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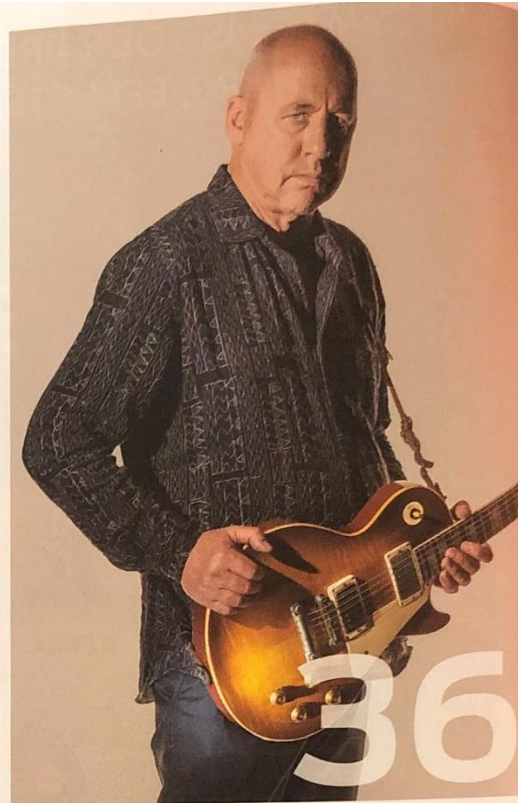
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PLAYERS

STRUM KING

BILLY DUFFY DETAILS THE CULT'S ROARING RETURN TO *SONIC TEMPLE*

BY JUDE GOLD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICK PEEK

THE NEIGHBORHOOD surrounding SIR Hollywood can be seedy. One tragic afternoon, I saw EMTs carting a corpse away from the bus stop just outside the musical equipment rental company's front doors. Once you step into the lobby, however, the vibe changes. Your eyes adjust to the dim light, and you become energized by the palpable sense of possibility that fills the place. With its soundstages, green rooms, dance studio and massive arsenals of guitars, basses, amplifiers and other rentable gear, this complex is where high-stakes auditions are nailed or failed, where bands emerge from industry showcases triumphant or heartbroken, and where dreams take flight or crash and burn on the runway.

Mostly, though, this is an oasis where an established band (and its stage crew) can run through a set a few times before embarking on its next big adventure. And tonight, on Stage 2, that is exactly what the Cult are doing.

It's been 30 years since the Cult released *Sonic Temple*, their fourth album. Powered by Billy Duffy's bigger-than-Beethoven guitar themes and Ian Astbury's mystical, soaring lead vocals, the record went Platinum by winning over both traditional hard rock fans and

alt-rock/pre-grunge fans alike, and, to celebrate, the Cult are hitting the road. Their aim is to transform each concert venue they hit into — to quote the name of their world tour — A Sonic Temple.

As I head into SIR to interview Duffy, the band's publicist, Mitch Schneider, calls to say, "The bad news is that rehearsal is running at least an hour behind." The good news is that I don't have to wait in my car, as I've been invited to watch the Cult run through hits such as "Sun King," "Fire Woman," "Sweet Soul Sister" and nearly every other song from *Sonic Temple*, which has been remastered and is being rereleased (with several bonus tracks, including demo and live versions of songs) by Beggars Banquet Records on August 30.

**"GET A REALLY
COOL GUITAR, ONE
THAT MAKES YOU
FEEL PROUD AND
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YOU FIND YOUR
OWN SOUND"**

