

VELVET REVOLVER LIBERTAD

Scott Weiland, vocals
Slash, guitar
Duff McKagan, bass
Matt Sorum, drums
Dave Kushner, guitar

*Break the chains of featherweights and giants
With the stain of forever lasting liars
They're afraid when we spit out the fire
And start living.*

— “The Last Fight”

Libertad is Spanish for both “liberty” and “freedom.” *Libertad* is also the title of the new album from Velvet Revolver. Due July 3, 2007 (on RCA Records), it finds singer/lyricist Scott Weiland, guitarists Slash and Dave Kushner, bassist Duff McKagan and drummer Matt Sorum throwing off the shackles of expectation.

“With the first record we had to establish ourselves as a new band,” McKagan explains. “Since then, we’ve actually figured out who we *are* as a band, so there’s been room for musical growth. These songs have more space; they breathe. Scott is writing about much broader issues than on *Contraband*; he’s looking outward more.”

Weiland confirms: “The songs started out being very personal, but they took on a more universal truth as they were nurtured by the five-headed beast that is Velvet Revolver. I want to tell stories about the world I see and how it affects all of us. With this album I was making the microcosmic macrocosmic.”

“She Builds Quick Machines” [the lead track] is “about a girl living in Las Vegas – goes to prison for fraud and drugs. She gets conjugal visits from her old man – get outs. She’s broke. She’s not used to not having money. She runs off to Texas ‘to keep away the excess’ and has to earn money from stripping and prostitution. She pays off her old dealers back in Vegas, as well as the folks she stole from. She’s a whore in Texas – but she’s nobody’s slave no more.”

Produced by Brendan O’Brien, *Libertad* is the follow-up to VR’s Grammy-generating, multiplatinum #1 debut, *Contraband* (2004). And though Weiland says the new disc “rocks like a motherfucker,” it’s also greased up and rooted down. *Rolling Stone*, for one, detected the presence of “slippery funk.” “*Libertad* has soul,” Weiland says. “These songs took on a life of their own in pursuit of groove.” The standout “Get Out the Door,” with its enormously chunky bass line and cowbell, is suitable for money-maker shaking. “Mary Mary” likewise slinks atop Weiland’s come-hither enticement, “*Get back, sugar baby.*”

This direction particularly reflects Dave Kushner’s past and present musical idols, the former including Stevie Wonder, The Commodores and Earth, Wind & Fire. Of the latter he says, “When I was writing the music for ‘Get Out the Door,’ I wanted to do something that sounded simple and modern, and then I thought, ‘What would [Outkast’s] Andre 3000 do?’”

The full-throttle, Deep Purplesque “Let It Roll” falls squarely in the pleasure-center-pounding hard-rock wheelhouse, but there’s no overlooking that gorgeous cover of ELO’s “Can’t Get It Out of My Head,” which no one could have seen coming.

That sort of stylistic freedom of expression is a direct result of the band's coalescing into a creative whole greater than the sum of its high-profile parts. Says McKagan: "We had more freedom to explore our musical ideas because we were confident in the chemistry. It wasn't so much knowing where each other's musical boundaries are; it was finding out where they *aren't*. Sometimes you're hesitant to break out that part you've been playing around with because you think someone on the other side of the room might say, 'Aw, dude, what is *that*?' I don't care who you talk to – every musician has felt it. We were just more comfortable trying things we might not have tried before."

Weiland also gives O'Brien credit for this, noting, "He helped us challenge ourselves. *Libertad* has a lot of different textures, and everyone really raised the bar on their skills. It just goes places the first record doesn't."

The singer's own instrument, one of the defining voices of alternative rock, itself is a revelation, more nimble than ever in calibrating the emotional nuances of the material and exploring the outer reaches of his range. At times his voice recalls the romantic gravitas of Jim Morrison; in other moments he pays homage to Sting or Elvis Costello. Clean and sober for more than three years, Weiland illuminated in *Rolling Stone*: "If you're shooting dope, it fucks up your voice completely. You have no range ... [and] without drugs, I have a direct link to my emotions. I can feel them."

One of those feelings, the thrill of inspiration, overtook Weiland when he spotted McKagan wearing a Day of the Dead shirt with the word *libertad* emblazoned upon it. He recognized it immediately as the title of the band's forthcoming record. For the members of Velvet Revolver, the word resonates beyond being liberated from preconceived notions of what kind of band they should be, beyond being confined, as individuals, to playing a certain style or a certain way.

"To me, it has a lot to do with freedom of speech," ventures Kushner. "We all have very strong opinions. Scott, for instance, has been adamant about various things throughout his career in the spotlight, and he's taken heat for it, but I respect him enormously for not holding back."

Weiland surely did not hold back when he confided his feelings about his brother, Michael, who died of an overdose in early 2007. "Michael's death played a big part in the writing of this record," he told *Q* magazine's Dan Stubbs, clarifying, "but the way I see it, he's finally free from pain. He's achieved final liberty." [Sorum's younger brother died around the same time, succumbing to cancer.]

