

INXS in Chicago in 1988. From left: Kirk Pengilly, Garry Beers, Jon Farriss, Tim Farriss, Michael Hutchence and Andrew Farriss.



REVENGE NEVER TEAR US APART

THE STORY BEHIND THE MAKING OF INXS' MOST MISUNDERSTOOD AND SUCCESSFUL ALBUM: *KICK*

BY ERIC SPITZNAGEL

CHRIS MURPHY, INXS' longtime manager, says he won't forget the day he knew that *Kick* would be the band's breakthrough album, because, he claims, it

was the same day he learned that Atlantic Records wanted nothing to do with it.

One afternoon in 1987, says Murphy, a foppish, wisecracking Australian, he brought a copy of the band's sixth album to the New York office of Doug Morris, then-president of Atlantic. Its ATCO label had released INXS' previous LPs, and its last, 1985's *Listen Like Thieves*, had yielded the group's biggest hit to date, the Billboard Hot 100 No. 5 single "What You Need." Expectations were high for the Sydney-based band, in no small part due to the bedroom-eyed charisma of singer Michael Hutchence. "He was a cross between Mick Jagger and Jim Morrison," says Alan Hunter, an MTV VJ for much of the 1980s. "He had such an amazing mystique about him — and a little bit of androgyny."

With no one else in the office, Murphy says, "Doug listened to the whole thing without saying a word. He just looked at the floor with his eyes closed." When it was over, Murphy claims Morris offered him \$1 million to erase the tapes and start from scratch. Morris, adds Murphy, deemed *Kick* "lightweight," telling the manager that "INXS are rockers, and this isn't rock."

Murphy says he left the meeting in a daze, but his despair turned to resolve. The

son of theatrical booking agents, he was no stranger to wholesale rejection. "I thought, 'Fuck it all. I'll do this myself,'" he says. "I knew *Kick* was going to be huge."

Andrew Farriss, INXS' keyboardist-guitarist and, with Hutchence, principal songwriter on *Kick*, recalls the label's frosty reception to the album as well. "They thought we were all from outer space," he says. "Their first response was, 'You can't put out this record! It doesn't sound like the hair bands wearing Spandex!' But we were like, 'If you put this out, it's going to do well. Trust us.'"

Morris, now chairman of Sony Music Entertainment, tells a much different version of his meeting with Murphy — and his reaction to *Kick*. "I thought it was a wonderful record," he insists. "I said, 'That kid [Hutchence] is going to be a huge star.' Whatever Murphy told you, I give you my word it's not true."

It is one of a number of details about the handling of *Kick* that — 30 years after its release in late-October 1987 — still finds the INXS and Atlantic camps disputing each other's accounts of how things went down. Responding to Murphy's version of his meeting with Morris, for instance, Reen Nalli, who was then-head of ATCO, says, "As far as the rest of us were told, we were putting out the album as planned."

What isn't in dispute is that the album was a game-changer for INXS and, arguably, the direction of pop music as well. It went on to become INXS' highest- and longest-charting album, reaching No. 3 on the Billboard 200 and remaining on the tally for a record 81 weeks. It yielded four Hot 100 top 10 hits — "New Sensation," "Never Tear

