The Rolling Stone Interview

By Jeffrey Ressner and Lonn M. Friend

DOUBLE JACK DANIEL'S and Coke, easy on the ice, with finger sandwiches. Five-fifteen Saturday afternoon at Le Chardonnay, the Los Angeles restaurant modeled on a Parisian art nouveau bistro, and there sits Slash, lead guitarist for Guns n' Roses, calmly talking in an ornate side room. "Try these, they're good," he says as a waiter brings over a plate of pastries. He nibbles the little tarts and slowly nurses his drink while speaking quite lucidly and soberly, in contrast to his infamous reputation as a Dionysian waste case. But Slash, who recently turned twenty-five, remains an outsider in this upper-crust environment. Despite his new-found millions and sterling position in L.A.'s rock hierarchy, he still can't get a last-minute dinner reservation at this ritzy restaurant after the interview session is over. No big deal. He and his steady girlfriend eat somewhere else that night, then stop by a decadent sex shop called the Pleasure Chest to pick up some Christmas presents, including a straitjacket for the band's singer, Axl Rose.

The last few months of 1990 have been hectic for Slash. In addition to putting finishing touches on Guns n' Roses' second album, he has been rehearsing with the band for an appearance at the Rock in Rio II concert this month in Brazil. In fact, Slash has been working almost nonstop for the past year. The group did a gig at Farm Aid III, contributed material to the Days of Thunder soundtrack...
and the Nobody's Child charity project and recorded more than thirty Guns songs for the new album. In addition, Slash has played sessions with Iggy Pop, Bob Dylan, Jackson and Pennywise, among others. This year should be even more intense: Once Guns n' Roses' album is finally released, the band plans to embark on a worldwide tour, the group's first tour since 1988 and — amazingly — the first time the group has played live as headliners.

It's been a long time coming. Slash, whose real name is Saul Hudson, has been a resident of Los Angeles since his parents moved to America from England in the early Seventies. His mother, a professional costume designer married Ola Hudson, tailored outfits for such acts as John Lennon, Diana Ross and the Pointer Sisters, while his artist father, Anthony Hudson, created album covers for clients that included Neil Young and Jimi Hendrix. Raised in the neo-hippie environs of Laurel Canyon — which he still calls home — young Saul's own creative instincts were nurtured early on. He was an enthusiastic artist and even contributed a series of animal illustrations to The Beatles, an unpublished book of verse written by Joni Mitchell, which was a considerable hit.

"He was drawing from the time he could pick up a pencil," says Ola Hudson, who adds that he was wonk on her Led Zeppelin albums and raised in a loving household. "I've been shocked at a lot of things I've read where it seems like I left him on somebody's doorstep in a basket. They make it seem as if he never had a family and grew up on the streets like an urchin, but that's not true. It's just part of his image. He's not all leather and tattoos.

When his folks split up in the mid-Seventies, Slash had to get used to an unusual family figure — David Bowie. "My mom dated Bowie right after my parents broke up," he says. "I hung out with him and his wife and their son, Zowie, when I was real young. I really didn't like him that much, because he was the new guy in the house. I was really unsuccessful. These days, Slash has reconciliated with Bowie and often spends time with him when their schedules permit.

If home life as a teenager seemed tilted, school was even worse. Shy and isolated, Slash preferred drawing pictures of dinosaurs or racing BMX bicycles to doing his homework. "I had long hair, and the schools I went to were filled with kids of bankers and real-estate agents," he says. "It wasn't like any of them came from the same background I had."

Repeatedly kicked out of school, Slash was a loner who never had many friends until he picked up the guitar. "The kids around me changed, and suddenly I got more popular because I was a guitar player," he says. He first became acquainted with the instrument after some coaxing from his twin brother, a fellow BMX racer who later served as Guns n' Roses' drummer.

Before Guns n' Roses, Slash juggled with several bar bands and served a short stint in an all-black funk ensemble. Then he hooked up with Adler and Indiana ex- 

Well, okay, then let's talk about the new album. Why is it called 'Use Your Illusion'?

