

# Bulletproof

In less than a decade, **DUFF McKAGAN** shot from strung-out **GUNS N' ROSES** megastar to sober bass-groovin' dude for **VELVET REVOLVER**. Bass Guitar's **E.E. Bradman** gets the rock-solid bass man in his sight.







**D**uff McKagan knows about missed opportunities. He was, after all, the founding bassist of the legendary Guns N' Roses, whose rock-star excesses, volatile live shows and incendiary albums made them the biggest band in the world before they spluttered to a messy close a decade later. But McKagan—who after a drug-and-alcohol-related pancreas explosion 10 years ago was told by doctors that his next drink would kill him—also knows a thing or two about second chances.

It's somehow fitting, then, that on this sunny L.A. afternoon, McKagan is betting on Scott Weiland. The onetime singer for Stone Temple Pilots, Weiland cultivated a drug addiction that outlasted his group. But McKagan is wagering that Weiland will do better by his new band mates in Velvet Revolver—Duff, guitarist Dave Kushner, former Guns drummer Matt Sorum, and Guns cofounder Slash. Listening to early mixes of their first album, *Contraband* (RCA), due May 18, it's impossible not to feel the band's thunder, precision and chemistry, and how Weiland swaggers over and through the music. Slash sounds strong, ready to take on all comers, and coguitarist Kushner adds fresh textures to a trio that has logged millions of miles together. Sorum is thunderous, evoking the giants while laying down his own solid beats. And Duff, as always, seals the bottom line with bluesy, in-the-pocket bass.

While a teenager, McKagan played guitar and drums in punk bands around his Seattle hometown, but it wasn't until he moved to L.A., in the early Eighties, that he picked up the bass. One of his first projects was Road Crew, a group that featured Slash and drummer Steven Adler, but he quit the band and quickly joined another with frontman Axl Rose and guitarist Izzy Stradlin. When Axl and Izzy's band mates backed out of a tour Duff had put together, he brought in Slash and Adler, and GN'R's most famous lineup was born.

Less than two years later, the multi-Platinum success of their debut, *Appetite for Destruction*, had set a new standard for gritty, Hollywood-style hard rock, and the band's extravagant partying became the stuff of legend. The controversial *Lies*, the sprawling *Use Your Illusion* project, the

**“Every good rock band has to groove. You need that something that moves people.”**

covers-only *Spaghetti Incident* and the so-so *Live Era* didn't measure up to the band's debut, and by 1992 Izzy and Adler had been replaced by Gilby Clarke and Matt Sorum. In 1993, McKagan released his first solo album, *Believe in Me*. Guns eventually crumbled, leaving an uncompleted (and still unreleased) album, tentatively titled *Chinese Democracy*, in the balance.

McKagan's second effort, *Beautiful Disease*, was lost to record company politics, but he stayed busy producing Betty Blowtorch, playing several instruments with Screaming Trees vocalist Mark Lanegan, and handling guitar and bass duties for Iggy Pop, Ten Minute Warning, Loaded, the Neurotic Outsiders (with John Taylor of Duran Duran and Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols) and the Rackateers (also known as Mad for the Rack-et). Duff officially left GN'R in 1997, but when he reunited with Slash and Matt for a 2002 tribute concert for Ozzy/Mötley Crüe drummer Randy Castillo, the chemistry was still there. “If we had started a band right when we left Axl, it would've been cheesy, and the timing wouldn't have been right,” Duff says. “Now it's time.”

Velvet Revolver's debut is packed with Duff's songwriting and bass contributions, from the nasty, distorted riff on “Big Machine” to the chaotic “Dirty Little Thing,” where he holds steady as a rock while sheer madness swirls around him. His grinding pick tone on “Set Me Free” and his sensitive work on “Loving the Alien” make you wish the guitars sat out a little more often, and on the victorious arena rocker “Fall to Pieces,” Duff, true to character, rises from the mix at just the right time.

“I think the secret to bass playing is know-



**HAIR FORCE ONE:** Duff, with Rose and Slash, in his GN'R daze

ing when to play and when not to play,” he says. “When you find little holes to do something, attack it, get the fuck out and get back in the groove.”

**BASS GUITAR** Did you make a conscious decision to play less on this album?

**DUFF MCKAGAN** Definitely. Matt and I worked hard to create much more of a groove, and I played deeper in the pocket than I've ever played. Our job was to create the foundation, so we said, “Okay, let's make the best fuckin' foundation we can.”

**BG** Compare your role in Velvet Revolver to your role in Guns N' Roses.

**McKAGAN** In Guns, it was easier to play fills and runs because of the way Axl sang. We wrote the music without him and he put his

lyrics on later. Scott is more involved, and he found brilliant parts for vocals in places we couldn't have imagined. So I'm underplaying, letting him do his thing.

