

PAUL GILBERT

I CAN DESTROY – BIO

BY MIKE METTLER

It's a question every artist has to grapple with: If you're not pushing yourself creatively, how can you grow? And that's exactly what acclaimed guitar maestro Paul Gilbert tackles with fervor on his new solo album, *I Can Destroy*, coming out May 27 via Ear Music / Edel. "One thing I've always struggled with as a writer is I don't think I've written a lot of songs that make it easy on the improviser," the consummate soulful shredder admits. "Coming from a heavy rock background, that's been a real challenge. But I worked really hard to rework all my fingerings so I could emphasize different tones the way my ear hears them. I'm still working on it, but that was a major step forward for me as a guitar player — to be able to get that sound on purpose, rather than by accident."

It's no accident that *Destroy* cuts a wide swath of styles and textures, from the full-frontal assault of "Everybody Use Your Goddamn Turn Signal" to the jazz-blues lament of "One Woman Too Many" (which also features Gilbert's patented four-pick Makita drill-bit riffery) to the radio-friendly balladeering of "Love We Had" to the smoking-hot gut/heart punch of "I Am Not the One (Who Wants To Be With You)," the latter track's title a playful reference to the ubiquitous #1 hit Gilbert enjoyed as part of his gig as lead guitarist for the still-going-strong Mr. Big. (More on that in a bit.)

Gilbert knew that *Destroy* producer Kevin Shirley (Led Zeppelin, Iron Maiden, Rush, Joe Bonamassa), whom he previously collaborated with on Mr. Big's 2011 release *What If*, would push him to do his best from the get-go. "One thing I knew about working with Kevin as a solo artist is that there weren't going to be that many overdubs on the record — not that many takes, and not many fixes," Gilbert reports. "As a musician, that puts the fear into you. It's a *good* fear, and it made me want to prepare in a pretty healthy way."

With Shirley onboard to get behind the board, Gilbert next had to cull together some top-drawer musicians to bring into the studio. "On drums, we've got Thomas Lang, who's somewhat of a drumming legend, and on bass is Kevin Chown," details Gilbert. "He was the only guy I'd never worked with before, and he was great. He played all the right stuff. He's played with everybody from Chuck Berry and Little Richard to Sebastian Bach."

Gilbert was excited to deploy a three-prong harmonic guitar attack for *Destroy*, so he reached out to some familiar faces and fingers — namely, Tony Spinner and Freddie Nelson. "We did a lot of guitar harmonies that were reminiscent of what you might hear on an Eagles song," Gilbert observes. "And even though our style of music is probably different than that band, when you've got this lineup and that set of instruments to orchestrate with, it's inspiring. It's like, 'Man, we've got *this*, so let's use it.' They're also singers in their own bands, so having guys like them behind me is good pressure. In a way, it makes it easier, because they sound so good, and I can just ride on top."

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Having the right personnel in place helped fuel Gilbert's approach to his songwriting for the album. "At the time I began thinking about the record, I was having a lot of self-doubt," the ace axeman admits. "I was wondering if the well was dry, and if I could write anymore. But the enthusiasm of Kevin Shirley and the musicians in their responses to the ideas I was bringing up and the song seeds I was sharing with them made the difference between having self-doubt and being confident. I couldn't have done it without them. I have profound gratitude for that. They're all great guys, and really fun to hang with."

Since Gilbert wanted to expand his horizons during *Destroy's* gestation period, he immersed himself in music he hadn't spent much time listening to over the course of his life — namely, blues and jazz. "The thing that really got me thinking about that was the fathers of a couple of my heroes — Eddie Van Halen and Pete Townshend — were jazz saxophone players, and I also know that Paul McCartney's dad was a jazz musician," Gilbert points out. "So I have a feeling having that music in the house informed a lot of what those guys did. It might be under a layer of Alex Van Halen bashing away, but when you hear the breakdown of 'I'm the One' [from 1978's *Van Halen*] — the 'Bop bah dah, shoobie dooby dooby doo wah' section — that's total jazz!"

Gilbert's new listening habits unlocked new doors for his own playing. "I'm really into the blues side of things, because I'm really greedy in terms of wanting to improve my guitar playing," he says. "It's so related to rock, and to listen to jazz guys do it, there's just so much good stuff for the taking — this free buffet of scales and licks, the way they bend notes and phrases, and the way they connect to the music. It's not exotic, it's not weird, and it's not alienating. It's allowed me to add stuff I wouldn't have added before, and it makes me go, 'Oh man, why didn't I think of this before?'"

