

[COILED AND READY]



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

BT KATHERINE TURMAN

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VEN UNDER THE BEST

of circumstances, the Hamburger Hamlet that anchors the west end of L.A.'s Sunset Strip is lacking in serious ambience. At 3 in the afternoon on a rainy Saturday, though, the venerable if unremarkable restaurant is surprisingly crowded, the day's watery light lending a strangely cozy, slightly

surreal air. **THE EATERY'S** PROXIMITY to the Atlantic and the Geffen record-company offices makes it a humming power-lunch destination during the week. Weekends, however, find plastic-surgerized Beverly Hills matrons quaffing diet sodas and kibitzing in the restaurant's brighter front rooms while the serious drinkers huddle in the welcoming banquette booths or at the bar in the slightly more dissolute atmosphere of the taproom. **PERCHED ON A BARSTOOL** is one Saul Hudson, colloquially known as Slash, Guns n' Roses' guitar guru. Save for the hefty diamond studs glittering in both ears, Slash — sporting facial scruff, a backward baseball cap, a hoop in his nose and a cigarette dangling from his lips — might be any other wanna-be rock star enjoying a midafternoon cocktail. **SLASH ACCIDENTALLY** ARRIVED an hour early for his scheduled interview, but unperturbed by the time mix-up, he waves to the waitress — clearly an old acquaintance — grabs his vodka and cranberry from the bar and slides into a booth, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Mr. T is sitting two tables away," he says sotto voce, excitement in his eyes.

THOUGH JET-LAGGED AND UNSHAVEN, the guitarist proves loquacious, candid and relaxed. While he's got the slacker-musician vibe in spades, his conversation moves between topics — from piercing {"The next time you see me, I'll have my navel pierced"} to Les Paul {"He wiped the stage with me once"} — with frightening rapidity and surprising clarity, never straying far from his current raison d'être, a down-and-dirty little rock & roll lineup known as Slash's Snakepit. Featured on the band's 14-song debut, *It's Five O'Clock Somewhere*, are ex-Gunner guitarist Gilby Clarke, present Gunner drummer Matt Sorum, Alice in Chains bassist Mike Inez and former Jellyfish background singer and guitarist Eric Dover on lead vocals. **SLASH WAVES** at the maitre d', who,

