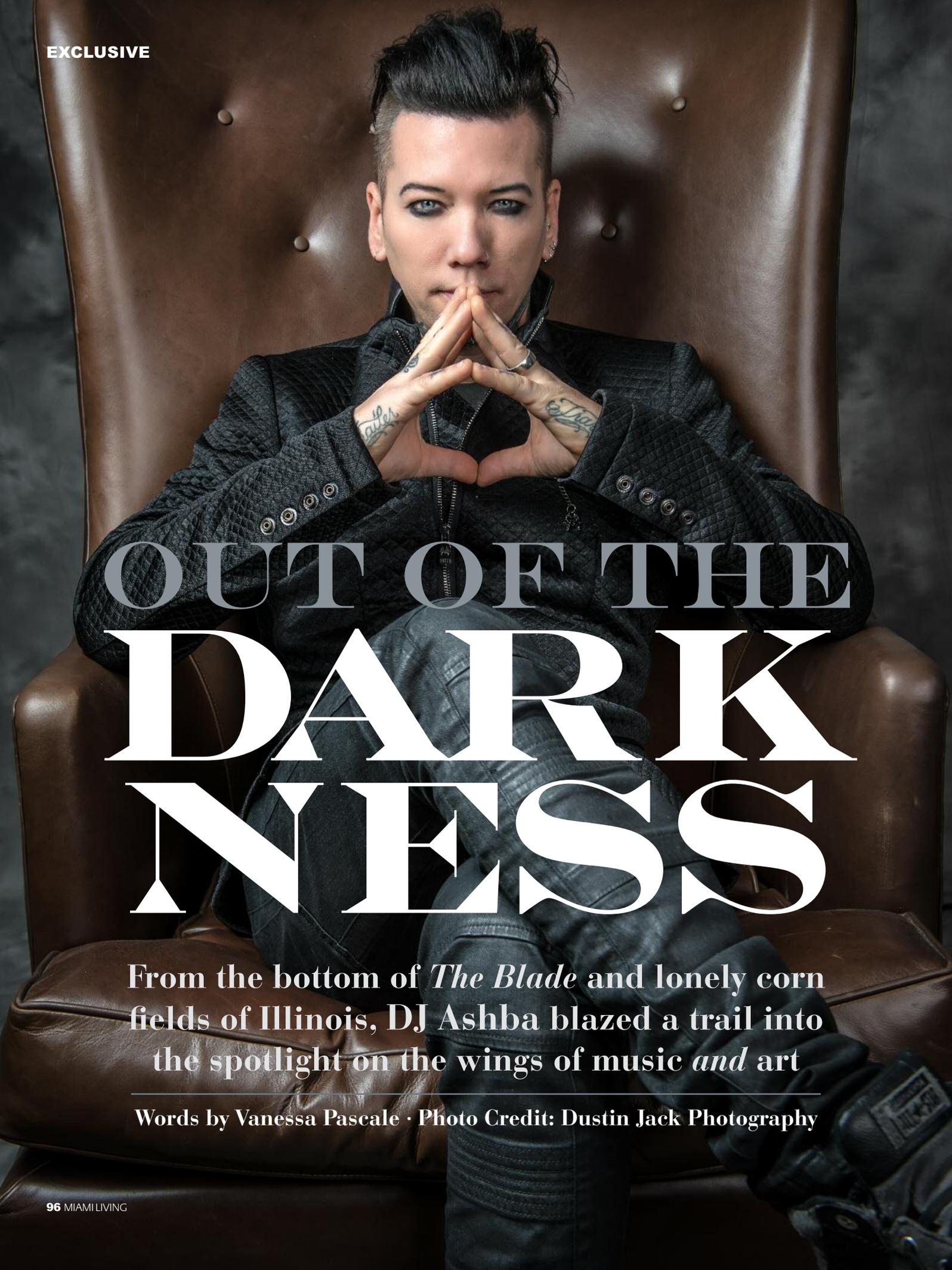


EXCLUSIVE



OUT OF THE DARK NESS

From the bottom of *The Blade* and lonely corn fields of Illinois, DJ Ashba blazed a trail into the spotlight on the wings of music *and* art

Words by Vanessa Pascale · Photo Credit: Dustin Jack Photography



It is two days before Thanksgiving. The air is particularly chilly in Nevada and the sun is beginning to descend behind the mountains when I arrive at the gates of an affluent development, a few miles from the Vegas strip, and check in with the security guard. DJ Ashba comes out to greet me as I am getting out of my car in his driveway. The 42-year-old musician is wearing fitted jeans and a black ASHBA t-shirt that reveals the colorful inked art crawling up his neck and down his arms. His black hair is slicked back, his blue eyes are rimmed in thick black eyeliner, and several piercings punctuate his ears, nose and lip.

