

MIKE NESS OF SOCIAL DISTORTION

Greatest Hits Record Q&A

May 2007

Q: What kind of music were you exposed to growing up?

A: I guess my first exposure to music was the radio around 5 years old. It was like an escape for me. I would go into a room, close the door and turn on the radio. It did something for me. It gave me a feeling. That was when I knew I wanted to play music. So by the time I was 5 years old, I knew I wanted to be a rock star.

My father listened to country music and blue grass. My mom listened to Rock and Roll, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and some other folk music. Between my mom and dad and my uncles, I had plenty of music around. Then I started hanging out with friends who shared interest in music. They all had older brothers. So we were always hanging out with older kids and doing what the older kids were doing.

Q: How did you come to learn guitar and start Social Distortion?

A: I started writing pretty early on. Me and this guy Casey, this drummer, would stay in on a Friday night. And his parents would go away or something and we would just turn on, put a couple of room mics up and he would be on drums and I would be on guitar and we would just keep it rolling for a couple of hours. And when we liked something we'd do it again and again. That's how you write if you like something, you memorize it. So it was pretty early on 16, 17 years old.

Q: Can you describe the first few years of Social Distortion?

A: Our first single was on Posh Boy Records as a three-piece band. Then we did "1945" and "Under My Thumb" in '82. And then we did Mommy's Little Monster in 1983 with Brent, me, Derek and Dennis. In 1982 we went on the Another State of Mind tour, first national tour, if you see the film it's a tragic comedy. Woody Allen should be narrating it. When I see the film I get a mixed reaction. My first reaction is like when you look back at your yearbook and you say "god what a geek." But I was in high school and I also see this really fucked up kid, who was, really always drunk and always in fights. I see that and I get sad sometimes but I also see me playing guitar on that porch and I think wow this really was the beginning of our career. Unfortunately, we came home from that tour and I was already playing with needles and stuff like that. So even though we recorded Mommy's Little Monster in '83, we don't remember recording it and by New Years Eve '83/84, Brent and Derek had had enough of my shenanigans. We were playing at Cathay De Grand, I think we were like making \$200 for the night and the promoter pulled me

aside and said, “hey, would you like me to just pay you in this white heroin instead of money?” and I said, “yes, that would work out really well.” So, needless to say, the band didn’t get any of that or any money and then they gave me some grief on stage. I think I threatened to beat ‘em up and they just quit.

Q: Can you talk a bit about how the writing of the songs for Prison Bound?

A: By October ‘85 I had cleaned up and started looking at the band, more seriously. It was like this was a dream I had for my whole life and I did not want to give up on it. Besides, at the time I had to get a job because I was in a half way house. I was painting houses during the day and there wasn’t very much applause in that. No matter how good a job I did, it wasn’t the same as being up on a stage. So I just started writing and by ‘87, ‘88, I was really looking at the band serious and I wrote the album Prison Bound. It let everyone know we were not going anywhere. We were still around we were serious. I lived my life for a year then picked up a guitar and it wanted to come out. I’m probably not the best communicator on a day-to-day basis, so for me that’s how it comes out.

Q: Where do you think the self-titled album took Social Distortion as a band?

A: The self-titled album was our first on a major label and, you know, its every band’s dream I think to get signed to a major label. Because you think they’re going to invest all this money in you and you’re going to get the exposure that you couldn’t get on your own. But that didn’t really work out for us. I mean, we got radio airplay but I don’t think the label that was responsible for it.

Q: Why cover Ring Of Fire on the self-titled album?

A: The question should be why *not* cover “Ring Of Fire”? You know its Johnny Cash. I remember getting a lot of flack for that in the beginning. Johnny Cash wasn’t as popular as he is now. All these kids saying “Social Distortion is doing a country song???” and I was thinking “Yeah!”

Q: It seems Somewhere Between Heaven And Hell quickly came together, can you talk a bit about the making of it?