It's the title of a painting by some controversy artist. I don't know who. I've never heard of him. I don't keep up with all circles. But that's the thing of this painting that Axl bought, and he said, "Let's make this the cover of the album." Like the last album cover, we just said, "Fine," no discussion.

How much material has been recorded so far?

Thirty-five songs. Thirty-five of the most self-indulgent Guns n' Roses songs... It's a lot of material to work with — like four albums' worth. For most bands, it would take four to six years to come up with this much stuff.

There have been a lot of rumors about whether it will be a single album, a double album, even a box set. What's actually happening at this point?

Well, this is like cleaning out the closet. There's a lot of material we don't want here, and the problem is, how does one release all of it? You don't want some kid go out and buy a record for seventy dollars if it's your record second record. We're trying to think of a way to distribute the material where each of the four discs of material, so that you can buy the whole thing, or you can buy just one. But since it's not released yet, nothing is etched in stone. It might change, and I don't want to mislead anybody. I know the thing that it's not going to be is one big boxed set, where you have to buy the entire thing or nothing. I can tell you that much.

There's been speculation that one album might be released in single, April, then a double album later this year, followed by another single in May. I'm not going to get into the details, but there have been reports of an EP featuring cover versions of various punk songs.

An EP is probably the direction we're going to go as far as some of the covers are concerned. There are six covers: "Live and Let Die," by Wings, "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" by Dylan — that new version (the soundtrack for Day of Thunder) that went nowhere... "Don't Care About You," by Fear, "Attitude," by the Misfits, "New Rose," by the Damned, and "Down on the Farm," by U.K. Subs. They're songs that we like — it's as basic as that. Each of us has an individual favorite, and at the same time we share scene. "New Rose" is something that I wanted to do, I think. "Don't Care About You" is something that I wanted. The Misfits song was Axl's idea, and "Live and Let Die" was songs Axl and I both thought it was a ripping song. In terms of the original material you've recorded, is there any specific theme or unifying message?

I'd have to say no. I will say it leans more to the darker side. There's not a ton of really happy material on it, you know? Most of it is pretty fucking pissed-off. It's very pissed-off, and it's very heavy, and then there's also a subtext to it as far as we really trying to play.

How do the songs reflect the changes that the band has gone through over the past few years?

The way our lives turned around, the repercussions of our success and the general shit that we do from day to day gets brought up a lot. There are a lot of semi-humorous drug tunes and a few songs about how going in various directions. Regardless of whether it sounds like the blues or not, basically that's what it is. It's a strange thing. I never thought we were a naive band; I always thought we were pretty hip to what's going on. But when we used to just hang out on the street, it was more fun than when we had lots of money and became part of society and were forced to deal with responsibilities. I think money is the entire nerve of it all, too. It's like I think Jimi Hendrix said — "The more money you make, the more blues you can sing." "Applause for Destruction" was pretty much a hand-rock album, while the 'G'n'R Lies' EP included several acoustic
songs. Will there be any radical musical departures on the new album?

There'll be a lot of different instruments. I've got guitars doing all different kinds of sounds and things. There are Noisem on "Love and Let Die." We didn't get into sampling, but right now, as we speak, Axel is in the studio with a rack of synthesizers, so we don't have to bring in an orchestra for a couple of songs. There might even be a bunch of kids singing on "November Rain," because it's that kind of song. It's very organic. We'll do whatever it takes to make the songs as powerful as possible.

A children's choir, harps, synthesizers — it sounds like the group is heading in a new direction.

It's not a change in direction. I don't think we ever had a real direction. But we have gotten a little bit more experimental, I guess. I hate that word — we've just been doing shit, whatever we felt like doing. This album goes from one extreme to the other, from some very, very intense, raunchy, over-the-top stuff to bring very mellow — and everything in between.

Any thoughts on a single at this stage?

At this stage, there aren't any singles at all. It gives it a little sense of danger. We're playing a lot.

