

MR. BIG.

BIG

Interview by James Gaden.
Photos by William Hames, Jason Quigley
and Larry Dimarzio

When Mr. Big's original line up of vocalist Eric Martin, bassist Billy Sheehan, guitarist Paul Gilbert and drummer Pat Torpey reunited in 2009, they not only surprised everyone by getting back together, they followed it up with a great live album and then an album of all new material, the impressive 'What If'. When it came to following up that record with 'The Stories We Could Tell', the group were dealt a huge blow when Torpey announced he had been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. Rallying in the face of adversity, they completed the album and found a way to tour, recruiting drummer Matt Starr and having his predecessor add percussion and vocals through the show. With a Mr. Big album called 'Defying Gravity' upon us, Fireworks spoke to a buoyant and candid Torpey to discover it could easily have been called 'Defying The Odds'.

The call was placed to Torpey the day after the band had finished shooting a video, with the schedule showing no signs of letting up.

"We were shooting yesterday and we'll be doing a second one today, you're bang up to date," he says. "We've done one for 'Everybody Needs A Little Trouble' and later today we're shooting 'Defying Gravity'. It used to, back in the day, take hours and hours to do a video. What we're doing is we start around noon and I was done by about 8:30 last night, which is pretty good considering there's a lot of set ups and camera angles to deal with; these guys are really efficient and get on it. It's not too bad – twenty years ago it felt like you'd be there fourteen to sixteen hours and a lot of that was just sat waiting. They were super expensive to do back then as well, the cost has come down dramatically."

Before covering the new material, Fireworks wanted to delve back to the 2009 reunion and see if "Mr. Big's Spiritual Leader" (as Eric Martin has called him) ever thought it was a real possibility.

"Well honestly, I was with the fans, I didn't think it would happen. I wasn't sure about it," the drummer confesses. "I was *hoping* that we could get back together, but a lot of it had to do with Paul; he was the one who left originally and we had to do a couple of records with Richie Kotzen. After that we just kinda stopped. I always thought if we ever did get back together again, I would hope it would be with Paul. I love Richie, he's a great guy and we're good friends, but Paul was the original and if we were to come back I'd want the original four guys, the original Mr. Big. Out of the blue, I got an email from Paul and it was unbelievable. I was really excited. It came back

together so easily and it's been real fun ever since."

There had been talk of tension between Martin and Sheehan in the band, so the question is why was Gilbert the one to leave?

"It was a typical genesis of a band; you make a record and everyone is happy, you make another one and then another one, you have to see each other 24/7, tensions rise, but really it was mostly musical. Paul was wanting to pursue some other musical avenues and I think he wanted more control to do his own thing. We always remained friends though, it wasn't an ugly breakup when Paul left. I'm glad it never became one of those public things where he's saying 'F-you' and we're saying 'No, F-you'. It was never one of those sort of situations. We left the door open that we could make music together. We're all pretty clean living people; it wasn't a drug or alcohol thing where somebody in the band can't handle it anymore, it's a pretty mild story compared to most Rock 'n' Roll bands!" he laughs.

Despite Richie Kotzen replacing Gilbert, Mr. Big ultimately called it a day in 2002.

"We did two records with Richie but he also had a solo career too that he was working on, and Billy was getting involved in other projects, Eric was doing other things, so we thought we should just hang it up. When we did the final tour it was billed as a farewell tour of Japan. I actually asked the promoter if we could bill it as 'farewell... for now'. I wanted us to just take a break, but they wanted to call it a farewell and I thought 'Oh God...'" he chuckles. "I wanted to leave the door open, I think everyone did really, we just needed a break from each other. Looking back at the tensions in the band at the time, it all seems really silly now."

After the 2009 reunion tour and 2011's 'What If', Mr. Big followed up with 'The Stories We Could Tell' in 2014, which was when Torpey announced he had Parkinson's disease. Torpey performed the drum parts electronically, programming what he would otherwise have played physically. The results were astonishingly authentic, a comment he appreciates.

"It's funny you say that, because when we finally finished the record and heard the playback, Billy and I

