

PAUL GILBERT

Paul Gilbert is a phenomenal guitar player with a string of solo releases to sit alongside his sterling work in Mr. Big. Initially starting off singing his own songs, Paul's most recent releases have focused more on instrumental tunes. With his new album 'Stone Pushing Uphill Man', Paul juxtaposes some new compositions with covers of songs by the likes of Aerosmith, James Brown, Elton John, Loverboy, The Police and The Beatles. The twist? He lets his guitar do the talking – or rather, the singing. An intrigued James Gaden asked Paul all about it.

The album surprised me - instead of you singing these songs, you've played the vocal parts on guitar, and made the guitar sound as close to the singer as possible! It's not what I expected at all, and it works much better than I thought it would.

Well I can't help what you expect, that's not my responsibility! (laughs) For me, it was just something I was really enjoying. I've been doing a lot of teaching and it's a great way to get right to the point with my students about the expressiveness of guitars. Vocal melodies are not usually super fast or really complicated, but they do require a lot of depth regarding musicianship. It makes you listen really closely to what I think are the most important parts, and they're great things to learn. I had such a good time doing it, I thought why not record some of them? It really helped my playing too. I could do another three albums like this and still have a great time.

I'm a frustrated singer - as a little kid, that's what I always wanted to be, but my voice was always a little disappointing. Finally, I figured I should put my love for vocal melodies together with my guitar playing and hopefully, the combination works!

It does! I always liked you as a singer, I prefer your vocal albums, with 'Burning Organ' being my favourite. However, the song that sold me on this record is Aerosmith's 'Back in The Saddle'. I found myself singing along to it, even though there isn't a voice there. The guitar work on that to replicate Steven Tyler's notes is amazing.

Thank you! Steven Tyler is an unbelievable singer and that's one of his most amazing moments. If I'd tried to cover that song as a vocalist, I'd fall short. With the guitar, all the notes are there for me. He hits some unbelievable high notes in that song and it's satisfying for me not to have to struggle to hit them, they're all there for me on the fret board. As a singer, the challenge so often is squeezing a certain note out of your voice. As a guitarist, it's different; you have to find expressive techniques like vibrato and dynamics. Singers phrase differently to guitar players. That was really beneficial to me as a guitar player, taking melodies I already knew - pretty much all these songs I grew up with. I could play them all on a kazoo in one take! The melodies are in my head, but the phrasing was often unfamiliar to what I'd do on a guitar. It was great to make my fingers work to match

what was going on in my brain.

Did you play the songs from memory or did you sit and study the originals?

I listened really closely to the vocal lines on most of the tunes. I wanted to learn from them and get them right. There were varying degrees. On the James Brown one, it was so difficult to copy him, I gave up after the first verse and did my own thing! (laughs) The Aerosmith one, I really listened closely to. I did some promotional appearances in Japan and played some of this stuff live and I was really scared at first. I spent so much time and work in the studio, I wasn't sure if I could do it live. Fortunately, it came together and worked.

I was also intrigued with 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', a song which is so closely associated with Elton John and the piano. Yet it works really well with the guitar.

I grew up in the 70s and there were so many cool Pop piano players, like Elton John, Burt Bacharach... if you listen to a 70s radio station there's so much Fender Rhodes, Wurlitzer, acoustic piano, Todd Rundgren did some great stuff like that. I had some piano envy, because you can play a chord with the right hand, change the bass note easily, that's much more inconvenient on a guitar. I didn't want to have songs taken away from me because of my chosen instrument, so I spent a lot of time learning 70s Pop tunes! I learned a lot of Elton John and that was one of my favourites. There's a huge vocal step where he jumps over an octave, and that's unusual in any kind of music, but it's great. I loved the melody and the only thing I changed was, as it is a guitar album, it needed a solo. So I inserted a crazy, almost Metal solo. Hopefully if Elton hears it he'll approve!

Was there a specific criteria for a song to make the record, or was it all on a whim?

It just had to be interesting to me and a lot of it was stuff I grew up with or that influenced me. Some of it was because it was a bit different. The James Brown song has less going on melodically, but way more going on rhythmically. He was a master of rhythm and grooves. That's something I wasn't too familiar with, I didn't listen to much James Brown as a kid, I was into more melodic acts like The Beatles and Elton John. That one was a challenge, and I had a good time doing it. I played the horn parts on guitar, I even played

bongos! I loved the Funk groove it created and the solo, I had to play so tight to lock into that groove. It really demanded a lot from me as a player, that one is one of the most difficult to play live.

Were there any songs you tried that didn't work or you chose to leave out?

There were some I considered, but didn't do because they are downers. Elvis Costello and Burt Bacharach made a record called 'Painted From Memory' and it's such a great record, but it's all about divorce and lost love. If that's your mood, it's the greatest record in the world, but I wanted to keep the album upbeat! I almost did their song 'God Give Me Strength' because that has a great melody, but it was bringing me down too much. I'd have loved to do some others but I ran out of time. I'd like to do 'Fire And Ice' by Pat Benatar... 'Long Live Rock And Roll' by Rainbow was one I fooled around with. 'Magic' by Pilot would work great, imagine that 'Oh, oh oh, it's magic!' line, that would have worked great! I'm sure I'll do volume two someday.

The one song that does have an actual vocal performance is the title track, 'Stone Pushing Uphill Man'. What is the story behind that?

