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Relive '80s with Def Leppard, Billy Idol

Rock icons perform old, new songs at coliseum

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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Listen to an interview with Def Leppard's Vivian Campbell

"It's a nice day for ... Pyromania ... In the midnight hour she cried ... You're bringin' on the heartache ... Well, rock the cradle of love ... Oh, I get hysterical, hysteria, Oh, can you feel it, can you believe it?"

Do those lyrics have a familiar ring?

You might recognize them, but they're not all from the same song. If you're a fan of pop/rock music from the last 20 or so years, you know those lyrics come from various songs by Def Leppard and Billy Idol.

If you're a child of the '80s who wants to revel in the past or a child of today who just loves a hook-driven rock song, then you might want to catch the Def Leppard/Billy Idol concert Wednesday at Memorial Coliseum.

For those of you who aren't familiar with either, here's a quick run-down:

The main attraction, Def Leppard, was formed in England in 1977. They've sold more than 65 million albums worldwide, and their 1987 album "Hysteria" generated seven hit singles. They're known for harder-edged rock songs and pop ballads with unforgettable hooks.

The first single off their new CD, "Songs From the Sparkle Lounge," is called "Nine Lives" (a collaboration with country superstar Tim McGraw), and that title is a pretty good phrase for this band.

For example, after their 1983 album, "Pyromania," broke into the U.S. market, their drummer lost his left arm in a car accident. Their next album took four years to make as he taught himself to use his legs to play a specially designed drum kit that compensated for the missing arm.

If that wasn't enough, in 1991, they lost one of their guitarists (Steve Clark) to a drug overdose.

Nine lives indeed.

But the group keeps performing and making new music. Joe Elliot, Def Leppard's lead singer, told Billboard magazine in an article in May what a Def Leppard audience is like these days:

"I think logic would say it's a continuation of the audience we've always had. But having said that, and without wanting to extend a cliché 'cause I'm sure you hear from every band our age that 'Our audience seems to be getting younger,' it really is in our case! At the last few shows, even the casino gig we did, there were, like, 10-year-old kids, albeit with their parents. I just think anybody that likes a great commercial pop-rock song, or a rock song, is potentially a Leppard fan."

As for the opening act, Billy Idol (real name Bill Broad), he was born in England in 1955, and also had his biggest success in the '80s. He started out as the lead singer in a '70s punk band called Generation X and then became a sneering, white-spiky-haired star of MTV with videos to songs such as "White Wedding," "Dancing with Myself" and "Mony, Mony."

As with Def Leppard, Billy Idol continues to record and perform, but he is best-known for the hits unleashed upon the '80s MTV generation.



More Information

Interview with Vivian Campbell

Writer Jim Grant spent some time speaking by phone with Def Leppard guitarist Vivian Campbell.

To listen to audio excerpts of the interview, go to www.news-sentinel.com. In the left-hand list of links, click on "Ticket!" and then the link for this story.

Here are highlights of that interview:

Q.: How is this tour different from previous Def Leppard tours?

A.: We're a year older (laughter). You know it's not that different, other than the fact that we'll be playing at least three (songs) from the new album. We're very fortunate to have a lot of hits, so we have to play those — it's kind of expected from the majority of people who come to the show. (They) want to hear those big radio hits — "Pour Some Sugar on Me," "Photograph," "Love Bites," "Hysteria," "Foolin'" — the list goes on. Every tour we do, we do something from our past, some album track. We're playing "Mirror, Mirror" from the "High and Dry" album on this particular tour, which only the hard-core fans will really know. It's refreshing for us; it keeps us on our toes, and the production's gotten bigger and bigger over the last few years. After the '90s, when putting on any sort of a big rock show was verboten, it's safe now to ... have fun and rock, and that's what we do.

Q.: Seeing that you've played guitar for several bands, do you find the audience for Def Leppard any different from, say, playing for Whitesnake or Dio?

A.: It's not that different from the Whitesnake audience because our audience is pretty much 50-50 female to male. That was the case with Whitesnake, too. Certainly the Dio audience was much more hard-core because it was a different kind of thing. Dio was a heavy-metal band, and Def Leppard is not. Def Leppard is essentially a pop band dressed up as hard rock.

Q.: I see you have Tim McGraw guesting on your new album. Are you guys big country fans as well?

A.: I can't honestly say that I am, no ... This came around because Def Leppard's drummer Rick Allen, his eldest brother Robert is tour manager, and he brought him (McGraw) to our show in 2006 at the Hollywood Bowl. Tim got up on stage and did the encore song with us, "Pour Some Sugar on Me", and he ... was very thrilled. He's obviously a big Def Leppard fan.

He said, "I grew up with your music, and I want to work with you guys." He kept going on about this title — he had

this song "Nine Lives" — which wasn't a song then, but he just had the idea for a title, a few lyrics and what not. We didn't think too much about it, but he kept e-mailing and coming around, and he just really wanted to do it. He had great energy about it so eventually he hooked up with Phil Colen and the pair of them knocked out a song, and we recorded it when we were doing the album. Phil flew out to Nashville and Tim did his vocals there, and then back to Dublin for Joe to put on his vocal parts. It was good. I think it's more a case of Tim McGraw doing rock than it is Def Leppard doing country.

Q.: Do you think that it's given you more exposure since radio airplay is limited now?

A.: Not really, no. It's been a talking point, for sure. It's gotten us a little bit of press I would say because it's an unusual kind of collaboration for us at least. But country radio, as far as I know, has not played the song because it's too rock. I'm not aware of any country station playing it.

Q.: Looking back on your career, is it what you had envisioned as an aspiring musician?

A.: You know, no, you never know what to expect. You never know where your career's gonna go. The only real regret I would say I have about my career is that I really kind of wish my first original band, Sweet Savage back in Ireland, could've kept it together and gone on. We had something. Maybe we didn't have quite what it takes, but we put a lot of energy in that band. ... We were part of that whole new wave of British heavy-metal thing, and it would've been great to still be working with those guys.

I've had a strange kind of career ... I was with Dio for the first three albums, then I got fired. I was with Whitesnake for about 10 minutes, then I got fired. Def Leppard is home. I've been with the band for 16 years. I'm the new guy ... I'm still feeling like a bit of a journeyman.

Concert

What: Def Leppard in concert with Billy Idol

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Memorial Coliseum, 4000 Parnell Ave.

Cost: \$69.50, \$55 and \$35; available at the coliseum box office, Ticketmaster locations, www.ticketmaster.com or charge-by-phone at 424-1811. Parking is \$4 main lot, \$8 preferred lot.