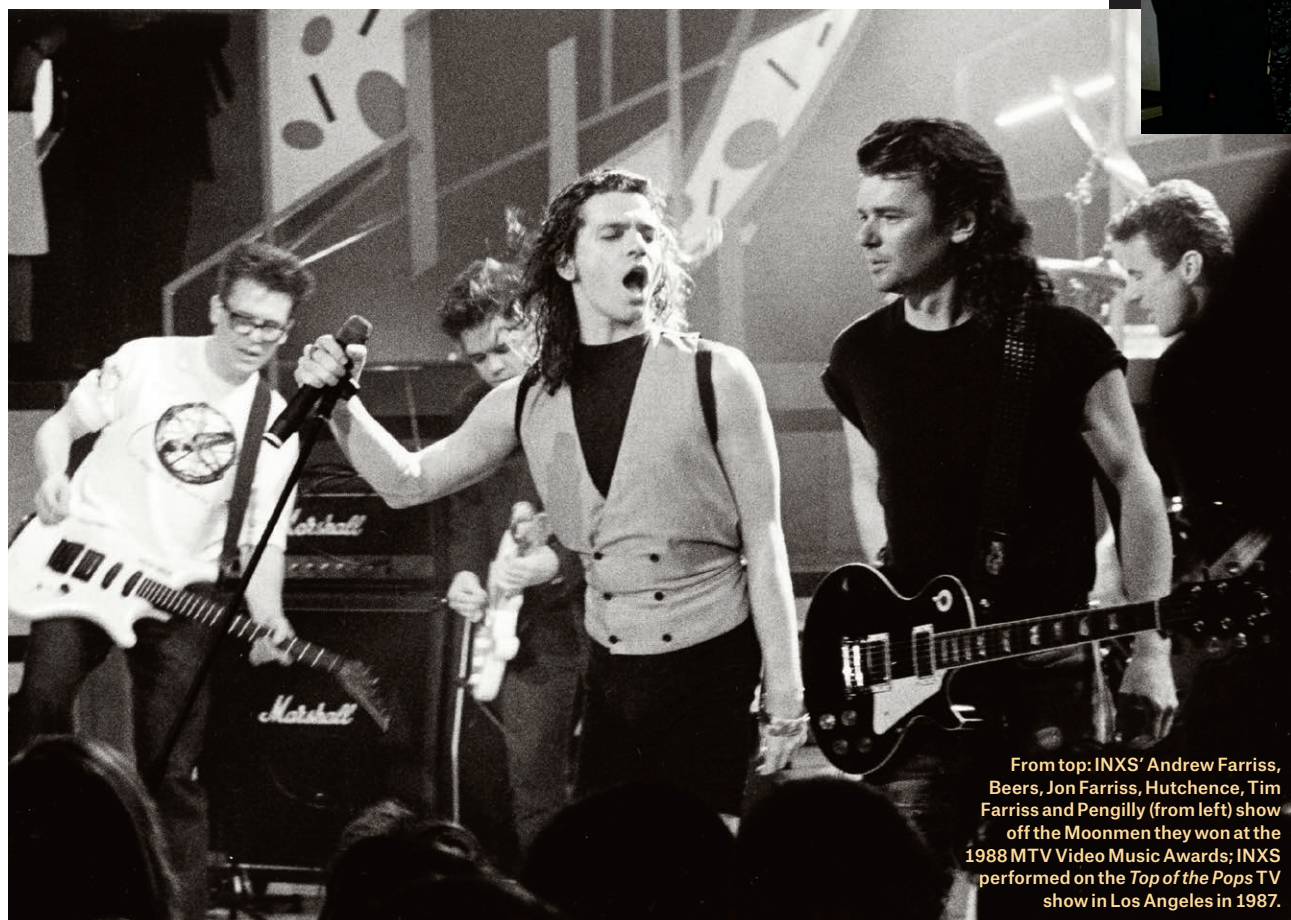
Us Apart," "Devil Inside" and the band's first and only Hot 100 No. 1, "Need You Tonight" — on its way to being certified six times platinum by the RIAA.

It also altered the soundscape of late-'80s pop music: a muscular mix of pop, rock, funk and dance that challenged master genre-blender Michael Jackson, who was riding the charts with *Bad*, and inspired contemporary hitmakers such as Maroon 5.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the band's rise from Australia's pub scene, where audiences could be merciless, INXS had never been an easily pigeonholed act. One of its early singles, "Original Sin," was a dance-club hit in 1984. Even Nalli had difficulty parsing the group's musical identity. "People would say, 'They're a pop band,' and I would tell them, 'No, that's... close, but... there's a little pop, some funk and other influences in there.' I'd get so frustrated and say, 'Just go see them in concert. You'll get it.'"

But judged by its two hits at that point, "The One Thing" and "What You Need," INXS fell most readily into the rock category — which made *Kick* as unexpected a next step for INXS as Justin Bieber's 2015 post-teenybopper collaboration with Skrillex

"[ATLANTIC] THOUGHT WE WERE ALL FROM OUTER SPACE. THEIR FIRST RESPONSE WAS, 'YOU CAN'T PUT OUT THIS RECORD!'" —ANDREW FARRISS



From top: INXS' Andrew Farriss, Beers, Jon Farriss, Hutchence, Tim Farriss and Pengilly (from left) show off the Moonmen they won at the 1988 MTV Video Music Awards; INXS performed on the *Top of the Pops* TV show in Los Angeles in 1987.

and Diplo, *Purpose*.

