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## Michael Schenker: Brick By Brick

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By [Chris Gill](#)

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**After years of grappling with alcoholism and itinerant living, Michael Schenker is fighting to rebuild his life and career. With a new Michael Schenker Group album, *In the Midst of Beauty*, the battle rages on.**

The liner notes to the new Michael Schenker Group CD, *In the Midst of Beauty*, feature the following cryptic message written by Schenker himself: "In the midst of beauty, the beast is always waiting and ready to attack." It's an odd statement, yet it makes sense coming from someone who has waged numerous battles against both personal and external demons that have threatened to destroy his career since almost day one. In addition to battling alcoholism for more than 30 years, the guitarist has been plagued by management problems and complicated family issues. It's a wonder that he didn't decide to pack it in many years ago, yet he continues to tour and make records at a pace that even trouble-free musicians have difficulty keeping up with.

When *Guitar World* last caught up with Schenker, in October 2003, the guitarist was rebuilding his life one piece at a time, attending rehab and living in a modest hotel in Phoenix, Arizona. During the previous year, Schenker's wife, Linda, had sold off most of his personal possessions before disappearing to Thailand with the couple's son. Schenker's manager Bella Piper had allegedly cleaned out most of the money he had earned since the Nineties from selling exclusive recordings over the internet and playing with UFO. To survive, he was forced to sell his few remaining personal possessions, including three Gibson Flying V guitars—his trademark instrument—that he had used extensively with UFO and MSG. Schenker got his musical career back on track in 2004. He toured throughout Europe and the U.S., released the Schenker-Pattison Summit album *The Endless Jam* and MSG's *World Wide Live 2004* DVD and hired a new personal manager, Nancy Lewis. But only three months after she was hired, Lewis was dismissed in an acrimonious split. In the latter half of the year Schenker arranged a tour with former Scorpions guitarist Uli Jon Roth, signed a new endorsement deal with Dean Guitars and announced plans to record a 25th anniversary MSG album featuring a variety of guest vocalists from throughout MSG's history.

But in 2005, just as things were starting to look up again for Schenker, his forward momentum began to slow down. A planned tour with Yngwie Malmsteen was cancelled, and an album of cover songs called *Heavy Hitters*, produced by Bob Kulick and featuring Schenker on lead guitar with a revolving all-star cast of guest musicians, was marketed as a Michael Schenker Group release, complete with unauthorized use of the MSG logo. Schenker received only a flat fee to participate in the recording.

Meanwhile, his ongoing problems with Bella Piper (with whom he fathered two daughters, Chinua and Essenz), his ex-wife Linda and Nancy Lewis came to a boil. Linda Schenker and Piper claimed that the guitarist was a deadbeat dad, and Lewis publicly accused him of not paying his income taxes and other debts. Schenker reacted by airing his dirty laundry via a lengthy letter posted on his web site, [michaelschenkerhimself.com](http://michaelschenkerhimself.com). "I don't feel safe coming back to the States," Schenker announced. "I am being threatened with [having] my passport suspended, my assets frozen and jail time."

Although Schenker was living in Los Angeles at the time, he was unable to come home due to his legal hassles, so he temporarily moved to Germany. Schenker explained the situation to his fans with the following message posted on his site: "I am announcing the cancellation of the MSG USA tour since I did not receive the official letters from Bella Piper and Linda Schenker that I have requested. Unfortunately, I must sacrifice this USA tour to protect myself to be able to keep playing music. I will not come back to America unless Bella and Linda stop threatening me in unfair ways for the sake of money."

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MSG's *Tales of Rock 'n' Roll* featuring guest appearances by several of the band's former vocalists, including Gary Barden and Graham Bonnet, was finally released in March 2006, a few months late for MSG's true 25th anniversary. Fans and critics praised Schenker's playing on the album, which many said was his best effort since MSG's early Eighties classics. The band toured Europe, but just as MSG were preparing to visit the U.S., the situation became grim again. Schenker announced that the tour was postponed until 2007, and a few days later his web site posted an upside-down MSG logo with the message "MSG is done." Apparently, members of Schenker's touring band members were complaining about pay, but they worked out their differences in time to tour Asia.

The first two shows of the Asian tour were the beginning of a roller coaster ride that lasted about a year. The first night in Tokyo, Schenker performed with fire and aggression, but on the second night he had difficulty playing even the simplest riffs and chords and left the stage after three songs. Apparently he had started drinking again, and his old habits led to unpredictable performances and numerous cancelled shows. MSG returned to the U.S. in June 2007, but the tour was cancelled after 11 shows; the tour manager had failed to acquire working visas for the group, and immigration officials forced the band to leave the country. The following U.K. tour was also plagued with numerous problems, causing Schenker to drink even more heavily to cope.

