BIG SUG

Music history has generally been good to intrepid pioneers who dare to combine diverse influences in new ways. Regurgitating existing formulae and current charttoppers can yield short-term rewards but won't pave the way for long-term success. Artists who forge their own style by drawing on the strength of their roots, however, can gradually carve out their own market and change music in the process. Big Sugar are one such band, currently distinguishing themselves in a new league of their own making. Their recipe combines blues and reggae on a bed of rock, just as a fine curry blends spices in a way that honours each ingredient whilst blending them all into a single, complex flavour. The Big Sugar sound is fresh, yet familiar: a combination that has served the band well, especially since the release of their highly-successful third album, *Hemi-Vision*.

Gordie Johnson, an upstanding member of the tiny Club of Canadian Guitar Heroes, fronts the band in style. His wardrobe of Hugo Boss suits and passion for vintage cars are almost as well-known as his playing and singing. Garry Lowe, president of the Canadian Society for Reggae Bass Legends, guards the bottom end. Kelly Hoppe holds his own in the Association of Authentic Canuck Blues Blowers, adding an important dose of harmonica and saxophone to the mix. Until recently, pop pounder Paul Brennan rounded out the lineup on drums; at press time, original drummer Al Cross is filling the seat but no permanent replacement has been announced.

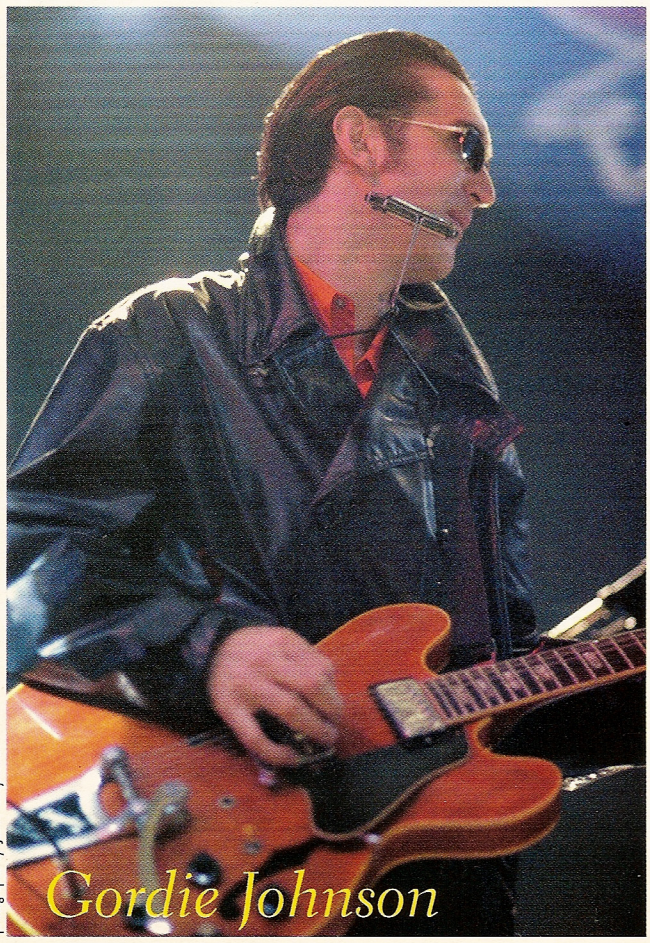
by Peter Murray

According to Gordie, the stylistic mix that makes up the band's sound developed very organically. "It was all stuff that I dug anyway. It wasn't like I sat down to think 'what would go well together?' like planning a dinner party or something. It wasn't just to go out and grab whatever disparate musical elements and toss them together, it was actually stuff that I had an affinity for."

The story behind how the current band came into being contains almost fairy-tale quantities of irony. Gordie was a bassist when he first met harpist Kelly in their home town of Windsor. Kelly needed a guitarist and Gordie volunteered despite a lack of guitar background; he needed a primer in blues, which Kelly provided willingly. "I gave him some Freddy King instrumental albums," Kelly recalls, "and he came back and he knew it all. It wasn't so much that he played note for note, he just played it with a lot of passion. He really dug it. Then I gave him some John Lee Hooker albums and he came back with the whole John Lee Hooker thing, the whole attitude of stompin' the foot, playin' the guitar by yourself — that kind of thing."

