

# Guitarist

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**Rock**  
HEROES

## Slash

On Les Pauls, Marshalls and...

20 years of  
Guns N' Roses

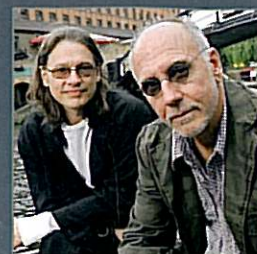
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“I played the Warlock for a while but when I went into the studio to record Appetite, I was listening back through the monitors to the basic tracks and those guitars sounded like shit. And I started to freak out – I needed to get a guitar. I didn’t have any money and didn’t know anyone I could loan the money from...” World-renowned guitar icon he may be, but it wasn’t always this way for the Guns N’ Roses and Velvet Revolver axe wielder. Slash offers Guitarist an autobiographical insight...

*Words Rob Laing Portraits Jesse Wild*

# Slash for questions.



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he world's most famous guitar hero is in a reflective mood. Leafing through a copy of *Guitarist* in the dressing room, before Velvet Revolver take the stage in Cardiff, has got him digging back in his colourful memory bank to recall his own gear back when it all began.

With an autobiography due before the end of the year and the 20-year anniversary of the album that made him a star (that's *Appetite For Destruction* in case you're fresh in from Venus) his willingness to look back is not surprising. But while that eagerly awaited tome will focus on Slash the man and his adventures, we're here to talk about the guitar side of the story...

#### How's the autobiography going?

"I was up at 6am this morning working on it."

#### Is it going to be no-holds-barred?

"I don't know what people are expecting but what I'm writing about is as much as I can remember from between the time I was born in the UK and Velvet Revolver. Everybody kept bugging me about doing a book and I said I didn't want to do it – this has been going on for a couple of years – because it makes it sound like I'm saying that was my whole life. Then it was suggested that I chronicle my Guns N' Roses life because now I've got another career, another band going. And I could see the point of doing that. It's not about guitar necessarily – I don't get into the details like a guitar magazine interview – I just talk about some of the shit I was into and everything is thrown in there. Life in general..."

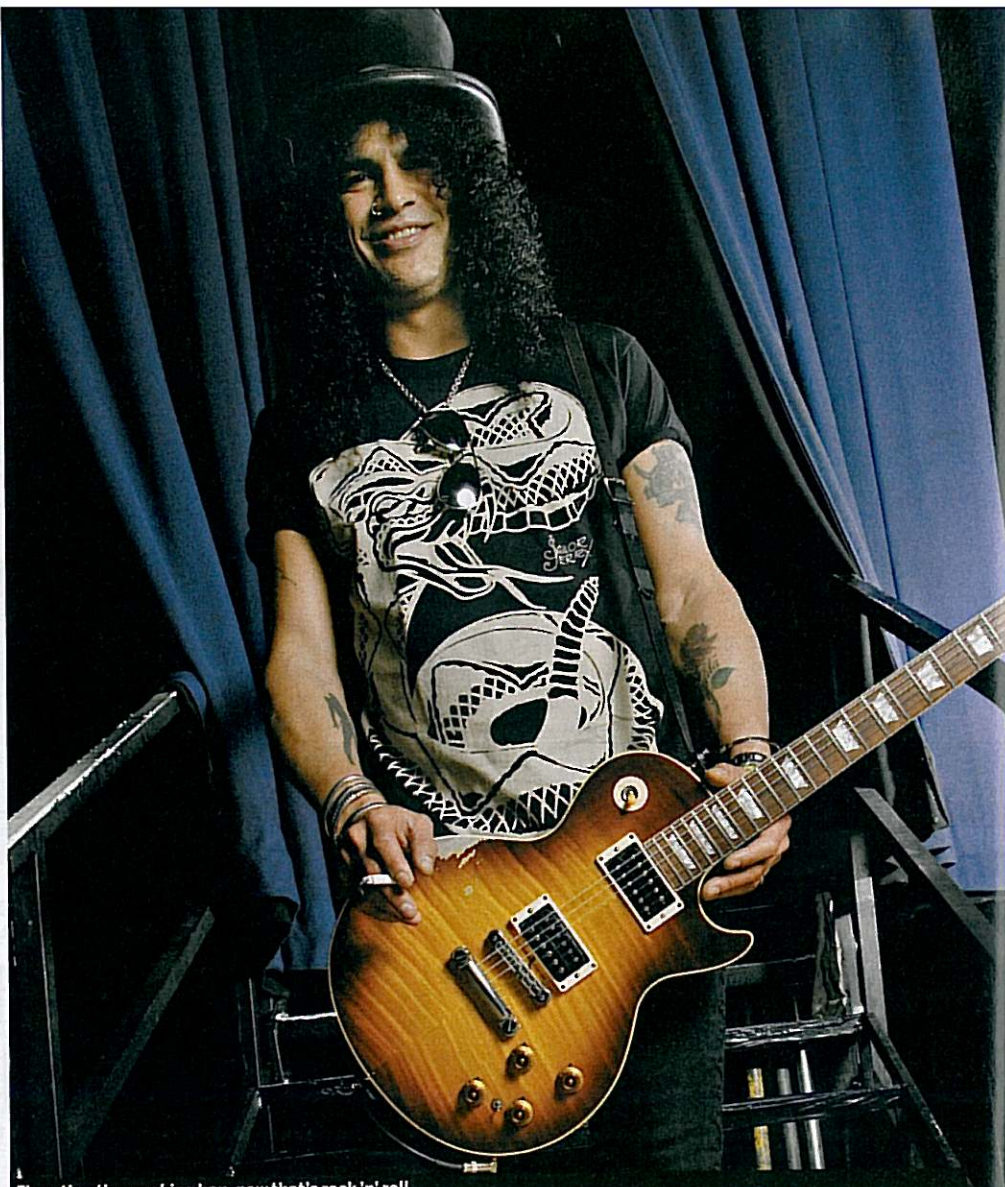
#### So you think it will set the record straight on some issues – you get asked a lot about Guns N' Roses...