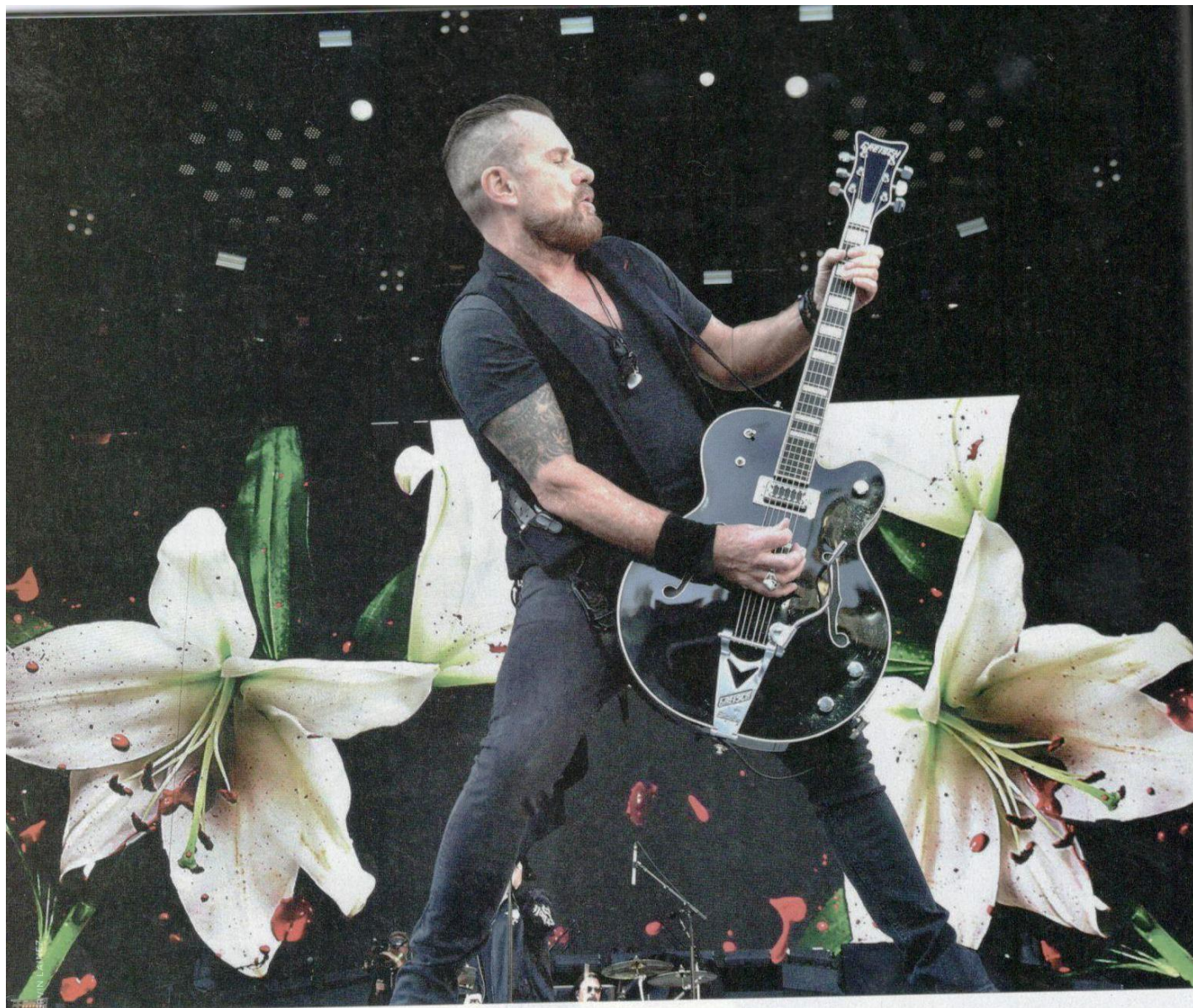
The spectacle is a bit surreal. I'm receiving a private concert of one of the greatest crossover albums in hard rock history. Adding to the unusual vibe, Astbury comes over between songs to tell Schneider and me about new bands he's been digging and offer Netflix recommendations.

Meanwhile, Duffy stays tethered to his rig on stage left until the very last note of rehearsal, switching back and forth between Gibson Les Pauls and his famous signature-model Gretsch Falcons. He looks very healthy. Later, I tell him he appears far younger than his 58 years. "You flatterer!" he replies, but I insist I'm being sincere and press him to share what, if anything, he's been "doing right" over the years.

