English language, he matched his UFO compatriots blow-for-blow in the bad-boy stakes.

“I remembering seeing Michael after one show,” says Mogg. “He's got a groupie on top of him, he's got a cigarette and a beer, and he's got a recording of the night's performance playing in one ear. The groupie is pumping him and Michael's going: ‘Hmm... I think there was a bit too much echo tonight.’ I said: ‘Aren't you meant to be giving her something?’ He replied: ‘Nein, for me the woman has to do all the work.’ It was a bit of a nutty period.”

When *Classic Rock* interviewed Schenker at the tail end of last year, he explained his role in UFO thus: “I was into the music but they [Mogg, Way and Parker] were into the rock'n'roll.”

“He can talk,” says Way. “I've seen that boy in some situations. What he probably means is that he practiced playing more than we did.”

“He can pull it out of the bag, can't he? Like a rabbit out of the hat,” says Mogg. “Come on, Michael. Give me a break here.”



Eventually relations between Mogg and Schenker became so strained that Way had to step in and act as an intermediary. As *Classic Rock*'s Dave Ling once wrote: ‘Inter-band relationships would flutter between mild camaraderie and all-out warfare.’

“When we got on well, we got on very well,” says Way. “But when we didn't I'd be like the middle man. Michael would come up to me and say: ‘How is your friend?’ Meaning Phil, of course. And Phil would say to me: ‘That fucking German arsehole.’ I got on well with Phil and Michael. I had good relationships with both of them. But yes, that was kind of tough. Because I'd always be at the centre of it.”

“Pete as the mediator? Maybe... maybe I didn't even know it,” Mogg considers. “You could be right. But Michael and I didn't have... that great confrontation. It wasn't that bad. He did his bit and I did mine. Egos brush up against one another, whatever. Michael once said: ‘No, it's the chemistry.’ It didn't occur to me until he mentioned it. I asked him: ‘What do you mean, chemistry?’ He replied: ‘We all blend in a difficult way.’ He had a point.”



Regardless of the mounting inter-band rivalry, UFO's career continued on an upward spiral, particularly in America. While many British bands – Status Quo for one, Slade for another – returned home after touring the US with their tails between their legs, UFO charged headlong into the experience and reaped the dividends.

“We used to sit down and do a lot of blow with the radio station people,” Way reveals. “The American DJs took to us because we used to have a laugh with them. They wanted to be part of us and that kind of kicked it on. That’s one of the reasons why *Force It* went into the charts over there.”

Another reason was UFO's ability to work a stadium audience. Touring the sheds with the likes of Edgar Winter, The J Geils Band, Jethro Tull and Steppenwolf, they realised quickly that American audiences wouldn't tolerate shy, retiring types.

“If you're playing an arena in the States, you can't end your show by going doodle-doodle-dum, doodle-doodle-dum,” says Way. “You've got to go... BANG! Thank you very much! BANG! See you next time! BANG! Goodnight!”

“A good scrub at the end, as we used to call it,” grins Parker.



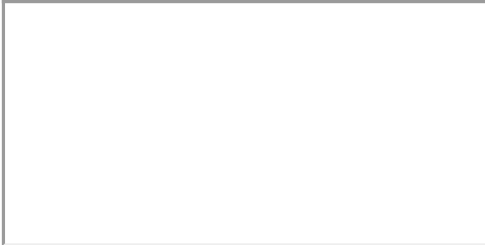
UFO stage two, with Paul Chapman in 1980 (Image credit: Getty Images)

UFO's third album for Chrysalis, *No Heavy Petting*, didn't chart in either the US or the UK. (“Perhaps we didn't do enough radio-station schmoozing,” admits Way.) But they turned their fortunes around with *Lights Out* (1977), *Obsession* (1978) and the career-defining *Strangers In The Night* (1978), a jaw-dropping double-live distillation of their career to date. Tracks such as *Only You Can Rock Me*, *This Kid's*, *Too Hot To Handle* and *Out In The Street* sounded forceful, powerful and potent. Packed with

unparalleled song writing maturity, they bristled with electricity and pulsed with passion. (Special mention must go to Mogg's terrifically evocative lyrics; imagine a British Springsteen or Mellencamp. We kid you not.)