We're slated for a two-year tour starting in April. We'll go to New Zealand, Australia and Japan, then to the United States, where we'll branch out to all those places we haven't done yet. We'll go to Europe and play. We'll be in the studio, I think, then go to Japan for one gig and then come back to the States. That's just off the top of my head. We'll do arenas here, and then we'll come back and do clubs.

Will there be a sponsor?

I'm willing to do it if there are no dumb ads and no dumb commercials. I want to do Black Death Vodka. Axel turned me on to it. I want Black Death Vodka to call me, because I'll sponsor them. Just me personally.

What about the benefits? Your managers have supposedly been talking to cigarette and beer companies about sponsoring the tour.

I guess we're doing it, but I don't want to sell out. I don't want to be the next Janet Jackson, M.C. Hammer, fucking Eric Clapton or whoever else. We're doing a tour, and if they want to help pay for it, we'll use their name — we'll just put banners up over the gig. I don't give a shit. If there's free cigarettes and free beer and they help pay for the tour, I don't care. But I'm not wearing a Budweiser T-shirt. I don't care if we do our own photos and it says "Budweiser" or "Mohawk" on the bottom of the page, but I don't want to do anything where I'm holding up something with a big smile on my face.

Are you concerned about a backlash from the fans?

I don't think the fans will care. They all drink Budweiser and smoke Marlboros. I was worried about the parents and what they'd say about the cigarettes, but it's like some of the most influential personalities in baseball, football, basketball and race-car driving do ads. I mean, I advertise smoking constantly anyway. I can't help it.

don't see why cigarettes are any worse than beer.

Speaking of homes, let's go back to this time last year and the American Music Awards. You gained national headlines when you requested that "Kiss Me, Coke" be played on television. What exactly happened that night?

The fucking music awards... What happened was I got this phone call the day of the show asking if I wanted to go. We were nominated for two awards, and someone from the band needed to accept if we won. So me and Duff and our girlfrends all got drunk and flapped on down there after a stop at Carl's Jr. When we arrived, it was mass confusion, the whole paparazzi thing. I really didn't give a shit, I just wanted to hang out and have a good time. Anyway, we had third-row seats, and the show was real cheesy and boring. We were smoking and drinking wine, and all of a sudden we won this award. We weren't ready for it. I don't know what I said onstage, but it was short and sweet. I don't think there were too many "fucks" in it. Then we went backstage. I met Lenny Kravitz, which was cool, but Prince blew us off. He and his entourage just ignored us when we walked by. He didn't say anything, and he probably didn't know who we were. I don't think we're what he'd call good company, and I really didn't care. He looked like a fag that night anyway. Afterward, we went back to our seats, and when the second award came, it was totally unexpected. I got up to the microphone and started to thank the people who helped us out over the years. I said "fucking" again, and I knew it was on television, so I said, "Oops."

But it just slipped out again and again and again. Once I started, that was it. It was just like using an adjective.

Why did you get so bumbled if you knew you might have to appear on the TV?

I wasn't really drunk. All I had was wine. I had, like, two glasses of wine during the show, and I wasn't that fuckin' up. That's just me — really, you have to know how I am, especially when I'm in a crowd of people. All this attention is focused on you, and I get very shy. I don't know why, but I can't approach a public situation like that. I was nervous. I don't know if it's true of these pieces, and you feel almost like you're being X-rayed. Besides, I sort of wanted to be the fuckups there, because everybody else was so polite and stuff and unnatural. We were trying to have a good time, and I think out of all the people there, we were the only ones who weren't putting on a facade.

A few months before the AMAs, there was another fuckup when the band opened up for the Rolling Stones in Los Angeles and nearly broke up in the process. What led to those shows?

At that time I was on the tail end of a really, really serious heroin problem. I felt the band had to do the Stones gigs to bring us back together. We were all living in our separate houses, no one saw anybody. I was doing my thing, and only three of us were going to rehearse on a regular basis. So I said, "Yeah, let's do the gig," even though our management was against it. I made an agreement with the band that after the Stones shows were over, I'd clean up. That was agreed upon and understood.