Once again Schenker hit rock bottom, but as before, he persevered and pulled himself back up. After spending time in a German

rehab facility, he reunited with MSG's original vocalist Gary Barden. In December 2007, they teamed up with bassist Neil Murray (Whitesnake), keyboardist Don Airey (Ozzy Osbourne, Rainbow) and renowned session drummer Simon Phillips and began work on *In the Midst of Beauty*. Although more pop inspired and not as heavy as Schenker and Barden's early MSG albums, the album represents a fine return to form for both musicians. Schenker's solos, characterized by his unmistakable midrange tone, burn with an imaginative melodicism that has almost become a forgotten art.

Currently living in northern London, England, Schenker seems determined to finally put his troubles behind him once and for all. "Things go in cycles," he muses philosophically while sipping a mineral water in a London hotel lobby. "There are big cycles and lots of smaller cycles. Right now I'm entering a big cycle. Gary and I have picked up where we left off, and many of our fans have, too. A lot of our fans stopped coming to see us because they had kids, but now that their kids are grown up they're showing up again. I've made a lot of progress in my inner spiritual life, and I'm finally ready to enjoy my new freedom."

**GUITAR WORLD** What has been going on with you since 2002?

**MICHAEL SCHENKER** That year was a disastrous time. I was in the middle of building a studio, and I had spent about \$900,000 on it. Then I realized that I was spreading myself too thin. I told my wife that I didn't think it was a good idea to continue with it, and she was very disappointed. I was trying to figure out how to break even and get away from the situation and start something new, but she didn't want to know about it. She was attached to it and didn't mind watching the money disappear. I had a lot of vintage equipment I wanted to sell, to help with the situation. My wife wanted to be in charge of the sale, even though she knew nothing about it. I probably could have gotten twice as much money if the equipment had been sold properly. It ended up being a loss in every sense of the word. Everything was gone, and we broke up. It was like being hit on the head with a hammer and being knocked out cold. That was a very big shock, and it was very difficult to recover from. I was just playing with all of these things. It was like being a kid building a castle out of sand on the beach and then the water comes and takes it all away. And it wasn't like I could just start over and build a new one. It was a very big disappointment to see how it was only the money that counted to her and not anything else.

**GW** Why did you move back to England again?

**SCHENKER** It was basically for personal reasons. I cleaned up all the mess I was surrounded by in 2006. In September of that year I decided to move over here. I started writing music, and as I was writing I was thinking about forming a band and thinking about who I wanted in that band. I started thinking about Gary Barden and eventually approached him. We had played the G3 tour in Europe in 1998, he sang a few songs on my last album, and I played on a few songs on his. I think it was meant to be. Re-experiencing things seems to be part of the universal system. Flared trousers are coming back, and all of that kind of stuff. *[laughs]*

**GW** What happened in 2006 that made you decide to leave the U.S.?

**SCHENKER** I was surrounded by weirdness, and I was becoming weird myself. Fortunately, I noticed that I was becoming weird and that it would not be good for anyone to be with me because they would become weird too, so the only way out was to get back to normal and get rid of the weirdness around me.

**GW** You've pulled yourself out of numerous rough situations before.

**SCHENKER** We all do that. In general, we all experience the same thing. Everybody is always falling and pulling themselves up over and over again, although it happens more with some people than others.

**GW** You were destitute for a while. Why didn't you turn to your brother for financial or emotional help?

**SCHENKER** You have your own standards. You have your own vision of what you want, and you cannot turn to other people for help, especially when the problem is within yourself. You have to figure out what is wrong by yourself. No external source is going to help you with that. It was an internal breakdown or depression based on loss and not being able to cope. I chose to cope with it in a bad way, by drinking. When you are in that frame of mind, it just takes as long as

**GW** You have succumbed to alcoholism several times.

**SCHENKER** Alcohol is an escape. Basically, I'm a loner. I grew up between four walls, practicing guitar day after day after day. I really missed out on developing basic social skills. Then I threw myself in with all of these people and I didn't know how to deal with it. To cope with it, I turned to alcohol. People could see that I was easy to take advantage of, so after getting ripped off and taken advantage of, I would escape by drinking. You just numb yourself in order to cope. In 1989, I realized that I could not rely on other people for my success or happiness. That's when I started to do a lot of work on myself, by myself. People recognize my vulnerabilities and they attach themselves to me in weird ways to try to rip me off. I'm still pretty naïve to the dirty tricks of society. When I was brought up, I never had to deal with any fights or anything that was rough. I always knew what I wanted, and I always would proceed from that level. I never had to deal with the dirty tricks, so I couldn't recognize them when they were happening to me. By the time you figure out what is happening, it's too late. Even worse, the people who are ripping you off know how to make

you look and feel like you are bad and wrong. That's part of the trick. It was a big slap in the face to experience that. Now, instead of drinking, I focus more on my spiritual side. I think that I have a stream of gold within me. Even if I lose my sight, I have the confidence that there is something to hold me together.

