

Son of Sugar

BY JOHN CULLEN

Gordie Johnson breaks a string in the middle of a song. Nonchalantly, he lifts the guitar from his body and gives it to an attentive roadie; all the while singing the lyrics. He is handed a new guitar and deftly re-joins the band in all

cuz I was really into Buddy Guy and Hank Marvin from the Shadows — like all the surf guitar players like Dick Dale. But any time you show up with a Strat, people start yelling, "Stevie Ray!" or "You gotta play Hendrix!" I don't really model myself after either of those guys.

companies are bent on making hits and singles. Have you felt any control placed on your creativity since you got signed?

GJ: No, because I wanna make hits and I wanna get songs played on the radio, so we see eye to eye...they wanna make money and so do I. I am in this to make a good living out of it. I want to see my record company make a lot of money, cuz if they're makin' money, then I'm makin' money. I wanna get songs on the radio. I know how to do that; I know what's required. I don't think it's a compromise.

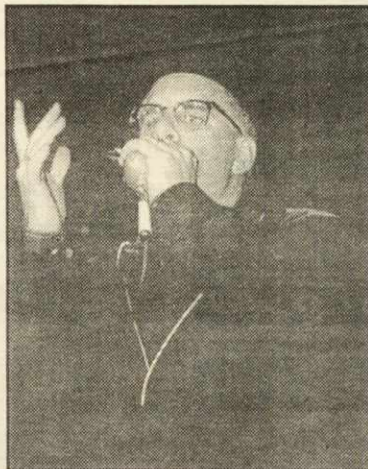
Gaz: What's required?
GJ: Well, being able to put something together. I mean when we play live, songs go as long as I want — you can hold people's attention in different ways. On the radio, you have one dimension. You eliminate the whole visual aspect, which is most of what a "presentation" is. And you also have people buying commercial time on radio stations, so if your song fits into a nice little package that's easy to slide in there — that's what's required. It's about trying to make things concise and getting to the point of your song in ample time.

Gaz: "Digging a Hole" and "If I had my Way" seem different from the rest of the album. Did you go about writing them specifically for the radio?
GJ: I didn't do that consciously, no, I like a song that as soon as it comes on the radio it has a hook — it's different, grabs your ear and makes its point in three minutes. "Gone for Good" does that. "If I had my Way" wasn't really written with that in mind. It's got this weird part in the middle, and I thought the people at the record company would say, "That's way too weird, maybe we should edit it out." The guy in charge of radio at A&M said, "What are you talking about? Leave the song alone, it's great."

Gaz: I was surprised that "Gone for Good" wasn't your first single...
GJ: Yeah, it's gonna be the third single.
Gaz: I haven't seen you play some stand-bys from *500 Pounds* lately — are you focusing on the new stuff?
GJ: Yeah, we try to play mostly new stuff — we're actually playing stuff that's not on *Hemi-Vision* now, maybe one or two songs a show — and we do the odd cover tune. We started covering a Beatles tune. So between that and playing songs people request, which are like "Wild Ox Moan", "Sugar in my Coffee", "Dear Mr. Fantasy"...

Gaz: Well, you couldn't take out "Sugar in my Coffee"; it's just so sonic...
GJ: Actually it doesn't get played every night, cuz some nights people wanna hear "Good-

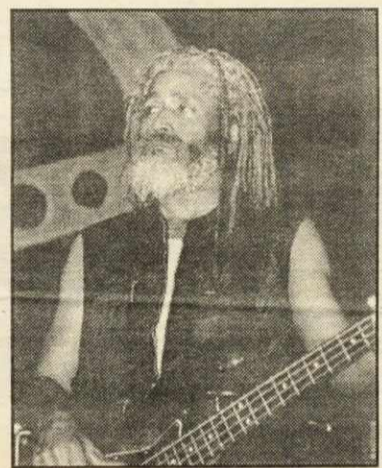
bye Train" and "Motherless Children". Next thing you know, you've been up there for a few hours and the show's supposed to be 90 minutes, and people are still calling out their favorite songs. So it's hard to get them all in, some nights... But on this tour, we'll pull out "Just About Sunrise" from our first album, which we



haven't played in ages, and it's like playing a brand new song.

Gaz: Musically, Canadian artists complain a lot about the lack of support from their own country. Did you find it hard to make a name for yourself?

GJ: Not really. I think Canadian record buyers and concert goers are really avid supporters of live music. More so than in certain parts of the United States. You can put on a really good professional show even in like smaller centres in



Canada, whereas in the US you just end up playing in really cruddy little bars where they have no PA systems or lights. We've been playing in Halifax for years, and we've always had a good PA system and a good light system, and we can put on a good show. In that way, I think it's been easy to play original music in Canada and get out there and start telling your story to people.

Gaz: So why did you go to Mexico to film your videos?

GJ: I had been there a number of times and I knew the place looked amazing. It was just to give them a different look. I think Toronto has pretty much been picked clean for locations. I also think Canadian videos have a look that I really try to avoid. And even though we went to Mexico, we bring our stuff back to Canada to edit, and it still ends up looking kinda Canadian. I kinda hate that.

Gaz: Are you not happy with how the videos turned out?