"It will set the record straight as far as I'm concerned. There's no dirt in there, there's no stirring up any shit. I'm not about to reveal secrets about people or relationships that they wouldn't want out there. It's more of a day-in-the-life kind of thing and all sorts of precious secrets are still intact. I didn't go out to be vicious or anything."

#### Do you talk about your audition for Poison in the book, and do you ever wonder 'what if'?

"It's in there, but no, I don't wonder. It's almost like I did that because I was looking for something to do, and if for some strange reason it would have happened it wouldn't have lasted. I never thought about it really but unconsciously I almost did want to join, just to play the shit out of the material and kick their asses that way! But I don't think I expected to have a successful relationship with those guys."

"They were making a covers record when we were at Hansen [studios] doing *Libertad*, and I would leave out the back door. Because they were recording in the main studio right at the front door, I'd come and go out the back door. It's not like I have anything against those guys, and we're amicable and everything, but God I didn't want to have to say, hey, and the whole bullshit of how are you doing..."



Flaunting the smoking ban, now that's rock 'n' roll

"I've heard stories about players that spend days getting their guitar sound. I've got a very short attention span – I set it up and if it sounds good I don't f\*ck with it"

#### A lot of other players in LA at the time were coming from the Van Halen school of guitar playing in the early eighties – did you feel separate from that at the time?

"Yes, but there was some stuff I picked up from Eddie too – in between his hammer-ons he'd play some really cool blues licks and that was the part of his playing that I picked up on. He definitely had a voice there that other people weren't appreciating – they didn't get it. Most of the people that were influenced by Eddie Van Halen, for the most part, were pretty soulless. They were all copying the flash element but not really getting the heart of it."

#### Plenty of players back then were playing modified 'superstrat'-style guitars – did that never appeal to you? You weren't playing the famous Les Paul/Marshall set-up from the start, after all...

"I went through as much shit as I could get – I was searching. I gravitated towards a Les Paul, the first electric I got was a Les Paul copy and

I identified with it. I could have chosen any number of piece of shit guitars but I chose the Les Paul shape – I could only afford a copy at the time for 100 bucks. Then after that I got a BC Rich Mockingbird – one of those short-horned seventies ones – and I played that for a long time.

