JETT PROPELLED She's got a big, swanky tour bus, the Blackhearts backing her up, a savvy manager, legions of loyal fans and an ultra-cool black leatherjacket. Whaat more could a hard rocker want?

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It's one of those big, plush rock and roll dreadnoughts, and it's slipping down Interstate 95 toward Baltimore like a silver dollar skipping over water. This baby has everything: designer Venetian blinds, real wood paneling, two VCRs, tres chic bathroom tile that overflows into the main aisle right up to the wet bar. There are a dozen cozy bunks, a full-length mirror and, of course, rock and rollers.

In this case, very hard rock and rollers: a tattoo-ridden, all-male trio of Blackhearts with large hair, excellent sunglasses and a drummer with a ring in his nose. At the moment, they sit up front, giggling and cavorting over an Andrew Dice Clay video. Their curling, hanging cigarette smoke mingles with the sound of the Diceman waxing putrescent; the air up here is exactly what the atmosphere will be like on the morning after doomsday.

Way in the back, where she has made it clear she isn't amused by the sexually explicit blurtations of the Diceman, sits Joan Jett, the 31-year-old leader of the band. As usual she is clad totally in black: short-cropped hair with the luster of polished onyx; a black, long-sleeve turtleneck set off by layers of silver chains, each supporting a silver ball or a pendant; her fingers sport a glitter of rings and around her wrists a jangle of simple silver bands competes with a lone black scarf wrapped around a forearm. Her jeans are tight and black, falling over soft, black leather boots. From her waist she has just removed a huge black gunfighter's belt that slings a black leather fanny pack along her hip.

But there, beside her, almost a presence unto itself, sits the piece de resistance, the sacred coat: a black leather, chrome-studded biker's jacket with more belts than a cheap saloon. It looks tough enough to clear out a joint on its own.

All of that black serves only as a stark, slightly unsettling, sometimes alluring contrast with her face. Pale, heavily made up so as to be almost theatrical, it says ever so brazenly "read my lips." And those lips are as red and as startling as a trooper in the rear-view mirror at midnight.

But then, as improbable an ending as a Woody Allen punch line, her eyes come into focus. A gentle, sweet, non sequitur brown, they betray a soft vulnerability

behind her leathery image. You can even hear it in her voice, a deep, raspy purr, like a panther with laryngitis.

"I guess I have to take credit for the name Blackhearts," she says, grinning. "I thought it would be easy for people to write the name of the band on bathroom walls. So it would be remembered."

Across the aisle, a sandy-haired ex-keyboard player named Kenny Laguna nods. "It's a nautical term," he says. She frowns at him, this man who rescued her career from oblivion 10 years ago and who has served ever since as her manager and mentor.

"Really," he says. "From the days of pirates and tall ships. I looked it up. A blackheart was someone who went his own way."

She digests it for a moment, lowers those brown eyes. She says almost to herself, "A blackheart is a loner."

ACTUALLY, BLACKHEART FITS Joan Jett almost better than it does the boys at the front of the bus. Her uncompromising approach to her music (Kenny prefers the word stubborn) has long kept her out of the Top 40 -- the musical path to the land of commercial success. Her image as a tough-talking, hard-rocking biker vixen with a bad reputation, has kept her largely a cult figure, a quirky enigma who every now and then surprises the pop world with a perfectly viable hit like "I Love Rock and Roll" or "I Hate Myself for Loving You."

The trouble is, every time her appeal broadens, the hard-core base of her fans -- to whom she feels an almost visceral loyalty -- shouts betrayal. In the meantime, the pop-music establishment, still remembering her punkish days in the '70s as a member of the first all-girl band, the Runaways, and a pal of Sex Pistols bad boy Sid Vicious, never quite accepts her. She gets scant, if any, attention on Top 40 stations.

And so, instead of playing the big amphitheaters, she dogs the small-club circuit -- her tour bus is heading even now toward a rendezvous with Hammerjacks, bringing Joan, a former Marylander, back to the fringes of downtown Baltimore. Endlessly gigging her way across the country, she and the Blackhearts play in places like Buffalo, N.Y., or Fargo, N.D., or Pipestone, Minn. But, she says, she loves it, says she doesn't regret that one of her former bandmates from the Runaways -- Julie Fox -- has gone on to become a Harvard lawyer. "In my next life I can do that. How many times do you get to do this? To get to be able to do this? For a reason deeper than I know . . . "

Buried within all of that depth lies a stubborn idealism. She steadfastly refuses, for instance, to lend her name or voice or lyrics to lucrative television commercials. She rails at the way a beer jingle can use a pop song to push its product but corrupt the mental associations one has for the song and its time in history.