The two gigged together for years in the Windsor Dukes until Gordie relocated to Toronto. There, he kept busy playing mostly blues and jazz in varied circumstances and founded Big Sugar, surviving many lineup changes. Through this period, Gordie and Kelly kept in touch and continued collaborating, finally officially reuniting in Big Sugar in 1994. "He sometimes refers to me as a mentor," Kelly admits, "But it's neat to see that here it is 10 or 12 years down the road and now I'm in a band with him, but he's the band leader!"

Gordie had been feeding his reggae fanship with regular live doses in Toronto and came to love the style and sound of local mainstay bassist Garry Lowe. Garry played with Leroy Sibbles, Culture Shock



Gordie Johnson

Garry Lowe

photographs by Justin Zivojinovich

AR'S

Sweet Blend

and Truths and Rights, as well as top backup bands Livestock and Hit Squad, backing up touring artists from Jamaica. "I think every reggae show I ever went to Garry was playing bass — no matter who the band was or where they were from," says Gordie. "I got to be a real fan of Garry's. I had hired all of these different bass players and someone finally said, 'why don't you just go and hire Garry Lowe instead of trying to make all of these guys play like him!' Because nobody could, and that was the sound I had in my head. I thought, there's no way he's going to take a gig playing with me. He's the man! But I called him up and he basically said yes over the phone."

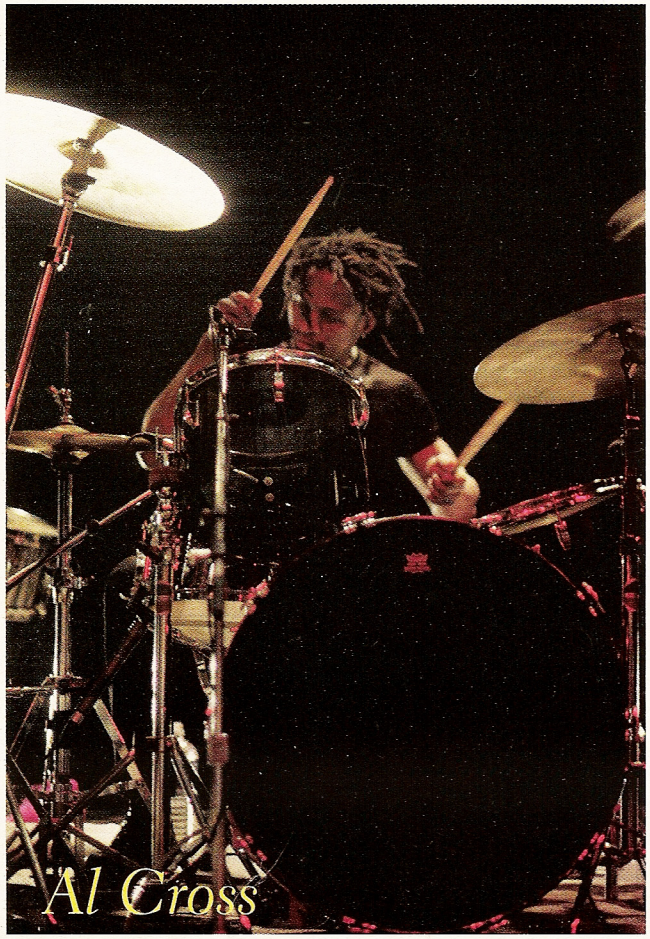
It just so turns out that Garry was quite available. "It was a little bit of a surprise," Garry admits. "I had met Gordie before and he was a cool guy and a great musician. When he asked me, I didn't have a gig at the time. I was like, 'Great! I'm willin' to try something else.' You want to be versatile and aware of different musical styles — which I wasn't really until then. I've always admired him as a player; the few times I saw him, I thought he was great. So I was really surprised he liked my playing, it was kind of flattering."

What emerged was something of a supergroup, but with all the tamed ego of a mutual admiration society: a burgeoning guitar icon mixing it up with his blues mentor on harp and reggae hero on bass. But if only the drum quarter could settle as firmly. For a while, drummer Al Cross had co-defined the Big Sugar sound, but since he left to "do the family thing," the drum chair has rotated with unsettling, almost Spinal-Tappish speed. Drummers Skeeto Gibbs and Stitch Winston both took turns, as did Crash Morgan until his tragic death mid-tour. Most recently, Paul Brennan (ex-drummer for Odds and Mae Moore) took on the post, bringing a crisper pop edge to the band—but his tenure didn't last either.

