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Burlington County Times

September 8, 2015

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Delran guitarist, 16, wows classic rock legends, fans alike



Posted: Tuesday, September 8, 2015 4:15 am

By Joe Green, Staff writer

DELRAN — The February snow had begun to lay outside the Sands Bethlehem Event Center when 16-year-old Matt Stanley arrived with his band, the Land of Ozz.

The concert at the Pennsylvania venue was the premier of the Ozzy Osbourne tribute band in which Matt, a junior at Delran High School, and his father, Mike Stanley, play guitar.

To old-school classic rock fans, the teen must have seemed out of place. Many had their doubts he could hold his own onstage.

They'd quickly learn otherwise.

A few songs in, the band members encountered a wiring problem with one of their amps, and needed to make a quick fix. They did just that, and Matt was unfazed.



Photos by William Johnson

Matt Stanley

Matt Stanley, 16, of Delran, performs with his father, Mike, in a rock band, The Land of Ozz, reminiscent of Ozzy Osbourne's glory days



his son's aptitude for music. "But I didn't want to push him."

Nonetheless, Matt's skills progressed over the next few years, as did his enthusiasm. It was just last summer, when he was 15, that he showed just how far he'd come.

He'd been listening to Osbourne's 1981 album "Diary of a Madman" and had been learning to play parts of it on his own.

"One day, I just woke up and decided to learn it all," Matt said. He spent the day going through the entire album, then looked for his father.

"He came to me and said, 'Hey, Dad, come check this out,' " Stanley recalled.

He was astounded to hear a guitar rendition of "Diary of a Madman" in its entirety.

"It was note for note, and I was blown away," Stanley said. "I looked at him and said, 'What we should do is start an Ozzy band.' "

He reached out to Paul Picarri, a producer and songwriter whose projects included helping start Get the Led Out, a Led Zeppelin tribute band whose September tour schedule alone stretches from Atlantic City to Kirkland, Washington.

The men spoke of recreating the sound of the two albums Osbourne recorded with legendary guitarist Randy Rhoads: "Diary of a Madman" and 1980's "Blizzard of Ozz."

The idea was to harness Matt's uncanny ability to imitate Rhoads' trend-setting style, in which he blended classical influences with heavy metal.

"He had a very particular sound and style," Stanley said of the guitarist who died in a 1982 plane crash at age 25.

"He was doing a guitar solo, and I looked out at the audience and saw this sea of hands up in the air," Mike Stanley said.

"I looked over at Matt, and it was like he had arrived."

It wouldn't be the last time the youngster whom many are calling a guitar prodigy blew away a crowd of rock gurus.

Following this past winter's Bethlehem show and others, Matt has received accolades from the likes of Sammy Hagar, and fellow guitarists regularly line up to talk shop with the young phenom.

An early start

Guitars and rock accoutrements have never been foreign to Matt Stanley. His father was in a band during his own youth and worked as a full-time musician. But even after settling down to a day job and family, his love of rock never ceased.

"We always had guitars laying around the house," Matt said. "My dad had been playing since he was my age. When I was about 7 or 8, I wanted a guitar for Christmas."

He soon began dabbling in picking the strings, but his interest didn't stick at first.

Then around age 12, he began playing the "Rock Band" and "Guitar Hero" video games, and he was noticeably good. That's when he got into playing the real thing.

"He just picked it up very quickly," Mike Stanley said of

"And I've never heard anyone play as close to his style as Matt.

"After each show, there's a line of guitar players asking him how he does it."

Ozzy all over again

Matt's unique talent and the idea of an Osbourne tribute band appealed to Picarri, who also became the new band's bass player. As for lead vocals, the band members decided to go for the singer they considered the obvious choice.

Enter Stephen Desko, a singer who naturally resembles the Ozzy of the '80s and '90s, aside from speaking and singing just like the self-proclaimed "Prince of Darkness."

At the time, Desko was still performing with his band the Ozzman Cometh, but he eventually agreed to join the budding group.

The Land of Ozz also added Tom "Stewart" Staszewski on drums and Mike "Viv" Vivial on keyboards.

The band has been rehearsing for shows Sept. 11 and 12 at Harrah's Casino in Chester, Pennsylvania. They practice on the same side of the Delaware at the Let There Be Rock School-Delco on MacDade Boulevard in Folsom.

Instructors there help developing groups gain and hone performance skills and practice together on-site. Genres are not limited to rock but, according to the school's website, range from that to country and even theater.

The Land of Ozz assembled at the school on a recent Wednesday night to rehearse for their upcoming show. They prepared the equipment in a small, second-floor studio with carpet, black walls, two sofas and a small wood bench. A large, ornate plate sat on top of a drum, serving as a makeshift coffee table of sorts.

The musicians went through sound checks and strummed out a few chords.

"It's gonna get loud in here," Desko said, as he approached the microphone and adjusted his classic, small-lens Ozzy sunglasses.

The group started going through the songs on "Diary of a Madman," in the order they appear on the album. They soon neared the end of the second, "Flying High Again," and the band's sound engineer, John Brady, walked in.

Brady has mixed for Jon Bon Jovi, John Mellencamp and other stars. As he listened to the evening's rehearsal, he signaled to the members from time to time to make adjustments.

Sitting on the sofa facing the band directly, he tapped his foot or bobbed his head to the beat, seeming pleased with what he heard as the group moved on to "You Can't Kill Rock and Roll."

World of possibilities

The title of the album's third song is fitting for Matt, a millennial who shows as much reverence for classic rock as any Generation Xer out there.

It's his favorite genre, he said one evening in the little, sound-insulated studio inside his home. Marshall amplifiers sat against one wall, along with foot pedals and other equipment.

Sitting in brackets on the wall or inside cases were more than a dozen guitars, many reminiscent of legends like Rhoads and Zakk Wylde.

Matt knows he wants to stick to it. He's just not sure in what form.

"I want to do something with the guitar," he said. "Whether it's giving lessons, being a teacher or being in a band.

"I just really like the classic rock sound, and think it's really cool to emulate it."

In the meantime, father and son are working on forming tour schedules. Land of Ozz shows have included appearances at the Treasure Lake Music Fest in Du Bois, Pennsylvania; Rocky Gap Casino Resort in Cumberland, Maryland; and a double bill at Penn's Peak in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, with AC/DC tribute band Live/Wire, among others.

The group wants to perform at other midsize venues as well. The Sept. 11 and 12 shows at Harrah's will feature "Diary of a Madman" and "Blizzard of Ozz," respectively.

"We're trying to get a full schedule," Stanley said. "We'd like to get some endorsements for Matt. Maybe get him seen by a national artist, even a boy band that needs a sidekick hard rock guitar player."

But for now, Matt is drawing plenty of attention where he is. Whether it's in the form of a Hagar tweet praising his skills or the attention of seasoned rock professionals, he's had plenty of support.

And of course, that includes Dad, who usually plays rhythm guitar while Matt takes the lead. He doesn't mind a bit.

"If I were to play second fiddle to anyone, it would be him," he said.