

TELL YOUR STORY TALKING

Stevie Salas is one of the most talented and unique guitar players on the planet, fusing funk and rock together in his own inimitable style. If that wasn't enough, he's played for legends like Rod Stewart and Mick Jagger, along with lending his six string wizardry to rock luminaries like Sammy Hagar and Glenn Hughes. A new double CD compilation of Stevie's work, fully remastered, has just been brought out entitled 'The Sun And The Earth Volume One'. James Gaden placed a call to Stevie and buckled up for a thoroughly entertaining ride that would take him through Stevie's illustrious career...

After I introduce myself to Stevie and start off with some small talk, I begin to talk about the new compilation he has out, which is excellent. Often I tell my friends or family who I've been interviewing, and not many of them were familiar with Stevie's work, so I tried to describe it... and had a hard time doing it. So I decided I might as well ask the man himself how he would classify his music to somebody who's never heard him play?

"You know, this has been a problem my whole career," Stevie replies. "The record companies never really knew how to sell me. A song like 'Start Again' or 'Tell Your Story Walking' would take off on it's own in a country, and the record company maybe wouldn't have had anything to do with that, and then they sit and think 'Oh my God!' and get with it and I'd maybe sell a lot of records. But when it came to the next one, they wouldn't really know which radio stations to try and get me on, or how to market me. I had the same problem, I never knew what to say, I was just me. Lately though, the easiest thing is to say if you take James Brown and Jimi Hendrix, and team them together, I think that's a reasonable assumption of what my records sound like."

I thought that was pretty close - like those two, but with a real modern edge and clear, modern production. There's a real punch to his records.

"Yeah!" Stevie enthuses. "I grew up surfing in San Diego, and as much as I love listening to Earth Wind And Fire, The Commodores and Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith and Ted Nugent, I still loved The Ramones, you know? I grew up in Southern California and punk rock was very popular. My band in high school learned every song by The Police, and we learned stuff by the Ramones too, so I've always had like a kind of aggressive attack with my instrument. If you listen to The Police, even though they'd be playing what is really a pop song, Stewart Copeland would always give it an edge of punk rock attitude."

When I heard 'Shapeshifter', Stevie's last studio record, I tell him the production on it

was so loud and in my face, it was like he was playing in the room with me. To me, that's what CD's were made for, you wouldn't get that with vinyl. The same goes for his compilation, it sounds so powerful, and that seems to be a trademark Salas production sound. I ask Stevie if he has a specific thing he does to try and achieve that?

"Well, I've just put out a new studio record in Japan - my first real studio record since 'Shapeshifter'," he tells me. "So I really went back to the early days in the studio. When I made 'Colorcode', and 'Tell Your Story Walking', what I've always done is get great, great musicians. I mean really good - not just session players, although some of them are, but I try and find combinations of guys who I know will just work beautifully together. Maybe get someone like T.M. Stevens, a bass player who played with Miles Davis, and get him to play on a rock song live in the studio, and you get a lot of energy. I literally record more than just the parts. I'm trying to record their energy and attitude as well. I try to leave that on the disk."

"I often do things that engineers get pissed about," he adds. "I don't mute all my tracks. A lot of engineers and producers keep the drums tight in the verse, and then open them up in the chorus, and they mute and gate everything. I leave everything on and do it, I dunno, kind of like they did in the seventies. I just move the faders a lot, a trick I picked up from Bill Laswell. I think that makes it feel you're more like a part of the recording in the room."

I offer my opinion that a lot of CD's have production that is too polished, where as Stevie's records sound, in my opinion, like a band should sound.

"With Pro-Tools, people have all these options now," he explains. "With options, things can sound cool when you're trying them out, but with a lot of new records, they don't last with me, you know, in my subconscious? I

used to think it was because it was recorded digitally, and not to tape, but I also think it's because each individual part can sometimes be overanalysed."

I noticed Stevie used his fan base on his website to decide on what tracks made the compilation. I ask if any of the suggestions surprised him? Were there any he didn't expect or didn't even consider?

"Well," Stevie sighs. "It's hard for me to remember precisely what did go on, because the Japanese version is different from the European version... to be honest, there are so many damn songs! I remastered, like fifty songs, so there's going to be a volume two as well."

