

Q&A: Slash sets sights on blues with new festival

Iconic guitarist to perform at Artpark

BY THOM JENNINGS

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Grammy Award-winning Rock & Roll Hall of Fame guitar legend Slash brings his inaugural traveling blues festival to Artpark on Tuesday, July 30. The tour is in support of "Orgy of the Damned," an album that features the iconic guitarist performing a selection of blues songs along with an impressive list of guest vocalists.

Dubbed the S.E.R.P.E.N.T Festival, the trek features a rotating lineup of openers. The Artpark date features Keb' Mo, ZZ Ward, and Robert Randolph. "Orgy of the Damned" has already hit No. 1 on the blues album charts, and the tour kicked off earlier this month.

During a recent interview, Slash discussed the tour, the album, and how the blues influenced him musically.

Thom: I sincerely appreciate you taking the time to chat with me today. You're a week into the tour, so tell me the pinch-me moments and the elevator pitch for people to come see it.

Slash: Well, the tour has been great. Going into it, I had no real idea exactly what to expect. I've never done a blues festival before, but I just knew it would be cool to do an outdoor summer festival. Having gotten into it, it has such a great vibe. I love playing with the other artists, and the crowd's vibe is excellent. It's turning out to be an awesome venture.

For people planning to attend, it's hard to describe it. It's just a day of really great music. There are a lot of diverse explorations in the blues genre, ours being probably the hardest-hitting one because I am me, and it is just a matter of what I play; it's going to be loud and in your face. But it's just a great time. That's about as big as an explanation I can give you.

Thom: I'm sure it's not lost on you that, when we think of the blues in America, you have the American version, but then Clapton and Led Zeppelin and all those guys took it in England and brought it back to us. You grew up in Los Angeles, but you're really



Rock & Roll Hall of Fame guitarist Slash will headline a July 30 concert at Artpark. (Image by Gene Kirkland, courtesy of Prime PR Group)

from England. So, you have the best of both worlds there.

Slash: I know; it's funny because I was raised listening to British rock 'n' roll. I mean, that's all I was exposed to for the first seven years of my life. Then, when I moved to the States, I was still very much into everything that was British. My mom was the one who turned me on to BB King to show me where the Brits all got it from. That opened up a whole world of music for me.

Thom: That leads nicely to my next question because I wonder what the listening experience was like when formulating both the album and the setlist. You're a busy

guy, but curating a set of these blues songs must have required you to go on a listening exploration to decide what songs you ultimately chose for the record.

Slash: It was different from what you call a one-sit-down listening exploration. It was more like my lifetime exploration, because I picked songs that significantly impacted me and influenced me growing up. So, all these songs we picked had a particular and direct influence on me as a musician or were just songs I loved as a little kid. I could have made a more extensive or longer record, but this handful of songs have a particular backstory for me, so it was easy to pick them.

Thom: One of those songs is "The Pusher" by Steppenwolf, a Canadian band, and you're playing here in Lewiston, New York, which is right on the Canadian border. You will be on the same stage where John Kay and Steppenwolf performed the song in 2017. They're one of those bands not appreciated as much as they should be for their influence on rock and blues. That song was a very interesting choice and you're playing it in the set as well, right?

Slash: When I was a little kid, I loved Steppenwolf, and for a band from the '60s, they were like the hard-edge, not so much a peace

and love band. They weren't quite like MC5, but they were hard rock and hard-edged. I just always dug that attitude.

I mean, "Easy Rider" was a huge influence on the people that my parents hung out with when I was little, and Steppenwolf was part of that movie, and I have always loved them, but that particular song is special. There are a lot of great Steppenwolf songs. "Born to be Wild" is great; "Magic Carpet Ride" is great, and all that; but "The Pusher" always got to me. That was the song that I picked because of its influence on me, and it's pretty much like that across the board, and all the songs aren't specifically blues. There are rock 'n' roll songs, and there are also some R&B songs. So, it was songs that I grew up with.

Thom: This music is clearly very important to you. We were both in our formative years when that first Blues Brothers album came out. They saw spreading blues music as a mission. Do you remember that album coming out, and do you have the same sense that this project is a kind of mission to promote blues music?

Slash: Those two comedians were exposing the world to their musical roots and then they had that great backing band with Steve Cropper, Duck Dunn, and all those other guys! Oh, yeah, that was a killer record.

For me, this wasn't so focused on being a mission. It was just something that I've been itching to do. And then finally got around to doing it.

I've been working with a couple of these guys in a band since the '90s, and it was just a cover band. It was cool, and I'd wanted to record it back then. But it wasn't something I took so seriously as to make it a priority, and it never got done. But then you're all these years later, playing the blues is an excellent outlet for me.

And when you were in a band like Guns N' Roses or even Myles Kennedy and The Conspirators or Velvet Revolver, they're very organized with many different influences, a whole melting pot with other people having input. So, you can't just go on a blues exploration with those bands, not even for a song.

But this kind of thing, you can, and it's just fun for me, and I enjoy doing it. So, when I made this record, it was something that I wanted to do for the fun of it, and it was enjoyable. I didn't have the mission aspect of it. It was just something I needed to get off my chest.

Slash brings the Solidarity, Engagement, Restore, Peace, Equality N' Tolerance (aka S.E.R.P.E.N.T.) Festival to Artpark in Lewiston on Tuesday, July 30. For tickets or more information, visit www.artpark.net.

