

BILLY TALENT



“ I’m not sleeping really well right now because I’m just thinking about shit and the record coming out and, I don’t know – I think it’s the best piece of work we’ve done, by far, hands down. But you’re just so involved... ”

Billy Talent singer Ben Kowalewicz has been front and centre in one of the greatest Canadian rock ‘n’ roll success stories of the post-millennial era. But today, with the release of the long-lived Toronto quartet’s third album looming large on the horizon and the final master of Billy Talent III still sitting in an unopened FedEx envelope delivered just hours before to his home, the normally hyperactive frontman is betraying neither cockiness nor complacency as he reclines in the band’s cramped east-side rehearsal space and candidly assesses what might await the group in the summer of 2009.



Go back and listen to the chorus of “Try Honest,” the monster single that broke Billy Talent and its eponymous debut album wide to the tune of triple-platinum sales in Canada back in 2003, and you’ll remind yourself instantly that this band had the chops on delivery to stick around much longer than the mall-ready “pop-punk” fetish with which it was in some quarters initially, mistakenly associated. Instant chart success can be a bitch, though, and it was only after Billy Talent demonstrated its lasting mettle in the wake of 2006’s Billy Talent II with three more platinum sales awards, a sold-out show at Toronto’s 20,000-seat Air Canada Centre and, most unexpectedly, a No. 1 debut in Germany to match the one already notched at home that most reasonable folks from these parts finally woke up to the fact that they’d been sleeping on a “real deal” in their midst.

Billy Talent is past all that, for the most part. Kowalewicz, guitarist Ian D’Sa, bassist Jon Gallant and drummer Aaron Solowoniuk have been slogging away together for more than 15 years now and, consequently, have nothing to prove from a “paying your dues” standpoint. It would be nice nonetheless if the scorching Billy Talent III decisively hammered home to both the fans and the doubters what a shit-hot, world-dominating hard-rock band has grown out of these four former Mississauga teenagers’ shared high-school dreams

of ... well ... growing into a shit-hot, world-dominating hard-rock band.

“We got a rough shake at the beginning, and then, I think, people started really understanding our band,” says D’Sa. That was something that happened in the early years because, when a new band comes out, in the public’s eyes, they need to be poked and prodded with ‘Where’s this band really coming from?’ I think people just got to understand us and now we don’t have those problems that much anymore.”

Billy Talent is fairly oozing good songs on Billy Talent III, and for the first time they’ve all made it to tape in pretty much the same form they’d be heard during one of the breathless live shows that initially, decisively established and have since cemented the band’s name and reputation.

For this, some thanks are due – if Billy Talent can be permitted a bit of uncharacteristic name-dropping – to producer Brendan O’Brien, who found time amidst a heroically busy schedule that recently added Bruce Springsteen and AC/DC to a list of superstar credits begun with Pearl Jam, Soundgarden and Stone Temple Pilots to come north to Toronto and man the boards for the BTIII sessions.

The band never actually thought itself worthy of working with someone who'd shaped the sound of so many of its members' agreed-upon "formative" records. Nevertheless, when asked by attentive record-label folk to submit a list of "dream" producers for the new album, the boys gamely responded with one that placed O'Brien at the top, then shared a good chuckle over their hopeless ambitions and simply proceeded under the assumption that D'Sa would be picking up where he left off after quite capably co-producing the second Billy Talent LP alongside Gavin Brown.

As it turns out, O'Brien's involvement only wound up further coaxing Billy Talent in the meatier, more deliberately paced and oh-so-slightly "classicist" riff-rock direction with which it was already flirting on the nascent tunes for Billy Talent III.

Lumbering, low-end-propelled behemoths such as "Devil On My Shoulder," "The Dead Can't Testify" and "Sudden Movements" signal a marked departure from more customarily

frenetic-but-melodic Billy Talent fare like "Tears Into Wine" and "Turn Your Back" (a pre-release teaser released to grateful radio audiences several months ago), unmistakably betraying a '70s AM-radio lineage shared with the early-'90s grunge that first compelled four future chart-toppers from suburban Toronto to take up their craft in earnest. Once Brendan O'Brien was in the picture, it only made sense to keep going that way. He'd helped cultivate their musical roots, after all; if they were intuitively going back to them on their own, this had to represent the closing of some kind of circle.



"He was our first choice but we didn't think that he'd ever want to work with a band like us," says a still slightly boggled D'Sa, who traces the group's collective admiration for O'Brien back to his work on two of the Rage Against the Machine records. "They just sound phenomenal. They have these huge drum sounds, great guitar tones, the songs are all great – he did an amazing job on those albums."

"He engineered (the Red Hot Chili Peppers') Blood Sugar Sex Magik, too," adds Solowoniuk, "which is going back to albums that shape you as musicians because that was one of them. That album blew me away. It blew all of us away."



"On the first day of preproduction in Toronto, just him showing up here, in this room, was definitely kind of intimidating," concedes D'Sa. "We set a chair aside for him and wrote 'Mr. O'Brien' on it. He didn't think it was funny."



"We never really planned out anything, but I'd been coming up with a couple of riffs here and there that were a little more on the '70s-rock side and some of those riffs ended up being songs like 'Devil On My Shoulder,'" says D'Sa. "And we just wanted to keep going, just let things happen organically and see what happens. There was no real, grand design to it..."

"At the time, we were all kind of listening to bands like Soundgarden and our favourite bands from the early '90s, all those grunge records. We kinda grew up in that generation, so I think that's where the influence kinda came from and it leaked into the music a little bit. You can hear it on the record. There's definitely a grunge-era influence on this record."

Kowalewicz concurs: "Just being musicians, you have allegiances when you grow up. We grew up in the early '90s, when all these amazing bands came out – Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Mudhoney and Jane's Addiction. All these amazing things, we grew up with, and as time progressed we explored punk – the Clash, the Pistols and things like that. We explored that avenue and, I guess, over time, as a progression, you kinda revert to a time when

studio while playing together in the same room. And you can hear it in the broadened emotional range the band demonstrates in slower numbers like the wrenching "White Sparrows," an almost-ballad that, Kowalewicz will allow, "grew into something pretty magical" by the time recording had wrapped. Maybe because – shhhh – someone finally figured out how to get this notorious shrieker to actually sing a verse or two once in a while.



"People are always saying: 'You sound so different from record to live.' And some people really like the way the records sound, some people really like the live stuff," says Kowalewicz. "So one thing that, I think, we really wanted to do was amalgamate both, so that it sounds really big and heavy but there's still, like, this feeling that's really visceral



things made the most sense. And, I think, the early '90s kinda shaped us and our psyches and who we are and why we even play music."

Regardless of how the tunes eventually shook down, tacit endorsement by an A-list production whiz of O'Brien's stature "probably lit a bit of that fire under us," as Gallant puts it, to step things up in the songwriting and musicianship departments heading into the studio. You can hear it in the playing, for sure, which has never sounded as dynamic and liquid and as definitively the product of 15 years' worth of dogged, sweaty, night-by-night toil as it does on Billy Talent III – check how limber the rhythm section rolls on the fond Police homage "Diamond On A Landmine" – and was, at O'Brien's urging, largely tracked for the first time while Billy Talent bashed it all out in the

and alive."

Mission accomplished. Billy Talent has never sounded more visceral, nor more alive than it does here. Nor more ready for the trans-continental rock-star close-up it's been threatening for a couple of records now. Heaven only knows we could use a few more hitmakers like these guys to remind us why we all cared about hits in the first place.