"*Kick* was so radically different from anything being played at the time on the radio or MTV," says Hunter. "It had a very rhythmic, bottom-heavy sound to it. It was less synth-heavy than a lot of music on the charts — even though they [used] synthesizers — and more about the rhythm." But, adds Hunter, "The big question was, What was it trying to be? Dance music? Straight-ahead rock? Some kind of funk-rock hybrid? It didn't fit in an easy niche. Remember, this was in a year when the biggest albums out there were by Michael Jackson [*Bad*], U2 [*The Joshua Tree*] and the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack."

Farriss says that, when it came time to write and record *Kick*, INXS' members — who included two of his brothers, drummer Jon Farriss and lead guitarist Tim Farriss — set out to make a record that didn't share any musical DNA with the hits of the time. "Anyone can write a song that sounds

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contemporary,” he says. “We wanted our songs to sound like the future.”

With the rest of the band’s blessing, *Kick* was the first INXS record written by Andrew Farriss and Hutchence without input from the other members. The two booked a trip to Hutchence’s native Hong Kong in search of inspiration for “an album in which every song could be a single,” says Farriss. There, they often worked independently, coming together regularly with ideas that eventually evolved into songs. “Hutchence’s instrument was his vocals; he couldn’t explain what he was thinking in musical terms,” says Farriss. “He would say things like, ‘It needs to feel like this.’ And I’d try to translate that into notes.”

The duo returned to Sydney with a cassette tape full of bare-bone songs, and fleshed them out in a studio with the band — in addition to Hutchence and the Farriss brothers, Kirk Pengilly (saxophone, guitar) and Garry Beers (bass) — guided by Chris Thomas, who had produced albums by Roxy Music, the Sex Pistols and Elton John.

According to Murphy, after his dispiriting meeting with Morris, he says, “I thought, ‘If Atlantic doesn’t want to release this, let’s force them to release it,’ ” and sought to



A scene from the video for “Need You Tonight/Mediate,” which paid homage to Bob Dylan.

drum up support for *Kick* within the lower ranks of Atlantic by playing “Need You Tonight” to a gathering of the label’s radio promotion, sales and marketing divisions. Murphy remembers it as “one of the most uncomfortable meetings I’ve ever been to. After the track finished, no one said anything. They just stared at their feet.”

Andrea Ganis, then a director of top 40 radio promotions, was the exception. The only woman in the group (and the youngest person there), she recalls, “I heard something that I’d never heard before in my life. It hit me on a visceral, gut level. Those guitars were unbelievable.” Ganis, now an executive vp at Atlantic, hums the stabbing guitar riff from “Need You Tonight” — “I blurted out, ‘This is a No. 1 record!’ ”

Murphy remembers it slightly differently, insisting that Ganis shouted, “‘That’s a fucking hit!’ ”

He claims that he generated additional buzz for *Kick* the old-fashioned way: spending his and the band’s own money, by liquidating real estate and other assets, to hire a team of independent promoters and marketers to launch a campaign for an album that technically wasn’t for sale yet. “We did it backward,” says Murphy

HUTCHENCE HOMAGES

Artists who’ve written songs about the late INXS frontman



1. U2, “Stuck in a Moment You Can’t Get Out Of”

Album *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* (2000)

Frontman Bono has said that the track is an imagined argument between him and his friend Hutchence about the foolishness of suicide. “The biggest respect I could pay to him was to not write some stupid soppy song,” he said.



2. Smashing Pumpkins, “Shame”

Album *Adore* (1998)

Pumpkins singer-songwriter Billy Corgan pondered what he would have told Hutchence in the days leading up to the INXS singer’s suicide. Sample lyrics: “You’re going to see this through/ Don’t let them get to you.”



3. Duran Duran, “Michael You’ve Got a Lot to Answer For”

Album *Medazzaland* (1997)

Released shortly before Hutchence’s death, Simon Le Bon, told *Q* magazine it was about “Michael being a naughty boy ... when he was living with Paula Yates. He did like his substances.”