The night of the first Stones date, Axel was underage and although drugs were destroying the group. How did you feel when you heard it was live?

I was about to walk off, I was pissed. We finished the show, and it was one of those nights where everybody had their little part of the stage and just stayed there. The show sucked, it was loud, and then Axel announced he was going to quit.

But he returned the next night, and things seemed to improve after you gave a little speech about dope. Were you persuaded into making those remarks?

Axel said he wouldn't perform unless I agreed to go up and do what he called apologies, which I refused to do. I said what I said, and he came out, and it was very warm because what I said was truly honest. It wasn't an apology; it was sort of an explanation. No, not even that — I just opened up and said what I felt about heroin and what it does to people, who it's killed and how wrong it is. Because that's how I felt. But I was a junkie at the same time.

When did you first get heroin?

I started sometime during the very beginnings of the band. I got turned on to it, and that was the beginning of the end, I guess. The first time I did it, I smokes it, and then I smoked it once. But the first time I really got high, I shot. I was that kind of junkie — smoking it wasn't enough and smoking it wasn't enough. Anyway, it's one of those drugs where it's a great high and you love being on it, and it really fucks your life up. It's unfortunate that something as fucking miserable as a little pile of powder can do that, but it does happen.

What do you think was the lowest you ever went?

Oh, man, the lowest was going to the Rainbow [in L.A. nightclubs] to borrow money, so I could score — shit like that. But I wasn't only a heroin junkie; I was a coke junkie, too, and I used to trip out really hard. The lowest I went was a little fucking episode in Phoenix, where I flipped out on coke, destroyed a hotel room and was all bloody, running around the hotel naked and shit. Some people tried to press charges, and the cops and paramedics came, but fortunately I fled my way out of it.

How do you feel about that? I've OD'd so many times.

I've woken up in the hospital so many fucking times. I don't like to get into it, but I've been through some shit. I've been in jail over drugs. You'd think things like that would make you stop, but they don't.

What finally caused you to quit?

Because the one time I cared about the most in my life — the band — was blowing apart. That was the major incentive. Otherwise, I was perfectly comfortable just relaxing on a high, hanging out with my snakes and stuff. It's been about a year or so since you've stopped shooting up. Any temptations to use hard drugs again?

The closest I've had to anything like that is I've dreamed about it a couple of times. Nightmares. Some pretty bad ones. But that's about it.

Were you ever a druggie junkie?

They tried to put me into rehab, but I left in three days. I was real pissed off and came back home, got loaded, then went to Hawaii and cleaned up. I've been clean ever since.

What was it about like for you at that time?

I had a pretty bad habit, so fucking was always rough. The physical part of it is bad enough, [Cont. on 51]
Black Crowses

[Cont. from 12] favored by one of his idols, Keith Richards, and drummer Steve Gorman joined the fold, the band settled into a nagging, blues-based groove. By 1994, when bassist Johnny Colt and guitarist Jeff Caase were inaugurated, the Black Crows had a firm handle on their sound.

The typical first reaction to that sound has become a constant source of irritation for the Crowes. The songs on shake your Money Maker - jangled, blurry barroom stampa, windblown, emotional R&B waltzers - have prompted more than a few critics to dismiss the Crowes as Rolling Stones knockoffs. And Chris Robinson’s gut-busting vocals invariably draw comparisons to a Faces-era Rod Stewart.

“It’s bullshit,” says Rich. “There’s no new music ever. Period. It’s all an interpretation of music that’s come before. I interpret Keith Richards in the same way that Keith Richards interpreted Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry. If anyone’s going to accuse us of ripping off the Stones, they’d better listen to a couple of Chuck Berry records first.”

