Last week, the church of heavy metal lost a god. Ronnie James Dio is dead. He didn't die fighting wizards, knights, demons, dragons or any other mythical beast he wrote about. No, he left this mortal world on a hospital bed in Houston after a six-month battle with stomach cancer. There were rumors of his death spreading around the Internet as early as last Saturday night, however it wasn't until Sunday afternoon that his wife and manager, Wendy Dio, posted this announcement on her late husband's official website:

"Today my heart is broken. Ronnie passed away at 7:45 a.m. 16th May. Many, many friends and family were able to say their private good-byes before he peacefully passed away. Ronnie knew how much he was loved by all. We so appreciate the love and support that you have all given us. Please give us a few days of privacy to deal with the terrible loss. Please know he loved you all and his music will live on forever."

Born Ronald James Padavon in 1942 in Portsmouth, New Hampshire (where, in 1988, his street was renamed "Dio Way"), he grew up an only child in a very Roman Catholic environment, feeling very out of place. Later in life, he would channel these feelings when writing many songs dealing with medieval conflict, demons, hell and the perceptions of good versus evil.

Musically, his career began in 1957 when he added his bass guitar to the Cortlandt, New York-based rockabilly/surf-rock band The Vegas Kings. After a few name and lineup changes, the group parted ways in 1967. Shortly thereafter, Padavon (now using the stage name "Dio," after 1950s acid-throwing gangster Johnny Dio) got together with guitarist Nick Pantas and formed the blues-rock band Electric Elves (later shortened to Elves, then simply Elf). Dio enjoyed mild success over the next eight years as lead vocalist (six of those years also spent playing bass), usually touring as the opening act for English hard-rock band Deep Purple. His rich, powerful voice soon caught the ear of lead guitarist and six-string legend Richie Blackmore.

Upset with the funky, soulful "shoeshine music" Deep Purple was now gearing toward, Blackmore left the band in 1975 with hopes of fronting a new group. Originally, he contacted Dio

for vocals, but ended up adding all of Elf (minus guitarist) after recording an album using them as a session band. Thus, Rainbow was formed.

Dio and Blackmore quickly abandoned the overripe barroom boogie and blues-rock directions of their previous acts, instead focusing on creating something more heavy and progressive. That same year, the world got their first taste with the debut album RICHIE BLACKMORE'S RAINBOW. Blackmore's guitar work on this album ranged from classically influenced to progressive shredding to his staple melodic riffs, while Dio's versatile vocal range proved fit to switch from deep hard-rock vocals to a higher, wailing ballad at the drop of a knight's helmet. He proved to be an equal powerhouse in his field, demonstrating a unique, larger-than-life style and complementing Blackmore's classical influences perfectly with lyrical content and a range that conjured up medieval and mystical images. However, the rest of the group was not such a snug fit.

Shortly after the album was released, Blackmore fired everyone except Dio; The funky bass playing and R&B drumming was like trying to shove square pegs into round holes. Blackmore quickly recruited a new line-up: Tony Carey on keyboards, Jimmy Bain on bass guitar and Cozy Powell on drums. This time, everything fit perfectly, and 1976 saw the release of the definitive Rainbow album, RISING.

Before you even listen to the songs, fantasy artist Ken Kelly's staggering, majestic cover art gives a taste of what's in store. There are only six tracks on this album, totaling about 34 minutes, yet it's an epic piece of work. Each member is in top form, especially on the eight-minute, 26-second centerpiece track "Stargazer." The Munich Philharmonic Orchestra is also present, adding even more atmosphere to the thunder. I dare you to not get chills while listening to this one; I get them just thinking about it. "There's no sun in the shadow of the wizard" is a line I vividly remember immortalizing with a Sharpie on a random page of my seventh-grade social studies textbook. At the time I wasn't sure exactly what it meant, but I was positive it was pretty much the most bad-ass song lyric of all time, and I was sure whoever read it would agree.