GJ: They're OK. I think they're interesting, just the locations alone make them somewhat unique, but I kinda hate videos in a way. I mean, they're necessary and I understand why you have to make them — I don't think I'll ever stop making them. It's hard to do anything of real quality. Videos are made by amateurs, really. People who are professional rock video makers, in the scale of the art form of cinema and using a camera and all that stuff, are really amateurish. Whatever the number one video on MTV is, that's what every video director who pitches you has in their mind.

Gaz: I wanted to ask you about the cars that are in your videos and on your album covers...

GJ: Yeah, the car that's on the cover of *Hemi-Vision* is actually in Alberta. And whenever we're on tour, I always get the bus to pull off to Medicine Hat and take it for a spin.

Gaz: And the Mercury in the "Ride Like Hell" video...

GJ: That's a Charger, man [makes slapping gesture towards my face]. There ain't no Mercuries. The Merc in the liner notes of *500 Pounds* is a guitar amplifier I used for recording the album. We used a '71 Charger in the "Diggin' a Hole" video, and we got the "Ride Like Hell" Charger for the "Gone for Good" video.

Gaz: What about the songs? Lots of them, especially "Sugar in my Coffee", sound really good driving along in a car. Do you have that in your mind when you put the songs together?

GJ: Sure, that's where you hear music the best. If the song actually influences your ground speed, then you're doing something right.



PHOTOS BY DANIELLE BOUDREAU

their sonic glory. The crowd reaches a new level of hysteria.

Saturday night belonged to Big Sugar. They played a two hour set plus a four song encore to a capacity crowd in the McInnes Room. Ever the showman, Johnson charmed the crowd with his version of the time-honoured speech, "Why you shouldn't crowd-surf when I'm performing". Many musicians have said the same words, but this time, people actually listened.

Just hours earlier, during the sound check, I completed the second instalment of my two part interview with Johnson.

Gaz: You guys play at extreme volumes; so did Pete Townsend and now he's got tinnitus. Do you worry about your ears?

GJ: Well, I'm pretty careful with that. I police my hearing; I sort of find a good zone to stand in on stage. I mean, Peter Townsend was using twice as much stuff as I use. We play at pretty extreme volumes by today's standards, when most bands use little tiny amps you can carry under your arm. But you'll notice I don't stack [the amps] up to my head, I keep the speakers along the ground — that way I'm not killing myself every night. But you have to have enough decibels on stage to move some air, y'know? That's what most of my sound is — just guitars feeding back.

Gaz: Do you have any kind of deal with Gibson Guitars?

GJ: It would be cool if I did, but I already have half a dozen Gibsons at home. I wouldn't know what I would do with another one. I mean, I'll always get another one, I suppose...

Gaz: Out of curiosity, why don't you use a Fender Stratocaster?

GJ: I used to play a stratocaster

Gaz: So who do you model yourself after?

GJ: Electric guitar players? Well, I love Pete Townsend circa 1970, like Live at Leeds and Isle of Wight era. Jimmy Page I really like a lot, Led Zeppelin. Eric Clapton with Cream — the list goes on and on and on...like heavy rock guitar guys, stuff like that.

Gaz: One of the guys from Rusty said, "People who listen to Big Sugar don't listen to Rusty. Basically, we're playing for an inattentive crowd." What do you think of comments like that and the idea of "Package Tours" in general?
GJ: I think it's an interesting way to expose you to people who otherwise wouldn't hear you. I think Rusty has done pretty good on this tour. People seem to be paying pretty good attention to them and digging what they're doing. It's better for them if they're playing in front of a room full of people who've never heard them. It gives you a chance to win some people over instead of preaching to the converted every night. And it's good for us too, cuz they will bring some people to the show who don't listen to Big Sugar and they'll come in and maybe go, "Wow, I like Big Sugar," and go and buy the album. I thing package tours where you have bands that are not similar [pause] I mean, it doesn't make that much sense to have bands together that sound exactly the same all the time, y'know? It doesn't really expand your audience very much.

Gaz: You signed with A&M last year. Tradition says that record



Short-film opportunity

BY GAZETTE STAFF

Every year, the Nova Scotia Film Development Corporation gives grants to aspiring video and filmmakers to produce, write and direct five minute short films. One of the goals of these grants is to provide training to people who are interested in pursuing various aspects of video and film production, ranging from location scout to lighting, and from assistant directing to acting.

This year one of the grant recipients is Tania Trepanier, a graduate student in the Interuniversity Women's Studies program. She is presently working on a script and is putting together cast and crew for the production.

"This is a wonderful training opportunity for everyone involved," said Trepanier. "Trainees will be working with professionals in a real production. You can read as many books as you like on the sub-

ject, but there's nothing like actually being there and experiencing it."

Her video is a short dramatic piece about an Indo-Canadian woman and a white Canadian woman who are in a relationship and live together. The piece revolves around the visit of an aunt from India and her reaction to their relationship.

If anyone is interested in being involved in this production, Trepanier is still looking for crew members and actors.

"This production is going to be challenging on many levels," she said. "I've had so much support from the Center for Art Tapes, who administer the grant, but I'm still quite a way from production and a final product. I'm very excited about the project, and I've already learnt so much."

Anyone who is interested can contact Maureen, the production manager, at 425-4265.