

Sugar sweet

BY JOHN CULLEN

Last Friday, I had the opportunity to speak with the frontman of Big Sugar, Gordie Johnson. His band has gained mythical status with their tireless touring schedule and intense live shows. Taking some time off between shows at MuchMusic's Snow Job '97, Gordie told me about God, style and Stevie Ray.

Gaz: Do you have a worldwide distribution deal for *Hemi-Vision*?

GJ: Yeah, we're just getting that through A&M Polygram.

Gaz: Are you trying to push the album heavily in the States and other countries?

GJ: Yeah, we're going into the States later in April, and then we're going to England at the end of April.

Gaz: *500 Pounds* [Big Sugar's second release] had songs like "Deliver Me" which was more steeped in funk, and I don't know how to describe "Aardvark Hotel"...

GJ: Ska, surf ska.

Gaz: Right...but *Hemi-Vision* has more of a rock/reggae feel. Was this a conscious decision, or did the band just evolve that way?

GJ: It was a slow evolution towards that. It's not like we made *500 Pounds* sound like that and then one day switch the channel, y'know? Gig after gig after gig it slowly evolved to what it is now.

Every night I walk out like, "This could be my last night playing." I look up to God and say, "Well, O.K. if this is my last night, here we go."

Gaz: I saw you on MuchMusic getting an award for best Toronto Area Guitarist. Do you take those kinds of awards lightly, or do you like them?

GJ: It was an honour. Sure, I was flattered as hell, 'cause I don't think of guitar playing in those terms, like "who's better, who's best." I play 'cause I love it and I love hearing other people play. Yeah, it's an honour to get, but it's not the music olympics. It's all good.

Gaz: Current bands in Canada seem to have an "I don't care" attitude about their appearance, yet you've cultivated your own style...

GJ: Well, I think it's kind of too bad. The "I don't care" look is just like what you said. If I'm expecting people to pay money to come and see our show then I don't mind them knowing that I actually care what they see, y'know? I want you all to come in and buy my T-shirt, buy my record and pay money to come and see me play. I am there to play for you, and I'm there to look good, so you have something nice to look at while I'm playing. It just stands to reason.

Gaz: Would you agree that the "I don't care" attitude is a style in itself?

GJ: Oh yeah. People go to a lot of trouble to look like they don't care, which is the irony of it all. I won't slag anybody, but there are enough bands out there that are looking good. The guy in I Mother

Earth, he's got some cum on his hair; the guy in the Tea Party, too. I mean you don't just put on a velvet shirt everyday when you walk out of the house.

Gaz: Big sugar seems to be making blues/rock more popular to a younger audience. Do you plan on evolving this form even more? Because I notice you have incorporated electronic drum in the new songs...

GJ: I don't really care about the future of blues, or making any statement, or saving it, or whatever. The blues I love is long gone. It's so long ago past and I don't want to bring it back, because you'll never be able to. But it has influenced what I do now, and I'm not self-conscious about going out on stage and thinking, "Well, is it bluesy enough?" I don't care about anything like that. I just reference the music that I love and play it back to people in my own way. So if that means Dub Reggae is going to come out, hey man, it's because I love Dub Reggae. If I like AC/DC, then they're going to get a little of that flavour. So much of that stuff that I love is going to come back at 'cha. The blues is just a part of it. I love blues music and stuff like that, but I don't really see myself in the scheme of blues history.

Gaz: What kind of old-style blues stuff got you into guitar?