Another guaranteed feather ruffler is to mention Black Crows as a Southern band, although, technically, they are one. Barren geography and Almanor Brothers veteran Chuck Leavell, who supplied keyboards on Shake Your Money Maker, helped in common with rockers like the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd or the Georgia Satellites, yet many journalists, playing up the good of boy angst, insist on invoking those names when describing the band.

“I mean, I was born in the South, and I’m very proud of that,” says Rich. “But I’m not wearing a rebel flag, you know.”

“Guitars at MTV got all upset because he read an interview where I called Ronnie Van Zant a redneck,” adds Chris. “He’s got, Ronnie Van Zan was a great man.” I asked, ‘Look, I didn’t say he was an awful band. I said he was a redneck.”

Scenes comparisons and Southern stereotypes notwithstanding, the quickest way to induce a stream of vituperative commentary from either Robinson is to bring up the Crowes’ state of rock & roll. Chris, who spends a great deal of time nosing around in record stores (see “Adventures in the Vinyl Trade,” page 12), is particularly indignant on the subject.

“Don’t sit around and complain about how sassy the music is if you’re putting up with it,” Chris says. “We heard that all these bands that headline arenas are allowed to go up to the stage and sing backup tapes? Aerosmith did it - I love Aerosmith to death. I respect ‘em, I grew up on ‘em. But you bore me when you sing to a backup tape. Heart, Robert Plant, they all did it. If you’re an entertainer and you take it seriously, you entertain with your natural abilities. You go onstage and take a chance like everyone else. People say to us, ‘Man, I heard some bad notes in your set tonight.’ Well, fucking-A, when you’ve heard some bad notes. You’re a real band, don’t you?”

Chris pauses, then swoops down on another pet peeve: “I don’t put licks of chicks in our videos with their tits hanging out, because I can’t tell you my band. What a novel fucking concept. I mean, I dig looking at chicks like anyone else, but if you can’t be stimulated by what I do, then I’m not going to feel you. You don’t like it? Turn it off. You like it? Buy the record or vote for the next one. Come to see us when we come to town. That’s what it’s all about. That’s what rock & roll was - not ‘Well, we’ll bring in a stylist and bring in Denim Child and Bruce Fairbairn to put a bunch of “oh, yeahs” on your record.”

“They know,” he says almost sadly, “there are people out there who really know what’s happening. I’m not calling for a call-in. I’m saying if you like Papa-Ta is a product, I make music. I don’t want it to be a fucking product, I want it to be a piece of your life.”

Half an hour later, Robinson, temporarily purged of demons, dives into a closer and emerges with a rough-hewn wooden erotica. It looks surprisingly like it might house a small monkey.

If one were to believe all the stories about the Black Crowes, the concept of Robinson’s harboring a bandaged boyman in his closet wouldn’t seem far-fetched. Naturally, when I was stumped by the Crowes’ reluctance to serve up tales of female conquest and drunken debauchery, they went beyond the call of duty to entertain their readers.

One masterpiece in a well-known rock magazine indicated that the Crowes were engaging in clandestine voodoo retreats before their shows. Chris says the trouble started when the writer of the piece asked him what he was reading, and he happened to be immersed in a tome about voodoo. (Robinson says he typically leans toward Beats novels and “really good contemporary things”, by writers like Franz Kafka.) During the interviews, Chris also casually mentioned the band’s habit of burning candles onstage and the Tibetan human-bone jewelry and grisa-grisa pouches collected by some of the band members. The finished piece made much of the band’s “voodoo obsessions” and hypothesized that it’s “an avid fascination with black magic that keeps these Crows flying.”

Chris, who contends that the Crowes’ interest in voodoo paraphernalia springs from more than a love of the exotic. In the days he found it funny. Some, however, didn’t find it so comical. The piece spawned a panicky rush of LP- and concert-ticket boughts organized by alarmed Christian parents in Texas and Virginia. Naturally, Robinson is eager to share his views on that sector of society.

“Jesus Christ loved everyone,” he says

Bluntly, "Jesus Christ probably loved Satan. I mean, I don’t believe that God and Satan are real, but if you’re a Christian, then you love everyone. And if you’re a Satanist, you think I’m fucked - then fuck you.”

