

Rolling Stone

THE BLACK CROWES

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THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

— BY —

JEFFREY RESSNER
AND LONN M. FRIEND

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

SLASH

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

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

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MARK SELIGER

LETTERED BY ANITA KARE

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, Michael Jackson and Lenny Kravitz, among others. This year should be even more intense: Once Guns n' Roses' album is finally released, the band plans to embark on a monstrous worldwide tour, the group's first trek since 1988 and – amazingly – the first time the Gunners have played arenas 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. Slash's mom, a professional costume designer named 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 Joni Mitchell. 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 Bestiary*, an unpublished book of verse written by Joni Mitchell, who was a neighbor.

"He was drawing from the time he could pick up a pencil," says Ola Hudson, who adds that he was weaned on her Led Zepelin albums and raised in a very loving household. "I've been shocked at a lot of things I've read where it sounds 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 father 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 resentful." These days, Slash has reconciled 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 alienated, 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 intrigued with the instrument after some coaxing from Steven Adler, a fellow BMX racer who later served as Guns n' Roses' drummer.

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

iles W. Axl Rose and Izzy Stradlin in a succession of rock outfits until 1985, when the four teamed up with bassist Duff McKagan and formed Guns n' Roses.

After the enormous success of Guns n' Roses' debut album, *Appetite for Destruction*, and the follow-up EP, *G n' R Lies*, the group found itself facing serious trouble. For starters, the band was ostracized because of the lyrics in the *G n' R Lies* song "One in a Million," which included references to "faggots" and "niggers." The charges of racism particularly affected Slash, whose father is white and mother is black. "When Axl first came up with the song and really wanted to do it, I said I didn't think it was very cool," says Slash. "But Axl gets very adamant about expressing himself, and his lyrics are very direct. He's very honest, and he's got his reasons. . . . I don't regret doing 'One in a Million,' I just regret what we've been through because of it and the way people have perceived our personal feelings."

Besides the furor over "One in a Million," a number of other crises threatened the band. Several members, including Slash, developed drug problems. The group began to slowly splinter, and it became difficult to organize sessions for a new album. An attempt to hold a series of rehearsals in Chicago failed miserably; a later effort to reunite to perform dates with the Rolling Stones led to Axl's threatening to quit; and Adler was dismissed last summer when he couldn't straighten himself out.

Eventually the band carried on. The Cult drummer Matt Sorum was recruited to replace Adler, and together with Slash, McKagan, Stradlin and keyboardist Dizzy Reed, the group laid down instrumental tracks for its new album last fall; all that remained at press time were the completion of Axl's vocals and the mixing chores. Following

some of the interview sessions, Slash proudly played rough but nonetheless impressive mixes of the band's new material – a Stonesy song featuring Stradlin called "Dust and Bones," a short catchy number titled "Double Talkin' Jive," a punkish tune dubbed "Shotgun Blues," a song about an Axl overdose entitled "Coma" and a duet between Axl and Alice Cooper on "The Garden." Additional songs recorded for the album include "Estranged," "Bad Apples," "Back Off Bitch," "14 Years," "Loco-Motive," "Perfect Crime," "Don't Damn Me," "Ain't Goin' Down," "You Ain't the First," "So Fine," "Don't Cry" and "Why Do You Look at Me?"

The interview with Slash took course over several different sessions, some held early in 1990 and the most recent ones conducted last month at Le Chardonnay and at his home, which is nestled in Laurel Canyon. Throughout every meeting, the guitarist was jovial, unassuming and – above all – focused. Although he didn't mind opening up about his personal life or his feelings about the other band members, he was clearly obsessed with finishing the new album. Still, he was reluctant to lay on a load of hype. "All you have to do is listen to it," he says of the album. "If you like it, you like it, and if you don't, we did it and that's it."

SLASH: First of all, I refuse to talk about drugs, Axl or any other bands. Period. [He smiles.]

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 controversial artist. I don't know who. I've never heard of him. I don't keep up with art circles. But that's the name 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 have you 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 boxed set. What's actually happening at this point?

Well, this is like cleaning out the closet. There's a ton of material we want to get out, and the problem is, how does one release all of it? You don't make some kid go out and buy a record for seventy dollars if it's your second record. We're trying to think of a way to distribute the material where each of the four discs of material can be separated, so 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 March or April, then a double album later this year, followed by another single album in 1992. There have also 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 [on the soundtrack for *Days 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 UK 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 some. "New Rose" is something Duff wanted to do, I think. "Don't Care About You" is something I wanted. The Misfits song was Axl's idea, and "Heaven's Door" and "Live and Let Die" were songs Axl and I both thought about doing.