"I don't know," he says. "I used to be quite fond of a drink, but I quit drinking a couple of decades ago. I thought, I'll stop for a bit, and that bit became longer and longer. Being sober sort of snuck up on me, and I think it's had a long-term benefit."

Speaking of healthy, Duffy and his tech, Matt McKenna, have the guitarist's oversized rig purring like a well-fed lion. It sounds warm and dangerous, and it can certainly roar like a lion, too, when





it needs to — as you might expect from a rig centered around a cranked-up 100-watt Friedman Brown Eye head driving two Orange 4x12 cabinets. “I space the cabs somewhat far apart because it creates a sort of stereo spread that I like,” Duffy says.

Running concurrently with the Friedman (and between the two cabinets) is a Vox AC30 combo that adds a sparkly midrange to every riff. Surprisingly, Duffy does not favor top-of-the-line Vox AC30s. “I use the Chinese-made ones,” he tells me later. “I had the hand-wired one, and it was actually too honest — a bit too chimey, brittle and clean for what I wanted. For me, the AC30 is there as an extension of one sound, so I need it to do more of a rock thing than a twangy ’60s sound. Plus, when we’re out on a fly date in Bulgaria or some place, and we’re using

rented gear, I’d best not be too picky about which amps I need to get my sound.”

The first time we met, I was doing a little reality TV gig for NBC, coaching an actor on how to become a better guitar player. We had spoken to a few pro guitarists, and they all gave us advice on technique or practicing. But when we ran into you on Sunset Blvd., you simply told us, “Get a cool guitar.”

Yes, I’ve been pretty consistent with that advice — get a really cool guitar, one that makes you feel proud and one that helps you find your own sound. I think it’s a British thing. Growing up in Britain, my background was very blue collar and working class, and we weren’t drowning in a sea of wealth, so I never really had

to worry about what car I was going buy. It was the small things — cool clothes, a cool guitar or other accessible things — that would make you stand out. It was an outward expression of how you saw yourself, because things were generally quite grim for most people in England in the ’70s.

You, of course, have become so famously associated with the Gretsch White Falcon that you now have your own signature models available.

I got my original Falcon from a guitar shop in London — we ordered it from America — and now people love to see that guitar. I think it gets a bigger round of applause than I do! It was the end of the ’70s, punk was kind of fading, and we were all looking for guitars that would give us different sounds because you couldn’t really outdo what heroes



like [*the Sex Pistols*'] Steve Jones or [*the Clash*'] Mick Jones were doing with a Les Paul. So I got into the Gretsch look. Plus, I wanted something that behaved a little differently, spatially. I needed to make as much noise as possible with a guitar. A good example of the Falcon sound is the guitar on "She Sells Sanctuary" [*off the Cult's Love album*].

I've actually retired my main Falcon. It has become a museum piece, so to speak. The guitar in itself isn't that valuable but it's got a lot of history to it. The version I'm playing now is a Stephen Stern Masterbuilt replica, and it's even better than the original.

How much White Falcon did you play on *Sonic Temple*? You're holding a Les Paul on the cover.

By the time we got to *Sonic Temple*, we had Bob Rock on as producer and the idea was to mix elements of the *Love* album — which was a little more open and psychedelic sounding — with the harder, more simplistic rock sound of *Electric*. So there's a lot of Les Paul on the album, but quite a bit of Gretsch, too. AC/DC did that in a great way, with Malcolm Young on the Gretsch and Angus on the Gibson, and in one sense that's what I was going for, but with a lot more layers. I had always wanted to make a fully explored, unashamed rock album with lots of overdubs, and it was finally time.

It's funny — Ian and I saw the project differently. To him, *Sonic Temple* was psychedelic, and we were doing *Disraeli Gears*. To me, we were doing a hybrid of Queen, Bad Company and Mott the Hoople, with a bit of punk rock in there.