"No amount of money could pay me to buy off those memories," she says. "They said I could just sing a commercial and not use my name. They said no one will know it's you. But I'll know. Take money? To ruin `I Love Rock and Roll' forever?"

Across the aisle, where his eyes are shielded by sunglasses, you can almost see Kenny's orbs rolling back into his head at such pronouncements. This is the man who had to cajole Joan into buying a fancy sports car -- a black Jaguar -- threatening to buy her one himself if she didn't. Well, she bought it, but doesn't drive it that often. She says she leads a bohemian existence, doesn't need

much money, only occasionally goes out to buy a pair of pants or a new bondage belt.

Kenny throws up his hands. As her manager he knows that 300 road shows a year are pretty much required to make ends meet and keep Joan in black leather and the boys in that fancy-bathroom-tile fast lane. He would love her to do commercials. He needles her about it, jokes about what could be done with all the cash, but because he is also her friend he is not about to push her.

WHEN KENNY MET JOAN IN 1980, she was a burned-out punk rocker without a focus. Born in Philadelphia, she moved with her family to Rockville, Md., during the mid-'60s. It was there she got her first guitar as a gift, and also fell in love with the Orioles. When she was 13, her father, a salesman, was transferred to Los Angeles. During two years of hanging around with the glitter rock-and-roll set of Hollywood, she taught herself the guitar. In 1976 she helped found the Runaways. "I didn't see anything else like it then," she says of the all-girl rock quartet. "I thought, `What a way to grab attention.' But the attitude was, `Girls were supposed to get married and have children.' It amazed me, the fact people said I couldn't do it. I wanted to prove girls were capable of playing rock and roll. But everybody expected us to take off our clothes."

In order to play with the Runaways, she left high school in her senior year, earning her diploma by passing a GED test.

"My parents were not too pleased," she says. "I'm sure they would have preferred I chose to do something else. My parents were separated by then. My father didn't have a say in it. It was more or less my Mom. She knew what I wanted. I loved being part of a band, playing guitar, just learning to write songs and express myself."

Still, the Runaways ran their course by the time she was 20, and most of the pop music world thought Joan Jett's career was finished. Enter Kenny Laguna.

In the '60s he was the keyboard player for a variety of rock-candy bands like Tommy James and the Shondells and the 1910 Fruitgum Company, and by 1980 he was a songwriter-producer-music impresario. When he and his wife, Meryl, met Joan back then, they immediately liked her and more or less adopted her. Even today she lives much of the time at their Long Island home.

It was Kenny, over the last decade, who navigated her through the confusing maze into which pop music had evolved. Whereas once any music with an electric guitar was rock and roll, there is now post-punk and heavy metal and new wave and alternative and a zillion other offshoots including something completely off the wall called rock and roll. Each niche is a minor kingdom unto itself; there are monarchs and there are outcasts and given the whimsical nature of music fans, today's sultan is very likely to be tomorrow's swat.

When no major labels were interested in Joan, Kenny engineered a new career for her by the strategic release of independently produced albums. He has continuously and protectively kept her on course as a No. 1 favorite in the ever-shrinking niche of basic hard-rock music. But he is clearly worried.

"Now you've got to fight for rock and roll," he says. "You call a radio station to get them to play one of Joan's songs and they say, `I already played a rock song.' It's a funny generation. That thing that rock and roll spawned from is almost over. Now you hear rock coming out of BMWs."

Joan smiles, the scorn thick in her voice. "Now, everybody has a leather jacket in their closet ready for their rock night," she says. "There used to be a meaning

behind the leather, beyond looking cool. It wasn't a fashion statement, it was just a statement. Now it means nothing."

She looks suddenly sad, her voice dropping a notch. "But it still means something to me."

Kenny is chuckling. "As a kid I had to hide my leather jacket from my father. I kept it at a friend's house. Sometimes he'd come by school and see me with it and I'd have to come up with a story."

Joan, who grew up a decade later, nods. "It was the same when I wore my jacket. Parents don't like leather jackets, that's part of it. Everyone made fun of me in California. They threw things at me when I wore my jacket. They thought I was weird. They didn't understand. Nor did they understand the guitar playing. I really don't know what their problem was."

Kenny does. Most definitely.

"It's part of the erosion of rock and roll."