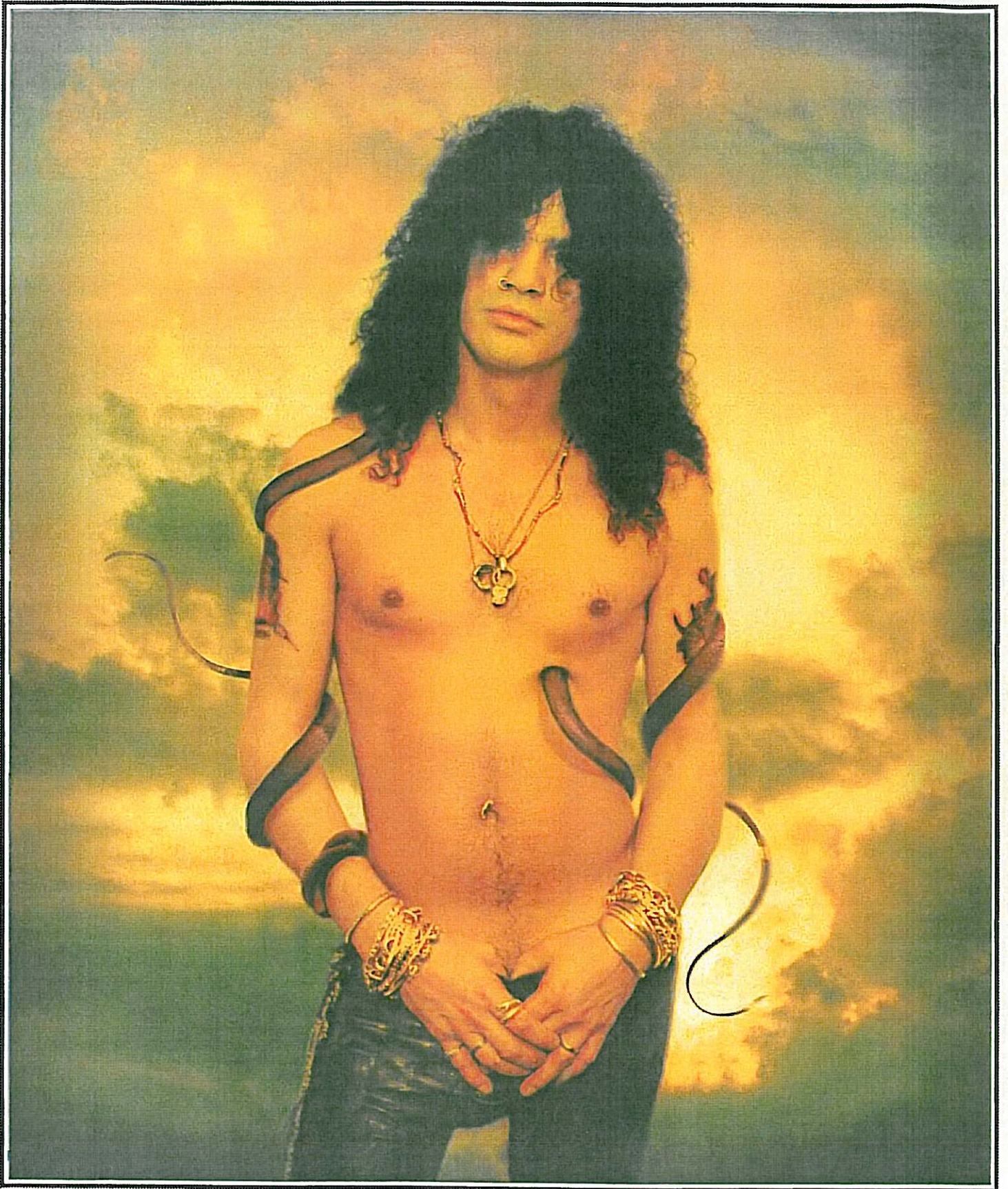
kindly, has not asked the guitarist to extinguish his cigarette despite stringent new anti-smoking laws in L.A. "That's Don," Slash says. "He's from the Sherman Oaks Hamburger Hamlet that was destroyed in the earthquake." **SLASH DRAGS** on his cigarette and downs a shot of Jagermeister. "This is the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

MR. T'S VOICE RISES above the din, and Slash peers at him over the heads of the other diners and grins, his eyes crinkling. "If Dean Martin were here, that would be classic," says the 29-year-old guitarist. He settles back into the booth and easily picks up his train of thought. "It's like I'm owned by Guns n' Roses in a way," Slash continues in his intimate, stoner-ish timbre. "It's our band. So if I write something, my first and foremost priority would be to dedicate it to Guns." He draws heavily on his cigarette as the maitre d' hovers. "At the time, no one seemed to be interested in the material. Axl {Rose} said, 'That's not the kind of music I want to do.' I said, 'OK,' and took it all back. That's happened too many times." **SLASH WASN'T PLANNING** on a solo record — "side project" being the

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much-preferred term. "It's not a solo project," he says, "because everybody in the band got to play whatever the fuck he wanted." The third original member of Guns n' Roses to release a solo album {following bassist Duff McKagan and ex-guitarist Izzy Stradlin}, Slash wrote all the music to the songs that appear on *It's Five O'Clock Somewhere* in his home studio, completing the initial concepts and tracks in early '94. The LP title was taken from a generous bartender at LAX airport, who gave Slash an early morning drink with the dictum "Hey, it's 5 o'clock somewhere, pal." **THE COOLEST OMEN**, says Slash, "was the night I recorded three songs and {*Cont. on 96*}

• Photographs by MATT MAHURIN •



BELLY

[Cont. from 50] and burp into the mike. So funny, so normal."

