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Velvet Revolver



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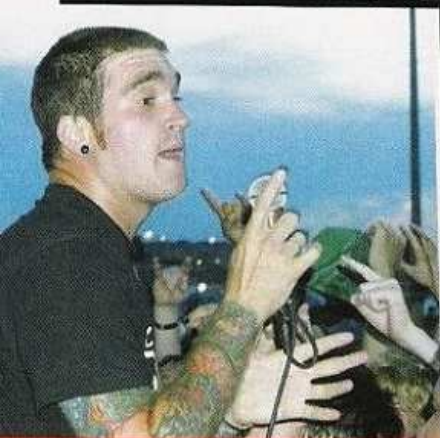
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Velvet Revolver



Weiland: Who's a pretty boy then?



The last gang in town

When five of rock 'n' roll's most infamous hellraisers formed a band together, disaster seemed imminent.

Then **VELVET REVOLVER** sold millions, conquered America, and laughed last. Now they're coming to the UK...

Words: Johnny Sharp Photos: Paul Harris

"PEOPLE HAVE come up to me in stores and said 'Thank you'," says Duff McKagan. "Fucking thank you for bringing back rock 'n' roll". I mean, whatever you may think of us, we're not Creed, we're not Nickelback. And thank God for that."

Writer F Scott Fitzgerald once said that 'there are no second acts in American lives'. But someone forgot to tell Velvet Revolver. And so it came to pass that a bunch of supposed write-offs, fuck-ups and 40-something rock casualties became the hottest band in America.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

WHEN WORD got around last year that Guns N'Roses survivors Slash, Duff McKagan and Matt Sorum had formed a band with Stone Temple Pilot Scott Weiland and ex-Danzig and Wasted Youth guitarist Dave Kushner, expectations in some quarters weren't particularly high. After all, we've all heard this one before, right?

The history of rock music is littered with so-called 'supergroups' formed by big names who sounded fantastic on paper but distinctly underwhelming on record. Anyone remember The Travelling Wilburys? The Far Corporation? Asia? No? Consider yourself lucky.

Velvet Revolver seemed all the more dicey a proposition when you considered its members' reputations. As Slash has said, when they had those 'dead pool' speculations on who would be the next rock star casualty, they long ago stopped taking bets on Guns N'Roses members. Add to that a reformed alcoholic guitarist and a singer whose struggles with drugs and the legal system have been well documented, a man who once claimed to have got so fucked up he would have 'sucked dick for a crack hit', and you have not so much an appetite for destruction as a recipe for disaster.

But Velvet Revolver were never in the market for such conventional wisdom. They got clean, got a band together that sounded good to them, went out and played to whoever would listen, and they were as unsurprised as they were unimpressed when their debut album sold a million copies in a month.

So what went right? Well for a start they wrote a bunch of songs that bristle with the kind of furious adolescent energy you wouldn't imagine possible from a group of family men with a combined age of nearly 200 and an occasional sideline in real estate investments. By default or design, they somehow managed to take an old school hard rock style complete with guitar solos, stadium ballads and radio-friendly hooks, and inject it with a dark, savage grunge, glam rock swagger and a 21st century punk rock vitality. Sounds unlikely in theory. Works wonderfully in practice.

Not that someone as laid-back and unpretentious as Slash and Duff McKagan would even attempt to analyse the whys and wherefores. They're just happy that for the first time in their careers, they might now be allowed to put Guns N'Roses behind them and be recognised for music they've made in this century rather than the last.

When we meet Slash in a Pittsburgh hotel room (where he's staying under the name 'Seymour Hymen' - arf!), idly strumming on a Les Paul, sipping a Guinness and smoking a Gitane, he can barely keep the grin off his face. And who can blame him? "People treat Guns N'Roses as this great mythical thing," he says. "I'll always be very proud of having come from that band, but it's been a long time since I was part of it, and if I walk into a bar and someone says, 'There's the guy from Velvet Revolver' that's a very big thing because it's the first time it's happened since I quit Guns N'Roses. And it was a very hard band to quit. But if I hadn't I'd be in the very same rut that Axl's stuck in right now, which is going nowhere. I couldn't sit still that way."

