SLASH takes a working vacation from Guns n' Roses with his new band, Slash's Snakepit

By Katherine Turman
EVEN UNDER THE BEST of circumstances, the Hamburger Hamlet that anchors the west end of L.A.'s Sunset Strip is lacking in serious ambience. At 3 in the afternoon on a rainy Saturday, though, the venerable if unremarkable restaurant is surprisingly crowded, the day's watery light lending a strangely cozy, slightly surreal air. The eatery's proximity to the Atlantic and the Geffen record-company offices makes it a humming power-lunch destination during the week. Weekends, however, find plastic-surgerized Beverly Hills matrons quaffing diet sodas and kibitzing in the restaurant's brighter front rooms while the serious drinkers huddle in the welcoming banquette booths or at the bar in the slightly more disolute atmosphere of the taproom.

LASH WAVES AT THE MAITRE D', who, kindly, has not asked the guitarist to extinguish his cigarette despite stringent new anti-smoking laws in L.A. "That's Don," Slash says. "He's from the Sherman Oaks Hamburger Hamlet that was destroyed in the earthquake." LASH DRAGS ON HIS CIGARETTE AND DOWNS A SHOT OF JAGERMEISTER. "This is the whole scheme," he says, shifting gears. "Initially I was just writing what I thought was cool. I was a kid in a toy store. I had a studio in my house. Get up in the morning. Literally. Press on. Plug in your guitar and go. I don't look at stuff from the concept of writing the quintessential hit record. Just guitar riffs. GUNS GOT OFF THE ROAD," Slash continues. "I had the studio built right next to my snake cage, a walk-in with all these 20-foot snakes in it. It's Slash's Snakepit at this point, because all of a sudden there's an all-girl band in San Diego called Snake Pit." He laughs. "Don't ask."

R. T.'S VOICE RISES above the din, and Slash peers at him over the heads of the other diners and grins, his eyes crinkling. "If Dean Martin were here, that would be classic," says the 29-year-old guitarist. He settles back into the booth and easily picks up his train of thought. "It's like I'm owned by Guns 'n' Roses in a way," Slash continues in his intimate, stoner-ish timbre. "It's our band. So if I write something, my first and foremost priority would be to dedicate it to Guns." He draws heavily on his cigarette as the maître d' hovers. "At the time, no one seemed to be interested in the material. Axl Rose said, 'That's not the kind of music I want to do.' I said, 'OK,' and took it all back. We've had that happen too many times in Guns, when certain songs just didn't make it, and they would have been killer. I didn't want to lose any more material."

LASH WASN'T PLANNING on a solo record — "side project" being the much-preferred term. "It's not a solo project," he says, "because everybody in the band got to play whatever the fuck he wanted." The third original member of Guns n' Roses to release a solo album following bassist Duff McKagan and ex-guitarist Izzy Stradlin, Slash wrote all the music to the songs that appear on It's Five O'Clock Somewhere in his home studio, completing the initial concepts and tracks in early '94. The LP title was taken from a generous bartender at LAX airport, who gave Slash an early morning drink with the dictum "Hey, it's 5 o'clock somewhere, pal." THE COOLEST Omen," says Slash, "was the night I recorded three songs and [Cont. on 96]
Donnelly ducks into the bathroom to put on more makeup. "Ugh, nerves," she says. Outside someone says in a chirpy voice, "Time to go on, fellows." "Here we go," Donnelly mutters.

"Get the band, never one fee shall appear, dispensers with the stage partner and launches into "Kang." It's a little wobbly, as is the next offering, "Puppy." Green wood is whirling her hair and bouncing around the stage. The band is exchanging funny looks. Not even the standby "Freds the Tree" puts them on steady ground.

"Not doing well," someone observes dryly behind them.

"Mm, pity," says his companion.

"Then the group rolls out the evocative "Judas My Heart," a song about the hopelessness of the slicker mystique. "Low hang the moon inside this room," Donnelly croons, and the audience is still. Beiley have found their footing, and by the time they unleash the kinetic "Red," Donnelly is booted and playful. They're rolling.

"Better, can get more than I've been back.

"Mm, yes," says his companion.

We have just adjusted our seats to the upright position and secured our tray tables. The captain has turned on the no-smoking sign. We are heading home to Boston. I am seated between the brothers German, who are having a serious snuff, passing and giggling in stereo. Donnelly, meanwhile, is reading a book. Hmmm, is it her favorite writer, Jeanett Winterson? Close. It's Jackie Collins' Lucky. As for Green wood, she has three photos and is giving herself a slide show parents, dogs, the Boyfriend Whose Name Is Chil. Parents. Dogs. The Boyfriend Whose Name Is Chil.

I am thinking about my clothes, trying to get into bed, and all of a sudden the TV at the front of the bed, just went.

The time was 4:31 a.m., Jan. 17, 1994. The Godzilla in question was L.A.'s 67-earthsquakes. The Hudson house in the Hollywood Hills was totaled, but with the disaster came the realization that it doesn't take much to make Slash happy.

"Everything I really cared about," Slash says, "which is my snakes and cats and Renault, were OK. I lost one guitar."