"What is cool with my back catalogue," he continues "is some of my records have done really well, and I've sold maybe 100,000 copies, and it's just exploded, and we don't know why. The next one, I might sell 20 or 30. I don't know what it is that makes one record do really well and another to not sell the same, but what we have noticed is... in summer, I work in Canada a lot. I go up to this camp for kids, full of kids between nine and seventeen years old, and four years ago they'd be showing up with Blink 182 records and stuff - the thing is called 'Camp Rock'. But the thing I've noticed in the last couple of years is they've been showing up with Led Zeppelin one and two. The Doors, Jimi Hendrix... I've seen that these kids are finding the classic rock records, and it's all new to them. Last year, to my surprise, a bunch of kids showed up with 'Tell Your Story Walking! That, and a song I wrote called 'High Road Easy' for Sass Jordan, were becoming like anthems to these kids. I'd ask them how old they were, and they'd say like twelve or something and I'd tell them those songs are as old as they are! It's all new to them though, they don't think it sounds like an older record, to them it sounds fresh, like it just came out. So that started me off thinking I need to re-release the old shit in a way that makes it fresh and accessible to this new audience."

I announce to Stevie the first thing I heard him play on was Glenn Hughes' album 'The Way It Is'. Stevie played and contributed to 'You Kill Me' and 'Second Son' from the album, and that was the first time I encountered Stevie's distinctive style.

"Yeah," Stevie replies. "I wrote 'You Kill Me'. I've known Glenn for years - you'll notice he's on the compilation singing 'I Was Made To Love Her'. That was when I first met him... that was awesome. Anyway, he called me up, and called Matt Sorum, who was on a break from Guns 'N' Roses. We started getting together at my house, because Glenn wanted to put together a power trio, and do some concerts in Brazil. We started working, and we did 'You Kill Me' and 'Second Son', and there was a third one.

"What we did was we went into Matt Sorum's studio when we'd rehearsed them, and recorded them as demos. Then I didn't hear from Glenn - he did some concerts, I did some concerts, and the next thing I know, I get a copy of this record! Literally, those two tracks on that record are just my rough mixes taken from the day we cut them. Glenn just mastered them and put them out."

I tell Stevie I've seen Glenn a few times, and 'You Kill Me' was a staple of his set for quite a few tours. It's always been one of my favourites and it seems to be a classic example of just capturing something magical if the version on the album was mastered from a rough mix demo.

"Yeah, I even heard it pop up on a live album he made," Stevie agrees, referring to the bonus live disk Glenn included on his limited edition of the 'Return Of Crystal Karma' album. "I really like that song - I think the riff on it is great. There was nothing much to it either - it was basically a Les Paul deluxe, and about twenty minutes work. I wish I could sing it man, I'd love to cut that for one of my records!"

As Stevie likes to capture songs as they happen, with that live feel in the studio, how does he prepare for that in regards to songwriting? Does he have an idea or just jam with the guys and see what he gets?

"I usually hear it in my head," Stevie reveals. "I find it in my head first and then I try and take it from there. That makes it easier. I don't want to be fooling around just guessing, because if I start guessing how something should go, I might think it sounds cool, put it away, go

back to it and find it's shit. Or worse, I might think it's shit and erase it right after I've put it down, and it might have actually been really cool. There is a song on the compilation called 'The Harder They Come' from the 'Colorcode' album. The solo on the end of that song, it's a crazy solo... I don't even remember how I did it. It became like a big deal when the album came out. Lots of the guitar kids heard it and they kind of freaked out. But at the time, I tried to erase it, and redo it differently. Fortunately, Bill Laswell, the producer, looked at me like I was out of my mind. I was adamant about erasing it, and back then, there was no Pro-Tools - you had to erase stuff and make a commitment. At the last minute I decided to wait, and listen to Bill... and thank God I did! I listen to it now and think 'Oh my God! What could I possibly have been thinking to make me want to erase that?'" he laughs.

I mention that he also contributed to another of my favourite artists, Sammy Hagar's 'Marching To Mars' album.

"Yeah, I did," Stevie says. "I went up to his house and we wrote some stuff, but he didn't use those songs on that record. He actually lifted what became the riff to 'Marching To Mars' from me. He didn't steal it, he took it and made it his own, so I guess maybe it's better to say I inspired him," he laughs.