DJ leads me through an enclosed courtyard into his pristine home featuring contemporary décor peppered with unique pieces that highlight his affinities. In the living room there is an impressive exhibit of motion picture quality horror masks curated like an art installation, a life-size Jason Voorhees mannequin—complete with wooded backdrop and faux shrubbery—stands guard of the dining room, and a collection of guitars hang on the walls. We take a seat at the dining table, where DJ begins the CliffsNotes version of his life story in a soft-spoken tone, starting from the middle, and volleying back and forth between the beginning and end. Halfway through, during a pause between questions, he asks, “Can you piece all this together?” I think so, I reply. He laughs good-naturedly before continuing. (DJ, here is my attempt.)

DJ is widely known as a “rock star” (a word he hates), rightfully as he is the lead guitarist in two of today’s biggest hard rock bands: Guns N’ Roses and Sixx:A.M. But there is much more to this rocker than his artful guitar slaying. DJ has penned lyrics for chart-topping records (co-wrote 11 out of 13 songs on Mötley Crüe’s album), co-produced albums (for his bands, Neil Diamond, Mötley Crüe, among others), scored music for movies, sketched cartoons and renderings for major brands, and physically built

projects from the ground up. Yes, rock star is a fitting title, but it does not do him justice. In my opinion, he is far better characterized as a versatile, visionary artist. And when someone is as multi-faceted as this, if he is a smart man, he culls these gifts, enlists an exceptional team to support him, and showcases it all under one umbrella, like DJ has done by establishing his creative agency, Ashba Media.

An ambitious artist from an early age, DJ has been honing his talents since grade school. Born in Monticello, Indiana, DJ grew up in a small, religious farm town fraught with corn fields, Fairbury, Illinois—a place he likens to the town depicted in *Footloose*. “My dad left when I was 4. I had a real shit childhood,” he says matter-of-factly, free of resentment, during an explanation of his affinity for crows (more on that later). His family did not have a television, but they did have music. At age 3, his mother taught him how to play piano. He played “Ode to Joy” at his first church recital when he was just 5-years-old. During this time, DJ’s hunger to create was channeled into drawing—on everything from paper plates to napkins, wherever he was, even at church. His mother longed for him to be an artist, [“but artists don’t make money, unless they die,” he argued] while he wanted to play music.

His love for music motivated him to work a whole summer when he was 9 detasseling corn, so that he could buy his first guitar from the Sears catalog for \$128. He learned the basic guitar chords from a kid he rode the bus to the corn fields with. DJ would learn a new chord each day using carvings in the back of a bus seat, and would go home every night to practice. As the years passed, art and music remained a constant in his life. In 6th grade, DJ took a job at *The Blade*, the local newspaper, folding papers as they came out of the machines. His boss, he tells me, was an old creepy, tall, skinny dude with an intimidating presence who everyone was afraid. The “creepy” three-story building was divided by job: the first floor was where the ink-covered “trolls” (DJ and his coworkers) worked, the second floor held the cushy offices and the third floor “at the end of this long spooky hallway that nobody dare go down” was his boss’ office.

One day, DJ decided to pitch his boss the idea of a comic strip in *The Blade*. “I’ve always had this creative bone in my body to do something and they (his aunt and uncle, the “inventors of the technology for aerosol cans and PAM butter spray”) were a big inspiration to me, so I’m like, *what’s the worst that could happen?*” Initially his boss turned him down on the spot, but three days later he reconsidered and requested a few sketches. DJ spent all night drawing a stack of cartoons that he named, *Beyond Hope*, featuring everyday “funny shit that happened to everyone. Wife swings open the fridge and it smacks husband in the face as he’s saying, ‘Good Morning, sweetie,’” DJ explains. His boss was sold.

