

BPMD
Bobby "Blitz" Ellsworth (vocals)
Mike Portnoy (drums)
Mark Menghi (bass)
Phil Demmel (guitar)

Long ago, The Who shouted "Long Live Rock," Rainbow declared, "Long Live Rock and Roll" and Neil Young crooned "rock and roll will never die." While much of today's youth are trapped in a world of vapid, vacant pop, some of tomorrow's leaders have absorbed the lessons of yesterday's legends.

Case in point: the eight-year-old son of Metal Allegiance songwriter and producer Mark Menghi. Despite being bombarded in his daily life by Taylor Swift, Kendrick Lamar and Ed Sheeran, Menghi's son has been able to filter out the distractions long enough to focus on the great rock and roll of the past. This comes much to the delight of his father, who was actually inspired by his son to form BPMD, a band that injects new life into '70s classics.

"Last summer, right after the Fourth of July, I was sitting in my backyard," Menghi recalls. "I had the fire pit going and I was drinking a beer. As it got later into the evening, I was listening to a bunch of '70s stuff and Lynyrd Skynyrd's 'Saturday Night Special' came on. I said, 'Man, I would love to play that song,' and my eight-year-old son said, 'You should do a record of all these songs, Dad.' And I was like, 'Hmmm? Yeah, why not!?!'"

Fast forward to the summer of 2020 and BPMD are ready to roll out their debut album *American Made*. Like CSNY and ELP, the band was named after each of the members – vocalist Bobby Blitz Ellsworth (Overkill), drummer Mike Portnoy (Metal Allegiance, Winery Dogs, Sons of Apollo), Menghi (Metal Allegiance) and guitarist Phil Demmel (Vio-Lence, ex-Machine Head). And it's the experience and enthusiasm of these four artists that turbocharges songs like Aerosmith's "Toys in the Attic," Grand Funk Railroad's "We're an American Band" and deeper cuts such as Cactus' "Evil."

"We weren't trying to make everything metal, we just wanted to play the way we play and this is what you get," Menghi says. "I'm a finger bass player so I'm kind of all over the place and we've all been influenced by a wide variety of bands including Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden and Metallica. So, of course, we're going to attack the songs a little harder than guys that didn't grow up on heavy music."

Moments after Menghi's son planted the seeds for his dad to form what is now known as BPMD, Menghi picked up the phone and called Ellsworth, who had previously guested with Menghi's other band Metal Allegiance and had talked to Menghi about playing together in a new project.

"When Mark told me about this I was 100 percent in," Ellsworth says. "I have a wide scope of what I like to listen to and I like to revisit my youth. It's not uncommon for me to be changing spark plugs in my garage and listening to Mountain, Cactus or Blue Oyster Cult. So, as a fan, it was something I loved doing and knew how to do."

Having secured a frontman, Menghi thought about who else he wanted in the band. Instead of having a twin-guitar lineup, he wanted a tight, controlled outfit, so he reached out to Phil Demmel, who flaunted his chops as the lead guitarist of Machine Head from 2003 to 2018. For Demmel, who is now back with Vio-Lence, the Bay Area thrash band he co-founded in

the '80s, the invitation to join BPMD wasn't just flattering, it was a reaffirmation of his value as a musician.

"After I quit Machine Head, I was going through a period of pretty low self-esteem," Demmel admits. "So, it was really nice to be asked to do this. It was cool to come in and help do these songs justice. When I'd finish a take and Blitz would say, 'Man, you killed it!' that really helped boost my pride and self-worth as a guitar player."

With three-quarters of the BPMD lineup in place, Menghi went straight to Portnoy, a close friend who he had worked with on three other releases. Of course, he realized that Portnoy is one of the busiest drummers in the business.

"Everyone knows he plays in a lot of bands, and above that, he gets offered to do all kinds of crazy crap every day," says Menghi. "He turns down a lot, but he was excited about this as soon as I mentioned the idea to him."

A few days after securing the lineup, the members of BPMD traveled to Portnoy's home studio in Pennsylvania and set up shop. Since the whole concept of the band was born the night Menghi was listening to "Saturday Night Special," BPMD were determined to record the song for the album. Beyond that, each musician picked two '70s rock tracks and everyone had to learn them regardless of whether they liked them or not. Menghi chose ZZ Top's "Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers" in addition to "Saturday Night Special."