Gordie connects road fatigue and loud volumes to Paul's departure: "I think it was really stressful on his hearing. Being the drummer, he's the closest one to the noise, really. My amps are behind me; if I had to face them it would be a different story. But the drummer, he's got the cymbals right up there in his face; and Paul's not a light stroker; he hits pretty hard. I think he just overdosed on it." He'll be missed, according to Garry. "He's a great drummer, if you ask me. I wish Paul was still with us, too bad he can't be." But don't expect drummer transience to slow the band down. They've been solidifying continually as a unit and as a result, streamlining their new music fusion. Kelly explains, "That's what [Gordie] wanted, was to have a band of guys that wanted to go on the road, wanted to record and bring to the musical party what they had to contribute." Garry adds, "I like the fact that we have a sense of it being a band, instead of just being hired musicians."

How does the sound come together? "I'd say just three years worth of gigs would do that to a band," says Gordie. "We never play from a set list, it's not like we had a house gig anywhere, we were never playing to the same people, we were always playing in a different city. You play every night and the music starts to evolve and shift, different people come in the band and they bring a little something and leave something behind. That makes a difference."

Their second album, *500 Pounds* (prior to the arrival of Garry on the scene) had hinted at the band's direction. Kelly explains, "Gordie was playing bass on the record and trying to sound like Garry Lowe, like on 'I'm A Ram.'" The grooving track in question in fact proved to be a defining moment for the band. "I think 'I'm A Ram' is still the quintessential song to describe Big Sugar," adds Gordie. "I mean, you've got an old Memphis rhythm section kind of



Al Cross

Kelly Hoppe

song, off the first Al Green album. Take that and put the big Motor City guitars on it, dance hall reggae beats and drums that sound like the Meters or something. That's just the way it ended up — and with a country singer singing it!"

Garry's arrival further imprinted the reggae groove on Big Sugar's aesthetic, and Kelly's traditional touches preserved the music's blues roots. As Gordie puts it, "Whenever Garry's involved, there's a reggae influence, it just can't be helped. It's not like you can write that into the recipe. Whatever song we play, if Garry's playing bass — that's what he plays: he plays reggae music. And Kelly, whatever he puts his hand to is going to have a rhythm and blues approach to it. It's all he knows."

It follows that none in the band is a purist of any kind. But all three went through years of "study" in their respective traditions. Kelly learned a reverence for classic blues. "I just started playing what I liked, and then the band I had became considered a sort of purist band. But maybe it's obvious I wouldn't have joined Big Sugar if that had been something that I was holding onto for dear life." Blues purism, he explains, diminishes the contributions of the genre's greatest legends. "Muddy Waters took the Delta sound and electrified it in Chicago — it must have seemed revolutionary at the time. It must have been, at that time, something that really pushed the boundaries. Now we look back on it and say: "man, that's real traditional blues!" but in 1951 it must have had quite an impact. From everything I've read about it, it was really electrifying literally and figuratively."

Garry, before joining the band, had devoted his musical growth almost entirely to reggae. "I wasn't playing anything else but reggae and ska. Maybe a little bit of other stuff now and then, but just mainly reggae. So playing with Gordie was like a different thing. And the blues is so natural, it's almost the same thing! We call it instinct music! So Gordie, with that kind of basis in his music, was perfect for me. And with the blues you can practically play anything, if you just play it that way. Which was another eye-opener; because reggae's more rigid in certain ways, in the sense that it has more definite parts."

For those who might think of reggae and rock as an odd combo, Gordie recalls some precedents: "The Clash did a fair bit of that. They would sort of do punk, and then they would do a reggae song; or they would cover a reggae standard. But for me, that stuff is a little too literal — here's the rock part, here's the reggae part. The Police I thought did it very well, as far as making a style out of it is concerned. I thought that with them, it wasn't so easy to separate."

The big blues-based guitar sound of Gordie Johnson has many influences, but no simple provenance. He makes no bones about his frustration with superficial, clichéd comparisons to famous guitar legends. "I actually gave away my Strat for that reason. I had a Stratocaster for years, and geez, every time someone hears a Stratocaster they say 'Play Stevie Ray or Jimi Hendrix!' You know, I like both of those guys, but give me a Gibson any day! Still, it's amazing, some reviewers, if it has any blues in it at all, they go 'with the deep Texas sound of Big Sugar.' What? I was in Texas and they all thought I was from England. I might as well have been from Jupiter when I showed up there — I'm so un-Texas! Even if I wear a cowboy hat, I don't look like I'm from Texas. And it's just funny to get your record reviewed by a newspaper in Edmonton saying 'oh yeah, they have a real Texas shuffle sound.' What?! There's not a shuffle in the whole repertoire!"