"Then I got a job at a guitar store – I had two or three jobs at the time actually – and that enabled me to buy a couple of other guitars. So then I bought a black Les Paul Standard and a Strat to go along with the BC Rich. I tried to work with the Strat but couldn't get along with it and ended up getting rid of it. Then I ended up getting rid of the Les Paul for what reasons I don't recall, but that particular guitar was sort of thin sounding. I was still exploring.

"Then I ended up getting Steve Hunter's Les Paul that I bought from a place in Hollywood and that was my main guitar. But somehow in the whole flurry of gigs, drugs and panhandling I lost that guitar. Then I ended up with a BC Rich Warlock that they made for me. I also had



a couple of Jacksons – one of them was a prototype strat-shape with an archtop.”

#### So you could've been known as the Warlock-wielding guitarist from Guns N' Roses?

“I played the Warlock for a while but when I went into the studio to record Appetite, I was listening back through the monitors to the basic tracks and those guitars sounded like shit. And I started to freak out – I needed to get a guitar. I didn't have any money and didn't know anyone I could loan the money from. I also didn't have any friends who could lend me a guitar. Allan Niven, our manager then, gave me this Les Paul '59 which has been my mainstay ever since [the Chris Derrig-made guitar]. Up until then I hadn't achieved that security of identifying myself and saying, okay I'm a Les Paul guy. Up until then it was a case of any guitar I could lay my hands on. But I was pretty adamant that Strats were too inconsistent and I wasn't going to go for a Charvel or anything like that. Even one of the Jacksons was a Firebird shape, that's the one they made for me with my tattoo on it.

“Finally, I was in the studio doing Appetite and I got this guitar the day before I was going to go in to do my overdubs. I'd rented a bunch of Marshalls and one in particular sounded fucking great and it was one of those things where it was a combination of the room and the guitar and amp – it made for the perfect sound

for me. It was my sound! I also had an SG that I used for something, but other than that it was straight Les Paul.”

#### What about amplification?

“I tried to keep the amp – to steal a Marshall JCM! We had a pre-tour rehearsal and I told my roadie not to bring that Marshall! Like an idiot he brought that Marshall, which of course the company that loaned it had been looking for. So they confiscated it. But I discovered later on – and especially recently when recording this album [Libertad] – that even where you put the cabinet in the room and those sorts of variables are part of what makes up your guitar sound.

“I was working at this particular studio called A&N – it used to be called Hansen back when we did the basic tracks there for the Use Your Illusion albums – and that studio never sounds good for guitarists for me. We did all the basic tracks there and I just moved one of the cabinets one day. They had the cabinets in an iso-booth and we took them out and put them in the main room in a particular spot. And that day my guitar sounded amazing compared to how it sounded before. So it's not just the amp or the guitar – it's other factors too.”

**You work better when it's not a drawn-out process – were the Use Your Illusion sessions an epic recording process?**

“Use Your Illusion was scratching all the rhythm tracks and then doing all the guitars over – same as Appetite. I couldn't deal with the headphones and would only play with the band because we needed to play together to get the feel. I would consciously know I wasn't keeping the guitar tracks so I would play like shit a lot of the time! So this time was different – this time we wanted to try it live and see what it sounded like and Brendan [O'Brien] was very encouraging in that way.”

#### Looking at what kind of player you were in your early 20s, do you feel your approach has changed a lot?

“My overall approach hasn't changed – the only thing that's changed is experience. I'm more in tune with what I'm doing than I used to be. I've always been able to pick up the guitar, know where the solo is and play something and feel it. Now I'm a lot more in touch with what I'm doing – I can sustain a note longer because I'm not as nervous a guitar player as I used to be. It's hard to pinpoint exact changes, but playing live I'm more conscious of the relationship between me and my guitar than I was back in the day.”

#### Is it true you worked out the whole of The Dark Side Of The Moon?

“Yes, that was off the record – learning it by ear.”

#### My first guitar

Slash on how it all started...