RISING's release commenced the band's first world tour, during which the live album ON STAGE was recorded. The following year, Blackmore decided that Bain and Carey were substandard, so he fired and replaced them. 1978's LONG LIVE ROCK 'N' ROLL was the final Rainbow album to feature Dio on vocals. During the recording session, Blackmore fired the bassist and played the instrument himself on all but four songs. After the release and world tour, Blackmore decided that he wanted to take the group in a new, commercial direction, away from the sword-and-sorcery theme. Dio was getting annoyed at all the changes and made a decision

himself, to leave Rainbow. Although he never played an instrument on any of the albums, he is credited with writing and arranging the music with Blackmore, and creating all of the lyrics for the three studio recordings.

Having kicked Ozzy Osbourne out around that time, the remaining members of Black Sabbath knew they needed someone new to revitalize the band, and Dio was that man. He was not so much a replacement for Ozzy but a transformation. In 1980, they released the album HEAVEN AND HELL—which, thanks to Dio's all-out performance, became one of their best-selling albums and gained them new, younger fan base. The entire group's attitude and musical approach seemed to change with the addition of the new vocalist as well. His extreme, passionate vibrato exposed many of the former frontman's shortcomings, and gave new life to a slowly fading group. It was around this time that Dio popularized the "devil horns" hand gesture that has been flashed proudly by metal heads ever since. According to Dio, he learned it from his grandmother, who used to make the gesture to ward off "the evil eye."

After a year of world tours, a live album (LIVE AT LAST) and the theatrical release of BLACK AND BLUE, a film of their same-titled concert tour with Blue Öyster Cult, Black Sabbath headed back to the studio to record 1981's THE MOB RULES. This album was well-received by fans, yet bashed by critics. However, like a fine wine, it has gotten better with age, and is now hailed as a strong companion piece to the previous record, and one of Black Sabbath's best efforts.

Unhappy with the quality of the first live album, they decided to record LIVE EVIL during their coming world tour. During the record's mixing process, there was a falling out: Dio was wrongfully accused by the mixing engineer of sneaking into the studio after hours and raising the volume on his vocal tracks. Furthermore, he was not satisfied with the lack of pictures of himself in the artwork, and wanted more say in the layouts. Ultimately, he left the group in late 1982 to start his own band, and took drummer Vinny Appice with him.

Wanting to continue together immediately, the two formed the group Dio, and the following year released their debut album HOLY DIVER. It featured the hit singles "Rainbow in the Dark" and the title tune, which up-and-coming cable station MTV helped to popularize. Dio once again made a scorching impression on the heavy-metal community with an instant classic, which eventually certified gold in 1984 and platinum in 1989. For the recording of the album, he even

played keyboards on a few songs. With this album, which marked the first time he had complete creative control over the finished product since the days of Elf, Dio forged the mystic, medieval content of Rainbow with the two-ton riffs of Black Sabbath to create a truly mesmerizing sound.

The band released their second studio album, THE LAST IN LINE (which spawned the title-track video seen below, directed by Don Coscarelli), in 1984, and their third, SACRED HEART, the very next year. Also in 1985, Dio wrote the song “Stars” for Hear ’N Aid, an effort by the metal community to raise money for famine relief in Africa. The group’s fourth album, DREAM EVIL, was released two years later in 1987. After the release, there was a revamp in band members—some Dio’s choice, some of their own accord.

With a new lineup, the band released the album LOCK UP THE WOLVES in 1990. During the tour, as luck would have it, Dio ran into former Black Sabbath bandmate Geezer Butler, which led to a single-album reunion, DEHUMANIZER, in 1992.

After this Dio, reassembled his eponymous group once again, retaining only the drummer. During this era, the band abandoned sword-and-sorcery lyrical content and focused on modern social issues. As a result, some regard the albums made during this period—1994’s STRANGE HIGHWAYS, 1996’s ANGRY MACHINES and the live album INFERNO: LAST IN LIVE—as the weakest in their repertoire. Due to disappointing record sales, management wanted the band to go back to their earlier style.

After a four-year hiatus, their eighth studio record, MAGICA, was released. This concept album not only featured the return of numerous past members, but also a reprise of the group’s original, more successful sound. It would be regarded by many as a comeback album, reaching #13 on the Billboard charts. A ninth record, 2002’s KILLING THE DRAGON, was also well-received by fans. Two years later, they unleashed their tenth and final studio album, MASTER OF THE MOON.

[redacted]