**GW** How did *In the Midst of Beauty* come together?

**SCHENKER** I got together with Gary in Muenster, Germany, at his friend's place, and introduced my new songs to him. I had melodies for the vocals, but he adapted and transformed them in his own way. When we had gone through all the songs, he went back home to write the lyrics and I went to Germany and started recording rhythm tracks—drum machine tracks for guidance, bass and rhythm guitar. Then we had Don Airey come out to do his keyboards. We also sent out the rhythm tracks to Simon Phillips in Los Angeles, where he has his own studio. He got the files from us and recorded his drum parts. We put everything together, and then Gary did his vocals. We mixed it, and that was it.

**GW** What influences your approach to the guitar these days?

**SCHENKER** I'm just being myself. I'll always be myself, more or less. It really comes down to who I'm playing with. They give me a different picture and may influence me to do different things that I haven't planned based on the circumstances or mood, but there is no structure or formula. This time I resisted the urge to double-track my rhythm guitars. I wanted to leave more space for the other instruments, and that way you also know where things are coming from in the mix. If you overproduce it with too many layers, you don't know what's coming from where. This way it's easier to imagine the musicians standing in a room.

**GW** All of the last three albums you've released—*In the Midst of Beauty*, *Tales of Rock 'n' Roll* and *Arachnophobia*—sound different from each other.

**SCHENKER** It's not me who changes anything. It's the other people who get involved with the project. When I did *Tales of Rock 'n' Roll*, I sent seven songs out to the various singers and let them choose which ones they wanted to do. The songs that I did with Graham Bonnet and Gary Barden sound like what I did with them when they were with the Michael Schenker Group. The songs that Robin McAuley sang sound like the McAuley Schenker Group. This new album sounds like Gary and myself. When Robert Plant makes a solo album he sounds like himself, but when he records with Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones it sounds like Led Zeppelin. When Jimmy Page does something by himself it doesn't sound like Led Zeppelin either. When you put everyone together, it happens.

**GW** How did you end up endorsing Dean Guitars?

**SCHENKER** I was touring America with MSG and Uli Roth was the supporting act. When we played in Chicago, Dean Zelinsky came backstage and asked if I wanted to try some of his guitars. I tried them and thought they sounded great and played good. The deal was great too, so I went with it.

**GW** Do your guitars feature any special pickups or modifications?

**SCHENKER** I don't know. I just know that I like the guitar. They make something for me and ask me if I like it. That's it. If I didn't like it, I would have had them make me something else. They just come up with something. I guess it's the chemistry. Different people can play the same pickup and it will sound different.

**GW** The Flying V has become like another part of you. What do you love about that guitar?

**SCHENKER** I don't know. I liked what Johnny Winter and Leslie West did with the Flying V. One day when I was playing with the Scorpions, I broke the string on my Les Paul and had to play my brother's guitar, which was a Flying V. That's when I discovered the combination of the V and the 50-watt Marshall. It just works.

**GW** Are you still playing through 50-watt Marshall amps?

**SCHENKER** I prefer to use a Marshall JCM800 two-channel 50-watt 2205 model whenever I'm lucky enough to find one. They always have more of a singing quality. It also depends on what type of guitar you play. Some guitars work better with 50-watt amps than others. Some people may get a similar sound through a 100-watt amp as I get with a 50-watt amp and a certain guitar. Some guitars produce more distortion. When you use a clean guitar with a distorted amplifier, it's usually the same as using a distorted guitar with a clean amplifier. I'm not very good at technical things. If I hear something and I like it, that's what I use.