***Sonic Temple* was one of Bob Rock's first big records. Any standout moments you recall from when you were tracking guitars with him?**

Yes, "Sweet Soul Sister." In those days we were somewhat indulgent with ourselves financially, so I spent a whole day doing the solo on that song, and, finally, we arrived at something we all knew was great. But somehow, even though Bob is super meticulous and never wipes anything, that solo got lost,

and I couldn't manage to recreate it. All we had was a rough mix, which was on a cassette tape Ian had been listening to in order to work on his vocals. So Bob finally just grabbed that cassette and somehow brought the solo section from it — with the backing band tracks and everything — back into the main session. The actual guitar solo on "Sweet Soul Sister" is from a cassette tape!

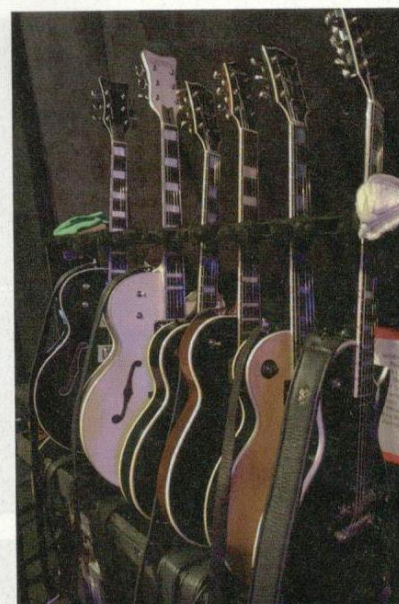
Honestly, when it came to doing the leads on *Sonic Temple*, there was a lot of chopping — a lot of proper old-school razor-blade-and-tape stuff. I had never seen myself as a fast or technically gifted guitar player, but because of where the band was headed, it was starting to be required of me. I kind of needed to be fast-tracked so that my lead guitar playing caught up with the sound we were going for. So a few of the solos were cut together.

Many of your big songs — "Fire Woman," "Sanctuary," "Love Removal Machine," "American Horse" and "Sweet Soul Sister," for example — are centered in D. I vote that you be made the honorary king of the key of D.

I was very proud that we had, I think, nine Top-40 singles England, and most of them were in the key of D. A lot of my stuff was the drone thing. I like the discipline of moving up and down the G string while the D is ringing below, like on "Sanctuary" or "American Horse." People go, "Why don't you just play all those notes in one place on the neck using different strings?" but that doesn't have the same effect.

It seems like there's a fair amount of delay added to intensify the drone effect.

To be honest, I don't put on as much delay as I used to — just enough to give me a little excitement value onstage. Any extra delay is added out front.



Top: Gretsches and Gibsons fill Duffy's guitar rack at SIR Hollywood. Above: Beneath a spare pedalboard and other gear, an early Friedman BE-100 (with a backup BE below it) drives two Orange 4x12 cabinets.

"THE SOLO ON 'SWEET SOUL SISTER' GOT LOST, AND I COULDN'T RECREATE IT. THE ACTUAL SOLO ON THE RECORD IS FROM A ROUGH MIX ON A CASSETTE!"



Why do you let someone 200 feet away add it?

Because I don't know what it sounds like 200 feet away. Plus, a sound guy will do a much better job with his stuff than I will onstage with a \$70 pedal.

It's said that handling success can be just as hard as handling failure. What did you learn from the experience of *Sonic Temple* blowing up and suddenly catapulting you guys to a much higher level of fame?

One thing is that you never really know when you're at your peak. Only in retrospect do you realize that something was your peak. You always think your next album is going to be the biggest one. There's no pamphlet or brochure that explains how it's going to go. You just have to hold on for the ride.

We had a sage manager back then named Howard Kaufman, and he said, "Be careful, because now you guys each have 'fuck-you money.'" And he was right. If you're lucky enough to get success — and some of the cash and prizes that come with it — it becomes an issue, because then people can be like, "Well, I don't need this. I've got money. I don't need to put up with your nonsense." You have to get through that phase as a band. Your overriding love and passion for music has to win out over the other stuff.