Wow, you guys don't have any shuffles, do you? "No!" insists Gordie emphatically. "We don't have any 12-bar blues, either. There's no 12-bar blues on our records. There might be 13 bars, or 15 bars, or one bar, you know, one chord that goes for ever and ever — I like that. If you look at my record collection, I don't have a lot of 12-bar blues type stuff in there. I've got all this John Lee Hooker and Lightnin' Hopkins. Even the Howlin' Wolf stuff I have is all that one chord, scary stuff. I'm more into that sort of thing."

The cross-cultural music exchange within Big Sugar makes for interesting tour soundtracks. "Oh yeah!" enthuses Gordie. "You should hear the music in the tour bus, it's fantastic, the stuff we listen to over a long trip. You come out of there with so much new music — it's like food for your brain, all this great reggae music and stuff." Garry, now turned on to Miles Davis and a healthy diet of rhythm and blues, agrees. "On a musical level, it's good music for me. It's a chance to grow and expand my horizons."

With all this cross-pollination going on, over the course of extensive touring, you would think that the next album will represent an even thicker intertwining of musical styles. "Yeah, I should think that the next album will be more fully-formed stylistically," agrees Gordie. "On *500 Pounds*, there's like a traditional blues song, a rock song, a song that sounds like some British rock thing, traditional blues — every couple of songs it would change. On *Hemi-Vision*, it's not as much like that. There are a few, like 'Tired All The Time' thrown in there just for colour, but more or less each song combines all the elements. I think though that by the next record that will be even more seamless."

The band experience for Big Sugar is an intense one, and jobbing drummers should think twice before considering applying. "Music is an ongoing thing," states Gordie philosophically. "You can't just punch the clock in a band. Maybe in some bands you can, if you're just jobbin' around. But our band is so demanding on a person, musically and spiritually. There's a lot of hours on the tour bus. The shows can be as long as two hours and 45 minutes, without a set-list, without a net. You have to be completely in tune to each other for that whole time. So it's taxing on a person and it's not for everybody. It suits me and Garry and Kelly — so far I've managed to find three guys that are really up to that. I mean the kinds of reggae shows that Garry has played — there's a pretty unrelenting music. You stay up there for four hours, and if you're playing the bass you're basically holding up the stage on your shoulders. So it's pretty hard for me to wear out Garry! And Kelly — we both grew up in Windsor and played music also in Detroit. In those days, you had to bring your own P.A. system, even in really big clubs. You had the whole day loading it in, setting it up, sound checking; then do four 45-minute sets and then after everyone leaves the bar, tear down the P.A. system and bring it back. Every night. I did that for years. So now I have technicians who tune my guitars and set up all the gear, and they unload it; I never have to touch a guitar case. And — I only play two hours and 45 minutes. Luxury! But some guys are just huffing and puffing at the end of it."

Their recipe combines blues and reggae on a bed of rock and blends them all into a single, complex flavour.

Anyone who's witnessed any of Big Sugar's intense live performances knows to expect both loud and heavy bass and guitar. Garry says of Gordie: "He needs a really bassy bass to play on, because he's got such a heavy sound. If you don't play with a heavy bass, then his guitar's going to kill your sound! So I think it works really well in that sense, because reggae bass tends to be thicker in the bottom. So I'm occupying that space that he's not really going to. It gives a fuller spectrum of sound."

Meanwhile, Gordie notoriously preserves rock tradition by running through fully-cranked Marshall cabinets, which he insists must be played on full for optimum tone quality. Strangely, amidst all the wonderful din, he doesn't use vocal monitors — at all. "For a lot of sound guys it can take them months and months to grasp the concept of not using vocal monitors." Understandable to most singers and sound techs. So why no vocal monitors, Gordie? "Well, Ray Charles didn't need vocal monitors," he retorts, "I sure as hell don't. You know? If it's okay for Little Richard, it must be okay for me. I don't know, I just came up playing in clubs where there were bad monitors, no monitors, great monitors. . . no monitors, more often than not. So I just got used to hearing that sound. Now if I walk out on stage and they have a quarter-million dollar monitor rig, I'm not used to that. I don't want it to sound like a recording studio up here, it's a live gig! I want to just hear it out in the house. It's just what I'm used to. If I don't have monitors for a whole tour, I can sing every night for three weeks. I don't need a day off, I don't lose my voice. As soon as someone thinks they're doing me a favour and they start pumping monitor sound onto the stage, I've gotta tell them to turn it off, and they turn it up; and I say no, turn it off and they turn it up — then I'll have lost my voice by the end of the first hour. I'm just not used to 'hearing' it."