Oh yeah, Axl. Whatever happened to that guy? Suffice to say that there is some amusement at the photo shoot when someone shows the ex-Gunners the recent Kerrang! Shitlist by new GN'R bassist Tommy Stinson, in which he lists tattoos among his hates... "except Axl's".

"I'm sure he's one of those guys who keeps himself buried in a computer all the time checking out what's going on with everyone," reckons Slash. "But it's not really here nor there with me what he thinks."

If he were to check up on Slash, he'd find a man who has pulled back from where he was when he left Guns. He still likes the odd shot of JD and enough cigarettes a day to send smoke signals to Mars, but he's stable, having just become a father.

Duff McKagan, meanwhile, looks like a man whose insides have been hollowed out and replaced with circuit boards. Not an ounce of fat, cheeks like caves and veins like pipe cleaners. He's equally relieved to have the monkey off his back.

For Slash and Duff it's vindication, and two fingers to the people who thought they would never get their shit together sufficiently to do anything more than live off former glories. It's also satisfying because they've taken a friend with them for the ride who many thought was even more likely to derail the whole crazy train.

Step forward Mr Scott Weiland, a man who, for all his achievements as frontman of one of the biggest American bands of the '90s, has had more column inches devoted to his battles with drugs and run-ins with the law than his musical output in recent years.

"All sorts of rumours were going around," recalls Duff. "These guys will never get the record done" - we did the record in three weeks. "Scott's going to get busted before they tour" - and here we are, touring."

It turns out Duff played a considerable part in helping Weiland back onto the straight and narrow. Ironically, it was the day before he was arrested for possession that he asked his new bandmate for help.

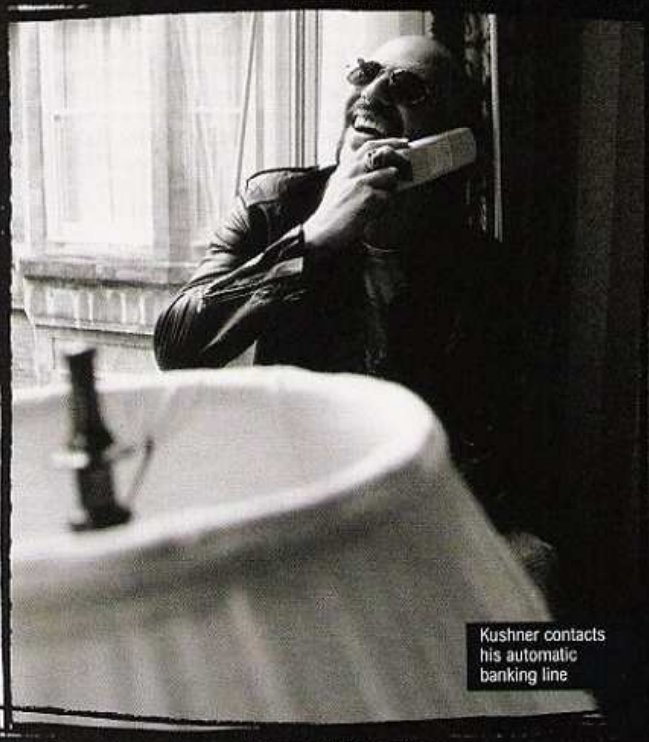
"He came to me and said, 'Listen man, I've been chippin' ever since Stone Temple Pilots broke up. It's become a habit. I've got a wife and two kids and I'm not with 'em because of this, and I want out'. So we went up to the



McKagan: enjoys a healthy tab after a hard morning's detox and yoga

"Rock 'n' roll should be confrontational! And sexual, and dangerous, and subversive - all at the same time."

Scott Weiland



Kushner contacts his automatic banking line

mountains in Eastern Washington and spent a month up there. We went to a kung fu master. It was like a Bruce Lee movie."

