

REPTILES magazine Interview With Slash from Guns N' Roses.

Slash from Guns N' Roses shares his interest in snakes and reptiles.

By Phillip Samuelson

My phone rang shortly after 8 a.m. as I was feeding my various animals and planning to leave for the REPTILES office. I was pleased to hear Slash's voice on the other end, responding to a letter I had mailed to him a few days earlier asking about his reptile interests.

As it turns out, Slash's fascination with herps – boas and pythons, especially – is very intense. As we were talking, it soon became apparent to me that I wasn't just talking to another guy who owned a pet snake and had a casual interest in reptiles, but rather to someone who had a thorough knowledge of numerous species and their proper husbandry. Our conversation was not too unlike the discussions I have on a daily basis with reptile owners around the country. We talked about herps that are on our "wish lists"—animals we do not own now, but would like to someday—and I promised to keep my eyes open for a few species Slash has an interest in.

Music has never been the primary focus of our discussions. Although I genuinely appreciate Slash's music, a strong interest in reptiles is the common ground we both share.

Slash reads REPTILES magazine and enjoys it, and he was perfectly happy to meet me for an interview. Since we both had busy, conflicting schedules, we postponed the interview and photo shoot until our agendas were less hectic. After speaking a couple more times over the next month, we decided to meet at Slash's Beverly Hills home in late November. Once we met, we were able to speak in more detail about his collection, and I was able to meet firsthand several of Slash's cherished pets. Earthquake damage from Los Angeles' January 1994 quake was evident at his home, and plans to rebuild were underway. Regardless of the damage, the house was beautiful.

As I entered Slash's front door, a very large (over 22 feet) reticulated python greeted me from its cage beneath a stairway. Indeed, custom cages built into the walls of the home itself are a common feature at this residence. A majestic pair of rhinoceros iguanas occupy cages in the living room. Off of the garage is a colubrid room where Slash and his caretaker house an impressive number of captive-bred kingsnakes. The patterns on these captive-bred snakes are particularly nice, and the colors extremely vibrant. The species being captive-bred include banana California kingsnakes, Blair's gray-banded kingsnakes, *Lampropeltis ruthveni*, *L. mexicana mexicana*, *L. m. greeri*, *L. zoonata algama* and *L. pyromelana*. On the landing of the stairway, a built-in cage houses a stunning pair of carpet pythons. Upstairs, a room-sized enclosure, complete with running water and tiling, houses a variety of large pythons. These cages are large, attractive and functional. All reptiles should live so well! I was truly impressed with the number of species Slash kept, and I was even more impressed by their condition.

After making the rounds and talking pythons for a while, Slash and I sequestered ourselves in his recording studio, away from other household activities. There, huddled on the floor around my feeble "voice activated" tape recorder, we managed to put together Slash's REPTILES interview.

How long have you had an interest in reptiles?

I started with the whole reptile, dinosaur and monster fascination as far back as I can remember. When I was young and lived in London, I think that one of the biggest thrills that I had was going to Crystal Palace. Crystal Palace is a big park, and it had huge, life-size sculptures of dinosaurs. The figures they had, though, were completely anatomically incorrect. I kept going there and looking at the sculptures and was very much into that.

I started keeping snakes and reptiles when I moved to California with my mom. I remember keeping a cage full of garter snakes. They were beautiful, and I kept a whole lot of them in one tank. Since then, I've been keeping snakes around, and I've always been studying up on them and learning more.

A lot of my snakes have been really good friends of mine. Some of them are snakes that I've taken on the road—even though that is something that I would never want to subject a snake to, or any living animal to besides the crew guys—but I didn't really have a place to live. So they would go with me, or I would have them stay with friends who didn't know anything about snakes. I'd try to teach these friends the ropes, and then take off for a couple of months.

A lot of my snakes have been around for a while. I was talking to you earlier about Pandora, who is the boa in our "Patience" video, and one of my big Burmese pythons. I've had these snakes for ages, and I can remember coming home from touring and seeing them, and realizing that I've really become attached to them.

Now I'm able to build really decent facilities for my snakes so that people don't bother them-because you know how snakes are, they want to be left alone. At my old house, I had all kinds of snake cages built into a room that also had an indoor Jacuzzi.

Have you ever taken snakes onstage during shows? The only person I can really think of that does that is Alice Cooper.

No. We toured with Alice, and he lost about four boas during that time – and it was a very short stint that only lasted about six weeks. I remember this one guy who worked for Alice who would parade the snakes around. This guy was supposedly the "snake handler," and he would take these poor boas out backstage and use them to attract girls. The poor boas just kept dying. So, no, when I say "going on the road" with my snakes, I mean moving from place to place, not taking them onstage.

I'm glad you said that, because being irresponsible about displaying snakes in public is something that we constantly try to discourage. It can unnecessarily frighten people and lead to exotic animal bans in certain areas.