**BG** Do you and Matt work out your parts away from the rest of the band?

**McKAGAN** Yeah, especially his fills. They're grandiose, they're ugly, they're fucked up, and I can't just sit there and do eighth notes while he's playing 'em!

**BG** Do you follow his bass drum closely?

**McKAGAN** I look at his kick pedal, but that doesn't mean I'm going to play exactly what he's playing on the kick. I like to know what he's doing so I can decide what to play. If I have to lock in with his kick, I will, but that can get boring. I use it more as a click, to

## Same As It Ever Was Duff's Gear Gunner

When Guns N' Roses received their first advance from Geffen Records in 1986, Duff McKagan took his share and purchased a Fender Jazz Bass Special. “I liked how it sounded through my Gallien-Krueger,” he says. “It was kinda funky, but it still worked with rock and roll.” He's been using Specials ever since. After the model went out of

production in the early Nineties, the Fender Custom Shop built McKagan several copies, each with Dunlop straps and strap locks.

Duff's combination of Rotosound RS66 Swing Bass strings and Dunlop Tortex .73mm picks lets him cut through the mix at will. As for amps, he's been a Gallien-Krueger man from day one and uses G-K

2001RB amps with G-K RBH 4x10 cabs. In the studio, Duff goes direct but sometimes mikes his 4x10 cabinets, a G-K 15-inch and a Marshall 12-inch for extra crunch. He has also recorded some tracks with a G-K head and an Acoustic 2x15.

Duff stomped through a few Ibanez and Boss chorus pedals before switching to

a rackmounted Yamaha SPX90 multi-effects. His only other effect is an MXR M-80 D.I.+ , which provides powerful gain and distortion tones. Onstage, Duff uses a Bradshaw Custom Audio Switcher and a Samson UHF Synth 32 wireless. His tech, Mike “McBob” Mayhue, keeps everything ready to rock.

—E.E.B.







know where I am and where the beat is.

**BG** What was it like playing with Steven Adler in the early days of Guns N’ Roses?

**McKAGAN** We really had to make a drummer out of him. We took all his drums away—he had a double-bass drum and all these fuckin’ toms—and he ended up with a kick, a snare, a floor tom, crash and ride cymbals and his hi-hats: a Ramones-style kit. The band would rehearse, then Steve and I would get together—just bass and drums—every day and work on grooves.

**BG** What did you practice?

**McKAGAN** We’d put on songs like Cameo’s “Word Up,” and we’d play over it, and then we’d play it on our own, just trying to get a pocket. We played a lot of funk and R&B but hardly ever any hard rock stuff, because it

was all about the groove. I’d have to lead the way with the bass, almost being percussive. But he became a unique and one-of-a-kind drummer by the time we did *Appetite*.

**BG** How did those R&B influences find their way into GN’R?

**McKAGAN** Every good rock band has to groove; you need that something that *moves* people. I mean, listen to Zeppelin; the groove is so fuckin’ deep you can sleep in it. There are a lot of bands out there that have no groove—you can tell they’ve never listened to Sly, the Funk Brothers or Prince.

**BG** When did you realize the importance of the groove?

**McKAGAN** Early on. I was the last of eight kids, and everybody played music in my family, so there was music and instruments everywhere. Our household was steeped in James Gang, Sly & the Family Stone, Zeppelin and Hendrix. Punk rock hit when I was 13 or 14, and I was like, “I can start a band!” I also discovered Prince’s first album, *For You*, at the same time. When his 1999 album came out, it totally fuckin’ changed my life. I would listen to 1999 and *Damaged* by Black Flag, and then a T-Bone Burnett record. I liked it all—except folk music.

**BG** How does your relationship to the groove affect your playing with Slash?

**McKAGAN** I’ll be paying attention to Matt’s kick pedal or his snare, and Slash’ll be in la-la land. [*laughs*] We all know our roles in the band, and my job with Matt is to create a place for Slash. He knows the groove is not

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his forte, but he’s a genius at playing around what we play. With Slash, you cannot over-play or it’ll be a train wreck. He takes up a lot of space, but it’s well used, and he relies on us to hold down the fort.

**BG** So how does Dave Kushner fit in the equation?

**McKAGAN** It’s hard to find a guitarist to play with Slash. Other guys we tried out would play a Les Paul through a Marshall and follow what I was playing. I’d have to tell them, “Don’t step on my passing note, dude! Do your own thing!” Dave grew up coming to GN’R gigs, seeing the dichotomy between Izzy and Slash, and he understands the dynamics of playing against Slash. He really worked at getting different sounds and textures with his pedals so he wasn’t just another rhythm guitar player doing barre chords.