The laid-back, classic yet punky rock & blues music found on It's Five O'Clock Somewhere, co-produced by Slash and G'n'R's knob twiddler Mike Clink, reflects Slash's easygoing personality and tongue-in-cheek humor as well as the input and feel of his comrades. Topics range from suicide to scolding and amusing LA. rock chronicles to relationships, with Slash writing the words for the tunes, "Be the Ball" and "Take It Easy." With the exception of Clarkson's "Monkey Chow," the rest of the cuts feature various songwriting collaborations. From the sensual, melancholic, harmonic-laden "Neither Can I" to the Humble Pie vibe of the beefy first single, "Beggars and Hangers-On," to the biting indictment and equally wild musing of "What Do You Want to Be?" It's Five O'Clock Somewhere often more than an hour of raucous rock & roll. And, yes, it's somewhere in the Guns' musical milieu. Vintage Guns. The LP does, thankfully, lack the bombast that has characterized recent Guns performances and songs like the melodramatic "November Rain.

"Guns have a tendency to sort of close themselves off," says Slash through a mouthful of food. "I hang out all the time in general, so I don't feel totally alienated. In Guns n' Roses, because we get whisked off in a limousine and Lear jet, this whole thing of flying coach and getting in a van is great [for me]. It's so much more fun. After you've played 100,000-lane bands somewhere, where do you go? The Empire State Building? Not to knock what Guns does — that's great — but Guns can't go back too the point where we all pick up a van and drive up to a show.

A FLAXEN-HAIRED WOMAN quietly appears at our table and announces that she's from Geffen and will be waiting outside with a car when Slash is through. The guitarist seems slightly surprised but replies politely and makes no move to leave. To the world at large, the term 'rock star' would certainly seem to suit Slash, yet it's far from the truth. The axman even copes to what seems to be a touch of genuine insecurity. "Go figure," Slash says, swinging from his drink. "When I first did the Slaughter thing and people wanted to hear it, I was really shit. I didn't play it for anybody. But it's been well received. If you communicate with the people you're dealing with and drop your guard a little bit, you realize that's who you're dealing with.

Guns' n' Roses' cadre of handlers makes the inner workings of the controversial lineup virtually implosible. The aura of G'n'R appears to the outside observer to be neither here nor there, with the band lying low subsequent to the 28-month world tour supporting Use Your Illusion I and II, which ended in early 1995. The most recent collective airings from Guns n' Roses are the relentless groupies that Guns were rehearsing with ex-Ozzy Osbourne and current Pride and Glory guitarist Zak Wylde filling Clarks's slot.

Slash, however, seems to wish that the band would show up somewhere at this juncture. The guitarist had high hopes that the Guns' recording of "Sympathy for the Devil" for Interview With a Vampire would motivate the band to re-engage again.

"It didn't work," Slash says. "We didn't all show up at the same time in the studio — put it that way. And that was pretty indicative of what I didn't want to happen. He's confident, though, that Guns n' Roses will fall into place when they're ready. Meanwhile, there's Smiskip to keep him busy.

"When the Smiskip thing is over, and I've got that out of my system," says Slash, "we all seem to be pretty amiable about how we feel about each other as far as Guns are concerned. I just want to do a really cool Guns record, and I don't want to push it 'cause I don't feel like we have to rush it out to keep up with the Jonezes. So when everybody feels comfortable doing that... I don't know exactly where [Reznor's] head is at, as far as what's going on — but I feel like it changes from month to month.

"But we talk," Slash continues.
"We're fine. All the rumors and all that
type of stuff, it's between us. It's sort of
like getting involved in someone else's
marriage. You don't know what's going
on, but people love to write about it.
Me and Axl and Duff are obviously
the fuck more close and personal
than they can even possibly put out in
some magazine. That goes back to
when Guns started, before we even got
signed. The first quote that was in
Marie Callender's "They'll be great if
they live long enough."

Drugs, and by proxy, death, are a
big part of the G and R myth, playing
roles in song and in stage riffs. "The
only reason I'm working so much now,"
says Slash, "is that the last time Guns
took some time off, that's straight
where I went [to drugs], before the
Stones gigs." (Which prompted the
infamous Guns onstage "breakup" at
L.A. Coliseum, with allusions by Rose
to a certain band member who was
"dancing with Mr. Brownstone.""

This time around, having been really
down and out and strung out and losing
Steven [Adler, original drummer] . . . .
Slash says. "I was obviously, is doing
doughnuts in Indiana somewhere. His
own band doesn't even know where he
is. I don't want to go through that again.
I got off dope. It's been six, seven years."

Where Slash pulled through, others
haven't. "Lower," a low-key, voice-box-
enhanced song on It's Five O'Clock
Somewhere, was colored by the suicides
of Slash's ex-girlfriend porn actress Savan-
annah and Keri Celestine, which occurred
within months of each other.

On a more upbeat tangent is "Be the
Ball," a twisted tale inspired by Hunter
S. Thompson's Fear and Loathing in Las
Vegas and written from the point of view
of a pinball in a machine. Slash raises
his eyebrows and says, "I'm pretty offbeat."

Slash laughs, stirring his nuclear-
looking orange dipping sauce into
psychedelic patterns. "The whole thing
has been one big circus ride," he says.
"From the beginning. Everything has
been this huge trial and error, not
knowing where we were heading be-
cause we didn't really care. That's for
me personally. For Axl, he probably had
visions of 'November Rain' all along. I
don't know. Everybody's got great
stories, with the exception of Warrant.

"I ended up doing Snakeskin," Slash
says with a shrug. "I'm a through-and-
through musician. I don't have any
outside hobbies other than home life. I
don't have dinosaur toys everywhere. Little
things like that. As long as I have an
appointment tomorrow so I can jam, so I
have somewhere to go. It's as simple as
that.

"I don't want to sound shallow,"
Slash says, sửaing out yet another
copyright, "but I don't have any as-
pirations like someday I want to be a
fucking president or actor. I'm a one-
track pony."

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