“What happened was that before I even had an instrument Steven Adler [childhood friend and drummer on Appetite For Destruction and Lies] was going to be the guitar player and I was going to be the bass player. But I didn't have an instrument and I didn't know fuck all about any of this – I didn't even know the difference between guitar and bass.

“So I walked into this local music school and said I wanted to learn how to play bass, and they asked if I had an instrument? I said no so they had some instruments there and I picked up the bass, but something about the bass seemed wrong to me. The teacher had an acoustic guitar and was playing Cream and Jimi Hendrix on it and I said, That's what I want to do. But he told me I needed to get an instrument...

“My grandmother had this Spanish acoustic guitar in the back of her closet with one string on it and that's where I started. So I went back to the music school... They started me on my way with the basic rudimentary parts. But all I kept thinking was I just want to do the Disraeli Gears stuff, and so my teacher would give me lessons which were like piano lessons and then he would play something that I liked and maybe write me out a chord chart. So I started watching him, learning parts from records that I would bring in until I thought, I could do that, which was much more fun than learning scales.”

#### Gun for hire

Slash explains the importance of playing sessions with other musicians...

“When people first started asking me to play on things, a lot of people said they're just trying to take advantage of your popularity in Guns N' Roses or whatever. And maybe it was true, but I thought it was more that I was getting to the point when I had a recognisable sound. So I was just flattered to be able to play with some of these really great people. Then I learned the experience you get from working in somebody else's environment and working with other people's music and respecting somebody else really broadened your horizons. I've learned how to adapt much more than when I was back in that Guns N' Roses bubble when I only collaborated with those four other guys. It's beneficial and I still do it when something comes up.”

#### Do you still do that when you hear a song you like?

“Well it depends – you hear so much crap on the radio. But if I hear something I like, my brain automatically tries to suss out what's going on. But I do play along with music on TV to practise. If there's something in particular on a record that I like and can't work out in my head, I'll go back.”

#### Is it true that Gary Moore was an important inspiration for you as a player?

“I went through a phase back in the day when I listened to more rock-orientated blues players and he was one of them – so I owe him credit for being an influence back then. It was during that period when Eddie Van Halen was doing his thing in the eighties and was already massive. During that time I was listening to Fast Eddie Clarke, Gary Moore, Michael Schenker and Uli John Roth – that was where my thing was.”

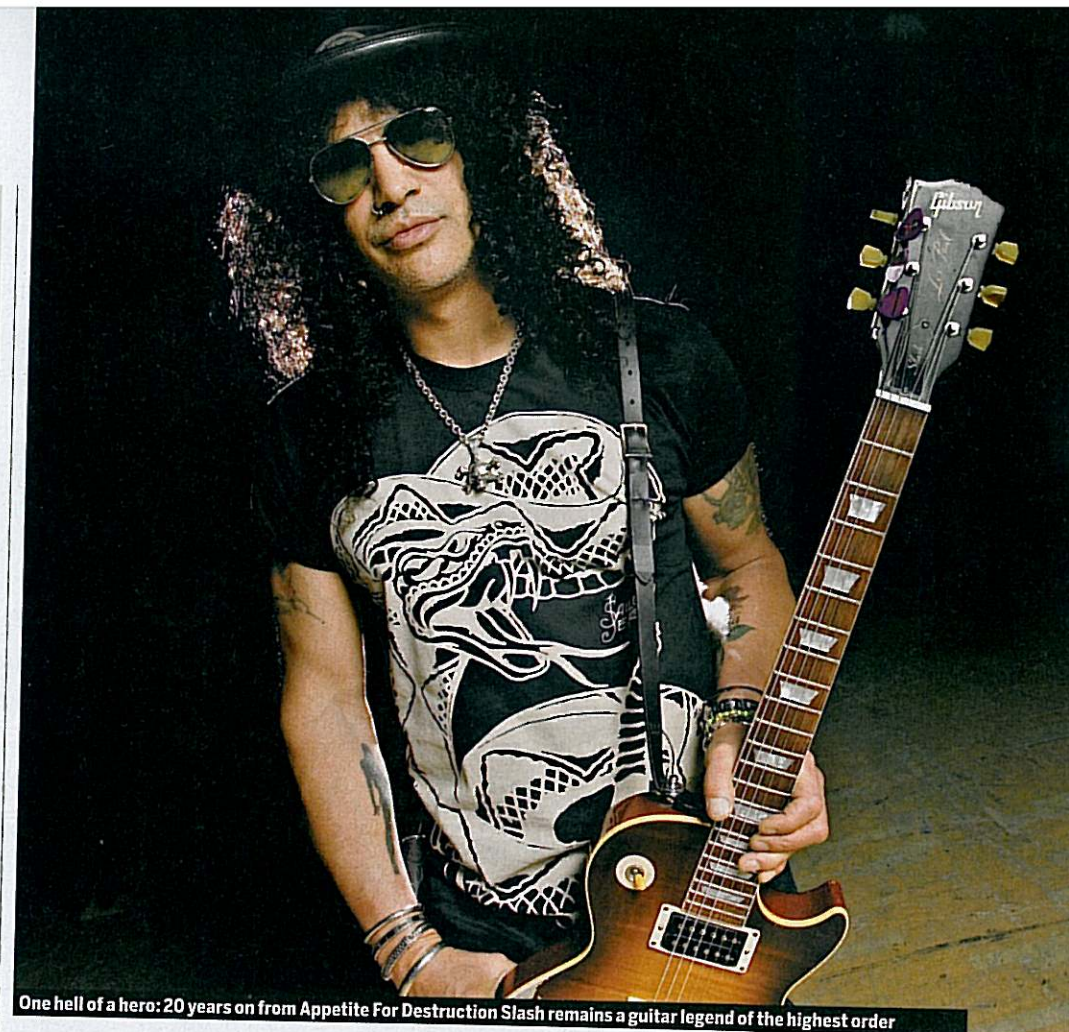
#### You left the UK at a young age, so the musical impact of growing up in America as a teenager must have been huge?