"He basically kidnapped me," admits Weiland later. "He took me up to the mountains in Washington and made me detox. We did a lot of martial arts, and it was my first real spiritual awakening after being clean."

"We were doing tai chi," says McKagan. "Meditation, writing, being honest with yourself, detoxing, running, a lot of talking. He really took to it. That was May. We announced we were a band in June. Now he's got his wife and kids back and he's a happy man."

'HAPPY' ISN'T the first word that springs to mind to describe the reed-thin dude who strides into the photo shoot in black lame trousers and aviator shades ranting furiously to his bandmates about how he has written an 'acid' letter to the individual deemed responsible for a sensationalised non-story about his ongoing legal case. Then he shakes my hand with the kind of warmth you'd normally reserve for a man who had come to repossess your house. I feel an icy chill descend.

We're lucky to get that much, though. He stopped doing interviews a few months ago, and only made an exception for Kerrang! when we wrote a letter reassuring him that for once the story for us was about Velvet Revolver's unlikely triumph rather than his personal trials and tribulations. We hear later

that the rest of the band still had to take him aside at the photo shoot and persuade him to do the interview, something he eventually accepted as 'sharing the load'.

If this sounds like a man with a lot of anger still seething inside him, one of the things that strikes you about 'Contraband' as an album is how gloriously nasty it sounds, chiefly due to Weiland's input. His vocals fizzle with venom and you suspect a happy, level-headed Weiland wouldn't have ripped it up quite as impressively.

"I definitely drew on the frustrations I was feeling at that time," he admits. "My wife and I were separated at that time and I was feeling a lot of anger and resentment dealing with those issues towards her, and towards myself. Ultimately that's where it came from. And also anger towards the system and the way it was treating me."

While anger and dysfunctionality makes for great rock 'n' roll, it doesn't make for a great long-term prospect. Weren't the others worried that Scott might fall back into his old ways and threaten the stability of the band?

"At this moment it's the last thing he wants to do," says McKagan. "It's not like we won't notice. You can't bullshit bullshitters!"

"This is a good place for us all to be," says drummer Matt Sorum. "Especially Scott, because we aren't guys that can be fooled. I can tell a singer that's high a mile away. If I'm driving in a cab in Iowa and the cab driver's done a little blow I can tell. Heh heh!"



Slash, caught off-guard in a quiet moment alone

For Scott himself, meanwhile, the rest of the band's shared past was one more reason why he wanted in.

"These guys had been through Hell and survived, and basically they promised me that they'd go to Hell with a squirt gun to get me out. There's comfort in knowing that I'm not alone in this fight. And I'm not just talking about struggles to stay away from dope, I'm talking about struggles in my own head. Whether it's depression or just insanity."

In that sense Velvet Revolver had an instant bond, summed up by Dave Kushner.

"It's like we're a group of shipwreck victims, or Vietnam vets. They might not know each other, but they have that shared experience which means they can instantly understand each other."

Yet this band are no rehab support group who've decided to have a jam session. There's a fierce motivation at work here, borne of a desire to shake up a rock scene gone stale.

"We set the goal to make the best rock album that had come out since the early '90s," reckons Weiland. "We wanted to stick a boot right up the ass of the record industry."

Well, if they were shooting for the moon, they've already gone through the roof. And it's a welcome return for some old school rock 'n' roll values that have been forgotten by the big-shorted shouters that have dominated the rock scene of late.

"You listen to rock radio now," sneers Weiland, "and every musician has taught himself the same chords, the same de-tuned guitars, has the same tone and everybody's dressed the same and everyone looks like fuckin' roadies. If there's one thing I hope this band does it's to inspire younger musicians to start thinking differently."

And he's not finished there...

"I think rock 'n' roll should be confrontational," asserts Weiland, "and sexual and dangerous and subversive, all at the same time. When I look at the ponderous boring lack of

ideals of the recent nu-metal thing, it makes me fucking sick, and the sexism which they seem to think is okay because they see themselves as rock-rap and there's a lot of that in hip-hop. There's a difference between sexism and sexy."

