

Big Bad Monsters

Todd Park Mohr's *Big Head Todd and the Monsters* get bigger

By Shari York Stowell (Winter 1997 issue)

Where oh where do I begin to talk about the band that, over the last four years, has rocked my world and changed my life?

Starting out as a bar band while still in college, and banking on their uplifting music and their sense of integrity, rather than the usual video-driven commercialism, Big Head Todd and the Monsters have richly earned their well-established place in the sun

Guitarist/vocalist/songwriter Todd Park Mohr is the son of a Korean-American father and a European-American mother, and remains very close to his family. He was born and raised in Colorado and influenced primarily by blues and soul, and has described himself and his band as American musicians playing American music that defies categorization. Their music has a truly American sound, soaring and atmospheric as the big West, inspired by gritty blues, sweet soul, and earthy country; all delivered with a powerfully hypnotic, smolderingly erotic charisma that can become overwhelmingly intense. Yet they never descend to the gratuitous vulgarity that is all too common in pop music, but rather, in the sweeter moments of their songs, there is a pervasive roses-and-candlelight romanticism. Both the lyrical themes and the stage persona are enlightening and often thought-provoking.

Todd, bassist Rob Squires, and drummer Brian Nevin, have spent ten years touring almost constantly (along with a loyal crew, several of whom have been with the band since the early days). They established an early fan base in the Minneapolis area as well as in other cities, including Chicago and San Francisco. To this day, venues such as Fifth Avenue and the Orpheum remain favorite places to bring the party during the Halloween season.

A few years back, after the release of their first major-label album *Sister Sweetly*, BHTM made it clear where their priorities were by resisting label pressure and refusing to do videos for certain songs even in the light of the almost certain multi-platinum fame that would result. This band had always held firm control over its own destiny, releasing two albums on their own Big Records label before ever being signed to Giant (now Revolution). While initially going along with the program, they were increasingly uneasy at the degree of control being taken out of their hands. In 1994, their self-produced *Strategem* represented a major power reestablishment by the band. The album didn't exactly burn up the charts (a shame, too, it's brilliant). Apparently, the most important thing to the band was and still is the music, as opposed to the sales figures.

Despite its decidedly American style, Todd Park Mohr has revealed Asian influences, particularly in the choice of the cover of the CD *Strategem*, which features a painting by artist Zhong Liang Li. In the liner notes, Todd writes at length about how this painting had inspired him; and also about how many of the verses are attempts at Buddhist koans.

Beautiful World is BHTM's fifth album, with three older tunes scattered amongst eight new ones (and one blazing cover). Representing something of a compromise between totally producer-controlled efforts such as Sister Sweetly and totally band-produced offerings such as Strategem, the band chose (Talking) Head Jerry Harrison to produce this record. Harrison has to his credit wildly successful records such as Live's Throwing Copper; yet he also has a reputation for allowing a wide creative berth to the artists he produces. He's a musician himself and knows how to tread that common ground. The resulting production is admirable: Clean but hardly sterile; still full of that loud, live kick.

One of the really striking things about this record is the fast-forward, fast-rewind effect when going from a mature, sophisticated tune like "Caroline" or the title track to the raw, yearning, youthful passion of "True Lady" and "Heart of Wilderness," and back again to the cosmopolitan cool of "You Can't Slow Down." The band's 10-year history flashes before your ears. Their growth and expansion hits you head-on.

The jetstream-energetic "Resignation Superman" is the record's lead track, and those familiar with the band might find themselves wondering about the seeming autobiographical nature of the lyrics, another of many tantalizing mysteries. Nonetheless, the song draws you in, invites you to lose yourself in its flow. "Caroline" is unusual in both its discordant (but not unpleasant) structure and the addition of a violin solo. But the predominant mood in most of the new material is a smooth, easy soulfulness through which that intoxicating intensity rises, recedes, then rises again; but never lets go.

Whiskey-and-satin vocals, guitar stylings always finely-detailed, richly embracing keyboards held together by solid, melodic bass lines and tight percussive punctuation: You can taste this stuff!

Many of the record's tastiest morsels are provided by Hazel Miller's purely wonderful vocals, in particular on "If You Can't Slow Down." Already an established local artist on the Denver music scene, Hazel has been guest-appearing with the band for several years; and as of this album, has been a full-time addition. Her compliment to Todd's vocals is nothing less than amazing: Hot-blooded pure soul that will make you run out and buy everything Aretha Franklin and Gladys Knight ever recorded, and put you in touch with the real roots that we're talking about here! Hazel has been touring with the band for the last year; and I've seen no one, other than maybe Boyd Tinsley of the Dave Matthews Band, who can make a crowd just totally lose their senses the way Hazel can!!

As for those roots, it doesn't get much rootsier than "Boom Boom," with the master John Lee Hooker himself trading purrs and growls with Todd. If this brandy-and-opium combination doesn't make you feel like a tomcat on a hot summer night, you better check your pulse!

Working with this great bluesman was an experience that the band found as terrifying as it was fulfilling. But it remains to be seen if anyone will ever pay Todd a greater compliment than when Mr. Hooker smiled at him and said simply, "You bad!!" Even though BHTM have plied their craft in arenas as a supporting act for the likes of Robert Plant or in spacious outdoor venues on the HORDE tour, they still shine their

brightest and most powerful in the small clubs and theater venues that they love and still play as much as they can. As it is now, the five-member band is a world band in every sense, with both genders and many races collaborating on stage. The music is just as all-inclusive; it's for everyone. There is truly a positive example here, for Korean-Americans surely; but just as surely for all others. The joy and enlightenment cut across all lines. We are all soul children.

Discography

Another Mayberry: 1989, self-produced. An unusually fine example of the embryonic regional alternative music that at the time was going unnoticed amidst all that L.A. hairband junk. An ambitious undertaking that was sold at the shows. Anyone with a vinyl copy of this has something to treasure.

Midnight Radio: 1990, also self-produced. An extremely ambitious live recording running over 60 minutes. An acoustic track called "Elvis" was recorded at KVSC in St. Cloud. Cover artwork done by Chris Mars of the Replacements. (Note: These two have been re-released by Revolution)

Sister Sweetly: recorded 1992, released 1993. Recorded at Paisley Park, produced by David Z. The band's first major-label album. A highly-polished collection of spellbinding tunes that received quite a bit of airplay at the time. This is still the favorite album of many fans and the album that succeeded in bringing in droves of new fans, myself included. However, the band came to feel that the record was overproduced and lacked too much of the spontaneity and "live" feel that they pride themselves on. The fact remains, this album eventually went platinum.

Live: 1993. A 3-song single recorded on the '93 HORDE tour. Features a slinky cover of Sly's "Everyday People."

Strategem: 1994. The grand reassertment. Recorded at the Boulder Theater, entirely self-produced. A sweeping return to the live freshness of the two indie albums. Flowers arising out of thorns: Todd cloistered himself during the writing of this album. Out of this lengthy solitary confinement arose strange and beautiful blossoms of the night. This is the record that makes me the proudest to be a fan. By now, has either gone gold or is on the verge of it. The Strategem sessions also produced the achingly beautiful cover of Led Zeppelin's "Tangerine" that graces the Encomium tribute album, also certified gold.