

Billy Sheehan

“My Middle Name is Roland!”

By Johnny DeMarco

Voted the “Best Rock Bass Player” five times in Guitar Player magazine, Billy Sheehan and his trademark sound and style are legendary. He has performed over 4,000 live gigs on almost every continent, and contributed to dozens of influential recordings. Along with two platinum albums as a member of David Lee Roth’s solo band, Sheehan spent time at the top of the charts with Mr. Big. But perhaps his most colorful contributions are his solo albums *Compression* and *Cosmic Troubadour*, on which he wrote the songs, sang, played 12- and 6-string guitars, baritone guitars, and the bass.

While Billy’s rise to cult status began in the '80s with his Buffalo, New York-based band Talas, he continues to innovate today with Niacin, an all-instrumental bass, drums, and Hammond B3 band that is expanding the limits of musical mastery.

Recently, Roland met up with Sheehan at his studio in Sherman Oaks, CA. The following interview reveals much about his musical persona that has made him a true icon in the world of music.

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How old were you when you first picked up the bass, and what inspired you to do so?

I was very young. I had older brother and sisters, and they were into all kinds of music. I was very lucky. Around the corner from my house was Joe Hesse, a bass-player friend who had a popular band in Buffalo. I used to go over there all the time to listen to them practice. It was amazing. I thought bass was the coolest thing ever because the strings were so big, and the giant amps. I would lie in bed and I could hear the bass thru the neighborhood, because the bass travels. I was into bass. It was my calling from the very beginning. I wanted to be like Joe.

That’s how I started. I was caught up in the moment with all of these bands and all this music, The British Invasion, the explosion of the Beatles, Beach Boys, Everly Brothers, the Motown stuff. Back then it was different. Nowadays there are a zillion things to do, like video gamming, all kinds of things. Back then it was “what bands are you into,” because everyone was into music. It was just a great, great time.

How did you build your chops to such a high level?

I have a deep bag of tricks from playing in cover bands for so long, and then writing my own music. You know I love doing all kinds of wild histrionics on bass. I love playing bass. But I still I loved to sit down and play “If I Fell” by the Beatles. That’s a love of mine. There’s no reason why you can’t do both. I think throughout history there has been a lot of great singer/songwriter bass players, not that I’m

counting myself in by any means, but Geddy Lee, Paul McCartney, Phil Lynot, Sting, Lemmy, Doug Pinneck — great bass players who sing.

As a bass player, who would you say influenced you more than others?

The original Yardbirds bass player, Paul Samwell Smith, was a brilliant player. He played all over the place; he played in ensemble with all three of the great guitar players of that band: Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, and Eric Clapton. Pretty amazing. Paul was incredible. The neck-position-style pickup on my bass was inspired by him. That's the tone I went for.

Then came Tim Bogert from Vanilla Fudge. Tim has become a friend of mine over the years, a wonderful guy, and a spectacular player. He credits a lot of his playing to Jamie Jamerson, the Motown Guy. Tim took what Jamie Jamerson did and took it into the stratosphere. It was incredible. Tim's the guy who inspired me to play with my fingers, rather than with a pick. Then there's Jack Bruce, Paul McCartney, Chris Squire, Jack Cassidy, John Entwistle, just about every bass player of note and some without note. Also Glen Cornick from Jethro Tull, an amazing bass player. It's a long list...

Seems you never limited yourself to one genre.

I try to really encourage people to do that, because it's just so enlightening as an artist to listen to all this stuff, even some great bluegrass. I'm not a big fan of country, but there's some stuff that you can't deny, Johnny Cash, for example. I love Joni Mitchell. God, she is amazing. What a genius, and she always had such amazing bass players. She was such a brilliant artist. You couldn't really call her just a musician; that's to demeaning.

I'm really a believer of spreading out across a lot of genres and allowing it to influence you. I'm basically into rock, heavy rock, hard rock, and improvisational rock. I like fusion, I like a lot of stuff, but I like rock especially. I like rock that has impact, with all these other things influencing it. It just adds other flavors that really make it more interesting than dirge funeral rock, which we hear a lot of these days [laughs].

You're one of the busiest bassists in the business. You've been traveling for practically a year straight in Steve Vai's Band, and, before that you were playing in G3 for many months.

Yeah, you know, as I get older, people in my family say you're not as young as you used to be. But I tell you what ... when I'm on stage, I don't feel any different than I did when I was 16. And that's a secret of it. There's no greater feeling than to be on stage performing and having a good time like that. It's super great.