Greenwood, who co-wrote the music for "Super-Connected" and "Puberty," provides a manic yin to Donnelly's serene yang. Listen in on this story, which she fires off in a dizzying 10 seconds. "This is what Tanya is like OK? We shared rooms for like a year, OK, and we got along great. Well, I snore like a fucking motherfucker — like a trucker. I have an adenoid problem. I can't help it. I'm usually very dainty. Ha! Or so I thought that one fateful morn — I think it was in Munich — 'cause I woke up early to take my morning jog, and I see poor Tanya sleeping, not looking restful, and on the night stand next to her is a cosmetic pad ripped to fucking shreds. I'm like 'Wow, what the hell did she do last night?' And I have the horrible realization that she's got little pieces stuck in her ears to block out my snoring."

As the new kid in the band, Greenwood says she senses "a little delineation. Probably no one feels this way but me, but when it gets to be 4 in the morning, and everyone's drinking, it's like 'Hmm, heard that story in Detroit.' I can only stay up so late with my bottle of water."

At the moment she confides this, Greenwood is guzzling her beverage of choice backstage at the Garage, a London dive where Belly are about to take the stage. Tom is inspecting the backstage sandwiches, which have congealed into one large loaf; Chris is contemplating "whether to get high or not"; and Donnelly is pacing. "I'm straight edged," Greenwood says. "Never drank, never smoked. Fuck that. I can get happy by running." Indeed, she has one of the more well-cut bods in the music world. "Although everyone looks at me and thinks, 'Recovering alcoholic,'" she deadpans. Her vice, instead, is candy. "Fuckin' circus peanuts! Those dots on the piece of paper! Shit candy!"

Donnelly, combating a case of nerves, grabs a fat Magic Marker and scribbles down the set list. From the stage below come the uninspiring sounds of the Pale Saints. Nobody cares. The audience is yelling, laughing and schmoozing with abandon. The lead singer tries to tussle with an audience member. "Fuck you," the vocalist says halfheartedly. No one budges. The show might as well be in mime. The audience is here to see Belly.

BELLY CLOTHING CREDITS

Cover: Sequins by Serious. White jeans by A.P.C. and Gap. Sunglasses by Armet. Page 46: Tanya Donnelly's top by Nicole Miller and skirt by Colin Baer. Page 48: Chris Gorman's black jeans by Diesel. Gail Greenwood's top by Betsey Johnson and bottoms by Keddies Bloomers. Page 49: Fuzzy jacket by Serious and black jeans by Diesel.

Donnelly ducks into the bathroom to put on more makeup. "Ugh, nerves," she says. Outside someone says in a cheery voice, "Time to go on, folks!"

"Here we go," Donnelly mutters.

Onstage the band, never one for shallow spectacle, dispenses with the stage patter and launches into "King." It's a little wobbly, as is the next offering, "Puberty." Greenwood is whirling her hair and bouncing around the stage. The band is exchanging furtive looks. Not even the standby "Feed the Tree" puts them on steady ground.

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

"Mm, pity," says his companion.

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

"Better," concludes the voice in back.

"Mm, yes," raves his companion.

WE HAVE JUST ADJUSTED OUR SEATS to the upright position and secured and fastened our tray tables. The captain has turned on the no-smoking sign. We are heading home to Boston. I am seated between the brothers Gorman, who are having sinus trouble, sniffing and gacking in stereo. Donnelly, meanwhile, is reading a book. Hmm, is it her favorite writer, Jeanette Winterson? Close. It's Jackie Collins' *Lucky*. As for Greenwood, she has three photos and is giving herself a slide show: parents, dogs, the Boyfriend Whose Name Is Chill. Parents. Dogs. The Boyfriend Whose Name Is Chill.

I am asking the band to fill in the missing word: "In Belly, I am the 'blank' one."