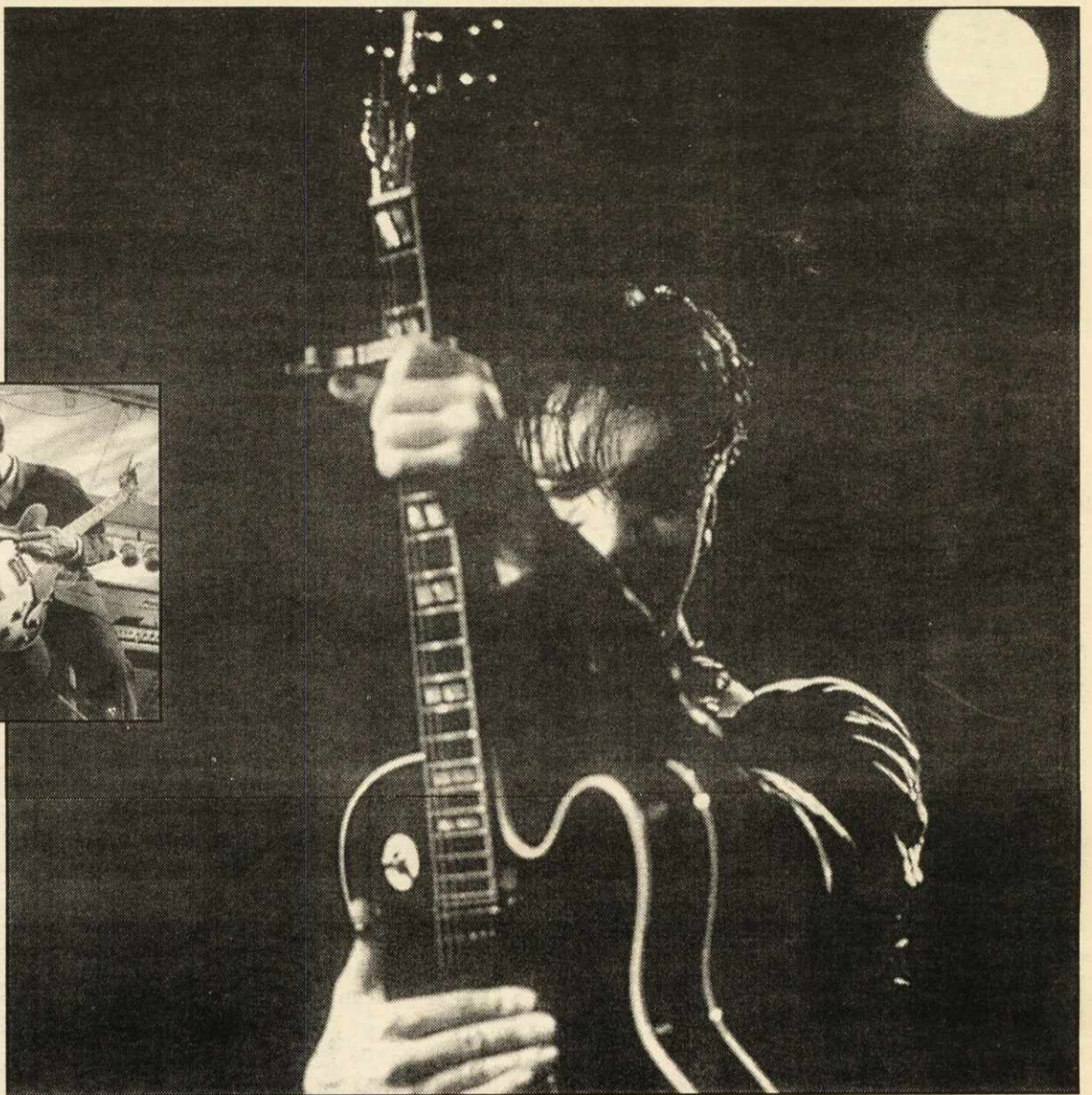
GJ: Son House, Charlie Patton, Tommy Johnson, people like that. Anybody pre-Robert Johnson was it for me. Once Robert Johnson come along, I started getting into electric stuff.

Gaz: You tour a lot and you play really long sets which are seen as being legendary in some circles. What do you do to keep it interesting? I have seen you play six or seven times, and no show has been worse than another...

GJ: Well thanks, man. Y'know, we strive for that. Every night I walk out like, "This could be my last night playing." I kind of look up to God and say, "Well, O.K. if this is my last night, here we go." Because it could just as well be; you never know. Do you think Stevie Ray [Vaughan] thought about that before he played his last show? Probably not, but you can bet he had a good night playing, because he played like that every night. So that's what I'm bound to do every night.

Gaz: You mentioned God. Do you hold religion as a big part of your life?