BUT, JUDGING BY THE SIZE of the crowd at Hammerjacks, when the Blackhearts and their bus pull into town, there has been very little erosion in this part of the world.

To the uninitiated, Hammerjacks is that brooding hard-rock quarry on the fringes of Camden Yards, the one commuters skirt daily as they drive into Baltimore along the I-395 overpass. This oddly peaked, barnlike structure, topped by a sign that features lighting bolts striking a hammer, is known to many only as Joan Jett is known: by a tough reputation. Hammerjacks is a place where banjo players need not apply, where ear drums are an endangered species, where, in comparison, the barrel of a 12-bore gun is about as noisy as a Christian Science Reading Room. It is a place where fully cranked guitars and drums literally move the air, riffle your clothing, drive you back like a bouncer with an attitude.

At 31, Joan Jett has been rocking and rolling longer than she hasn't and she loves clubs like this. It goes back to her basic reasons for getting her parents to give her that guitar when she was a Rockville teen-ager. When she got it she didn't start strumming sweet Joni Mitchell stuff, but went immediately to the heavy base power chords all the way up the neck, playing along with records by groups like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Cream and T. Rex.

"I wanted something primitive," she says. "The really enjoyable thing was just learning to write songs and express myself through music. Playing guitar, you have a real physical connection to the music. It's something you feel. That's why I enjoy playing in small venues. The front row is 20 feet away."

As she speaks, she gets to her feet and leans across the aisle of the bus, playing an air guitar a foot from Kenny's face.

"I'm only a few feet away," she says, still strumming the air. "They see your face, they see what's going on, they get that extra feeling from the actual performance: the primitiveness of it. They see the music played -- not that we do anything special -- but they see my eyes, my mouth. I'm singing to everybody and it feels good."

Kenny is smiling again. He tells the story of what happened when he first met Joan after the Runaways folded. He took her in, bought her a pair of jeans

because she didn't have any money and had only one pair of pants to her name. He then helped her put together an album of songs -- they co-wrote most of them -- and when they were about to start recording he suggested she allow studio musicians to overdub her rhythm guitar parts. She went through the roof and threatened to walk out.

"She confronts me on that right away," he says. "I said, `You're so f------ poor you don't even have two pairs of pants. So don't do the record.' She said, `I'd rather work at McDonald's.' And I'm thinking, `Where does she get these balls to say this?' She calls my bluff right away."

"Right," says Joan. "I wasn't going to change just to get accepted."

"She was pretty wild," adds Kenny. "So many kids were coming to see her, kids who felt disenfranchised. She had a black leather jacket, she was singing that you didn't have to give a s--- about your reputation. It was vivid. It was definitely a statement. It was her. She got better, she drank less. When I met her she was a wild drinker. We used to have five glasses of wine on stage. Then, boom, she stopped outright."

"Yeah," she says. "Those were times when it was pretty crazy. I wasn't afraid of dying. I was afraid of losing the band, of not being able to be a musician."

THE CAPACITY CROWD AT Hammerjacks this Friday night is mostly a young one in their early 20s, most of them wearing jeans and sneakers. A few with leather jackets, a few more with Orioles caps.

A contingent of Oriole front-office folk pays Joan a visit in her dressing room before the show. Her association with the team goes back to the day in August of 1969 when her father took her to her first ballgame at Memorial Stadium. She was 9. Jim Palmer that day threw a no-hitter, and ever since she has been a fanatical Oriole fan. Every night during the season she checks scores by phone as soon as she gets off stage. She is no stranger to the Oriole clubhouse, is so well-known there that she was invited to sing the national anthem on opening day in 1989. And last spring she participated in the Orioles' annual fantasy camp in Florida for fans who have diamonds in their dreams.

In the darkened hallway outside her dressing room, she talks with Charles Steinberg, the Orioles' director of productions. She is hopeful about new Oriole additions Rick Sutcliffe and Storm Davis. There is some talk that maybe she could do the national anthem in the new stadium. She seems excited.

To her, athletics and rock and roll have a lot in common. She never played Little League, she says, only sandlot ball. Rock and roll is a lot like the sandlot. You improvise, you are freed from structure, you get to wear whatever clothes you want to wear, you can't get thrown off the team for swearing.

A few minutes later she is on stage, and she is a different person from the withdrawn, nervous figure on her bus. Her Gibson Musicmaker guitar is white, her costume this night is all black, topped by a red spangled jacket. For 90 straight minutes she twists and jumps, throwing her body, squealing her trademark "Ow!"