These newly unearthed influences can be felt instantly via the vibes evident on a track like the aforementioned "One Woman Too Many." As Gilbert recalls, "I didn't grow up with jazz, so I'm catching up now. I'm really into Johnny Hodges, the Duke Ellington sax player. I've been listening to a lot of the '50s jazz guys, the horn and clarinet players who played blues, because blues is such a big part of being a rock guitar player. But rock guitar players tend to play a lot of the same phrases, because the instrument leads you in a way that leads to a certain sameness. If you listen to people using other instruments playing the same sort of music, they approach it in ways you wouldn't think of — not shred-crazy stuff, but three amazing notes that I never would have found without hearing a guy do it on a sax or clarinet."

Destroy's lead track, "Everybody Use Your Goddamn Turn Signal," also covers a broader stylistic palette — as well as puts a spotlight on the sweet way the band continually harmonizes on the G-word. "That puts a big grin on my face," Gilbert chuckles. "It's a contrast between the meaning of the word and the happy spirit we sing it with. The groove itself is a swing groove, which is connected to jazz. The first thing you learn about playing the blues is whenever you play the third, you always bend it up, unless you're playing a minor blues like 'The Thrill Is Gone.' As for the solo, I wanted to get one that I could really *nail* because I knew I had to get it right with Kevin at the helm, so what you hear is a straight major blues scale. Obviously, I wrote the song for my own amusement, but if I get the benefit of it helping save people's lives, that would also be a wonderful thing."

Another *Destroy* highlight is "Adventure and Trouble," the first song Gilbert wrote for the album. "After I had my meeting with Kevin Shirley and found out he was enthusiastic about the project, I was happy. I was driving home, and that song came into my head," he recounts. "The title came to me right away, and I started scattin' it. To me, it's kind of a gospel thing. It was really satisfying to do a tune like that, because I've always been a fan of chord changes. I'm still a heavy metal fan — I could put on *Heaven and Hell* (1980) by Black Sabbath and not want to change anything because it's perfect — but that was the most limiting thing during my beginnings as a heavy metal musician. To have a whole career just playing those chords would be really constricting to me, especially when I know there's other stuff out there."

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Gilbert found special inspiration for the title track to *I Can Destroy*, which is also buttressed by that propulsive three-guitar attack. "I was inspired by being a new dad, just watching my son tear things apart as he learns what the world is," he reveals. "Suddenly, I've got this little boy to introduce to the world. In a

way, he's like an alien, because he's never been to the planet before, and it's my job to show it to him. Of course, it's also his job to learn about it, and the way he often does that is figuring out, 'What can I destroy and pull apart?' He's not malevolent about it; he's doing it for knowledge. The connection I made about it is the biggest machine in the world is the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) at CERN near the French-Swiss border, where people are trying to learn about how atoms are put together by smashing them together. Certainly, it's more sophisticated than my son crushing a cup, but the principle is the same: Let's destroy it, and then look at the parts."

As noted earlier, Gilbert enjoyed coming up with "I Am Not the One (Who Wants To Be With You)," which pokes gentle fun at the storied legacy of Mr. Big. "It's been amazing to put the band back together and have a second life," he readily acknowledges. "That one is an 'anti' song — me just being angry, going, 'Really? I've gotta do this?' It's kind of like me saying, 'I Am *Not* the Walrus!'" Gilbert laughs. "But the other emotion there was the appreciation of what [Mr. Big vocalist] Eric Martin and I have together as people and as bandmates. It also made me think of relationships when you're younger and you have that first love or first marriage or first band, and all the things that you go through. Nothing is ever quite like that first time."

Ultimately, the joy Gilbert expresses all throughout *I Can Destroy* celebrates the freedom and creativity he enjoys as a solo artist. "I do my best. It's pretty incredible to have been living the dream and putting food on the table by banging it all out on an electric guitar," he concludes. "This is actually my 30th year as a recording artist, and I still enjoy the search. I like looking around, trying to find things I haven't done yet, and then seeing if I can do them."

If *I Can Destroy* is any indication, Gilbert is on the right path to continue creating material that's clearly built to last.

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