"I spent a lot of time hanging round the beaches in Mexico," he adds "and I met Sammy in Cabo San Lucas. I first met him when I was a kid, playing for Rod Stewart, and he was still in Van Halen. We got to know each other, and I was surfing in Cabo San Lucas back in about '95, '96, and I had a scooter down there with my surfboard on the back. Back then Cabo San Lucas was just a dusty desert town. I remember riding my scooter and I saw a sign saying 'Cabo Wabo Cantina - this weekend, Matt Sorum, Steve Jones, John Taylor, Duff Mckagan'. It was just before they got together as the Neurotic Outsiders. I saw it and I was like 'Shit! Those guys are my friends!' I popped down and everyone was in like trunks, and flip flops, and the place was packed. Hagar shows up, and Matt introduces me to him again, he gets up, and I get up and we jam stuff like 'Summertime Blues', and all those sort of songs. Sammy just took a liking to the way I played guitar, he liked the way my rhythm was. I got back to California and my phone rings, and it's Hagar, He'd just finished with Van Halen and he called me the next day. He asked if I was interested in being his guitar player because he was going solo again."

"At the time, the 'Back From The Living' album was just dropping in Europe, and it was really big in places like Japan, making the kind of money I couldn't really walk away from. Even though it was probably an underground record, I was getting paid hundreds of thousands of dollars. For some reason it went huge in Japan, where I couldn't walk down a street there without getting my hair pulled out. So I couldn't leave that at the time to play with Sammy.

"We always stayed friendly though, and every year we'd meet in Cabo San Lucas. John Entwistle from The Who used to go down as well. He had like a time share place down there. When John was there, he, Sammy, myself and usually Matt Sorum would play a whole set of The Who, unannounced. That's all we could play, because Entwistle couldn't play anything but Who songs. The only covers we could play were the ones he learned that The Who covered. But man, when we played 'Won't Get Fooled Again, with Sammy singing it, and Entwistle on bass, it was some of the most epic shit I ever did in my life! All of us up there in t-shirts and shorts... except John, because he always dressed like he was still in The Who in 1977! It would be 100°C outside, and he's have on the full gear!" Stevie chuckles.

I comment that's considerably better than that awful skeleton suit he wore at the famous Isle Of Wight gig.

Stevie bursts out laughing at the thought. "Man, he had some crazy shit didn't he? You gotta love it!"

With a career playing for or with Glenn Hughes, Sammy Hagar, Bootsy Collins, George Clinton, Mick Jagger and Rod Stewart, I ask Stevie is there anyone left out there he wants to work with?

"David Bowie," Stevie replies without hesitation. "We've spoken a couple of times but I've never gotten

to do it. That's one person I REALLY want to work with before one of us dies!"

If it's any consolation, I mention that at least he's managed to get Bowie's piano player to perform on 'A Dedication To You' - namely Mike Garson.

"Yeah!" Stevie says, clearly very proud. "That was a dream come true!"

The story behind it was quite amusing - the new compilation's sleeve notes, written by Stevie, explain that Stevie met him once at a Bowie show, and Garson said 'I live in Woodland Hills, I'm in the book. Nobody ever calls me.' So Stevie did call him, and the next thing he knows he comes down to the studio to play on the track.

"It's a famous line of his now," Stevie laughs. "Every time he drops me an email it's like 'Give me a call, I'm in the book! It's a big joke now, but that's true, that's what happened. When I was a kid, I'd listen to those Bowie albums and I'm not big on piano, but the way he played, it just moved me."

I ask Stevie if he taught himself guitar, or took lessons?

"I pretty much taught myself," he says matter of factly. "I had friends who would teach me things at the beginning like 'This is an A Chord', but I never took a lesson. I learned by ear, or I'd go and watch. I'd go to see people when I was still in high school to check out what they were doing. I didn't start playing until I was fifteen. I literally ended up playing in Rod Stewart's band six years after I started playing guitar."

"I would watch people play," he says "and I remember seeing a guy playing a club and he played 'Eruption'. When I saw it I was like 'Oh my God!' because when I heard the record, I thought it was a guitar synth, or some kind of trickery. But when I saw a guy actually do it... the place was just full of great guitar players when I was growing up, and most of them never made it for whatever reason. You remember Jake E. Lee? (Ozzy Osbourne/Badlands guitarist). Jake used to play around San Diego and I used to sneak into this club to watch him play. He was one of the few who actually made it, but there were a lot of guys like him around who never got the break. So I'd just stand right at the front, and just watch how they did what they did. Then I'd take what I'd seen, go home, try to figure it out, and then bastardise it in such a way I created something new and weird."

I tell him that I was under impression he was self taught because of his unique sound, but I started doubting that theory because it meant he'd become Rod Stewart's guitarist only six years after picking up a guitar. Amazing!

"Believe me, I had no business being in Rod's band," Stevie confides. "What it was, I could walk into a room and light it up... that was the one gift from God that I had. Some of my skills weren't that great, but I could excite people."

