



The original quartet of Billy Sheehan, Eric Martin, Paul Gilbert and Pat Torpey reformed Mr. Big back in 2009 for a well received world tour, before following up with their comeback album 'What If...' in 2011. With commitments to a variety of other projects, there was some downtime for Mr. Big, but eventually news came out that a new album, 'The Stories We Could Tell', was on the way. More recently, news of a graver nature was released: drummer Pat Torpey had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. With the future of the band uncertain, die-hard Mr. Big fan James Gaden called a candid Billy Sheehan to hear about how the future looks for the band and to discover how the new album is set to be a triumph over adversity...

Your last album 'What If' was done spontaneously and in the moment. How did you have to approach this record?

Well, we had a situation beyond our control, which meant we had to make this record differently to any other. Fortunately, we've all done so many records together and so many individually, I'm confident we can make a great record under any condition, in my humble opinion. We had to adjust quite a bit, not just musically, but emotionally, due to the situation with our drummer Pat. It was a difficult thing, but Eric, Paul and myself got together many times and jammed, put together ideas and worked with each other as best we could. Once we had the structure of the songs together, Pat worked with a programmer who basically did Pat's drums parts, programming what Pat would have done with his sticks on a real kit, under Pat's direction. It was unusual for us, but I've played on a lot of records where the drums already existed. The ability to programme drums these days... there are a lot of great Rock records that come out now where there isn't necessarily a real drummer on them. Most Pop records don't have a drummer at all. That's no excuse, but under the circumstances, we wanted Pat's heart and soul on the record; his drumming feel and style. The only way we could get that was have drums programmed under his direction. Once that was done, we pieced everything else together around it. It was quite an adjustment for all of us.

That's why I was curious - the announcement about Pat's health

was only put out relatively recently. As a huge fan I was gutted to read the news, so I can only imagine how it must have affected you guys in the band. It said he wasn't going to be able to play on the tour, you were looking at having him sit in here and there and be present for the acoustic portions.

We're hoping he can play with us as much as possible, however I'm concerned with Pat's safety. This particular affliction, Parkinson's Disease, makes it difficult for him to do long flights. I know Pat and I know how it happens with myself, when you're backstage, the lights go out and the crowd roars, that's quite a rush of adrenaline and he might end up pushing himself too far without realising it. He is definitely in a weakened state so I'm concerned. We will know for sure, probably the week before we leave in October, what the procedure will be for doing shows. We wanted to continue moving forward, also for Pat's sake, so he had a goal to shoot for. It's important sometimes to have a challenge to rise up to. We wanted to give Pat something to rise up to without forcing him, by any means. It's a precarious, upsetting catastrophe for the band. We love Pat and we want him to do as much with us as he is physically and mentally capable of.

You chose Pat Regan to produce the new record, who worked on 'Get Over It'. Did you choose him because you had worked together before?

Yes, Pat Regan is an old friend of ours, he produced a couple of my solo records and he's worked with Pat Torpey closely for

years, that's how I met him, through Pat. We wanted to use someone who was close to Pat, who knew him well and could take into consideration what we were working with. Bringing in a new producer who we weren't familiar with, they might not have realised the depth of the situation we have here. The two Pat's are very close friends, and it was more comfortable for Pat to work with someone he was close to. Like you said, he only recently released the information, I've seen some of his friends in L.A. and they've said 'Hey, where's Pat, how's he doing?' and I've had to say 'Yeah, good...' because it's up to Pat how he let's people know. We have to let Pat deal with his situation how he chooses. So we were really fortunate Pat Regan was available and happy to do it. I've worked with him myself a lot and I'm supremely confident, because he can do anything! In the past, if there's been a problem with a recording, a live taping, something isn't right and you think it can't be fixed... call Pat Regan! He's a wizard.

How did you go about managing your schedules for this album?

We managed to carve some time out and we booked a little rehearsal studio to get together. Eric gave me a couple of songs to do lyrics for, I gave him them back, while I was on tour Paul and Eric worked closely together, then everything was run by Pat Torpey. So it wasn't easy but we did manage. We really wanted to get this record done for Pat, that was our extra special motivation. We're hoping Pat improves, but we don't know. I have no idea if that will happen or not, so we really wanted to get this record done with him. We cancelled anything we could and spent as much time together as possible.

The previous record was named 'What If...' which was a reference to the band getting back together in the first place. This one has been named 'The Stories We Could Tell'.

Right - just sitting around talking, we've

got a huge life changing situation. It's what happens whenever there's a monumental event, somebody is born, somebody is married, whatever, people sit and talk about it. 'Wait until I tell you what happened...' and the stories begin. In this band, all four of us come from different walks of life. We all have our stories of what we went through when we started playing; the early days, the adventures, shenanigans and catastrophes we've all been through. We tell a lot of stories and it's a lot of fun. Anytime an event happens... one time we came out of an airport in Singapore and we were almost killed by about 5,000 fans waiting for us, with no security! We had to run into the cabs and get out of there, it felt supremely dangerous. And that happened about five times. (laughs) But the stories we could tell from that... they can be entertaining, funny, and with our situation now, we can look back on the band and say 'Man, the stories we could tell...' There's an ancient old song by the Everly Brothers called 'The Stories We Could Tell' and it was one of my favourites. The lyrics say that if it all blows up and all goes to hell, in the end you'll have a great story to tell. That inspired us to mark where we are now. If you were to sit down with the band, the stories we could tell you! It's mostly performance art, I don't tell my stories unless there is an intimate group of people... and a glass of wine involved! In the end, you try to live with as much vigor and adventure as you can. If you do that, you experience incredible things, whether they are good, bad, crazy... when you relate them to other people, that's the earliest form of entertainment. We like our songs to tell a story. Iconic songs do that, you get a depth which you never get with songs that go 'I love you baby, but you broke my heart, now I'm crying'. That's not much of a story! Look at Johnny Cash songs, or 'Eleanor Rigby'... stories, put to music, penetrate people's hearts and souls.