For Weiland, too, however, *libertad* seems to have many shadings. This is the same man, after all, who sings on the melodically transcendent "The Last Fight": "*Break the chains of featherweights and giants/ With the stain of forever lasting liars/ They're afraid when we spit out the fire/ And start living.*"

According to Slash, Velvet Revolver did not start living and breathing as a band until well after *Contraband* debuted at #1 on the *Billboard* 200 and the radio track "Slither" won a Grammy for Best Hard Rock Performance. Though Weiland had fronted Stone Temple Pilots, Slash, McKagan and Sorum had played together in Guns N' Roses, and Kushner had played with McKagan in Loaded, Velvet Revolver was a brave new world.

"When we started, we dove right in," he relates. "We did the record pretty quickly and were on the road before it even came out. There was a lot to learn. We had to learn about Scott; we had to learn about Dave; I had to learn about Duff and Matt in *this* band. As we went along, I noticed onstage that we were learning each other's styles, picking up on each other's dynamics. There was a point at the end of the tour where we felt pretty seasoned; we'd actually started to set. Maybe six months after the tour ended, we did a series of shows, and it felt very relaxed. By the time we went back into the studio, we all knew each other really well, and it was a really good time. Everybody was playing like they didn't have anything to prove." Weiland says simply, "We toured for two years and got really close in the making of this album."

Each member had spent the hiatus working on new material, and then, as Kushner puts it, "We all showed each other what we did at summer camp." Says McKagan: "Everybody's always got riffs and bits and pieces. Some of us demoed whole songs and brought them to the band. What happens a lot is that one of us will say, 'Hey, I like that bit you just played. Play it again.' Then the rest of us will tear it apart and put it back together again. We write really well that way; it's how we bring the best out of each other."

Kushner reveals: “Especially with Slash, if I do something he’s impressed by, it means a lot to me. I’ve known him since junior high and have been a fan of his playing since high school. I’m so close to him at this point that I don’t think about who he is. But once in a while I step back and think, ‘Wow, I’m in a band with *that guy* – he’s an icon.”

Similarly, McKagan says of Sorum: “I’ve really come to respect Matt’s ideas on songwriting and arrangements. You can take an idea to him and trust that he’s going to nurture it. As a bassist, to play with someone like that – who creates such a big pocket and has such an amazing feel for groove – is awesome. He continually challenges me, makes me a better player. We’re feeding off each other now more than we ever have. A lot of the time onstage, we are in our own little world together.”

Another highlight of *Libertad*, “She Mine,” was sketched out when McKagan and Sorum were being videotaped during a photo shoot: “We hate standing around during those things so we started jamming,” the bassist recalls. “At the very end of the recording sessions, I said, ‘Let’s check out the video from that photo shoot and listen to that riff we came up with.’ I just had a feeling about it. So we started tracking it, and Scott came up with a killer chorus. The album had been pretty much done at that point. I’m really glad I kept pushing to watch that video.”

By all accounts, collaborating with O’Brien, who’d previously worked with Weiland in Stone Temple Pilots and is also renowned for his work with Pearl Jam and Bruce Springsteen, among many others, was a key factor in the settling in and stretching out that characterizes *Libertad*. “For one thing, he was great at corralling us,” says Kushner, “which was sometimes like getting five kids to come in from recess.” Slash adds, “He likes to work really fast; he doesn’t fuck around. I love that because I have a short attention span.”

Perhaps more important, though, were O’Brien’s chops as a musician. “During preproduction, he sat in the room facing us, with a Les Paul plugged in and a microphone, and he was kind of like the sixth member,” Kushner informs. “Brendan’s a great player but he doesn’t have a lot of ego,” Slash says. “He didn’t take that whole producer kind of attitude, which I’m more than familiar with. His communication with us was great. We were able to take his criticism constructively and not personally, which is amazing because we’re the kind of band that if you walk into a room and try to dictate to us, chances are you’ll get a fist in your face.”

At some point during the sessions, Slash ran into the band’s production manager. “She had this Chilean coin on a chain around her neck. It showed a woman breaking free of chains and it said *Libertad*. Seeing that felt like fate, like this album was absolutely meant to be called ‘Libertad,’” he says. “Scott’s intuition was dead-on.”

“Scott had the title before we even started writing,” notes McKagan, “and I think in a subconscious way, the idea of *libertad* was with us when we were working on the songs; in some weird way, it seeped into our songwriting. It’s not like we said, ‘Okay, let’s write songs that sound like freedom.’ Somehow, though, if you listen to the record, it sounds like the title.” Weiland affirms, “Liberty seems to ring throughout every song. Listening on headphones, it all came together for me. By not making a concept album, we made a concept album – about liberty. The feel, the energy of *Libertad* is about the eternal struggle for freedom – personal and social freedoms.

For Slash, freedom from accumulated baggage is another fundament of *Libertad*. “The word has a lot of meaning considering where the band is coming from,” he says. “We’ve been up against it from day one. People have tried to pick us apart, make Velvet Revolver all about Guns or all about STP. Some people didn’t want to see us leave the past behind by committing to this new project. Some people said we wouldn’t be able to find a singer, we wouldn’t be able to keep it together to record an album, we’d fall apart on the road. But we’re past all that now. We wrote a bunch of really inspired songs, we’re excited to get out on the road, and we’ve maintained our dignity and a positive attitude. The dust has settled and we’re standing tall. This record has liberated us.”

##