It was a title I'd had for a while. I've been listening to a lot of Blues and it's kind of a Blues song, the chords are maybe a little more Jazz than standard Blues, but it's Blues at its core. The lyrics themselves are about me. Last year, I was at the peak of my hearing loss, before I got my hearing aids. I was starting to retreat from everybody and was kinda down. With my music, I wasn't feeling like a fan of it anymore, I wasn't listening to much Rock, I was into more Jazz and Blues, and I didn't feel I was good at those styles. I just felt like this stone was the accomplishments of a Rock player and it was just falling downhill. It wasn't what I liked anymore and I felt like all of my efforts were that stone, just falling down hill. I started pushing the stone again, because on this record and on 'Vibrato' there are what some call 'adult' chords, things you get more in Jazz, because that's mostly what I listen to now, alongside 70s Pop nostalgia. As I was pushing the stone uphill, I was thinking 'God, this is so hard!' but I discovered I was really starting to enjoy doing it again. I was playing guitar, being challenged, doing the music exactly how I want to, and the effort resulted in something I loved doing.

Who did you use for the playing and production on the album?

I have an online guitar school which I work on everyday and I found an assistant to help me out with the video editing and stuff. He's a guitar player and he has a great ear and he ended up helping out in other stuff to the point where I quickly showed him how to use Pro-Tools. After a few recordings I realised hey, he's the co-producer! (laughs) He was great, he's much younger than me and he's a big fan of Metallica and Guns N' Roses, so he has that youthful energy.

I played all the guitars, most of the bass, and of course the bongos. (laughs) The drummers were Mike Portnoy who played on 'Working For The Weekend' and 'Why Don't We Do It In The Road'. Kenny Aronoff played on all the others. My co-producer is Swedish and he knows a bunch of Swedish musicians who lived nearby and they came in and played on k.d. lang's 'Wash Me Clean'. Don't ask me their names, I literally only met them that one day! The guitar is the main star, it's a very guitar heavy album. Even the vocal harmonies on the originals, I recreated with guitars.

Is this likely to be it for you singing on solo albums now, are you going to go this route instead?

I find it easier to play than to sing, at least in terms of enjoyment. When I did the song 'Shock Absorber', I wrote it as a vocal song, I had three verses, the whole thing written and I started to sing it in the studio. After one pass, I thought 'Wait a minute, let me try that on guitar'. So I listened to each one, as a listener I preferred hearing the guitar version so much, I decided not to sing it. I just put the lyrics on

my lap and played over what I would sing - plus it allows me to throw in some extra licks too. It's funny, after the record was done, I went to Brazil to do a clinic tour. I did some singing there, doing Hendrix tunes and stuff. It was some of the best singing I've done in my life! I saw some Youtube footage and I thought 'Man, I'm singing great!' (laughs) I do enjoy singing, but sometimes I find I'm disappointed with my voice. Other times it really surprises me!

I think you are an underrated singer, because I remember seeing Mr. Big in Shepherds Bush and Eric left the stage while you, Billy and Pat sang 'It's For You' a capella. It sounded fantastic, the harmonies were superb.

Oh yeah! That was a Lennon/McCartney song, but the most famous version was by Three Dog Night and they had three vocalists. There was no part for Eric, so he left the stage for a rest. It was a nice discovery when we formed the band that everybody could sing. Pat has great range and power.

You've done some great covers together, you always choose well.

We're all music fans. I always try to stretch the boundaries a little live and with my solo stuff, I've done Madonna, Donna Summer, Carole King... the Spice Girls! A great song is a great song and it's fun to do. The only ones that are off limits for me are things like 'You Make Me Feel Like A Natural Woman'. (laughs) That would raise some eyebrows! Some songs are very sex-specific because of the lyrics, so I did wonder if I did one instrumentally, if I did say 'Papa Don't Preach' by Madonna... it has great chords, the intro is really cool,



it's a great groove, Madonna's vocal is amazing, but I just feel a woman has to sing that song. Even if I did it instrumentally, people will sing it in their heads and it would just sound wrong!

This record comes out prior to the new Mr. Big album. Were you working on the two in tandem, or did you get the chance to finish your record first?

I finished this one and literally the next day started on the Mr. Big record! That's about two notes from being finished, so I'm excited about it, it's turned out great!

Was it difficult to get back into Mr. Big mode immediately after this album, writing music for an actual vocalist instead of a guitar line?

No, music is music, guitar is guitar. The only transition I'd have difficulty with would be if I had to switch to something like traditional Jazz, because that's like a foreign language to me. I haven't spent enough time with it, I have with Mr Big and the styles we use. The new album is really nice, Eric really did so well with both the writing and singing. Everyone did great but especially Eric, he's such a talent.

Do you get chance to get together at the same time to record, or do you have to do it via the internet with you all being so busy?

We do both. Everyone is busy, Billy has the Winery Dogs, Eric does a lot of touring around the world, I've got my clinics, Pat has stuff going on. We meet up when we can, other times we're emailing files around. Whatever gets the jobs done.

Finally, as a graphic artist myself, I loved those fantastic Photoshop pictures you used to have on your website, they inspired many of mine! Any chance of you doing any more?

(Laughs) Oh yeah, I haven't swapped my head with anybody for a while, I should do that again, it was fun!

Some of those images were so off the wall, I wondered what on earth you must have searched to find them!

That's the internet for you! It was an exciting thing when it started. Google something - astronauts, what comes up? I was doing it even before I had a computer. When we toured with Rush, one of my favourite bands, we had 'Art Wars'. I'd get a picture of Rush, take it to the local printers and get a bunch of copies. I'd then cut out all their heads and paste them on a different picture, make a load of copies of that and post them backstage. Then they'd do the same thing to us - that was our pre-Photoshop days. It's so much easier now! (laughs)

'Stone Pushing Uphill Man' was released via Mascot Records on August 11th.

Visit Paul online for guitar lessons at <http://artistworks.com/guitar-lessons-paul-gilbert>