I don't do any drugs at all, which has helped me keep my health and my attitude, hopefully, in the right place. Last time I had even an aspirin was 1971. I have a couple of glasses of red wine after the show or on a day off, but I'm a non-drugger and I think that's important because we've lost so many great, great spectacular talents. Not that I'm preaching. People who are drug users are still my friends and I still love

them dearly. I don't judge people that way. I'm always concerned for their health and well-being, though.

It's important to let people know: Hendrix is dead, Cobain is dead, a lot of guys are dead. It may have been directly or indirectly related to some drug thing, so it's a big item for me.

So that helps me be on the road for extended periods of time, and have a blast. Come back healthy and happy. The main underlying thing is that I love to do it. I love to play.

Tell us about Cosmic Troubadour



When I did my first solo album [Compression], I did it almost completely solo. I had a couple of guests on it, Terry Bozio and Steve Vai. For this one, I wanted to have more of a band effort, so even though I did all the guitars, basses, singing, and the songwriting, I had a drummer named Ray Luzier, who played for David Lee Roth for a long time. A spectacular drummer! He played on the whole thing with me ... 30 songs in two days! I like being in a band situation where everybody does his or her thing, and it ends up being a unified piece of music.

Cosmic Troubadour is more of a band effort than my first record. But I'm still happy with Compression.

When we first met, I told you that I worked for Roland and BOSS. Do you remember what you told me?

Absolutely: "My middle name is Roland." [Laughs.] My grandfather was William Roland, and that's who I was named after. My uncle Admiral Edwin J. Roland was the Commandant of the United States Coast Guard. They have a Roland Hall at the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. The Roland name in my family has quite a heritage.

Speaking of Roland, you use a Roland Micro CUBE amplifier. How did you discover it?

I was doing a TV thing in Japan, and they needed to plug my bass in to do some demo stuff. So I saw the Roland Micro CUBE and thought, "it's awfully cute, I wonder how it sounds?" So I plugged in and this thing just sounded great! To me, my relationship with an amplifier, whether it's big or small or even micro, is very, very important. In a lot of ways, I play the amp as much as I play the bass. With some amps, you plug in and you're at war with them. They fight you. With some amps, you plug in and they work with you. Right away, the Micro CUBE was just automatic ... it made my hands feel good on the bass.

I can plug into an amp sometimes and it feels like my strings are farther away. I'll check the action to see if something has changed. Then I plug into another amp and it's just like butter. The Micro CUBE was like that right away. A great tone! I had it backstage with me the whole Steve Vai tour. It was a godsend. We also took it with us on the bus; we couldn't play a lot of our DVDs on the bus so we played them thru the Mac and plugged the Mac into the Micro Cube for the volume. It became the center of our universe entertainment wise on the tour. It was just great. It fit into my bag, and we would use the battery feature when we had no European adapter.

Throughout the years, have you played other Roland or BOSS equipment?

I used the Roland PK-5 MIDI pedals for ages on all the Mr. Big tours. “Green Tinted Sixty’s Mind” needs the low end in the intro while I’m playing higher on the bass. So I always use the Roland PK-5 hooked up to my synths. I have two sets of them, one for backup, but I’ve never had one fail, ever. So my backup one is still new. That was an integral part of my setup for years and years. It became essential to the show. When I play solo, the PK-5 has to be there. I’ve always enjoyed the gear from Roland. I’ve always had great respect for Roland. Plus my name is on all their products [laughs].

Also, as a bass player, it’s important to understand a lot about drums. Since I’m a big fan of drumming, I went out and bought a Roland HandSonic, which is a spectacular device. I’ve used it to lay down tracks to my demos and songwriting stuff like that.

As for BOSS, I use the DB-66 metronome. I carry it with me on tour. It’s great because you can do triplets, accents, even odd time signatures. I use it all the time. It’s part of my life.

Parting thoughts?

Let me say one thing about Roland: There are so many companies making musical products, and Roland has a tradition of doing great stuff. I like to try to remind all the folks that work at companies like Roland, exactly what kind of impact they are having on the world. They are really inspiring artists, helping musicians, and their impact is gigantic, it really is. When some kid buys a BOSS pedal, takes it home, that could be an amazing day in his life that inspires him to go on and do something. Next thing you know he is on the charts, accepting his Grammy, and picking up his platinum record. I do believe that manufacturers have a lot to do with that.

I’m inspired when I get a great piece of gear. It inspires me to work harder, play harder. I think it’s important for the folks at Roland to realize they are a point of inspiration. Their gear is great. It inspires me, it helps me, and I’m thankful for the Roland Micro CUBE. That’s the truth.

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