His frustrations vented, Robinson lowers the boot to the floor and begins unbot- ting the laces. And though the effect inside don’t turn out to be something that was once alive, it wasn’t said to say, a man. It was a gourd.

Robinson proudly holds up an elaborately carved, beautifully shaped gourd. Earlier today, he has gone on a bash-bash shopping expedition in Greenwich Village. The instrument is Chris’s surprise Christmas present for his brother, who is, by this time, sneezing in his own suit down the hall.

“His things will perk up,” says Robinson gleefully. “There’s a side of me that wants to go wake him up and say, ‘Rich, look what I brought you for Christmas.” You know, because I love him so much.”

“Me and Rich are much closer,” he says softly. “We’ve gotten closer this year than we’ve been in a long time.”

He takes up the tobacco and examines its separate networks of heavy and fine strings. Carefully he begins to pluck at it, eliciting a succession of eerie, keening notes. “I have no idea how to play this fucking,” he says finally.

For the benefit of instance, Chris Robinson actually appears to be a master of himself.

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Slash

[Cont. from 30] but the anxiety part is the worst. But I don’t see why the subject of kicking dope is such a big deal. It’s personal, really. It’s like asking how I go to the bathroom or what do I wash first when I take a shower. As far as I’m concerned, I don’t think it’s anybody’s business. I don’t want to be another Keith Richards. His whole history has been so heavily publicized, and he’s spoken so candidly about it when he was fucked up because he thought it was cool, I guess. What happens is those stories never go away. It’s a very sensitive subject. But it’s a subject that you don’t try and put across to how many millions of people who read this magazine who don’t do it or haven’t been through it. There’s one of probably the most disasterous things that a human being can go through. It’s like sitting on your deathbed all the time.

You’ve also had severe alcohol problems. How bad did your drinking get?

I seriously used to go through one and two bottles of Jack Daniel’s a night. Easy. Sometimes a half gallon. I used to get up in the morning and I’d just be drunk all the time. I passed out on the floor of a guitar store in England - really stupid shit. It was all a growing experience. I think I’ve learned a lot, and I think that I’ve learned a lot. Sometimes when I don’t know if it’s made me any better or worse as a person, but I’m very hip to any drugs and alcohol now, I know what they’re all about.

How’s your drinking these days?

I haven’t been drinking that hard if I can help it. I still get overly drunk sometimes and have a good time, and it doesn’t bother me. It’s sort of a pain in the ass the next morning, though. But I still have my little quirks and insecurities where I go to a bottle rather than just being sober and dealing with it. I still have those little problems, which are a part of a pattern, I guess. But then I haven’t been as depressed as I was. Usually if I’m drinking too much, it’s for a reason. Boredom is my worst enemy, and I get bored really easily. In the history of this band, as long as we were out playing, I never had a problem of any kind. When we’re rehearsing or recording, or taking a break, there’s not really much drinking going on, nor am I concerned about it. I’ll have a cocktail when I’m home or whatever, but it’s as simple as that.

Guns’ N’ Roses replaced lanky drummer Steven Adler because of his substance abuse. How would you describe his problem?

Steven is about as rock & roll a personality as you can get. All he lived for was sex, drugs and rock & roll - in that order. Maybe drugs, sex. (Cont. on 32)
Slash

[Cont. from 51] and reck & roll. Then it was drugs and rock & roll. Then it was drugs.

How do you feel when people say he was kicked out of the group unfairly? I felt really bad for Steven. He's saying stuff like "How could they do this to me?" But it wasn't a matter of how could we do this to him. It was how could he do this to us. He was taken care of by this band. Anybody who thinks he just kicked him out is just somebodies who doesn't know what the fuck they're talking about and doesn't know what went on. We waited for him for a fucking year. How long is a band supposed to wait around? We all wanted to get out and play, and he wanted to play, too. He was just too loaded to do it. Really, we did all kinds of things for this kid to get him back to normal, and he just would not let him time go into rehab, he took off. I mean, I took off from rehab, but it's because I didn't want to be controlled by anybody else. I went and cleaned up on my own. Steven had no control whatsoever. He didn't want to be in rehab and still wanted to be doing what he's doing. He thought it was very rock & roll. What do you tell a guy like that? I said, "Fuck you, man. This is all I can deal with anymore, we have to get a new drummer."