**BG** How did starting out on guitar and drums affect your bass playing?

**McKAGAN** Playing drums has had more of an effect on how I play bass. Since I play guitar, I know how a guitar player thinks and where they’ll go, so I keep away from their turf. But playing drums and knowing how a drummer thinks has influenced me more.

**BG** How did the new material take shape?

**McKAGAN** Matt, Slash and I had a list of 60 songs we’d written, and we gave Scott little pieces of songs to check out. He chose the stuff he liked, and then we wrote six more songs together. Slash had the riff for “Slither,” then Matt and I wrote the intro, the bridge and some turnarounds. Matt brought in the riff from “Set Me Free,” which he wrote on guitar. We needed something with a Stones *Exile on Main Street* vibe, so Matt and I wrote “Loving the Aliens.” We gave “Big Machine” to Scott; he chopped the shit out of it in Pro Tools and gave us this thing that was like—*whoa!* Then we played it like he’d rearranged it, and it totally made sense.

**BG** On records, you sometimes double Slash, do your own thing and then come back.

**McKAGAN** Yeah. We’ll riff together a lot on purpose. When we’re writing a song we don’t discuss the parts, but there are certain trademark things I do. For instance, I’ll start a bridge up high and go down low for the last section. And I always play fills under Slash’s solos; it’s an instinctive thing that we do, and it adds more excitement to the solo.

**BG** The intro lick to “Sweet Child O’ Mine” is one hell of a bass riff.

**McKAGAN** The funny thing is, Slash’s guitar part started off as a joke. Izzy wrote this three-chord song, and we were like, Fuck this—we do *not* play ballads. Axl, of course, loved it. We were trying anything to not do the song, so Slash wrote that crazy guitar part, trying to make it prog-rock or something, and as a joke I played that bass part. Of course, it all came together and made sense.

**BG** With Revolver, did you try to update the sound you’ve developed over the years?

**McKAGAN** On this album, Slash really worked on moving forward, on being contemporary. We picked Josh Abraham [*Coal Cham-*

*ber*, *Limp Bizkit*, *Staind*] to produce us because he we knew he’d record us just the way we sound—no more, no less. We have guitar solos, which is going to seem like a new thing to kids. People who’ve heard our stuff say it’s the new direction of rock radio, which is a huge compliment.

**BG** Do you ever play five-string?

**McKAGAN** Fuck no. Somebody fucked up and put one too many strings on there! [*laughs*] I’m too old-school when it comes to bass; it’s got to be four strings. Otherwise, [*Motown bass legend*] James Jamerson would be looking down on me going, “What the fuck are you doing?” I do tune down, though; a third of our record is in dropped D. On “Slither,” I play the whole song on one string!

**BG** How about active basses?

**McKAGAN** Nope. I once had a bad experience with one. We were playing a live show for MTV and at the beginning of our first song, “It’s So Easy,” I hit a note and... nothing. The battery was dead. So I threw the bass back to my tech, got my passive Fender Jazz Bass Special and kept on playing.

**BG** What bass players rock your world right now?

**McKAGAN** Ben Shepherd sounded so good on those Soundgarden records. That’s some interesting and unique stuff he plays; he’s really underrated. And Nick Oliveri from Queens of the Stone Age is a huge benchmark for me. I’ll listen to a Queens of the Stone Age record, either *Rated R* or [Songs for the Deaf], and I’ll ask myself if my own bass lines are as aggressive or subtle as his.

**BG** Are you worried Scott’s personal problems might sabotage Velvet Revolver’s momentum?

**McKAGAN** Scott’s working out his drug addiction, and we’ve all been through it. In fact, we’ve each taken it way farther over the edge than he has. Scott knows that, and he couldn’t be in better company. As far as the songwriting process, he’s there for the band, and we don’t have a past with him like the DeLeo brothers [*Dean and Robert*, from *Stone Temple Pilots*] do. We’ve talked to those guys, by the way, and everything’s cool.

Listen, obviously we knew what was going on with Scott, but as soon as he walked in the room it was like, This is the guy we want. And we’ve made it this far; we’ve made a really good record. Scott wants to be in a hard rock band, and this thing fits perfectly.

**BG** Any more Duff McKagan solo albums, side projects or production gigs anytime soon?

**McKAGAN** Velvet Revolver is my priority; we’re being offered the world right now. I think we’ve made the right record, one that will let us tour for a year and a half and release three or four singles. We have a team at RCA that sees this as a global record, and management that wants to make this thing huge. That would be great, but for me the music always comes first. I’m proud of the record we made, and I hope it’ll satisfy the Guns fans who never got that lost, unreleased Guns N’ Roses record. ■