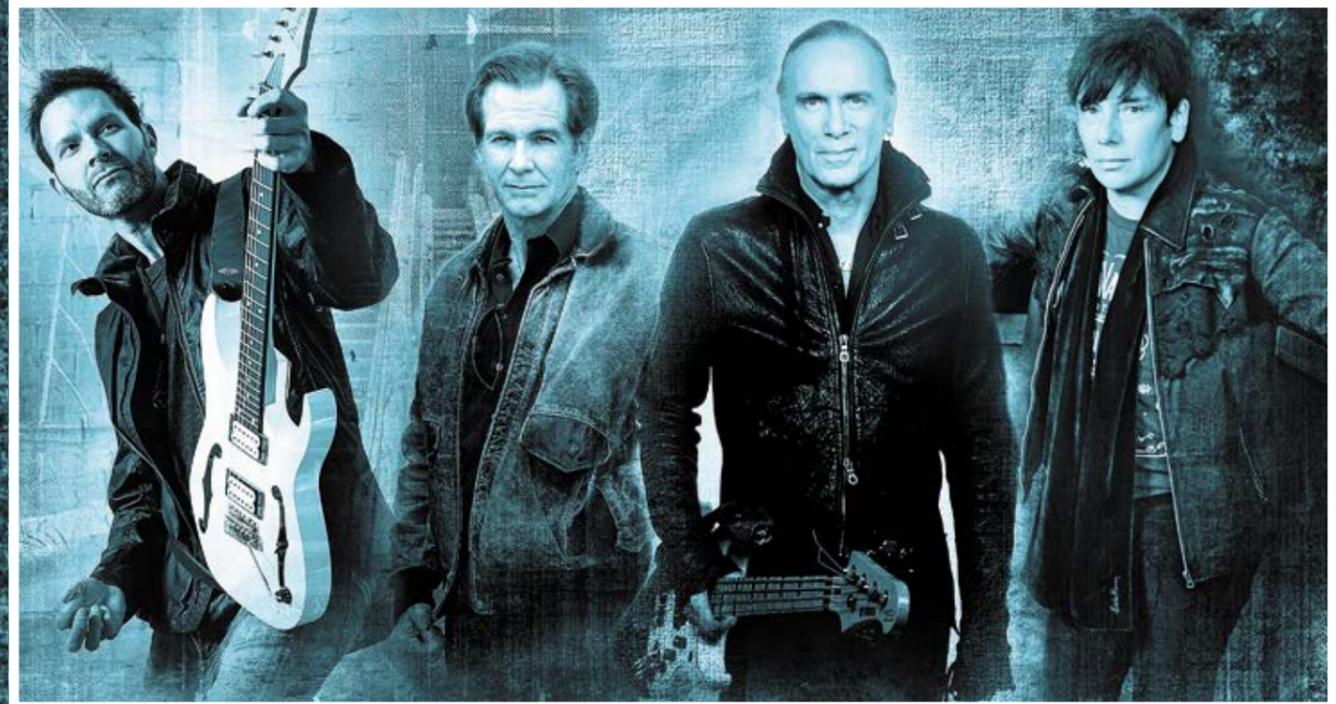
were talking and he said, 'We could have probably gotten away without saying anything about it,'" he laughs. "I did do programming, but I also played some electronic pads, which allowed me to come up with the groove and work within my limitations in that situation. That was my biggest concern, whether it would sound like a drum machine or not, and fortunately it doesn't. It was all about the sound; I made choices to try and incorporate myself as best I could without a real kit, but with electronics. I tried to interpret the song as me, just using a different instrument."

With such a spanner being thrown into the works, it's a fair question to ask if the band thought 'Stories...' would be the last Mr. Big album as a result.

"When I first was diagnosed, I must admit I went through some depression. All of a sudden you get diagnosed with this life changing thing. I always considered myself as Pat, the drummer. That's me. All of a sudden I have to re-think that because maybe now I can't do what I've been doing for fifty years! There was a lot of soul searching that went on. When we first started work on 'Stories...' I said the guys should just get another drummer but they all said they didn't want another drummer, they wanted me to do it and were keen to figure a way in which I *could* do it. They were very encouraging and supportive and I have to hand it to them, because I was ready to throw in the towel. Because of their support and encouragement, I didn't, so I really have to thank them for that, they're my brothers from different mothers. I look back now and your brain is a powerful thing. When you're depressed you can talk yourself out of anything, but with all that support from the band, my wife and my family was so great, you can talk yourself *into* anything. All that support really made a difference."

Torpey is more than "just the drummer" though, with Martin also billing him as "Mr. Big's secret weapon" due to the fact Pat is a very active song-writer and contributes vocals that are a key part of the group's sound.

"That's the sort of band I've always loved, like Queen, like The Beatles... it wasn't one person's vision, every member was really important to the sound and that's the kind of band Mr. Big aspired to be. The vocals we have in the band



were kind of a happy accident, it was very serendipitous. When Eric joined the band I loved his voice and he was the singer, that was that and I was content to just sing some backgrounds. It's since developed into this harmony thing that we utilise not just in the studio, but can showcase live as well. It's nice when people notice that we are all integral to the Mr. Big sound."

The next problem was touring. The band found a compromise by bringing in Matt Starr on drums, playing the bulk of the set, while Torpey would add percussion, backing and even lead vocals.

"I was really grateful, because Billy found Matt jamming in a club in LA. I checked Matt out on Youtube and then we tried him out and he fit right in, he's a great guy. We didn't need to do a slew of auditions. When you're on the road you're with these people all the time and they've gotta be cool, you need people you can get on with and Matt and I have become super friends. He's really become the 'Fifth Beatle' as they say, we were lucky to have found him."