GJ: No, I don't practice any organized religion or anything like that. God bless you if you do, that's fine; if you don't, that's fine too. It doesn't really have much to do with my music. I mean I do believe in some kind of spiritualism, but for me, my whole life revolves around that two hours that I walk out on stage — nothing else. Everything else in my life can wait. Whether I eat or whether I sleep, all that doesn't stack up against show time. If I'm hungry and it's too close to show time, I don't eat. If it's show time and we got a bunch of stuff we gotta



do, well I need a nap before the show 'cause I gotta be ready — that's it. I think people see that when I walk out on stage and we play. No one's seen Big Sugar have a bad night, because we don't. They've seen this guy way, way out on a limb and take a lot of risks out there, and the only way you can do that is if you're totally plugged in to what you're doing.

Gaz: A couple of years ago, I saw you on YTV and you made a comment that there aren't many new bands out there that captured your attention. Do you still think that?

GJ: There's a couple of smaller bands in Toronto that I'm starting to hear and dig. Big Rude Jake is one; I've produced a couple records for them — I like what they're doing. There's a new band in Toronto called Quevida who have a really interesting sound — they're sort of like Latino Rock.

Gaz: What about Wide Mouth Mason?

GJ: Oh I love Wide Mouth Mason, they're really soulful too. When I see them up playing, they're playing in front of our [Big Sugar's] audience, not their audience. They walk up, people don't know who they are, they got no soundcheck, they're doing 45 minute sets — just trying to scratch it out. Man, they walk up there and they've got the joy of music in 'em. Big smile on their faces and they play like they love it, and that's what counts. I support that.

Gaz: I gather Big Sugar is your band with your creative input. Do you see a future for the band, or are you going to branch out into something else?

GJ: No, I mean the personnel in the band is the band now, y'know? I couldn't really do what I'm doing without Gary [Lowe — bassist], Kelly [Hoppe — harmonica/saxophone], and Paul [Brennan — drums]. I need those guys for their input. We have our little family and it will continue.

Other things I do, like producing bands and things like that, I can always do and always will do.

Gaz: What about that Don't Talk Dance project you did with members of The Barenaked Ladies?

GJ: [laughing] That was a gag, man! That was a joke. I don't know, they made a record of it. I couldn't believe it! It was just an excuse to have a party. We used to throw a party every couple of months and call it "Don't Talk Dance" and everybody would come and jam. We'd play until 5:30 in the morning 'till the cops come break it up. We did that so many times and had so much fun, and then soon as they started making a record of it, they wanted us to go on tour. I was like, "Wow, you know what, the joke's over."

Big Sugar will be performing in the McInnes Room March 29th with Rusty and Sandbox. Look for part two of this interview in next week's Gazette.

Putting criticism where it belongs

BOOK REVIEW

The Paris Review (issue 141)

George Plimpton &

Peter Matthiessen (Eds.)

Random House Distributors

Founded in 1953, the *Paris Review* consists mostly of material by unknown writers who have yet to be published. The book comes with a history of previous works printed by Jack Kerouac, George Steiner and Samuel Beckett. In its fifth decade, the *Paris Review* still tries to cling to this belief, hoping, "To emphasize creative work in fiction and poetry — not to the exclusion of criticism but with the aim in mind of merely removing criticism from the dominating place it holds in most literary magazines and putting it pretty much where it belongs —

somewhere towards the back of the book."

Issue number 141, this year's winter edition, is around three hundred pages in length and houses a diverse collection of material. The highlights are eight works of fiction by a collection of new authors. They are all short stories, my favourite being "You Can Have It" by Chris Adiam, a very comical piece about the life of Jesus' lesser known twin brother. The twin has grown up in the shadow of his "saviour" elder, and wishes he could have a normal life.

Other stories include "Why I Married the Porn Star" by J. David Stevens, about a man trying to understand what love is when his wife is a porn star, and "The Savant", a well written piece by Joyce Hackett which boggled my mind as I tried to comprehend what it was all about.

Poetry also fills the pages of *The Paris Review*, but in this issue is not too exciting. There is one interesting piece, "Schindler's List", which deals with Stephen Spielberg and his view on the holocaust.

This edition of the *Paris Review* is enjoyable, but at times I find that it is glossed over with too much filler. This includes a long interview with poetry critic Helen Vendler, and a large section of questions asked to editors. This section would probably be of more interest to writers so they can know what editors are looking for in the future.

Despite the filler, it is nice reading the *Paris Review* knowing that all of the works within are by writers who have had no pieces published beforehand.

STUART MCMILLAN