All in front of your fully-revved Marshall stacks? "Oh yeah," continues Gordie. "Sure, man! There was no such thing as monitors until after Woodstock, were there? Look at old pictures of The Who and Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin! There's no monitors in front of the stage! Those guys are just up

there singing through little Shure Vocalmaster P.A. systems and things like that. Eric Clapton and Cream, look at any old pictures you can find, man, there's just a big bare stage. So I figured, well, I'm not going to be at the mercy of somebody else's equipment and somebody else's taste in monitor mixes every night, I'll be fine just by myself. Anytime I had soundmen who said, 'well, if you're gonna play that loud I won't be able to put you in the P.A. system.' Big threat! Big deal! I have a bigger P.A. system than you do! It's just part of being self-sufficient, I guess. That's where it started."

Does your soundman understand? "Actually our soundman now has become a pretty integral part of the band as well. For years, we used different sound guys, and they were all good, but I had a different approach to our presentation. But the sound guy we have now has been mixing reggae his whole career, since he was a teenager. He's the reggae dub mixer, the dance hall don: the guy's great. Because we do lots of dub remix in the show, if you've got someone who's only mixed rock and roll before, they're just like 'Whoa, what do you want me to do? How come you guys keep stopping?' You know, they just don't get it. But Jeffrey Holdip, that's his specialty. He's like a fifth band member to me."

You might think that under the circumstances, Gordie might be going a trifle deaf. But apparently not. "My hearing's good," he claims. "It's the funniest thing — when I was playing jazz gigs in Toronto, I'd sit down with Al [Cross] and Terry Wilkins and we'd be playing jazz standards all night. Do you know, I got tinnitus doing that? Having that ride cymbal in my ear all night, every night, I got really bad ringing in one of my ears. It really messed me up for a long time. I never told anybody about it — but I kept gigging. Since I've been doing this [Big Sugar], I haven't been having any problems. Plus, I like the sound, too. I think that's part of it, if you're hearing a sound that you like. To me, that's the biggest thrill there is: as soon as I hit the standby switch and hear that 'hhhhh...' It's like a fire-breathing dragon back there, the 'breath' from those amplifiers!"

Informed of the focus of this month's issue, making and promoting your own recording, Gordie doesn't mince words when asked for advice. "I have to be honest with you: it's not a popular view to have anymore, but I've never been fond of the D.I.Y. thing. I embrace the recording industry. I don't long for days of playing in little intimate clubs and indie labels and things like that. I'm in it for money, too. The more records I sell, the more money I get; but that also means more people have heard my music. I can take that money and put it back into the presentation — I can put on a bigger show. It just means more music to me. More money means more music, more people to play for."

"Hopefully your final goal is to get with a major record label and learn what that's about a little bit: it's a business. It's just like getting into the car business or the computer business. You should know a little bit about that. Not to be a party pooper or anything; I mean it's great to be in a band with all your buddies. You can play in someone's basement or at your neighbourhood pub, and it's lots of fun; and it never has to go beyond that. That's fine. If that's what you want to do, you can do that. But if you're going to start playing in the deep water pool, then you've gotta learn how to swim in there. That's not a downhearted, jaded thing to say, it's just the way it is. When you can finally get with that reality, then you can start to work it.

"I always run into musicians who just whine about the injustice in the music industry — 'record labels this, and record labels that', and then 'this record label didn't do anything. . .' Hey! You know what? The answer is, it all came down to dollars. There's no injustice in it; someone has to make money, someone has to answer to the accountant at the end of the day. Put yourself in that quotient, figure out where you fit in there. Then when the record company doesn't give you half a million dollars, they only want to give you a quarter of a million dollars, or a quarter of a thousand dollars or whatever, look at your product and say: 'Okay, why would a record company give me a million dollars?' They're not giving it to the needy! You have to see where you fit into things and how you can make yourself worth more to a record company. If you can do that, then you start to turn the wheels yourself a bit." **CM**

Peter Murray is a bass teacher, session player and producer in Toronto, and is the author of Essential Bass Technique. *His band, surrender dorothy, has just released its debut album,* Serum, *in Canada on Ozmusis/Universal Records.*