For a while, a drummer from the Sea Hogs sat in with Guns, but Martin Chambers from the Pretenders stepped in momentarily. How did you scale on Matt Sorum from the Cult?

The guy from the Sea Hogs was a really cool guy, and we got along, but he just didn't fit right. When I saw Matt at the Universal Amphitheater, and after a few months went by and nothing happened, it dawned on me that he was the best drummer I'd ever seen in a long time. So I said, "Fuck you, I can't stand him anymore."

Thank God I went to that show that night. The fact that Matt could play and fit in was what saved us. If we hadn't found somebody, it would have ultimately been the demise of the band. Matt's been capable of keeping us up, if not enhancing it totally and bringing new stuff to it. He still can't show up anywhere on time, though. (He laughs.)

While most members of the band have had drug-free back doors and drugs, Slash has had the toughest time just dealing with people. He's had the most with his neighbors. He's had marital woes, continuing confrontations with the Hollywood police and other sticky situations. How have these incidents affected the group and its recording process?

Well, they're a pain in the ass, and they keep things from getting done. I'm the most uptight about all of this. It's just my nature — Axl thinks I'm this sort of sick-minded workaholic. And it's true — in some ways, I do get uptight. I can get very negative about it. But there are moments when it (Axl's troubles) really gets in the way of what I think is productive, and we end up spending a lot of money. Sometimes I think Axl's not interested in the video, or has a very slight idea of what the financial reality is. I mean, to me $400,000 or whatever to make a record is ludicrous. Of course, if I was to say that to Axl outright, he'd say, "I don't know what he's going through, and there'd be a fight right there. That's the way we've always been — there's something I can't relate to or vice versa, and that's where we butt heads. So I just sit there with my head between my knees, freaking out... But Axl's craziness drives me crazier than it does Axl, unbelievable to him. And thank God.

Why do you think he gets into so much trouble?

Axl is like a magnet for problems. I've never met anybody like him. He's the kind of guy that would just knock his drum stick down his throat because that particular touchbrush happened to be defective.

I mean, shit goes on with that guy, and if you talked to him, he'd tell you the same thing.

The bond between you two often seems volatile. What don't you want to talk about Axl, because everybody is constantly trying to pit us against each other. You know, they're trying to put two fucking Japanese fishing fish in the same bowl. We've always been the same, we've got our ups and downs, and we butt heads. As long as I've known Axl, we've had so many differences that have been like the end of the line as far as we were concerned. I think that happens with most singers and guitar players, or whatever that is. It's really too little on the outside, seeing all this shit that we're going through, but it makes for a tension thing that's a kind of weird way very reducible to the music we collaborate on. But as far as Axl goes, he is the best singer-guitarist around.

Although Guns 'n' Roses took on an extended hiatus from recording, you made a number of appearances on other people's albums last year. You played on Iggy Pop's 'Brick by brick' album and on Bob Dylan's 'Under the Red Sky.' What was the Dylan session like?

Don was called me up and asked me to play with Dylan, which turned out to be one of those mistakes you try to avoid. He must have had words while I was there. One was "I'll" and the other was "Play it like Django Reinhardt." With all due respect to Django, that would have been a great concept had to fit the song. The whole thing was just a drug. Nothing against Dylan, because my dad liked him. I mean, I grew up on Bob Dylan; he was the guy my family listened to. And I never did understand him until the last five or six albums. I did get to meet George Harrison while I was there, though, and that was great. He was doing some fucking awesome slide playing.

Did you have another unfortunate recording experience with Michael Jackson?