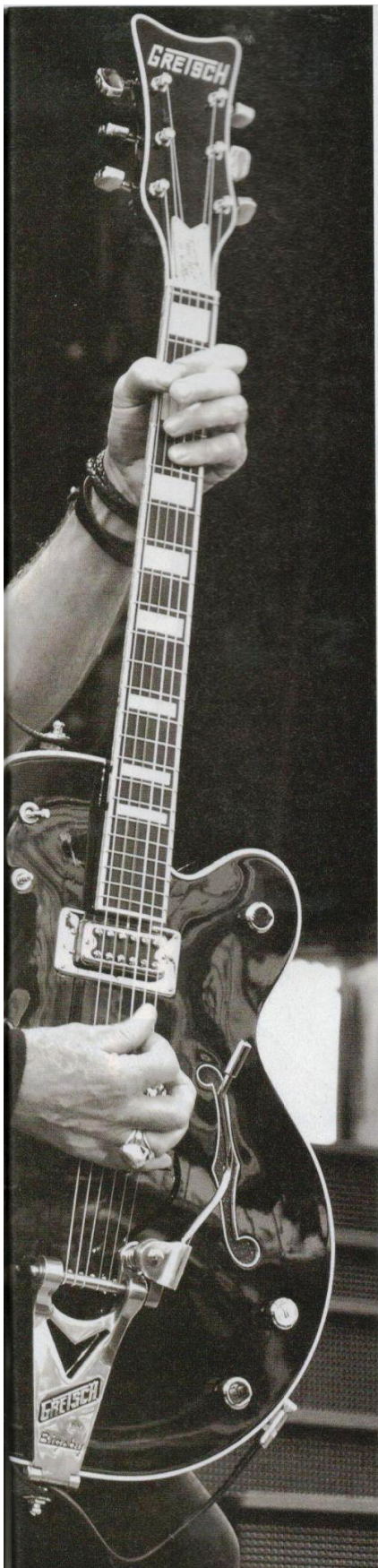
Are there any hilarious onstage Spinal Tap-style moments you remember from the first *Sonic Temple* tour?

The biggest Spinal Tap moment I've ever seen came a couple years later, and it happened to somebody else. We were playing soccer stadiums in Europe with Metallica, and Megadeth were on the bill too. The stage had a triangular ego ramp that went way out into the crowd, and Metallica let Dave Mustaine use it.

One day, Mustaine walks all the way to the front of that thing to start a song with a big chord, only to discover his tech had not turned on his wireless battery pack, so the guitar didn't work. I was right there as Mustaine walked all the way back in silence, just fuming. I was shitting my pants laughing.



"IF YOU STICK AROUND LONG ENOUGH, YOU SEE EVERYTHING. THINGS GO WRONG, AND IT'S NOT ALWAYS A BAD THING"



Top: A Vox AC30 (with a spare on the floor below it) adds midrange sparkle between two Friedman-driven Orange cabinets. **Above:** Duffy's main touring pedalboard includes a Morley George Lynch Tripler that makes it easy to run up to three amps in parallel.

thinking, Oh no! Somebody dig a grave for that poor roadie.

The thing is, if you stick around long enough, you see everything. Things go wrong, and it's not always a bad thing, because I think people in the audience can relate more to those moments than any other.

Back then, you were running a Roland JC-120 where the Vox now sits.

The Roland is great, but in recent years I've been using boost pedals, and I found that because the the JC-120 is solid-state, it boosts too much. I have boosts from Whirlwind, Lovepedal and Klón, and whenever I would kick one of them

on, the JC would jump higher in volume than the tube amps would.

From 40 feet back on the couch where I was sitting during rehearsal, one of the Gretsches you were playing could almost pass for a Les Paul.

That's this new Gretsch Jet Players Edition-based G6228 I'm using that will hopefully become a new signature model of mine. I'm working with TV Jones to create a special pickup for it. It's got a bit of balls to it and is a great halfway point between the Falcon and a Les Paul.

It's half Malcolm, half Angus.
It's a Mangus. 🐼