**GW** Do you still use a wah pedal as a tone control?

**SCHENKER** No. I used to think that using a wah pedal sounded really good, but now when I listen to my old MSG records where I used it, I really don't like it. I like what I used to do, which was leaving the pedal at its sweet spot. I used the wah-wah that way on one song on this album, but I've given up on using it. First of all, the JCM800 apparently was designed after my sound, so it has that wah-wah midrange frequency in it already. That may be why I don't like using wah-wah pedals anymore: they add too much

midrange and overcompensate for what is already there. That's why the sound gets so thin now. Before, it gave it some warmth, but now it doesn't work that way. I don't like the sound of the wah pedal on MSG's *One Night at Budokan* album. I do like the sound of the sweet spot on *Lights Out*, but then again that was played through a Pignose amp. Live, we had all these stacks of Marshalls, but there I was, in the studio making an album with a Pignose, and it turned out to be the biggest UFO album. If people knew that before they heard the album, they would have said, "That can't be any good!"

**GW** What is the status of your relationship with UFO?

**SCHENKER** They approached me about a reunion for 17 years before it finally happened in 1994. By then I finally had my own company and UFO had collapsed. My business was doing really good, and it was based on selling only myself. UFO never really earned any money from their records. When they approached me I said I would do it if they gave me half of the rights to the band's name. I wanted to make sure that the name wasn't abused again and that they wouldn't trick people into thinking I was still in the band when I wasn't. The agreement was that UFO could not exist unless [lead singer] Phil Mogg and I were in the band. We started to record and there was this American guy who wanted to manage the band. He came up with this unbelievably stupid contract that was more than 36 pages long. It was very one sided—all for him and nothing for us. It was more of the same old thing that we had before, so things collapsed at that point, although I toured with UFO a few times after that, through 1998. Around 2000 we started to reorganize again and we recorded *Covenant and Sharks*. In 2000 we were playing in England, but we cancelled the tour halfway through when we were in Manchester because of something that happened the night before. [UFO bassist] Pete Way would get totally drunk and get in my space, standing on my feet and handling my strings. The whole thing collapsed at that point. We recorded the album *Sharks* in 2001, and that was the last album I made with UFO. After that, Phil didn't want to tour anymore because he was too embarrassed by what happened in Manchester. A half year later he asked me for the name back, and I was just happy to give it to him because I wanted to move on with my own stuff.

**GW** You were successful on your own with MSG, so wasn't it hard to go back to a band like UFO?

**SCHENKER** MSG was developed for the freedom to create what I wanted to create and tour when I wanted to tour. I have refused numerous big offers, but I'm happy I never ended up in those big bands because it would have been more of the same thing as UFO. After I screwed up the Scorpions by disappearing in 1979, I did not really understand what my problem was, but I personally think that everything is meant to be the way it is. I told my brother that it would have been terrible for him if I stayed with the Scorpions. He wouldn't have had the same life. He comes from similar genes as me so he has a similar sense of melody. He needs to have a good partner to share his creativity with. Klaus [Meine] and Rudi are a great team. With two

**SCHENKER**s in the band it would have been too much of the same thing. When I did MSG I realized that I needed to do my own thing. But even that wasn't enough because I also needed to explore my spiritual side with the [four] acoustic *Thank You* albums [released between 1993 and 2003]. My creative outlets need to be on different levels.

**GW** You've endured a lot of hardship and conflict, yet it's never seemed to affect your creative output.

**SCHENKER** There are reasons why these things happen. While I was going through that, I was also experiencing amazing things. I realized it's just part of my journey through life. Some people have a great beginning of life and a bad ending. I just saw a headline on a magazine in Germany that said "Wunderkind and late bloomer" and I thought Wow! That's me! Things happened very quickly for me in the beginning. All of a sudden my success was right there. I'm lucky that I got over the roughness during the first half of my life and am having the better part during the second half. If you do all the good things during your early years, you don't truly enjoy them because you are dumb and carefree. When you're older and wiser you appreciate life differently. At least that's how I feel. It's hard to tell which is the better way around, but I like where I am right now.

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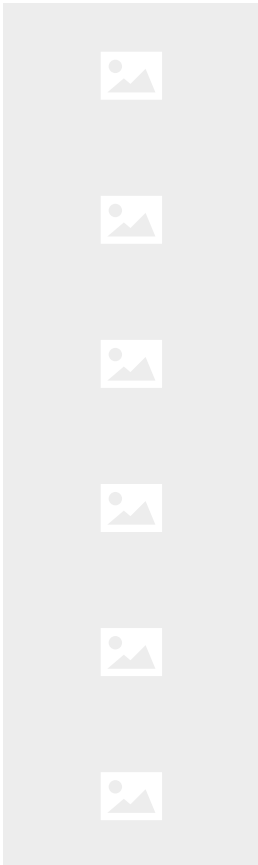


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