

BILLY SHEEHAN

THE BASS VIRTUOSO DISCUSSES TALAS, DAVID LEE ROTH, MR. BIG, AND WHY HE WON'T PACK IT ALL IN TO GO FISHING...

INTERVIEW BY HOWARD JOHNSON



BUFFALO, NEW YORK

"It's where I grew up, a real blue-collar town full of factories like Bethlehem Steel, Anaconda Brass, Ford, Chevrolet... A lot of bands and a lot of great musicians came out of Buffalo because back in the '70s the place was full of clubs that booked live acts. There was Patrick Henry's, He & She's, Uncle Sam's, maybe 20 to 30 places to play. And then every high school would have a Friday night dance where they'd hire a live band, so there were endless opportunities."

LEARNING THE TRADE

"I'm very, very lucky that I grew up in the right place at the right time. I played a lot of shows in the Buffalo area, literally thousands. That was where I learned all about my bass and my gear and all the variables that happen when you're constantly moving from one place to another to play. I learned about hitting my marks, hitting my harmony vocals, all that stuff. It came from repetition. I once played three shows in one day. The first in downtown Buffalo for the lunch crowd at the M&T Bank. Then we packed up and went to Niagara Falls. The Buffalo Bills American football team had an exhibition game and we played for the crowd after that. Then we packed up and headed to a club in Lakewood where we played until two in the morning. That was how it worked back then."

PLAYING PROFESSIONALLY

"I was a professional from a young age. My band Talas became well known on the circuit and after a while we all had our own cars and apartments. We had a crew of six to eight people, our own sound system, and our own truck – all without a record deal! We simply played for a living – and it was a good living. But what became evident on that circuit was that there were the guys who were happy to get free beers and an envelope of cash, and there were those who wanted more. I was happy to get the beer and cash, of course, but I definitely wanted more. With such a vibrant scene it was easy to get caught in the trap of *not* devoting time to writing and rehearsing original stuff."

COVER VERSIONS

"There were people who were snobby about covers and insisted on only playing originals. I always thought they'd be incredibly lucky if they made it, because very few did. The Beatles started out playing covers, so did Van Halen, so did AC/DC. I thought it was important to go that route so you could learn how to play as a band in front of an audience, which is as important as learning how to write. The general plan was to sneak the odd original in.

So you'd do it at first, the dance floor would clear, the club owner would give you the eye, and you'd go back to playing some song everybody knew. But when you got better at writing, people would start to recognise your own material. Then you'd scatter two or three originals

through the set, then eventually you'd be able to start splitting your set into three parts; a set of copy tunes to start with, then a set of originals, then you'd close the show out with the best of your copy tunes to keep people there. Then it became 50/50, then 75/20 and eventually you become pretty much an originals band, an originals band that was really seasoned in all departments."

SUCCESS

"My theory was always that you needed three things. You needed

to be in a band, because working with other people and understanding your role is essential. You needed to have songs, because you've got to have *songs*, right? And you need to be in a band with songs people *sing*."

THE ROLE OF THE BASS

"My favourite line-up to play in is a three-piece because it forces me to think on my feet, and do things on a bass that you wouldn't normally do. Back in the day when I played covers, I had to make all the extra sounds that were in the original, like the keyboard stabs in 'Carry On Wayward Son' and the sax in '21st Century Schizoid Man' on my bass. It was pretty demanding. I remember we did the song 'Burn' by Deep Purple, which has a big keyboard solo – and we had no keyboard! So I did the solo on the bass, and it was a beast to learn. But I managed to chip away at it and finally pulled it off. Things like that gave me a good work ethic. What I also learned in the clubs is that if you're going to do a bass solo, then it had better be exciting and fun and entertaining, otherwise you're going to lose the audience in a heartbeat."

OPENING FOR VAN HALEN IN 1980

"Talas didn't have a record deal at the time. We had a manager, but he knew he was kind of limited. So the local promoters who brought in all the big bands ended up being our main managers, trying to get us a deal. Now those guys dealt with Premier Talent, a huge booking agent that booked Van Halen. We sent them a demo tape, which they sent on to Van Halen. They heard it and decided to book us as an opening act for their 1980 tour. As a side note, the local promoter's name was Harvey Weinstein. Yes, *the* Harvey Weinstein. And I'm proud to say that we ended up on very bad terms. Anyway, we were there at the first show opening for Van Halen



Mr. Big photographed in Hollywood, May 1989. L-R: Paul Gilbert (guitar), Billy Sheehan (bass), Pat Torpey (drums), Eric Martin (vocals)

"PEOPLE SAY TO ME, 'OH YOU MUST BE P*SSSED OFF BECAUSE MR. BIG'S BIGGEST HIT 'TO BE WITH YOU' WAS A BALLAD.' I COULDN'T BE HAPPIER. IT WAS JUST AMAZING."