

MUSIC

Billy Sheehan - A "Big" Bass Player

By Ward Porritt

Billy Sheehan is to bass guitar as Eddie Van Halen is to guitar playing. He's not just a rock star, he's a rock god.

Sheehan became a household name among hard rock fans when he joined David Lee Roth's post-Van Halen solo band. After the initial skepticism that greeted Roth's new line-up, Sheehan's blistering riffs on songs such as "Shyboy" (a song written by Sheehan) silenced the critics. Still, the 56-year-old virtuoso says he was never fazed by the media scrutiny.

"We were having such a great time when we put that band together," Sheehan recalls fondly. "We weren't even really thinking too much about any kind of competitive thing. It was like getting a PhD in show business working with Dave, that's for sure."

After touring with Roth and fellow axe wizard Steve Vai, Sheehan formed the group Mr. Big. A mild success initially, the band launched into the stratosphere when a Nebraska deejay Nebraska began playing their signature ballad "To Be With You."

"Sure enough, the thing took off and became number one on Billboard for three weeks," he says, mystified. "[We] sold millions of records."

However, Sheehan is quick to dispel rumors that the band was only successful overseas.

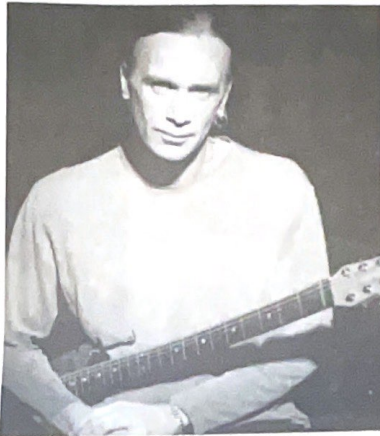
"Some people buy into the 'Big in Japan' cliché. We sold way more records in America than we did in Japan."

Normally, this would be the part of the article detailing how the rock star lifestyle inevitably overshadowed the music. That's not the case with Billy Sheehan.

"I was never a drug guy," he admits. "A couple bottles of wine will take care of a whole weekend for me. [I] was always pretty much focused on music more so than any kind of a lifestyle of partying though I do like to hang out and have a great time."

Still, after multiple decades of loud, frenetic, bass playing, one would think the constant touring would eventually take its toll.

"For me it was never really hard,"



Sheehan says. "It's all about music and playing. I think if you keep your head on straight, there's no reason why you can't enjoy it."

Far from the typically burned-out demeanor of many of his rocker comrades, Sheehan maintains an almost comic perspective on his ability to be doing what he loves to do.

"I get to go up on stage and have a blast and play music for thousands of people. And they pay me too! Unbelievable," he says, laughing.

Sheehan will continue playing to thousands of people when a Mr. Big reunion tour begins at the end of June, starting in Japan, ironically.

"We sold out the Budokan out in a matter of minutes, literally. That's

pretty cool," Sheehan says. "It's going to be a great, great, time."

Despite his heavy touring and recording schedule, Sheehan is never too busy to give guidance to the future bass shredders of tomorrow, though his teaching methods are more "School of Rock" than Music 101. Sheehan's best advice?

"Learn 'Back in Black' by AC/DC on bass," he says, although he often just prefers to show new players how to do it himself.

"I go, 'What's your favorite song?' I'll show you how it goes. Now you try. 'And they go, 'Holy cow! I can play it!'" he says, laughing.

"Holy Cow" just happens to be the name of Sheehan's third solo album. Besides playing bass and singing most of the lead vocal tracks, the just-released disc features appearances by a couple of Sheehan's favorite players, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and former Mr. Big member Paul Gilbert. A solo tour is planned for later this year, though the line-up is still to be determined. Sheehan knows too well the price of hiring sheep talent.

"When you pay peanuts, you get monkeys," the wizened rock god muses.

"Holy Cow" is now available on Mascot Records.

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