Pat Benatar & Neil Giraldo find unconventional path to chart-topping success (cont.)

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"It's what we do," Benatar continued. "We have our three grandbabies, and we're with them all the time. You know, trying to get them to play piano and do all these things and get them interested in music. They're little. One's just 5, we've got 4, and then the baby's turning 2. We're always doing all kinds of things with them musically, and they're always watching videos. And, 'Grandma, is that you? Why is your hair dark?' That kind of stuff (laughs).

"It's just really fun; and we just thought it would be cute to write a little book about our experiences with them. And it's a beautiful, little rhyming story for kids to read."

Adorable? Beautiful? Fun? Now, if your mind is blown – and you're wondering, "What next? Will Darth Vader adopt a puppy?" – consider how this musical union began. It's then this latest chapter will make sense.

You see, "When I go in to do a record, or produce a song, I want it to be different," Giraldo said. "Not to be different just to be different. I do it because it's my nature. It's who I am. I want it to sound different. I want to crossbreed different styles. And that's what it is."

Going against the grain – doing the thing that nobody expects – is what first set Benatar and Giraldo apart from their peers in the late-1970s. She took a 2 a.m. open mic night slot and turned it into a record deal. Far from phoning it in that hour of the night, she showed



Neil Giraldo and Pat Benatar photo courtesy of High Rise PR

the world why she is a force to be reckoned with, and a singer whose sound demands to be heard.

Giraldo was the perfect producer

for Benatar, because, "I don't like following (a formula)," he said. "If you notice, a lot of the songs, when they became hits, they didn't sound

like the one before it. That was intentional. I did that intentionally. I wanted to push people. I wanted to challenge them."

So, instead of repeating what worked – what was expected – from past successful singles, Giraldo and Benatar boldly declared, "We belong to the sound of the words we've both fallen under."

"I can tell you this, that, a lot of songs when they came out, people didn't like him at first," he said. "But it's been part of the thing I like, because, if you don't like it right away, and it grows on you, it stays with you for the rest of your life. It's like a tattoo. That's really important to me. And yeah, I intentionally did that."

"Every time I'd get ready to deliver a record, the record company would go, 'You're going to do the same thing you did last time, right? It's gonna be the same?' I would go, 'Nope. It's going to be 100% different.' They'd go, 'Oh, no, why can't you do the same thing?' I go, 'I'm not going to.'

"And that's kind of who I am."

It's that kind of creative obstinacy that leads two rockers to write mild-mannered stories for children. It's also what led the pair to two multi-Platinum records, five Platinum and three Gold albums; 19 Top 40 hits; record sales exceeding 36 million worldwide; four consecutive Grammy Awards; three American Music Awards; and a People's Choice Award.

"Love is a Battlefield," "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," "We Be-

long," "Invincible," "Treat Me Right," "Fire and Ice," "Shadows of the Night," "Heartbreaker": Together, Benatar and Giraldo – 2022 Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductees – crafted songs that are both iconic and enduring; that, five decades later, are still featured in commercials, on TV and in movies; that are sealed in our hearts and minds, having surrounded us on first dates, weddings, never-ending summer nights, and car rides with best friends.

And despite a desire to be different musically, "I think the main thing about what works always is that they were always a good fit," Benatar said of her songs' substance. "They fit from the moment you heard them, from the moment you recorded them, and they were always completely spot-on in every aspect. They were what you were feeling; they were in the right key; they were the right tempo. Everything."

"There's so much that goes into it, but I think the major thing is that you can relate. And there are songs that, no matter what age you're at, no matter what part of your life

you're in, the songs make sense to you. You can relate to what you're saying, the words. And this is, for me, especially – obviously, I'm the vocalist and I'm doing the talking – for me, the lyrics, everything has to make sense to me. And then for Spyder (Giraldo), everything has to make sense musically.

"You get to a point, at this point in your life, where it's a long time and you've learned so much, and you can't play things that are not at least elevated in some way. Some of those songs were elevated right from the beginning. So, even if you were young and you didn't know any better, but your intuition was good, you felt it then, because you instinctively knew. Not like you could articulate it back then. But those are the ones that still hold up."

Just like Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo. As part of Artpark & Company's 50th anniversary season celebration, Pat Benatar and Neil Giraldo headlined an outdoor concert on Wednesday. For more information on Artpark, visit www.artpark.net.



Train, Yacht Rock Revue bring lively performances to Artpark

If ever Artpark & Company was considering a house band, there would be done better than Yacht Rock Revue. Of course, YRR is off touring the country and releasing its own music this summer. Nonetheless, the band thoroughly entertained the audience with covers including "She's Gone," "Sweet Freedom," "Ride Like the Wind," "Brandy" and "Africa" on Friday.

The singing and dancing only grew, as Pat Monahan and Train took the stage for an energetic and efficient set that started with mega-hit "Calling All Angels." Train wasted no time in providing fans with beloved songs: "If It's Love," "Get to Me," "Save Me, San Francisco" and "Meet Virginia" were among the first half-dozen selections. As the night continued, Monahan made sure to borrow fan phones for selfies, as beach balls filled the amphitheater, and music filled the Lewiston night sky.

• See more photos online at www.wnypa-pers.com.



Pat Monahan of Train • Yacht Rock Revue

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