With Mr. Big finding a way forward over such a large obstacle, now there is a new album which Torpey credits as being partly the band's idea and partly the label's.

"Almost two years have gone by since our last record, so we naturally start thinking about doing something but Paul is always busy doing stuff, so are Billy and Eric – me not so much, but I have a fourteen year old son and there's

a few other things I do and stay involved in. Our manager called to ask if we were thinking about another record and we are always up for that. Then the Japanese label said they'd love to have a new record from us – and proceeded to give us a deadline, which was ridiculous! We were all thinking, 'Oh my God, how are we going to make this deadline?' We actually weren't sure if we'd have the material and be ready in time, but we decided we have enough experience, so we went into the studio with probably five or six songs that were complete... but we

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Mr Big's Pat Torpey on his diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease

needed eleven. So we jumped in, there's always little ideas floating around from each of us, and we managed to basically bang out eleven new songs during the six days we were in the studio. We laid down basic tracks and the main vocals, then jumped out of there and went across to another studio to lay down background vocals. Then it was on to mixing, we were actually mixing songs while we were doing background vocals. It was a really quick process – we'd

mix a couple of songs, then go across to the other studio, lay down some backgrounds, then come back and mix a couple more. It was a really tight schedule but it was fun and invigorating, it was creative. When you're under the gun like that, it's like someone lights a match under your rear end, you've got to jump. I think it was a fun experience actually."

For the first time on a Mr. Big studio record an additional musician contributed to the recording, with Matt Starr laying down the drums.

"Originally I was going to use

producer. He played 95% of the drums, I added a few things like some percussion and effects, just to enhance things, but Matt did the body of the work. It's still Mr. Big though, it's a tribute to Matt that he was happy to take direction and I'm happy with it, I was still able to influence it."

The album has a few connections to the band's origins, not least with the opening sample of "Okay we're rolling..." from their debut album's 'Addicted To That Rush'. They also reunited with producer Kevin Elson, who presided over the group's early records.

"That's another reason we felt we could meet the deadline," Pat confirms. "We have a long history with Kevin and we basically picked up right where we left off, even though we haven't worked together for decades. We've remained friends and I've bumped into him here and there, so it was great to have him back. He's a great producer."

One of the new songs is simply called '1992' and the lyrics tell the story of the band coming together and having their huge hit 'To Be With You'. It references the lyric "a line of greens and blues", which Pat says refers to a mood ring. The lyrics also talk about the band having the huge hit and then being dumped into "the garbage can" by the label.

"We recorded 'Lean Into It' and the label released 'Green Tinted Sixties Mind' as a single, then they tried 'Never Say Never',

then 'Alive And Kicking'. 'To Be With You' wasn't the label's idea of a single," Pat explains. "What happened was a radio station played 'To Be With You' in Nebraska, a guy named John Terry played it. It started to grow from there, another radio station picked it up, one thing led to another and it turned into this hit in middle America. Meanwhile the label didn't think we were a priority, they were telling our manager they couldn't promote the thing, they had other priorities. So our manager actually hired independent promoters to push the single ourselves. Eventually, when it's number one and it's time to get the awards and have the pictures taken, there all the label guys were! So the song '1992' is basically true, the label were saying to us we should go and make our next record because they were done with 'Lean Into It', there was nothing else they could do with it!"

If the label didn't see any potential in the song, an obvious follow up question is what the band thought when they were first presented with it?

"I'll take a little credit, because Paul sent me a cassette with some demos and ideas on. Eric had made a demo of 'To Be With You' a few years before Mr. Big had even gotten together; he'd written it with his friend David Grahame – however it was on piano, not guitar. I'd never heard it before and when I got the cassette from Paul, it came on and I thought, 'Oh my God, what a great song, it's such a cool melody!' So I called Paul and asked what it was and he told me it was a song Eric had, he thought it was cool and he put it on the tape in case I hadn't heard it. I said, 'We gotta do it!' and Paul really liked it, in fact the only person who was kinda against us doing it was Eric himself. He said he didn't think it was right for Mr. Big with it being on piano. I suggested we could do it with acoustic guitars and put our own stamp on it. And Kevin, who was producing, was into it. The reason it's the last song on the CD is because we never thought, 'This will be a huge hit', it was more about it being a cool sing-a-long song to finish with. So no, we didn't *know* it would be a big hit, but we did all think it was a great song, for whatever that's worth. People can say, 'I know what a hit song is' but usually it's a roll of the dice, there are plenty of songs which people thought would have been absolutely huge and weren't, just as there are songs like 'To Be With You' which broke out basically on their own. That to me is more of a real hit song, it became a hit just because people were really into it, without it being forced."

