





# Sacrificial ALTER

**Climbing to the top of the rock and roll tree isn't without its sacrifices. But Brian Marshall wouldn't have it any other way**

Photos by Tina Korhonen

**Y**ou'll often hear rock stars complaining about their lot in life. If they're not being hounded by the press that they often court, then they're struggling with life on the road, away from their families and creature comforts, or they have serious issues with the current state of the music industry and their resultant dwindling album sales (usually pinned on spotty kids downloading their albums for free). One guy you won't hear that from is Brian Marshall of Alter Bridge and Creed. It speaks volumes about his attitude that when we eventually hook up for an interview, after an aborted attempt due to issues at a soundcheck prior to a gig at Wembley, he feels the need to apologise: 'We just had some problems there, and then we ended up running on into some scheduled production meetings. It was a nightmare.'

Prima donna rock star he ain't! We get talking about the UK tour that has just ended, which by all accounts went superbly with sell-out dates, and conversation naturally turns to life on the road. Sure, it has its ups and downs, but by and large it's a pretty good life, according to Brian. 'You do have to make sacrifices. When you're out on the road for weeks and months at a time you don't get to see your family and friends, that's tough. And you don't get much personal space and time either. But in many ways you get spoiled: catering, riders, runners doing things for you. When you get off the road sometimes it's like, "Oh man! I have to cook for myself!?" Life on the road is not that bad at all.' Obviously there are other downsides too, as he goes on to explain. 'Well, often you're just sitting around and waiting to do something. You don't usually have much time to see all the cool places

you go to. If you're lucky you might get to see some of the major sights, but with travel, soundcheck, media stuff and all that, you don't get much time to explore. I also find the time zone changes and temperature changes hard on the body. Going from somewhere warm to suddenly somewhere cold and damp, that can be hard. You have to stay healthy when you're touring. I've no idea how all those bands in the 80s did it, with all that partying too.'

It isn't just the time zones and temperature that changes from country to country; Brian has noted a marked difference in the response of fans. 'It's definitely the case that in the UK fans are more enthusiastic, I'd say. When the doors open you see them rush to the front. It's similar for us in Germany and Italy. American audiences have been a little stand-offish. I think it's because Alter Bridge is heavier than Creed and so

some fans have taken time to come around to it.'

When Creed crumbled in 2004, Brian hooked up with the rest of the band, minus singer Scott Stapp, and formed Alter Bridge. Myles Kennedy took up lead vocals and the band released their first album, a collection of songs that were mainly unused efforts from Creed recording sessions. The reception was lukewarm at first, but as the group went out touring they began to win people over with their great performances and fan focus. By the time the second album *Blackbird* was released the band had found their feet – and their sound. 'I think through the process of touring the first album, and also some personal and band issues at the time, we ended up going in a heavier direction. It took us much longer to sit down and write the stuff. We were changing managers, changing labels. It was a dark period

BAND: **ALTER BRIDGE AND CREED**  
BASSIST: **BRIAN MARSHALL**

## THE GEAR

I've played Sadowsky basses for ages. When I was in Creed I was going through a number of Fenders. Basically they just wouldn't stay in tune and I often ended up smashing them up! I love the feel of a vintage Fender, though. My tech at the time told me about Roger Sadowsky, and we stopped by his workshop when we were in New York. I tried one and just fell in love with it. So I bought it and custom ordered a couple more 4-strings. Then when Alter Bridge started the guys suggested I try 5-string bass. I was reluctant but it really adds more depth to the sound. So I got a few 5-strings from Roger. Sadowskys are all I play live. They play great. They

have that feel of a vintage bass, but with a modern sound. You can do a lot with the EQ, run it passive or active, though I always run it passive. However, I always record with a Music Man StingRay 5. It has this piano chord-like tone on the low B that works great in the studio.

Amp-wise I'm using Ashdown, the 900 series. They're great. Amazing tone and the guys at Ashdown are great.

I don't use any effects. I used to have a Budda distortion pedal, but in the end we took it out because it was just too noisy and coloured my sound too much. So now I just drive the amps hard when I want some grit. All I have is a Boss tuner and that's it.



for us, but it helped create a separate sound and identity for the band.

It's no secret that the main songwriters for the band are Tremonti and Kennedy, who now, due to time constraints, often write separately from each other (Tremonti has Creed to attend to, as well as an upcoming solo album, while Kennedy fronts Slash's band as well as doing solo work). However, Brian doesn't just add his bassline and that's it. 'Well, Mark and Myles will record demos at home, or maybe into their iPhone or something. We'll then vibe on it for a while as a band, I'll add my parts, and so will Flip [Scott Phillips, drummer], and then we help with the arranging. We both act as a filter. Flip and I have a good handle on what an Alter Bridge song should feel like. Sometimes we'll tell them, "You know this feels like a Creed song, or something for your solo album," and they both respect that.'

As a rock band that sits on the heavier end of the

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spectrum, edging into the world of heavy metal at times, Brian often locks up tighter-than-tight with the riffs and drums to provide that solid foundation that rock is built on, but he does try to spice things up where he can. 'Well, I always listen to the riff, and sometimes you have to just double that up, to get that heavy groove going on, but I always try and push and pull to do something a bit different. You have to make sure you're tight with the drummer, and you can work around the drumbeats to make it rhythmically interesting. Then I might hear something in the vocal melody and tee off of that to play something that is kind of a counterpoint to it. I always try to serve the song,





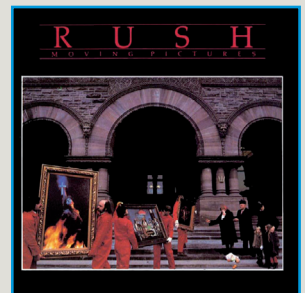
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“I like the bass to be crisp and punchy, but also have that low-end warmth to it. I like some grit too, but I just drive the amps for that”

## THREE OF THE BEST

If I had to pick my favourite three basslines ... well, that's tough. It'd have to be 'Ramble On' by Led Zeppelin, 'Tom Sawyer' by Rush and 'Who Are You?' by The Who. What I love about all three is that on each one the bass supports the song, but also has moments to shine, and that lifts the track.



but sometimes the guys have to rein me in to make sure that happens!