"No doubt about it. Those songs are masterpieces, aren't they?" Mogg chuckles.

Unfortunately for UFO, Michael Schenker left during the mixing sessions for *Strangers In The Night*, to be replaced by Paul Chapman (ex-Lone Star, Chapman had briefly played guitar in UFO alongside Schenker circa 1974).



Whether this was the end of an era or the beginning of a new one is for UFO enthusiasts to debate. But as Way reflects: "A lot of the problems within the band would have been solved by someone just saying: 'Why don't you take three months off?' We were never given that opportunity. It was non-stop. It was back to back. At the time you put it down to management, they should have looked after us. Of course at the same time we're doing a lot of cocaine as well..."

"Okay, you're selling a lot of tickets, you're playing a lot of shows, but in the end it becomes meaningless. It's a bit like you're repeating yourself and then you need to revitalise yourself to make a new album. That's why we got into the fun aspect of it. But even fun wears out after a while."

UFO were a gang though, we remark.

"We were," says Way. "Right to the end."



Phil Mogg: "There's something essential about singing and playing, I don't care where" (Image credit: Getty Images)

With the anniversary of UFO'S formation approaching, it's interesting to compare the then with the now.

Phil Mogg, as we mentioned at the beginning of this story, lives in Brighton. His house is painted black and it's sandwiched between a pub and an old-fashioned ladies' hairdressers. It's located in, shall we say, one of the city's more colourful districts – something Mogg failed to realise when he moved there. There are sea views though, and just around the corner is a men's barber where he can get his barnet cut for £10.

Mogg has had his fair share of bust-ups with the hostelry next door, what with its customers performing lewd acts on his doorstep and everything. On one occasion Mogg's temper exploded and the police were called but it's all sorted now, he assures us, pointing to a recently installed, impregnable-looking, wrought-iron front fence.

Mogg won't let Pete Way come visit him. When we ask why the singer simply raises his eyebrows and says: "Sheesh – can you *imagine?*"



Mogg lives with his wife Emma, a former Page Three girl. They married in Gretna Green a couple of years back. No other guests were invited.

Mogg digs out a wedding photo. He and Emma are posing on the bonnet of a high-performance British Leyland Mini, its front grille festooned with fog-lights. He also shows us a framed picture of Emma taken when she was 15 years old – "I was going to get it blown up but they'd probably think I was a fucking paedophile" – and another one of his father dating back to the 1950s. ("He was a mechanic for the Eastern Electricity Board – and a very good one.")

Mogg is in reflective mood. "I've done stadiums and now I'm quite happy to play the pub down the road," he shrugs. "There's something essential about singing and playing, and it doesn't have to be huge. I don't need it. I've done it. I've been there. It doesn't bother me any more. It bothers certain other people, but not me. I'm quite happy just playing and kicking a bit of arse now and again.

"It doesn't," he repeats, "bother me any more."

Mogg turned 60 on April 15.



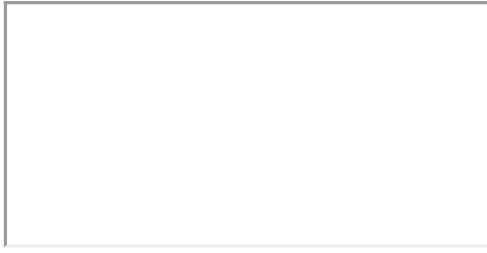
(Image credit: Getty Images)

Pete Way lives in an end-terrace house with broken windows in Birmingham. The house is in the process of being restored by builder friends who pop in occasionally but always seem to have more lucrative work to do. The broken windows were caused by a contretemps between Way and a stepladder.

“Can you take a photo of Phil’s house when you go see him?” Ways requests. “He won’t let me visit, you know, and I’d like to see what his house looks like.”

Way lives with his lovely American missus Rashida (wife No.5) who to this day battles to keep her husband on the straight and narrow. She’s naturally suspicious of anyone who hung around with UFO in the 1970s – which means *Classic Rock* comes under scrutiny. When Way gets us a can of fizzy drink out of the fridge he jokes: “Geoff enjoys his Coke, you know.” Rashida knits her brows. She is not amused.