A: I think “Somewhere Between Heaven and Hell” came quickly because we were in a similar situation to what we’re in right now. The making of the self-titled was such a good experience and you know you have this reverberating, creative thing that happens when something goes so well. You just don’t want it to end right there. You want it to keep going. You want to continue.

Q: What was your Warped Tour experience like in 1997?

A: The Warped Tour was pretty cool, once again playing in front of a whole new generation of kids. I think that was the beginning of what it is now for us. It was the beginning of us not just playing for the old fans who had been following Social Distortion for so many years. It was like, lets try to get some of these kids hip to us too because they're the future.

Q: How did Social Distortion cope after Dennis Danell's death?

A: When Dennis died I really had to re-evaluate things and ask myself if we were going to move forward or not. The decision was made pretty quickly when I asked myself if this was something he would want me to keep going on and doing. And then it became very clear. It kind of gave me a new purpose with the band, to carry it on in his honor – Dennis and I started this thing in 1979 in a garage. When everyone told us we couldn't do this. I would think that he would want me to take it all the way to the end. That's when I decided and that's when I wrote "Don't Take Me for Granted." It was the easiest song to write in my life and also one of the hardest. It was hard because it was sad, but it was also very easy because all I did was close my eyes and get a couple flashes of him and I as teenagers, doing the things that teenagers do. I wrote a song and basically it was like, if you don't have friends or if you don't have family, you really don't have shit.

Q: How did you find Jonny and Charlie? What made you want them in the band?

A: When we did decide to keep the band together, Jonny 2Bags was the most natural replacement for Dennis. Jonny had stood in for Dennis on a European tour when Dennis' wife was having their first child, so Dennis couldn't be there. We had Johnny standing in for us and I had known Jonny since he was 16. I just thought he was the best guy to replace him and he's turned out to be a really good addition to this band. Charlie I ended up picking just because of his versatility. He can play anything I ask him to play.

Q: What do you think when you hear Social D songs on the radio 25 years after you started the band?

A: Right now the most fulfilling thing is to look out into the crowd and to see the old timers still coming to see the band. The people who were there 20, 25 years ago but also see 10, 15, 18 year old kids who weren't even born yet when we were starting making records. They've heard of us from uncles or brothers or whatever and now they're here to see what we're about. We do take pride in our live shows as our main focus. I see these kids after the show and its like, "it's my first concert." They're going to be disappointed when they go see a band and all the band is doing is staring at their sneakers.

Q: How do you think Sex, Love & Rock 'n Roll fit in with the albums Social Distortion has made?

A: Sex, Love & Rock 'n Roll is just part of the natural evolution of each album. I think that with each record you want to try and out do the last. That's where we're at right now. Sex, Love & Rock 'n Roll was a great album, but I want to do better. That's the approach I have to record making.

Q: What is it about Social Distortion that has kept the fans coming back all these years?

A: I think the thing that has keep the fans coming for so long is that we were never afraid to evolve and take chances. We also held on very strongly to signature things about us that people liked in the beginning. Whether it was the honesty, or the stylistic aspects of songwriting and performing live. It's a thin line to evolve and want to change and progress and at the same time hold on to the things that made you successful in the beginning. The things that were so prevalent, you know, the attitude, the energy, the honesty, the intensity, and I think that that is what it is. We've managed to keep those. We've managed to be aware of those things. But truthfully, I think they're part of the personality. Once they're part of your personality, they never really go away and I think that's what people appreciate the most.

Q: How does it feel to be putting out a Greatest Hits album?

A: It feels really good to put out a greatest hits album because it's a reflection and a retrospective of our career. Starting out as teenagers playing at bars before we were even 21. And to have lasted. We had a cab ride here tonight and I was talking with a guy, an aspiring musician, and he couldn't believe that we've been around almost 30 years. He said, "man to be together 30 years and to still be doing it and making a living you must have done something right." And he's got a good point, you know, we've been lucky, but I think it's a lot of hard work, and it's paid off for us.