This approach shouldn't come as a surprise when he lists Geddy Lee, John Entwistle and John Paul Jones as influences. As a youngster, Brian was always drawn towards bands with big rhythm sections – when he first heard Rush and Led Zeppelin he tells me his life was changed forever. But initially he wanted to be a drummer. No surprise, given that his dad was one. His fascination with rhythm led him on to the kit, and he would regularly follow the local American

football team's marching band around, checking out their moves. However, an exuberant performance at a pep rally resulted in the change to bass. 'Well, I'd borrowed my dad's kit for this gig, and I dinged it up a little. So he suggested maybe I try a different instrument [laughs]. At the time I was having saxophone lessons too. My teacher was an amazing multi-instrumentalist, and I asked him what his favourite instrument was. He told me it was the bass, so I went and got one, had a few lessons with him and that was that, I fell in love with it!

Forming bands with friends, Brian cut his teeth rocking out playing covers by bands like AC/DC, but took his playing to another level when he attended Florida State University. Forming an all-original band called Mattox Creed and then also playing in a covers band, his style and technique came on in leaps and bounds. It was during this time that he hooked up with Tremonti and Scott Stapp. 'They would come and watch the band's gigs. I got to know them a bit and I found out they were like a duo who worked together. Anyway, one day they asked me to join a

band with them and that's how Creed got started.' Creed's rise to fame was meteoric, shifting tens of millions of albums in relatively short order once they made their breakthrough. 'Well, we were always quite goal-orientated. We'd rehearse for four or five hours a day, and then in breaks we'd be discussing and planning what we needed to do to take it to the next level.'

It was during his Creed years that Sadowsky basses became his favoured instruments for live work (see boxout) and he developed his tone. 'I like the bass to be crisp and punchy, but also have that low-end

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warmth to it. I like some grit too, but I just drive the amps for that.'

The astronomic success of Creed could have gone to a man's head, but not Brian. 'It was amazing what happened, but also very humbling. We've all tried to just stay grounded and not let it affect us too much.' And what is at the heart of staying grounded? For Brian it's all about family and friends. 'When I come off tour I spend lots of time just hanging out. I live in Florida, so I do a lot of fishing. I'll go and see my parents, spend time with my family and friends. It's a decompression. At first you think, "Shouldn't I be calling my tour manager?" It takes time to adjust, but you really need it.'

So after all this time at the top of the rock world, does Brian still sit down for a practice session? 'Oh yeah. Well, I have to keep my fingers speedy and limber, you know. Mark's a shredder and when I have to double up those riffs I have to make sure I can keep up. I use a lot of chromatic exercises to strengthen my hands up. I play with my fingers pretty much all the time. Occasionally I'll use a pick, like on 'One Day Remains.'

The line on that is straight 16th notes all the way through and at a pretty tough pace. It's hard to get the kind of consistent attack you need on that track with your fingers, so I'll grab a pick for that style of line.' But it isn't just about the physical. Brian also likes to work on his ear by playing along to the radio. 'I'll just flick the radio on and play along with whatever comes on. I'll work out the bassline, or maybe figure out the chords and improvise my own line. It's good because you get such a varied range of genres to play with. I also check out ActiveBass, a website that has lots of good theory and practice tips.' Like a lot of fingerstyle rockers, Brian is also developing a three-finger technique. 'It's getting there. It's not quite in place but it will be soon, and that will really help with the speed aspect.'

With Alter Bridge now established as one of the world's top rock acts, what's next? 'We've got some dates to play in Australia next year. We're doing some shows with Steel Panther, so that should be interesting! Then, about March or April, Creed will start work on our next release. At the moment we're not



## THE STATE OF PLAY

Man, I would *not* want to be a band coming through now. Creed was one of the last bands to hit big and sell tons of albums just before the explosion of the Internet and file sharing. I use Spotify and I've been listening to all the Faith No More albums. Now, I don't know what that generates for those guys, but it can't be the same as record sales. Everyone is

suffering from poor sales now, compared to how it used to be. On top of that, it's a hard industry to break anyway. In America everything is so radio based. If you can't get your stuff on the radio it's almost impossible to make your mark here. Because of that there are a lot of people that will cut your throat, and because bands are desperate they walk right into it.



sure if it'll be a full album, or if we'll release a single and a six-track EP. Then we'll tour in support of that, and there's talk we might be coming over to the UK and Europe, which will be great. Then come this time next year Alter Bridge will start working on material for the next album. We kind of have to plan at least a year in advance.'

With so much going on, though, doesn't it risk becoming a bit of a grind like any other day job? 'Man, I just love playing the bass. You know, I want to play live. When you're touring a lot you

do crave being at home, but after a few months at home you itch to be out again. It's a two-edged blade. I never played music to make it but because it's what I love. If Creed had never made it, I don't know what I'd be doing but I'd still be playing. I love being out there, feeling the air from the amps hit my chest, that low-end rumble through my bones. There's a feeling I get from playing the bass that I don't get anywhere else in my life, and I wouldn't change it for anything.'

**Ben Cooper**