AND WHAT'S wrong with being sexy?

Absolutely nothing when you see the kind of spectacular performance Weiland gives onstage with this band. Kerrang! is witness to Velvet Revolver's headline show at a mud-sodden fairground in the middle of the Pennsylvania countryside.

In his aviator shades and military cap he looks like Rob Halford after a month on the Slimfast plan, dressed by an explosion at a glam rock jumble sale. Ziggy Stardust could take lessons in glam style from this fella.

As he wiggles his snake hips, he's camper than you thought was actually legal in a conservative Mid-west backwater like this, and you realise his use of the word 'subversive' isn't just empty rhetoric.

His presence also makes Velvet Revolver an original, unpredictable and exhilarating proposition, so much more so than had the mic been in the hands of singers considered for the band, like Joshua Todd of Buckcherry and Skid Row's Sebastian Bach.

"Scott's the best rock 'n' roll frontman out there," says McKagan. "By far."

Tonight, it's hard to argue. And if Weiland's recruitment was a stroke of luck, you suspect that it was also just as well that early rumours of Izzy Stradlin's involvement in VR came to nothing. The notion of GN'R MkII minus Axl would surely have detracted attention from what a formidable band this is in its own right, and the influence of Dave Kushner's guitar on the darker, spikier Velvet Revolver sound shouldn't be discounted.

So far so good. But how long-term a prospect is this? Is this just a one-off record, or a 10-year plan for world domination?



Scrum: "Look guys! 'China democracy!'"

"If things keep going as they have been going then I see no reason why it can't last," reckons Slash. "One thing these people have in common is some knowledge of how to keep a band together."

"We would love to do this until we're too old to shake our asses anymore," says McKagan. "But it's a rock 'n' roll band, and it's volatile, and that's the way a good rock 'n' roll band should be. I wish QOTSA hadn't lost Nick Oliveri, but that shit happens in a rock 'n' roll band. We're totally committed to this, but I don't have a crystal ball."

Both admit this is a more serious proposition than previous projects such as Loaded, Neurotic Outsiders and Slash's Snakepit. But wouldn't they still be tempted by the prospect of getting back together with Axl for a GN'R reunion?

"When I left Guns I was very resentful about some of the shit that another human being put me through," says Slash. "Then a few years later people were saying, 'Oh, they'll get back together, like Aerosmith'. But it wasn't like that. The animosity was such that he'd have to go back and really change, and make me think there was something redeemable – which I don't see happening."

"There was also a point where the big money offers started coming in. And I was like, 'You know what? Go talk to him! He might care about the money but he's not going to right all the wrongs he's done. He's not even going to admit it, so until that happens I don't care if someone puts six million dollars in front of me. You go talk to him'. And they all went over to Axl and never got any response and I was like, 'That's what I'm talking about!'

"And now we've got this going on and it feels better than anything I've done since the first two years of Guns, so it's

"If I hadn't quit Guns N'Roses I'd be in the same rut Axl is in right now...going nowhere."

Slash

Questions are asked as Slash's post-gig bar bill arrives



not even a remote possibility anymore."

That's us told. And you believe them, too, because clearly these are men enjoying a second chance they feared they'd never get. And lest we forget, one man is also finding his first flush of real success.

"When I got my first cheque through I couldn't believe it," says Dave Kushner. "I rang my mom up and put the phone on three-way so she could listen to my bank phoneline saying 'Twelve... thousand... and... twenty... four... dollars! I was almost crying – I've never had that much money in my life!'

AFTER THE show we think we say our goodbyes... only to be immediately joined by Slash, who orders a Guinness and JD shots all round, then attempts to have a conversation with every single person in the hotel bar, chatting amiably to everyone from a wedding party to off-duty marines to salesmen in suits. When a drunk nearly gets into a fight with one of the crew, Slash steps in and gets them to shake hands and buy each other a drink.