Michael Jackson was somebody I admire and have a lot of respect for. But when it came down to it, the sessions were slow unorganized. I tried to keep a schedule and be punctual, but those dates just sat there for months and months until I kept thinking they didn't want to use me anymore. I got a call three months later to do it at such and such a date, but when that date came, it wouldn't happen. I finally went down and recorded some rhythm stuff for a couple of songs. Then the producer said he was going to another country for a while, and I told him to give me a call when he got back. But all I did was end up talking to his wife or his kid trying to find out what the fuck was going on, and to this day I still don't know what the fuck was going on.

If Dylan and Jackson were unpleasant experiences, you seem to have clicked with Lenny Kravitz. After you met at the AMAs, how did you start recording together?

I went down to the studio where he was in L.A., and we hung out that night. He smoked pot, and I drank vodka, and we did a solo on one of his songs called "Fields of Joy." I just finished recording another song for his new record, a song I'd originally written for Guns that never happened as a Guns song. We had a great time hanging out in New Jersey. The guy is so fucking down-to-earth. It's a pleasure to work with somebody like that, where there's no bullshit.

Have you been doing any other sessions recently?

Lester Paul called me up to play on this tribute record where he's producing tracks by Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and all these greats. So I took another song called "Burnout," which should have been a Guns tune, and got Iggy Pop to sing it and Kenny Aronoff to play drums. Didn't go any further. But I got together with Lenny and started on it.

When we were at the studio, Lester Paul said to me, "You're pretty good when you learn how to play." Thanks, God. You know, that was pretty fucking intense. I just sort of bit, crept away.

Anybody else been offered to do session work?

I got a call from Kim Basinger to play on her record. That was, like, no, okay?

Despite your rocky road, your romantic relationship seems stable, you have a strong attachment to your family, and your house is completely filled with kittens, dogs and what appear to be your favorite pets — makes you like a kid, you think it's cool.

I have eleven now. I have ten. I just lost one, Clyde, who I had for about eight or nine years, the longest I've had any of these guys. He just passed away in the back yard the night before last. It's sort of a drag, because he's been through so much. So when Clyde died, we had to try so hard to keep him alive, and he fucking died. It was depressing, because it was a bad night as it was. I came home, I was passed off about some shit, and I wanted to check on the snake, and the snake was dead. It was, like, oh, fuck, I stayed up all night. I was just miserable, a fucking wreck. Nobody really understood. It was, like, my snake died, and people just went, "Oh, that's too bad?"

Had he been sick for a long time?

Snakes get these incurable diseases. It's really hard to get them back to normal, but I've gotten pretty good with them. I had a vet coming in, and we were working with Clyde. He lost all this weight, and we were force-feeding him and giving him medication. I knew that Clyde was a really tough snake because he's gotten into all kinds of things in the past. I mean, he got caught in the trash compactor once and got electrocuted and poked his eye out. We thought hopefully, whatever it is, if we kept it long enough, we could keep it in there, but he didn't make it. He's buried out in the back yard.

Besides your pets, you're also very close to your parents, and you hang out with your brother Ash a lot. Did anyone else in your family influence you?

My grandmother bought me my first guitar. I used to fuck up around the house, and my grandmother would chase me around the house. She'd freak out, and when she'd play "Black Dog" really loud. I wasn't ready for her death at all. I think of her a lot, and she's with me all the time, I guess.

Despite your relationship with your family, you once said you make a point not to get close to people. Why?

For the most part, it's because I don't trust anybody. I've got a few close friends I trust implicitly. But when you're dealing with people on this level, most of them are out to get you. I've had a lot of friends turn on me, so I'm just a little bit I'd like to trust everybody, but sometimes you've been so totally taken advantage of that you feel like a piece of meat.

Do you think your feelings have anything to do with the way you were raised?

That's a good point. A lot of musicians are very rebellious because they come from a really repressed, sometimes damaging family life. I was really fortunate. I come from a very loving and supportive family, thank God. I could be a lot worse than I am now.