Way is concerned about his forthcoming medical, which will determine whether he’ll be allowed back into America to tour with UFO. “I’m down to a bottle of wine a day,” he claims, “but my hands still shake a bit. I’m worried they’ll ask me about the scars on my arms. And I’m scared they’ll examine my groin because I used to inject there as well.”



(In the event Way failed his medical due to liver and kidney damage, and his US working visa was refused. His place in UFO was taken temporarily by Rob de Luca of Sebastian Bach's band. "The past catches up with you," Way tells us. "I'm not exactly flavour of the month with UFO at the moment.")

Way reveals that UFO's German manager, Peter Knorn, is trying to persuade them to reintroduce *Boogie For George* and *Prince Kajuku*, two songs from their space-rock days, into their live set.

"Peter's desperate for us to do it and he says the crowds will go crazy, particularly in Germany. We might do it for a laugh. Vinnie [Moore, UFO's current guitarist] can play *Boogie For George*. He can play *Prince Kajuku* as well. With his juju stick or whatever it is."

After a period out of the music business working for his family's firm in Hertfordshire, Andy Parker was invited back into the UFO fold in late 2005.

"I was sitting at home and the phone rang," he recalls. "It was [UFO keyboardist] Paul Raymond. He said: 'Phil Mogg says you won't be interested because he's asked you before, but we've got this gig in Spain in November – would you be interested in playing?' I said yes and it was like I'd never left."



(Image credit: Getty Images)

Parker now lives in Granbury, Texas, with his wife Jo. "She's from Dallas, so we decided to move to Texas. Jo has this friend who's a property developer and he was working in Granbury, about 45 minutes from Fort Worth and an hour and a half from Dallas. He

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kept saying what a great little town it was. So that's where we moved to."

Parker says he has much more influence on the day-to-day running of UFO than he used to.

"Peter, the manager, tends to run things by me. Phil never answers his emails and half the time he won't answer his phone. It's really hard to get hold of him. And Pete is Pete, you know? I don't think I've that much influence, but it's nice that people ask me now. I never used to get asked anything before."

With regard to UFO's longevity, Parker says the band would be nothing without Mogg: "That guy's just kept us going all this time. At some points he was the only original left. He's just kept the fucking thing going and that's not an easy thing to do.



"That's why it was so sad when I left UFO in the early 1980s, because it had degenerated to the point where Phil wasn't communicating with the audience. He used to stand there with his back to the crowd for what seemed like ages. He started abusing them."

Parker says he enjoys Mogg's company these days. "I can actually have fun with Phil now. In the past you couldn't say anything to him or the fists would start flying, he was so volatile.

"He was a difficult guy to deal with. Nothing was ever quite right and he always seemed very angry. He's mellowed a lot. I'm glad Phil's doing okay because I never hear much from him when we're off the road. That's the frustrating thing – we don't play too much these days and we hardly rehearse at all. I'd love to do a bit more.

"It's almost," Parker reflects, "like we've gone from one extreme to the other."

This article originally appeared in *Classic Rock* #121.

For more UFO and Phil Mogg, then click on the link below.

[Heavy Load: Phil Mogg](#)

Geoff Barton is a British journalist who founded the heavy metal magazine Kerrang! and was an editor of Sounds music magazine. He specialised in covering rock music and helped popularise the new wave of British heavy metal (NWOBHM) after using the term for the first time (after editor Alan Lewis coined it) in the May 1979 issue of Sounds.

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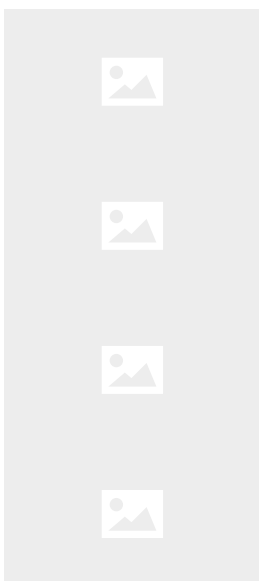
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