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 subtlety to it as far as us really trying to play.

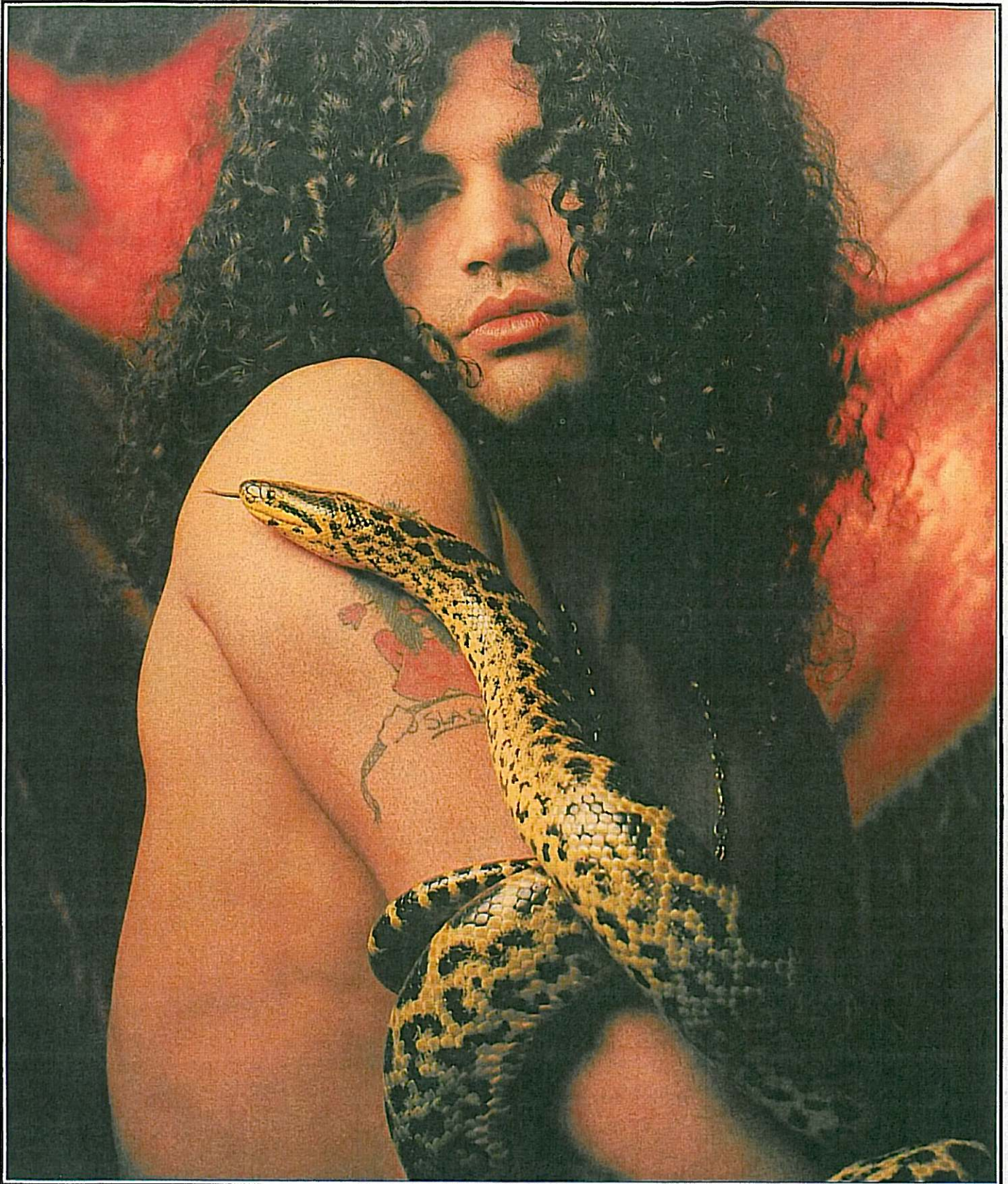
How do the songs reflect the changes that the band has gone through over the past few years?

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 love going in whichever direction. 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 like the central nerve of it all, too. It's like I think Jimi Hendrix said – "The more money you make, the more blues you can sing."

'Appetite for Destruction' was pretty much a hard-rock album, while the 'G n' R Lies' EP included several acoustic

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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 horns on "Live and Let Die." We didn't get into sampling, but right now, as we speak, Axl 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 angelic. We'll do whatever it takes to make the songs as powerful as possible.