With that in mind, were there any songs from the back catalogue that Pat felt could have fared better?

"It's hard for me to say because I like them all," he replies, "but when we made 'Bump Ahead' I thought 'Promise Her The Moon' had potential to be a breakout song, it has that ballad style but I thought it was a really sophisticated track. It didn't do much though. I also thought 'Green Tinted Sixties Mind' was a real crowd pleaser – that said, we've never tried to write 'hits'. We just sit and write material that sounds good. Our concern is the live setting, how will

a song work live, what will a crowd react to, that's our main consideration. For many years, bands made records that were so overproduced that you couldn't play them live. Our thing has always been getting in there and capturing a performance in the studio. Songs like 'Addicted To That Rush', 'Colorado Bulldog', songs like that came from thinking how a live audience would react, what would get them excited, that's where those songs developed from. It's always about the performance, we always get in a room and bash the songs out before we go in to record them. This album was the exception because we had to do some writing in the studio, but even then it was organic, we didn't Frankenstein it by stitching together different recordings, this is still a collection of performances."

This album most certainly isn't overproduced, with lots of space and very little in the way of double tracking or noticeable overdubs.

"That was a combination of working quickly and we try to use the minimal amount of overdubs anyway because that's the way we like it, it's more intimate that way. That's why we had great chemistry in the first place,



because we were all influenced by bands who made performance records. The guys would lay it down in the studio and when you would go and see them, the same guys were on stage playing it live. They did it all, they didn't have three girls on backing vocals, an extra keyboard player, strings, a horns section or anything. It's just four guys banging it out. Led Zeppelin were a big deal to me, and millions of others. I always wanted to be in a band that was just guitar, bass, lead singer and drummer, with everybody contributing. Everybody is integral, so my dream came true, whether through fortune or because that was what I was pursuing, but I got lucky and found the right guys with this band."

Pat has also taken the opportunity to accompany Eric Martin on some of his acoustic dates in Japan, an experience he clearly enjoyed.

"Yeah, we did eight or nine shows in Japan. Eric plays these shows, often it's just him with his acoustic guitar, but I'd asked him about going. I said I'd love to come out with him. He said 'Let's try it!' and it was really fun, so easy and breezy because there's no pressure, I just had to sing background and play some percussion. I played cajon... it was actually a wearable one so it almost looked like a guitar but it was a

percussive instrument and it was really good. We didn't play to huge crowds, it was more 300-500 people and our Japanese fans always treat us so well. One of the shows came out, it was filmed for DVD, probably only in Japan but we played some of Eric's songs and some Mr. Big tracks. We had another guy with us, John McNamara, a guitar player friend of Eric's. So those two played guitar, my percussion... it was a nice full sound."

Finally, Torpey issued a pair of underrated solo records called 'Odd Man Out' in 1998 and 'Y2K' in 1999. An inquiry if he has ever been tempted to do more reveals it's unlikely.

"That was something that just happened, I never planned on it. To give you the short version, I was doing a session for Teddy Andreas who was the keyboard player in Guns N' Roses for a while. He was doing a solo record for a label in Korea and they asked me to play on a couple of songs. The label representative was there and Mr. Big are really popular in Korea. He asked me right there on the spot if I wanted to make a solo record, and I said 'Really?' I honestly had never thought about it. So I decided to do it. I actually recorded both albums at the same time, I recorded twenty one songs in one long session, and then released them as two different albums. The thing was, it was mostly done working with Lanny Cordola and Chuck Wright; they're good friends of mine and we've done a lot of stuff together, and their idea was to bring some guests in and get some other musicians on there to enhance the appeal of them. Everybody did such a great job on those – it was such a fun thing to do."

It turns out while Torpey harboured some desire to be a singer, it happened because circumstances forced his hand.

"It was a combination of wanting to do it, then *having* to do it!" he laughs. "I always liked the idea of being a lead singer but the drums were always so important to me, I could never see myself stood out in front of a band. I wanted to be like Paul McCartney's little half-brother, I think he's got such a versatile voice – he can sing anything. But I never aspired to be a lead singer on a full record, that was actually one of my big concerns, could I carry a full record with my voice? It's a big responsibility. All the guys encouraged me and I had Pat Regan producing, who did the last Mr. Big record. Pat and I go way back and we were in a band together in the early eighties, with Chuck Wright actually. Pat is a really talented engineer and producer, he supported me and together we made it happen."

Since Mr. Big reformed, traditionally they do an encore where they swap instruments with Torpey out front, singing Judas Priest's 'Living After Midnight' on the last tour.

"Yeah, that's always a fun part of the show and it's just enough to feed that lead singer beast that's within us all, that wants to feel what it's like. I wouldn't want to do it for two hours, but it is fun! I kind of make a laugh out of it, try and go a bit over the top and I find that works better than taking myself too seriously!"