Yeah. Already there are laws in some places that prohibit the keeping of snakes. If you happen to own a reptile, then you have to treat it as such. It's not a cat or a dog or a horse, or whatever. Reptiles are not very social pets, and people use them for sensationalism. They take them out around town and take them down to Venice Beach, and I think that's really sad.

Actually, most of my snakes are orphans. People call me up and say, "We've got this snake. Do you want it?" I had one situation in this house where I got a phone call from a large T-shirt company. The company owners had called the Guns N' Roses office, and the office called me and said that these people had a 12-foot albino Burmese and wanted to know if I would like to have it. I said okay, so these T-shirt guys drove from Sacramento to here with the snake. I was expecting them to come, but I was thinking there would only be one or two people. So the doorbell rings, and I look out the front door at something that looks like it's right out of a commercial. There were all these guys and girls piled into this convertible, an Oldsmobile convertible. They hadn't bothered to put the snake into a bag or any sort of container-all the way from Sacramento to here! So the snake had climbed up into the dash, as all snakes will do, and it took three of us to take the dash apart and sort through the wiring to release it. It was just pathetic. Their attitude was, "It's just a snake, so it's cool."

Most of my snakes, with the exception of the big ones that you can see in the rooms with built-in cages, are off in separate rooms where it's very quiet for them.

Except for your big cage with large pythons, it doesn't really seem like you mix different species together.

No, not too much. I've learned enough over the years that I'm pretty careful about which snakes I put together. We have problems with the big reticulated python downstairs. He's bitten three other snakes, and one of them died, so that's why he's separated from all the other pythons. The boas and pythons that do live together get along really well.

I saw a photograph recently that showed you with an anaconda. Do you know which snake I'm talking about?

Yeah, that was Clyde.

Tell me about Clyde.

Clyde was a snake that I bought when I was still living at my mom's house, so this was a while ago. I'd always loved anacondas, and I'd never seen one in a pet store or anything. And there was a local pet store that I went into one day. The little tag on one of the tanks said there was an anaconda and a retic inside. I ended up buying both of them, but I needed to work really hard to earn the money to get those two snakes. I remember I couldn't really see the anaconda because it was under a bunch of shavings, but I got so excited! That was Clyde. He bit me the first day I got him (laughs). I took him and the retic home, and I built Clyde a cage that was half water and half dry ground. It had a divider between so the water level reached a certain point.

Clyde was the first anaconda I ever owned. He went through the years of when I left home, moving from a house to an apartment. And he went through the whole period of the band making it, from the time we began, all the way through

when we got a record deal and really started touring. Because I was gone a lot, I started letting him stay with different people, and he bit everyone. He never bit me a second time, but he left some scars on a few people, especially my old girlfriend (laughs).

Finally, I reached a point where I had many snakes, including a few anacondas. I had several anacondas together in the same cage, and something happened to Clyde, and he eventually died. We buried him, and it was really sad.

That was Clyde. He was very much the rock-and-roll anaconda.

So everyone in Guns N' Roses knows about Clyde?

Oh, yeah. A lot of people know about Clyde. We had another snake named Bonnie, who was a small retic, while Axl was living at my house. One night Axl was sleeping on the floor, and I woke up and couldn't sleep at about four in the morning. My snakes were kept off of one of the bathrooms, and there was a hole in the side of their cage that wasn't completely covered by a piece of wood. They would sometimes push out, crawl over the wood and come into the bedroom, which was no big deal.

But anyway, one night I woke up at four and saw this retic right next to Axl, who is sleeping on the floor. I woke Axl up and said, "Axl, don't move! Whatever you do, don't move!" (laughs). The snake was really close, just like this (Slash holds his hand in front of his face like a snake's head). This retic was just sitting there...and sitting there. And Axl's not a snake guy, man. The snake never would have bit him, but Axl didn't know that (laughs). I kept saying, "Don't move. Just stay there!" This went on for almost an hour.

So, did Axl get back to sleep that night after you put the snake away?

No. He never even slept on the floor again!

We've had snakes around the band in some way, shape or form for a long time. When we go on tour, what we do—or what I do—is go off with my security guard to zoos or snake parks or alligator farms or whatever. We go to all the museums and places like that when we have down time.

Do you experience problems going out in public? Museums are fairly safe places as far as people approaching you, aren't they?

People don't mob me if I go to natural history museums. In fact, the only time anything has happened is when there have been large school field trips going on where you have about 200 screaming kids. Then someone might recognize me, and I'll sign some autographs.

Otherwise, people are there to see the exhibits as opposed to other things. They're there to see the woolly mammoths.

There's also a lot of nice private collections out there. I've found that I like to visit really nice private collections or behind-the-scenes collections at zoos more than public exhibits. I'm sure you probably know about nice collections in the private sector.

Oh, of course. You remember when I was telling you about the guy I knew in San Francisco who used to have lots of reptiles? He had the best private collection I've ever seen. He had some amazing stuff. I was telling you about his alligator snappers.