The man's a legend in his own happy hour. You'd be hard pressed to find another rock star of his stature with so little ego, so unaffected by the bullshit that

has surrounded him for the best part of two decades. No wonder he plays like someone half his age.

In the end, the road crew intervene, begging the bar to stop serving. JD is potentially bad for his heart, they explain.

But they're fighting a losing battle. Because despite being a band of rehabbed, reborn survivors, there's still the sense that the chaos, the headlong flight down into the darkest abysses of the soul will never be very far away. And that sense of danger has been missing from rock 'n' roll for too long. Duff's right: Velvet Revolver aren't Creed. And we'll drink to that. ■

VELVET REVOLVER'S SINGLE 'FALL TO PIECES' IS OUT ON RCA ON SEPTEMBER 20. THE ALBUM 'CONTRABAND' IS OUT NOW.

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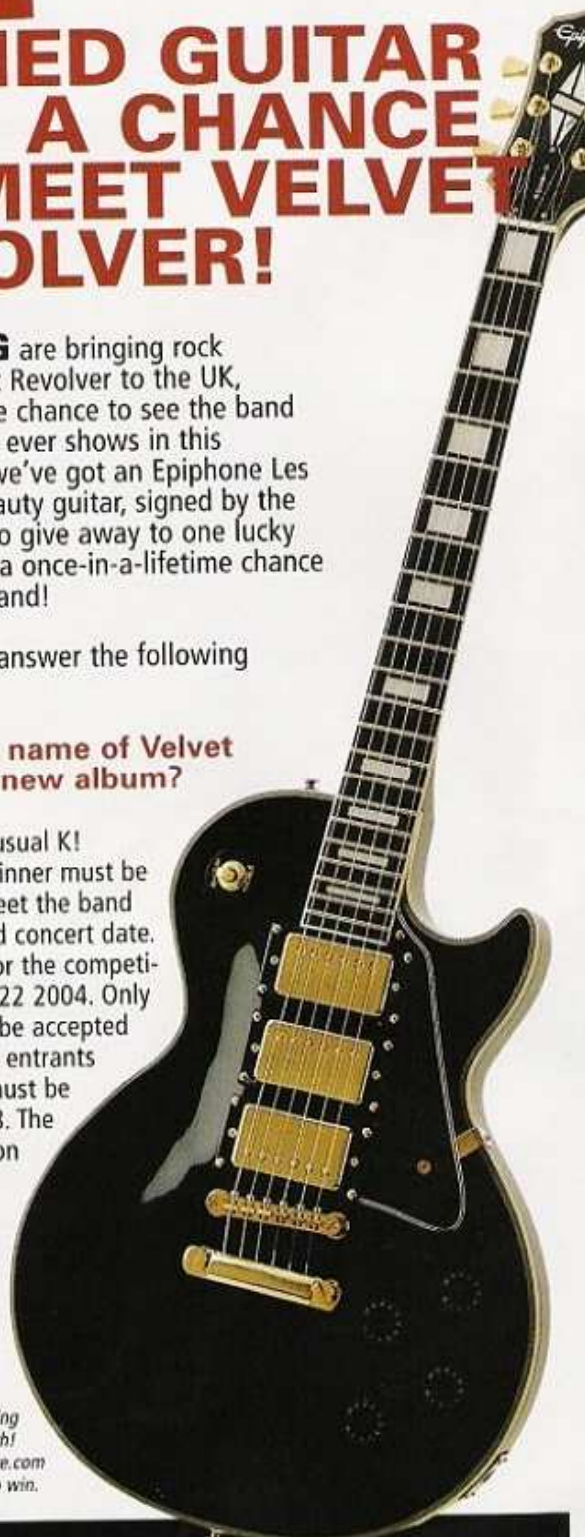
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What's the name of Velvet Revolver's new album?

Entries to the usual K! address. The winner must be available to meet the band at the specified concert date. Closing date for the competition is August 22 2004. Only one entry will be accepted per person. All entrants and winners must be strictly over 18. The editor's decision is final.

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VELVET REVOLVER



"You lookin' at me?"