One of the things I love most about Mr. Big is that not only are you four incredible musicians, but each of you are song writers in your own right. Does that mean there is a lot of material stashed away and stockpiled fans have never heard?

We got tons of stuff! (laughs) I'm the senior archivist and I've saved all the cassettes of all of our rehearsals, song writing sessions, practice sessions... I have a pile of cassettes that's literally about two feet high and three feet square. I took two dual cassette decks, so that's four cassettes at once, hooked them up to my recording setup and put up an eight track recording session. I had it set on auto-reverse so the cassettes would go right through to the end, and I just hit record and let them go. I transferred every single one to digital. I didn't even think I'd get through them all! There were hundreds. So I have all these recordings in a huge folder, many of them have been edited up already. Some reside

in my collection personally. It's not just Mr. Big either, I've got David Lee Roth, Talas, UFO, pretty much every band I've ever been involved with. The Mr. Big archive has some really endearing, cool stuff. The cassettes were left rolling between takes so we have all the banter, the jokes and the fooling around, it's just great. Priceless stuff, listening to it is a real inspiration and a testament to how much fun we have in this band. At some point, if everyone gives permission, I'd like to make some of this available. The hardcore fans would really enjoy some of the stuff, and getting to hear how songs started out - start with a guitar riff, we discuss it, there's a part added, then a lyric and the next thing you know it's 'Alive And Kicking'!

I'd love to hear stuff like that. Being a die hard myself has cost me a fortune in Japanese imports for bonus tracks - a 'From The Archives' release would be amazing.

I'm the same, I spent a fortune on bootlegs and recordings of all my favourite bands. I've got tapes of the Jimi Hendrix



and The Band Of Gypsies rehearsals. I've got Genesis rehearsal and writing sessions for 'The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway'. All kinds of Beatles stuff - David Bowie's alternate takes for pretty much every song on 'Ziggy Stardust' - those are full takes with vocals. As a collector and a lover of all these artists and their music, that's money well spent. So being on the other side of the fence, being the guy making the records and being involved with them, I'd like to make as much available as possible, because it's what I'd want as a fan. I try to judge my activity and course of action as a musician looking at it from a fan point of view. I look and think 'I wouldn't want to hear that, but I'd want to see this video footage'. My collection is backed up and I'm at 1.5 Terabytes now... and growing. (laughs)

On the subject of great bands, not only are you the bass player in Mr. Big, but you've got the Winery Dogs too, with Richie Kotzen and Mike Portnoy. That's taken off and been really well received - did you expect to have that response with your first record

together? The success of the Winery Dogs must have impacted on your Mr. Big plans.

I always hope for the best but you never know. You make a record and you roll the dice, wondering what number comes up! You never release anything you aren't sure about, you always put out something you believe in, but you can't ever know what the response will be. I've put out records thinking 'Man this is going to be fantastic!' and nothing happened! (laughs) With the Winery Dogs, instantly we were overwhelmed by the response. We then started getting tweets from people in really big bands, like the guys in Kiss, saying The Winery Dogs was their favourite record. We were supremely happy. We went and played our first show in Brazil. The record had only been out there for a day, and the crowd sang every lyric of every song. They were so loud, if you watch on Youtube, you can't even hear the band, just the crowd singing. And it had been out a day! That was so cool, and it continued, we ended up touring for a whole year. I love Mr. Big, but unfortunately with schedules, we can only tour once every two years or so. Guys don't want to tour as much, Paul's about to have a baby, Pat's got his son, Eric has his kids, they don't necessarily want to always be on the road. I however, have to play. I have to keep my hands in shape, that's my lifeblood, being on stage. When Mike called me, I was really pleased and it was never a side project, it was always a full on band. Of course, Mr. Big is still very much my heart and soul and I will always take time for it whenever I can, but I needed something more full time. All of this happened before the situation with Pat went down. It was fortuitous that I secured a place within another band that became successful, but all that came before I knew Pat might not be able to tour anymore, so I was sad because I had no idea what the touring future of Mr. Big would be. It was an emotional blow.

From a fan's point of view, I was just thrilled you reformed and toured. Then you released 'What If.' which was a huge bonus. The fact we're getting another record is just fantastic.

Great, that's nice to hear. I've not got the finished article, but what I have heard I'm very pleased with, which was a couple of sample mixes before they went to be mastered. I made a couple of tweaks and Eric made a couple of suggestions, but I think it's rolling now. I should be getting the entire package of songs very soon and I think people will be happy. I appreciate your and the other fans regard for Mr. Big very much. Pat is our drummer and we are delighted he was involved on this record. We have a London show planned too, so come down and see us!

Mr. Big released their new album 'The Stories We Could Tell' in Europe on Frontiers Records September 19th.