DONNELLY: "God. I don't know. I'm very maternal, but that's with everybody, not just them. Hmm. How about, 'I'm the tired one.' Honestly, that's probably the most accurate answer."

TOM GORMAN: "I am the pessimistically optimistic one."

GREENWOOD: "I am the most nice."

CHRIS GORMAN: "I have sinus trouble. Can I be Sneezy?"

Upon arrival in Boston the band almost immediately goes back into the trenches. After two blissful days of downtime ("I can't wait to molest my boyfriend," says Donnelly with gusto), there are more interviews, more touring and more fans, who, disturbingly, often ask Donnelly for a hug.

"Sometimes I say, 'I don't like to be touched,'" Donnelly says, opening her tray table as a stewardess slaps down her vegetarian meal (it looks just as ghastly as the chicken or lasagna, FYI). "That's a way of getting out of it and being semienigmatic. I'm getting less and less polite as the years wear on." For a while she had another trapping of fame: her very own stalker.

"The way he was harassing me was so typical and unimaginative," Donnelly says. "I ended up doing something in retro-

spect that was probably dumb. I wrote him a threatening letter saying, 'I will hire someone to hurt you if you contact me again.'" It worked.

Most of the fans, however, are of the eager-to-please ilk, which touches Donnelly. "I'm older than most of the people that come to our shows," she says. "But that's OK." She settles into her seat with her Jackie Collins opus. "I like being in a position of, you know, Mom with a guitar." She smiles. "There's something strange about that, but there's something sweet about it, too."

SLASH

[Cont. from 55] mixed them that night, which I normally wouldn't do. I went to bed with the DAT in my hand, all 14 songs.

"Actually, I was going to have sex," he confesses with an impish grin. "I took my tape and said [to wife Renée], 'Honey, I'm done. . . . And it was like Godzilla came to town. It was so freaky, so surreal. I'm pulling down my clothes, trying to get into bed, and all of a sudden the TV at the foot of the bed, it just went.'"

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

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

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

"Guns have a tendency to sort of close themselves off," says Slash through a mouthful of salad. "I hang out all the time in general, so I don't feel totally alienated. In Guns n' Roses, because we

get whisked off in a limousine and Lear jet, this whole thing of flying coach and getting in a van is great [for me]. It's so much more fun. After you've played 100,000-and-some seats, where do you go? The Empire State Building? Not to knock what Guns does — that's great — but Guns can't go backward to the point where we all pack up in a van and drive up to a show."

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

Guns n' Roses' cadre of handlers makes the inner workings of the controversial lineup virtually impenetrable. The status of G n' R appears to the outside observer to be neither here nor there, with the band lying low subsequent to the 28-month world tour supporting *Use Your Illusion I and II*, which ended in early 1993. The most recent collective stirrings from Guns n' Roses are the reliable grapevine gossip that Guns were rehearsing with ex-Ozzy Osbourne and current Pride and Glory guitarist Zak Wylde filling Clarke's slot.

Slash, however, seems to wish that the band would be in a different place at this juncture. The guitarist had high hopes that the Guns' recording of "Sympathy for the Devil" for *Interview With a Vampire* would motivate the band to record again.

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

"When the Snakepit thing is over, and I've got that out of my system," says Slash, "we all seem to be pretty amicable about how we feel about each other as far as Guns are concerned. I just want to do a really cool Guns record, and I don't want to rush it out to keep up with the Joneses. So when everybody feels comfortable doing that . . . I don't know exactly where [Rose's] head is at, as far as what that should sound like. It changes from month to month."

"But we talk," Slash continues.

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

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

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

Where Slash pulled through, others haven't. "Lower," a low-key, voice-box-enhanced song on *It's Five O'Clock Somewhere*, was colored by the suicides of Slash's ex-gal pal porn actress Savannah and Kurt Cobain, which occurred within months of each other.

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

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

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

"I don't want to sound shallow," Slash says, stubbing out yet another cigarette, "but I don't have any aspirations like someday I want to be a fucking president or actor. I'm a one-trick pony."

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