A children's choir, horns, 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 intensely raunchy, over-the-top stuff to being very mellow — and everything in between.

Any thoughts for a single at this stage?

I don't think there are any singles on this record.

Why not?

I don't mean to rock the boat or anything, but I think there's a swearword of some sort on every song. Every potential single it's, like, whoops, oh, well, not that one. But there's some great songs, and I don't care if they say "fucking" in it or if they say "shit" or if they're talking about girls in the way we're not supposed to.

Will the album carry a warning sticker?

Axl doesn't agree with stickering. I don't care — I think the sticker is fine. It gives it a little sense of danger.

Are there plans for a tour?

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 Wembley [in London], 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 coliseums.

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. Axl turned me on to it. I want Black Death Vodka to call me, because I'll sponsor them. Just me personally.

What about the band? 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 put banners up all 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 "Marlboro" 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.

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

Speaking of booze, let's go back to this time last year and the American Music Awards. You gained national headlines when you nonchalantly said "fuck" on live 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 girlfriends all got drunk and flipped on down there after a stop at Carl Jr's. 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 live 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 bombed if you knew you might have to appear on live 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 fucked 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 without loosening up. That night, I didn't wear my hat, I didn't have a guitar to hide behind, and I wasn't performing. You walk into one of these places, 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 stiff 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 façade.

A few months before the AMAs, there was another fiasco 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 at 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 rehearsals 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, Axl went onstage and allegedly that drugs were destroying the group. How did you feel when you heard that?

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 lousy, and then Axl 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 pressured into making those remarks?

Axl said he wouldn't perform unless I agreed to go up and do what he called apologize, which I refused to do. I said what I said, and he came out, and it was very warm because what I said was totally 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 use 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 smoked it, and then I snorted it once. But the first time I really got high, I shot. I was that kind of junkie — snorting 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 menial as a little pile of powder can do that, but it does happen.

What do you think was the lowest you ever sank?

On heroin, the lowest was going to the Rainbow [an L.A. nightclub] 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 lied my way out of it.

Have you ever overdosed?

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 thing I care 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 dope. 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 in a detox clinic?

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 withdrawal like that last time?

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

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Black Crowes

[Cont. from 12] favored by one of his idols, Keith Richards, and drummer Steve Gorman joined the fold, the band settled into a swaggering, blues-based groove. By 1988, when bassist Johnny Cok and guitarist Jeff Cease were inaugurated, the Black Crowes 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*—jagged, bloozy barroom stomps; winding, emotional R&B wailers—have prompted more than a few critics to dismiss the Crowes as Rolling Stones knockoffs. And Chris Robinson's gurbusting 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 refer to the Black Crowes as a Southern band, although, technically, they are one. Barring geography and Allman Brothers veteran Chuck Leavell, who supplied keyboards on *Shake Your Money Maker*, the Crowes have little in common with rebel rockers like the Allmans, Lynyrd Skynyrd or the Georgia Satellites, yet many journalists, playing up the good ol' boy angle, 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 waving a rebel flag, you know?"

"This guy at MTV got all upset because he read an interview where I called Ronnie Van Zant a redneck," adds Chris. "He goes, 'Ronnie Van Zant was a great man.' I said, 'Look, I didn't say he was an asshole, I said he was a redneck.'"

Stones comparisons and Southern stereotypes notwithstanding, the quickest way to induce a stream of vituperative commentary from either Robinson is to bring up the current 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 shitty the music is if you're putting up with it," Chris says. "Who said that all these bands that headline arenas are allowed to go out and sing to 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 right you heard some bad notes. You saw a real band tonight, didn't you?"

Chris pauses, then swoops down on another pet peeve: "I don't put lots of chicks in our videos with their tits hanging out, because I can sell 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 gonna fool you. You don't like it? Turn it off. You like it? Buy the record or wait 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 Desmond Child and Bruce Fairbairn to put a bunch of 'oh, yeahs' on your record.'"

"You know," he says almost sadly, "there are people out there who really care and who don't call records product. A Pop-Tart 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 closet and emerges with a rough-hewn wooden crate. It looks suspiciously like it might house a small mummy.

If one were to believe all of the stories about the Black Crowes, the concept of Robinson's harboring a bandaged bogymen in his closet wouldn't seem far-fetched. Several interviewers, perhaps stumped by the Crowes' reluctance to serve up tales of female conquest and drunken debauchery, have gone beyond the call of duty to entertain their readers. One masterpiece in a well-known rock magazine implied that the Crowes were engaging in clandestine voodoo rituals 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 Beat novelists and "really good pretentious things" by writers like Franz Kafka.) During the interview, Chris also casually mentioned the band's habit of burning candles onstage and the Tibetan human-bone jewelry and gris-gris 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 Crowes flying."