Yeah. Alligator snappers are awesome. There are efforts being made right now to provide more protection for them throughout their range.

That's probably good, all things considered.

In some areas, though, like New Orleans, there is still a lot of evidence in the marketplaces that people harvest them for food, shells and other body parts. People seem to eat snappers like chicken in Louisiana.

Yeah. I know this probably sounds sacrilegious, but I tried a little of it down there one time. It was on the menu, and I don't eat any fish.

We were on tour and traveling through rural Louisiana. Our bus driver was Cajun, and he took us to an awesome Cajun

restaurant that was owned by some family back in the woods. So I ended up trying alligator, rattlesnake, turtle and, surprisingly for me, blackened catfish. I just tried little bites of each.

It's really a trip, because when you're in Louisiana-or Florida, for that matter-you're in the home states of so many of the reptiles that people keep as pets. There's an abundance of reptiles. It's amazing.

Having seen your collection, it seems that boas and pythons are your primary interest. Your rhino iguanas are very nice. Some rhinos are real aggressive, though, and you need to be careful around them. I know of a guy who lost a finger to all adult rhino iguana.

A whole finger! I can't afford to lose any fingers. If I couldn't play guitar anymore, I'd have to find something else to do that I really liked. Who knows, I could even end up working for REPTILES magazine (laughs).

You're right, though. Most of the snakes that we have are boids—boas and pythons. I'm not so much of a colubrid freak, although with Jim, that's his main interest. (Note: Jim Meyer is the name of the general caretaker for Slash's animals.) Jim's given me a few. I've got an albino kingsnake, and some other kingsnakes like pyro and greeri.

Have you ever owned a green iguana? They seem to be the most popular reptile pet.

I used to a long time ago. I was a kid, and I remember my dad got it for me. But that was ages ago.

When you do some rebuilding to fix the earthquake damage in this house, do you plan on changing any of the custom snake enclosures?

I'm going to keep this large upstairs python enclosure the way it is, but I know I want to redesign my carpet python cage. The rest of the reptiles will probably stay the way they are now, taking up the same rooms that they always have. I want to build one more built-in cage like the large python cage.

At this point, I'm so used to reptiles that their built-in cages are part of the house and the furniture.

We've talked about the "Patience" video before. Can you tell me about how this video came about and the snake you used for it?

I just took Pandora down to the video shoot and we did a scene where I'm laying in bed. She's just a regular red-tailed boa—it's a he, actually. He's a real sweetheart. I named him Pandora because I thought it was a she. I didn't really check him out too well when I got him.

So, I took him down to shoot this scene in the video, a scene that I wrote. I always write my own scenes, and I had this idea to use a snake. It's pretty cool. You met Pandora today, so you should be able to recognize her in the video.

Pandora was given to me by Lisa Flynt, who is Larry Flynt's daughter.

A fellow snake lover?

No, she doesn't know anything about snakes, which is how I wound up with Pandora. Someone gave Pandora to her or she bought him somewhere. She had this snake and realized she had no idea what she was doing, so she gave it to me. Actually, now, Pandora is the longest living of all my so-called rock-and-roll snakes. Pandora had an infection recently that we took care of, and he's okay.

We've saved a lot of snakes around here. We've taken in so many orphan snakes that had things wrong with them—mites and ticks and everything.

So many people don't know how to take care of snakes and buy them on impulse.

Yeah, I've been given some that were breathing bubbles, and they had mouth rot and abscesses—all kinds of obvious stuff, not to mention things that you don't normally see. Some had obvious abrasions. When I first got Clyde, someone had pulled him out of a tree roughly, and he had all these scars from being pulled through the branches.

It's kind of a trip. As I said, people ask me to give homes to snakes they don't want, which is why I have more than enough snakes, but I don't mind taking them if people can't facilitate them.

I received this one ball python that was completely emaciated and had been fed oatmeal. So this snake is dying, and the owner is force-feeding it oatmeal! We brought her back to life, and now she is doing fine. But you know ball pythons, they're iffy at best.

Right. They're known for long periods of fasting.

Yeah. That's for sure.

So a large portion of your snakes were given to you sick, and you nursed them back to health?

Yeah, most of them. Actually, I can only think of a few that I went out and bought.

Have you gotten involved in breeding at all?

Breeding was never my main concern. I have been lucky with my albino Burmese pythons, and they've bred. I've kept a few of the babies and given the rest of them to people I know who will take care of them.

The colubrid breeding we do here is really Jim's area.

A final question: As a reader of REPTILES magazine, what kinds of topics would you like to see covered in each issue?

As much as I hate to use the word, REPTILES is very informative. There are a lot of books out there that are full of wrong information. For me, personally, it's just nice to see a magazine dedicated to that particular subject-which is reptiles. That's what's cool. Although there might be something in there that is of particular interest to me, I just like having the magazines around. They're interesting to read, you know? They're even better than Playboy (laughs).