"When I went in the room with Rod originally, they were all like 'Wow! This is rocking!', but I think they figured I wasn't experienced enough, so I didn't get the gig. Eddie Martinez, who played for Robert Palmer, was doing it, but eight days before the tour, he quit, and went back to Robert Palmer's band. So they had eight days to find a replacement. I got the call because they remembered me. Before they could realise I would fuck everything up, I was playing in a stadium eight days later!"

"They started to realise there were problems because the second or third gig was at Miami stadium, we were headlining. I started to play 'The First Cut Is The Deepest' on acoustic guitar, and I'd never really played acoustic guitar, ever. I saw myself on the diamond vision screen at the other end of the stadium, and I stopped the intro and I pointed, saying 'Oh my God...' Then I realised I was on stage in front of thousands of people, and I thought 'Jesus, what am I doing!' So I started the song again, and that night Rod was screaming at me backstage, shouting things like 'You'd fucking better start being a fucking professional! What are you doing, stopping and waving at the girls?'"

"I was like 'I wasn't waving at the girls, I looked at the screen and saw myself and it shocked me!' and he yelled 'That's even worse!'"

"That same night I go to start 'Maggie May', and

for me, I was so pumped up, I played it like Pete Townshend! I was hitting chords like 'braaaang!' and bashing it. By the end of the tour I had it intricate and beautiful, but at the beginning I was literally doing the windmills because I was so excited. I had no business being on that stage, but I got through it. I should have been fired so many times!"

After having a good laugh at that story, I let Stevie continue as he explains it wasn't all bad!

"Being in that band gave me a growth spurt," he says. "Playing with guys like Carmine Rojas, Jeff Golub, having all these great guys as my band mates... they elevated my playing, and the next year, when 'Colorcode' came out, I was opening for Joe Satriani, and that... you wanna talk about a test? When you playing in front of 5,000 guitar player kids who just stare at you, that is a pressure cooker. But after those two tours, I really felt I could eat up anyone on the guitar if I had to get into a head to head competition. If you wanted to get a battle going it was at this point I thought 'Now I can hold my own', you know?"

I ask Stevie if he has any wild stories from the tours with Rod and Mick Jagger?

"Are you crazy? That's all it was!" he laughs. "The thing about Rod was, when Nirvana and Pearl Jam broke, it ended a lot of stuff, but before that, with Rod it was all private jets - we could go anywhere. One time we were in Washington D.C., and hanging out in the bar in a hotel, and all these women in the bar could give a shit that Rod Stewart was sat there. It was really bothering him, and then this old guy would come in and the women would go 'Hey, that's the lawyer for Senator so-and-so' and they'd go sit with him and be laughing with him and drinking champagne. Rod's just sitting there, and he's getting no love!"

"Rod looks at me, and I was his little sidekick. I didn't think I was then, but looking back, I was like a mascot. He says 'Let's get out of here!' and he calls the tour manager and tells him to fire up the plane and round up the boys, because we're flying to Atlanta. We book the whole top floor of the Ritz Carlton in Atlanta, get limos from the plane to take us there, have dinner, go to a strip club, it started getting crazy, girls, bubble baths... we all crawl to the limos at sun up, get in, fly back and go straight to the Capitol Centre to play in front of 20,000 people. Shit like that - it was crazy."

I comment that is what it's all about, that's why people want to be rock stars!

"Jagger's the king though," Stevie adds. "You walk into Jagger's place and there will be people sat in the living room having a conversation, and you'll hear music and you'll follow it into the kitchen and find him in there dancing with a bunch of hot chicks!"

If interviewing rock stars isn't cool enough, it's even cooler when you start getting stories like this from a guy who's actually seen it happen, or being involved. I urge Stevie to continue because I'm thoroughly enjoying myself. This is awesome!

"Oh yeah!" Stevie chortles. "One time Mick was playing a show and it was going to be a television shoot, and he didn't want the camera just focusing on Hollywood celebs who might be there and stuff... so Mick hired eighty five fucking models, and he hand picked each one, and had them piled up at the front of the stage. Mick is the king, he knows his game. I never seen a guy work so hard in all my life on every detail, every aspect, anything to do with his work."

I come back to Stevie's career and I ask him what is next now that 'The Sun And The Earth' has come out?

"I'm writing songs for an album," he replies. "Oh, and I'm scoring a movie. I've got an album just come out in Japan, so I'll be playing some shows there in May, and after that, I'm going to look at coming to the UK and Europe to play."

That would be great, and I tell him so. I ask him if he has anything to add before I end the interview?

"Just tell everyone to get that record man," he states, "because I don't like playing to small crowds!"