“My dad is such a rock fan and I remember my uncle and my dad playing The Moody Blues, Stones, The Kinks and The Beatles in England. I remember that like it was yesterday.

“Then when I moved to the States it was a combination of my mum and dad's influence – Bill Withers, The O'Jays, Cat Stevens, Elton John, Led Zeppelin, War, Stevie Wonder on my mum's side. My dad's was still the Stones and The Yardbirds so it was all that mixed together – it was a really musical and creative environment to grow up in.”

#### It's 20 years since Appetite For Destruction – does it feel like that time has flown by?

“20 years is a long time but it doesn't feel that long. If I stop to fill the gaps in of the tour for Appetite and the records after that it's pretty



One hell of a hero: 20 years on from Appetite For Destruction Slash remains a guitar legend of the highest order

“I've always been able to pick up the guitar, know where the solo is and feel it. Now I'm a lot more in touch with what I'm doing – I can sustain a note longer because I'm not as nervous a player as I used to be”

clear, but if I try to sit there and think about the details of any particular tour it gets away from me – it's a little blurry!”

#### Is there anything that stands out as your absolute highlight from your time with Guns?

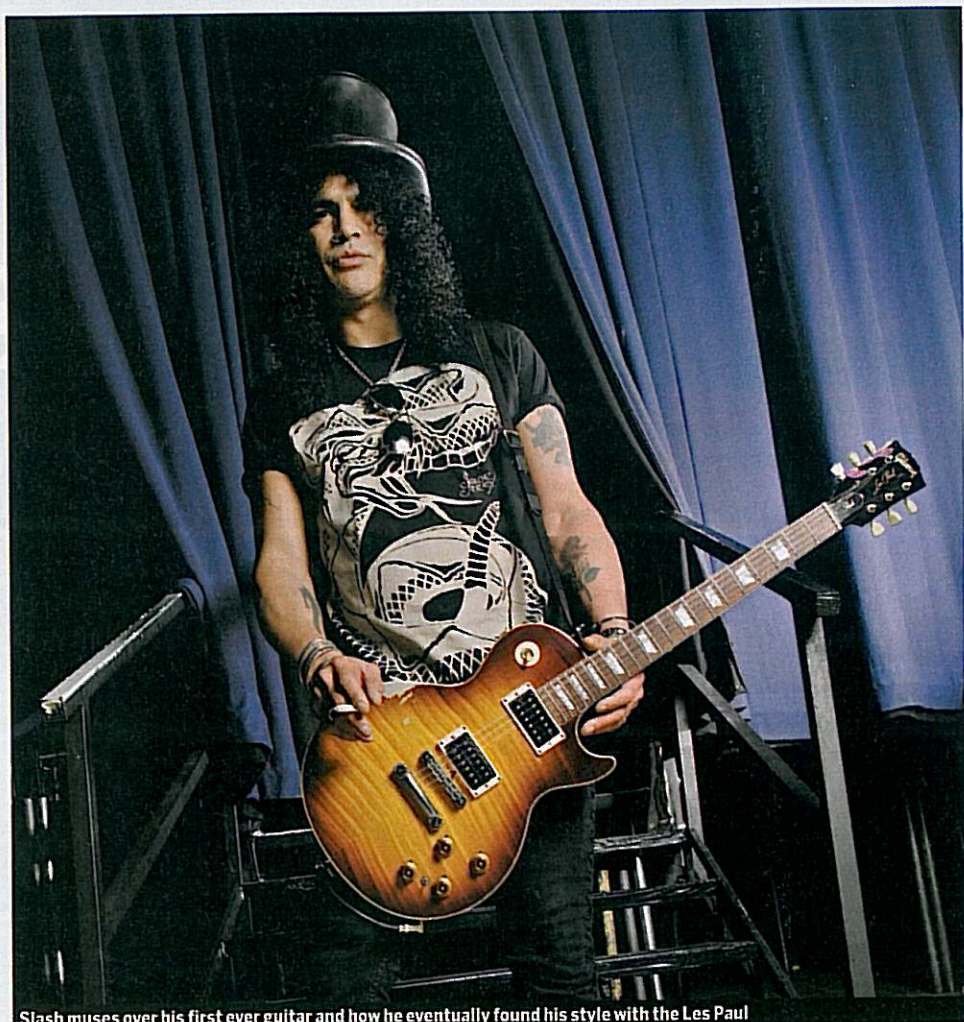
“There was a lot of great stuff that went on. But the key thing is always that the chase is better than the catch, right? It was always the climb up that was the good part. Anything that's new that you're discovering as you go is fun: those first US tours, the first European tour in particular. All that stuff was particularly memorable. Playing with Aerosmith too, when we got to that level. Then we turned into a stadium band, with that fucking naïve ignorance about how big the band was – not knowing or understanding that. And