Hutchence during the recording of the music video for “Mystify,” off INXS’ *Kick* album.

with a laugh, by targeting college radio and booking university gigs where INXS spread the word by playing songs from *Kick* live.

“That’s such bullshit,” says Nalli of Murphy’s claim that he hired an indie promotion team. She agrees that college radio was targeted for *Kick* — “we went after it like it was pop radio,” she says — but insists it was hardly a rogue operation that Murphy engineered. “My team worked their butts off to get those songs on college radio,” says Nalli, who’s now an A&R consultant. “By no means were we throwing up our arms and saying, ‘We give in!’ We did a full-blown college promotion thing, and it paid off.” That said, she calls Murphy “brilliant” for helping Atlantic to promote the album long before its official release, then adds, straight-faced, “I taught him everything.”

When *Kick* was released, Jackson’s *Bad* held the top spot on the Billboard 200. On the Hot 100 dated Jan. 30, 1988, “Need You Tonight” knocked “The Way You Make Me Feel” — the third single from *Bad* — out of the No. 1 spot. In late February, *Kick* peaked at No. 3 on the Billboard 200, topped only by George Michael’s *Faith* and *Dirty Dancing*. The follow-up single, “Devil Inside,” spent two weeks at No. 2 on the Hot 100; “New Sensation” and “Never Tear Us Apart” would rise to No. 3 and No. 7, respectively.

MTV also played a significant role in the selling of INXS, but Hunter says the push began long before *Kick*. Beginning in 1982, he recalls VJs “being called into meetings with executives, who told us there was an arrangement between Atlantic and the network. We were going to see if MTV could break a band.” INXS would serve as a guinea pig, and, indeed, heavy video rotation of its debut U.S. single, “The One Thing,” in 1983, helped drive the song to No. 30 on the Hot 100. “We were always getting pressured to talk up the band,” says Hunter, and though *Kick* was released as he was leaving MTV, he recalls in-house discussions about “programming the hell out of the album, to see if it can have an impact.” (Judy Libow, then a promotion vp for Atlantic, says that no such arrangement existed, saying MTV was simply “part of the marketing puzzle.”)

MTV’s attention certainly didn’t hurt,

and the video for “Need You Tonight/Mediate” — the visuals for the latter song a spoof of Bob Dylan’s cue-card-wielding “Subterranean Homesick Blues” scenes from D.A. Pennebaker’s 1967 documentary *Don’t Look Back* — won five Moonmen at the MTV Video Music Awards in 1988.

One thing that all parties agree upon is that Hutchence was the biggest factor in INXS’ global success. “If I knew nothing else about *Kick*, I knew that this kid was going to be a star,” says Morris, although the singer’s stardom would be brief.

Hutchence committed suicide in 1997, hanging himself at age 37 with his own belt in a room at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Sydney just days before INXS was set to go on tour. He reportedly was distraught at not being able to see his 16-month-old daughter, Heavenly Hiraani Tiger Lily, whom he had fathered after a long affair with Live Aid organizer Bob Geldof’s wife, Paula Yates. Hutchence reportedly was despondent over an injunction filed by Geldof — as part of a custody battle with his ex-wife Yates — that kept mother and daughter from traveling to see him. (Yates, who died from a heroin overdose in 2000, offered another theory in a *60 Minutes* interview: that Hutchence had died from autoerotic asphyxiation.)

Since its release, *Kick* has sold an estimated 5 million copies (based on RIAA certification figures and Nielsen Music sales data). Those numbers should grow with the Nov. 13 reissue of an expanded anniversary edition of the album. The surviving members of INXS have toured with three different replacement singers since their bandmate’s death — one hired from a 2005 reality-show competition — but officially announced their retirement during a concert in Australia in November 2012.

Murphy ceased managing the band in 1995 but continues to develop and license projects that involve INXS’ music as chairman/CEO of Petrol Records. (An off-Broadway musical and documentary on Hutchence are in the works.)

Thirty years after the release of *Kick*, the album still lives up to its name. “If Shawn Mendes sang ‘Need You Tonight’ in 2017,” says Murphy, “it would be huge.” ●

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