Blitz's choices were a little more obscure – Mountain's "Never in My Life" replete with cowbell and a blazing repeated blues lick, and Cactus' "Evil," a fiercely Zeppelin-like take on an old Willie Dixon song. "That one caught my ear the first time I heard it back in the '70s," Blitz says. "I think that and the Mountain song gives the album more of a genuine feel of the era. And they're deeper cuts so I don't think as many people would have been exposed to them as Lynyrd Skynyrd or ZZ Top, which I thought was cool."

For his tracks, Demmel picked Van Halen's "D.O.A." and had a blast channeling his inner Eddie Van Halen. However, he also took a deep dive with the Blue Oyster Cult's track "Tattoo Vampire."

"On the third Vio-Lence record there's a song called 'Twelve Gauge Justice,' and there's a riff on there that is almost identical to this one," he says. "So, it was something that was always on my mind and that I'd always loved so I threw it out there. Mike had the idea to add a Ramones kind of drumbeat at the beginning, which punked it up a little."

Recalling the days when Ted Nugent was more of a bad boy and a sex fiend than a gunslinger, Portnoy picked "Wang Dang Sweet Poontang." He also chose the album's first single, Aerosmith's "Toys In the Attic."

Portnoy recorded all of his drum parts in July 2019, leaving August for the guitars and vocals and late August and early September for the bass parts and leads. To maintain an immediate vibe, the members of BPMD tried to record no more than a song a day – two at most – and although they were focused being creative when they were playing, as soon as the recording button was off, it was time to goof around.

"I think we spent 90 percent of our time busting each other's balls – especially me and Blitz – and 10 percent of our time being serious," Menghi says. "Between Bobby and me, the whole

project was a contest to see who could insult the other more. But that comes from a place of love. I think Bobby is a phenomenal vocalist and he has an amazing ear for detail which I'd never experienced that with a vocalist before."

"Here's our basic mindset," Ellsworth adds. "If we're not busting your balls it means we don't like you. If we're busting your balls we accept you."

Even with the ballbusting, BPMD maintained a strong work ethic when they were plugged in. And while everyone had a blast arranging and recording the songs, giving them life beyond that of the '70s vinyl on which they were originally captured, there were challenges along the way. Above all, Menghi's priority as primary producer was to make sure the songs balanced heaviness with groove.

"As the bass player, it was my job to make sure that the groove does not go anywhere," Menghi explains. "When you're doing '70s stuff, you really need that and if you lose it you're fucked. No matter how fast we played, everything had to have groove. By the end, Blitz was calling me The Groove Police."

For Demmel, who hadn't recorded rhythm tracks on an album in 12 years, laying down all the riffs, licks and leads was both enjoyable and empowering. For most of the songs he easily adapted to the style that needed to be played, whether it was the surging, boogie-blues of The James Gang's "Walk Away" or the Southern-fried Texas stomp of ZZ Top's "Beer Drinkers & Hell Raisers," which Demmel toughened up with some extra crunch. The only song that gave him momentary pause was "Toys in the Attic."

"It was tricky because Aerosmith have two guitarists, Joe Perry and Brad Whitford playing different things," Demmel says. "So, as one guitar player, I had to pick a medium place between the two that sounded good. I thrashed it up a little by adding a lot of down picking and some gallops and triplets."

In the end, it didn't matter how easy or difficult it was for BPMD to nail the songs. Even though they worked quickly and efficiently most of the time, they never worried about being on the clock too long since they weren't paying for studio time and they didn't have a deadline. When they started, they didn't even have a record label.

"For me, the highlight of the whole experience was being able to do it without any pressure whatsoever," Menghi says. "We went in with no expectations whatsoever except to hang out, have some fun and make a record. It was kind of like back when we all first started playing and the magic was all just about making music. I think that's why it came out so good."

"We're basically a cover band but we made sure we did high-quality versions of these songs and gave them all a little twist," Ellsworth concludes. "I think there's a place for that in the music world today. There's something really great about nostalgia, especially if it's reimagined."