Her music is as basic as rock can get. Three guitars, drums, unchained energy and sweat. It is loud and aggressive, her lyrics suggestive and defiant: a foaming rebellion against all in life that stinks.

I been laughed at

I been shut out

but let there be no doubt

I never been afraid of the chances I'm taking

It offers, if not hope, then the next best thing, an opportunity to rage against hopelessness, whether the hopelessness is merely of getting to the bar for another beer, of getting some action going or of just getting a life.

I'm just a victim of circumstance

just a victim of a bad reputation

I got no chance to shake it

For all the rebellion, though, she will point to a fairly basic British-written tune as her definition. "It may sound corny but I'd say `I Love Rock and Roll' is the one song that sums me up," she says. "It's such pure emotion. There aren't a lot of complicated explanations required about it. It's just there."

The audience loves her, calls her back. After the show, as her bus pulls away, heading for her hotel, a young man runs after, pulling his T-shirt up. She turns in her seat, laughing. Kenny says, "He's just showing you his chest." She laughs again and says, "Yeah, but I've never seen it done like that before."

IN THE HOTEL, KENNY turns serious again, worrying about rock and roll's future.

"There's a lot of menace to rock and roll," he says. "Rock has to have a certain rage. That's the thing that can't be taught. To me it's maxed out. Corporate America and rock and roll have merged. Rock and roll stood against that. I think the fans see it but I don't think they care. We're a lazy society. The desire to go out and see the subculture has disappeared. Maybe rock and roll is simply like Sinatra was with the last generation. Rock and roll was a rebellion against something. Now it is that thing."

Joan, though, seems relaxed, different from the costumed woman on the bus, different from the wild performer on stage. This persona seems more at home with those brown eyes, thoughtful, introspective, smiling.

"People usually use the word aggressive to describe me," she says. "I somehow don't think that's the right word. Tough? I think the word tough is too much. I think people get tough and aggressive mixed up with mean. I don't think I'm mean. For the most part I think I'm fairly easy to get along with."

That seemed evident after the Hammerjacks show when she sat on her bus for an hour, happily signing autographs and posing for snapshots with some of the most polite fans ever to grace a rock and roll coach.

"I was always too shy to ask people for an autograph," she says. "Too many times you see bands tell people to f--- off. It's such a special thing, getting an autograph. . . . "

But Kenny worries about her fans.

"Joan has menace in her whole persona," says Kenny. "Some of her fans are scary. Among the disenfranchised are a lot of fans who think she's singing to them."

Of course they do. The disenfranchised are her crowd and she's not about to abandon them. They, after all, are the ones who know why they're wearing leather.

"You've got a responsibility to stay true to your kind of music, to not have a veneer of safeness over you," she says. "How many of us feel disenfranchised with life? You don't have to be screwed up to relate to this music. You can just have everyday problems. Kids find it easy to relate to."

She pauses, leans forward for emphasis, her voice as intense as it was two hours ago.

"They empower themselves by realizing they understand what I'm saying," says the No. 1 Blackheart. "It's us together."

[Illustration]
COLOR PHOTO 1 COLOR PHOTO 2 COLOR PHOTO 3 COLOR PHOTO 4 COLOR PHOTO 51 COLOR PHOTO 6; Caption: JOAN JETT AT HAMMERJACKS, A CLUB ON THE FRINGES OF CAMDEN YARDS. SHE ENJOYS PLAYING SMALL VENUES, WITH CROWDS CLOSE TO THE STAGE. JOAN'S MUSIC IS AS BASIC AS ROCK CAN GET: THREE GUITARS, DRUMS, UNCHAINED ENERGY AND SWEAT. RIGHT, JOAN AWAITS HER CUE JUST BEFORE GOING ON STAGE. SAME AS COLOR PHOTO 2 JOAN'S TOUR BUS DROPS HER OFF AT A DOWNTOWN HOTEL FOR SOME R&R BEFORE HER HAMMERJACKS SHOW. JOAN DOES VOCAL EXERCISES IN HER DRESSING ROOM BEFORE THE CONCERT. "PLAYING GUITAR, YOU HAVE A REAL PHYSICAL CONNECTION TO THE MUSIC. IT'S SOMETHING YOU FEEL."; Credit: PATRICK SANDOR PATRICK SANDOR PATRICK SANDOR PATRICK SANDOR PATRICK SANDOR PATRICK SANDOR

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