Chris, who contends that the Crowes' interest in voodoo paraphernalia springs from nothing more than a love of the exotic, says he found the article funny. Some, however, didn't find it so comical. The piece spawned a panicky rash of LP-and-concert-ticket bonfires 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 Christian and you think I'm fucked... then fuck you."

His frustrations vented, Robinson lowers the box to the floor and begins undoing the catches. And though the object inside does turn out to be something that was once alive, it wasn't, sad to say, a human. It was a gourd.

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

"He's going to freak out," says Robinson gleefully. "There's a side of me that wants to go wake him up and say, 'Rich, look what I got for you.' 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 have in a long time."

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

For the briefest of instants, Chris Robinson actually appears to be unsure of himself. ■

Style

Medicated Noxzema Skin Cream at mass-market retail and drug stores nationwide. Edge shaving cream at drug and mass-merchandise stores nationwide. Gillette Sensor razor at mass-market retail outlets nationwide. Schick Tracer razor at drug and mass-merchandise stores nationwide. Sea Breeze Antiseptic for the Skin wherever health and beauty aids are sold. Neutrogena Moisture at department and better drug stores nationwide. Lever 2000 soap at select mass-merchandise stores. Call 800-451-6679 for the store nearest you. Vidal Sassoon Ultra Care at mass-merchandise and drug stores and Vidal Sassoon salons nationwide. Paul Mitchell's Conditioner at authorized Paul Mitchell salons nationwide or by calling 800-321-JPMS for the salon nearest you. L'Oréal Studio Line Clean Gel at food, drug and mass-market retail chains nationwide. Keri Lotion at drug and mass-merchandise stores nationwide. Degree Anti-Perspirant and Deodorant at mass-merchandise, grocery and drug stores nationwide. Copper-tone Sport available this spring at mass-market retail and drug stores nationwide. Bain de Soleil's Face Crème Fluide at drug and mass-merchandise stores nationwide. Aloe Up Lip Ice SPF 15 at drug and specialty stores nationwide. ■

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 with drugs 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. It's like one of probably the most disastrous 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 I've grown up a lot since then. 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 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 onstage, there's not really that 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.

Last year, Guns n' Roses replaced longtime drummer Steven Adler because of his substance abuse. How would you describe his problems?

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 52]

Slash

[Cont. from 51] and rock & roll. Then it was drugs and rock & roll. Then it was just 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 we just kicked him out is just somebody 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 refused. Every time he went 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? So I just said, "Fuck it, that's it, I can't deal with it anymore, we have to get a new drummer."

For a while, a drummer from the Sea Hags sat in with Guns, then Martin Chambers from the Pretenders stepped in momentarily. How did you settle on Matt Sorum from the Gills?

The guy from the Sea Hags was a really cool guy, and we got along, but he just didn't have the right vibe. 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 seen in a long time. So I just said, Fuck it, it couldn't hurt to try him.

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 up with it, 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 difficulties handling booze and drugs, Axl has had the toughest time just dealing with people. He's had hassles with his neighbor. He's had marital woes, continuing confrontations with the Hollywood police and other sticky situations. How have these incidents affected the group and the recording of the album?

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 has no idea, 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, unbeknownst to him. And that's the truth.

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 get a toothbrush stuck down his throat because that particular toothbrush 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.

I don't 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 fighting fish in the same bowl. We've always been the same. We have 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 cliché is. It might look a little intense on the outside, seeing all this shit that we're going through, but it makes for a tension that's — in a morbid kind of way — really conducive to the music we collaborate on. But as far as Axl goes, he is the best singer-lyricist around.

Although Guns n' Roses took 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 learn from. He must have said two words while I was there. One was "Hi" and the other was "Play it like Django Reinhardt." With all due respect to Django, that would have been a great concept had it fit the song. The whole thing was just a drag. 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 disliked 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.

Didn't 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 so unorganized. I like 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's happening.

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?

Les Paul called me up to play on this tribute record where he's producing tracks by Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and all these cats. 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. Duff's going to play bass, and Lenny sang back-up on it.

When we were at the studio, Les 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, like, crept away.

Anybody else been after you to do session work?

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

Despite your rowdy rock image, 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 — snakes. How many of the reptiles do you own?

I had 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 shit with me — my whole career. I tried 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 pissed 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 here, 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 was that kept him around that long would keep him 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 couch. She'd freak out when I'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 it a point not to get close to people. Why not?

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 a little jaded. 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.

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