playing these huge places and not really getting it at first – that was pretty tricky, that was interesting... There were certain dynamics that were happening that made the whole thing a lot less enjoyable than it should have been. Then it started to become a lot of unnecessary work.”

**People aspire to play guitar like yourself, Jimmy Page, Angus Young and David Gilmour – do you think the 'guitar hero' lead player is becoming a dying breed?**

“The lead guitar thing has been sort of wacky from the day I started. When I first got into all this it was the tail-end of bands like Cheap Trick, Aerosmith, Queen and Led Zeppelin and the beginning of Van Halen and Mötley Crüe. I like Van Halen but it still isn't the same kind of band I was into when I was younger. AC/DC were still around, then you had your Judas Priest and Scorpions – that whole scene. That was a little different, but there was still guitar going on, even though it was its own little private niche. Everything else that was commercial was not really guitar driven at all.

“I don't know where it's going to go – what kids are hoping to have happen over the next few years. That's all a crapshoot: you just wait and see what happens. For me, I just do what I do. But I'm getting bored of listening to the same old records decade after decade...”

“By the time Guns N' Roses came, the whole LA scene had watered down guitar in the way that I understood it pretty much. Then in the nineties you had a lot of really great bands that weren't really lead guitar-driven at all, then in the middle of the nineties up until now you had this sort of potpourri of pop bands. So the guitar hero has sort of gone – luckily Zakk is still around. I think Zakk and I are the last of the Les Paul-wielding guitar guys!”



Slash muses over his first ever guitar and how he eventually found his style with the Les Paul