As the new cartoonist, DJ was given an office on the second floor with massive windows overlooking the town. “I had a phone and I was like, *Fuck yeah!*” He laughs. “Everybody in that small town loved it,” he beams about *Beyond Hope*, which he sketched throughout the duration of high school. “I would go to the grocery store and they would be like, *Ohmygod!*” [His mom still has every cartoon.] This opened the door to other jobs. The local supermarket enlisted him to design their ads, and soon after, DJ was pulled out of his classes to co-teach his school’s advanced art classes (since he aced it in 9th grade) and paid to paint all the logos and mascots on the gym floors and weight room. “I’d design all the backdrops for prom, yearbook covers. I was like the ‘Art Kid.’ Because I had a comic in the newspaper, I was kinda like a little celebrity.” He smiles. All these experiences prepared him for the fame and Virgin Entertainment job that would come years later.

While art took up a significant amount of DJ’s time, the love and desire to play music was still there. At 15, DJ moved in with his brother, Shane. “We had a two-story house overlooking some park, but it was always empty. I put my tiny amp on the roof, climbed out my window and would crank it up and play. Even though the park was empty, in my mind it was packed and I would rock out.” His concerts did not sit well with his neighbors, who called the one cop in town on him. Playing rock ‘n’ roll was not

allowed, so DJ was given two choices, they take his guitar away or he moves to the outskirts of town if he wants to keep playing. DJ chose the latter, and relocated to an old trailer surrounded by corn fields. “It’s funny — I came back after I wrote a #1 hit, and now they sell guitar picks ‘cause of me in the little gas stations. All the parents that never believed in me were bringing their kids over to meet me when I started getting successful. Going back home is a trip...” he muses, “but everybody back home is awesome.”

When DJ was 20, he moved to Los Angeles. He played in a cover band at as many places he could for the exposure, and made a demo that landed him his first instrumental album, *Addiction to the Friction*. “It was my first taste of what I thought was success.” Years later, Joe Lesté (Bang Tango frontman) knocked on his door, and asked him if he wanted to start a band with him. Their first show was opening for Kiss. “For that first show we were called, Ego Star. I was like, ‘You pick a word. I’ll pick a word. Ego. I said, star. Great!’ Biggest show of our career and we come up with some lame name that we never used after.” They finally agreed on the band name Beautiful Creatures after seeing it on a business card. “We played Ozzfest and did a bunch of stuff after that —that’s when I met Axl [Rose] for the first time. Sharon Osbourne actually introduced me to him.”

Eventually, Beautiful Creatures was dropped from the label, and DJ was offered his own record deal, but out of loyalty to Joe, he turned it down. He tried to make it on his own for awhile but nothing materialized, until Mötley Crüe’s Nikki Sixx, an acquaintance he’d run into here and there, called him up out of the blue. DJ was on his way to rehearsal when Nikki asked if he could stop by. “I’m like, *Why would Nikki Sixx want to come to my rehearsal?*” After rehearsal, Nikki invited him back to his house, where they sat down at the piano and wrote four songs in one day. DJ was on the verge of signing a deal with Interscope, when Nikki asked him not to, and instead collaborate with him as a songwriting-producing partner at his studio, Funny Farm. “I blew off the Interscope deal, and sat out there for a year writing songs. He’d come in and out of tour with Mötley Crüe. A lot of those songs turned into the first album of Sixx:A.M. later on.”

Sixx:A.M. (comprised of James Michael, Nikki Sixx and DJ) came to fruition unexpectedly. “We were literally putting together an album for fun to tell the story of Nikki’s diaries —the thought of being a band was never in the picture... The label, somehow, released one of our songs to the radio, and we got a call that our song went number #1. They’re like, ‘You need a band name!’ We had nothing. Why don’t we call it our last names?” [DJ suggested.] ‘Let’s just call it Sixx, Ashba, Michaels, so that’s how,’ DJ explains, “Sixx:A.M.”

Right before Sixx:A.M. materialized, DJ established his company, Ashba Media. He credits James Michael for giving him the push to start the company, loaning

him the capital to do it, and tipping him off on Virgin Entertainment looking for a new Agency of Record. Coming off a really bad break-up, DJ was broke and needed to move immediately. Not someone who asks to borrow money, ever, DJ accepted a \$4,000 loan from James, which he used for a new apartment and “to incorporate the name Ashba Media.” DJ then recruited three graphic artists that he knew to execute his vision for Virgin. On pitch day, DJ nervously presented his team’s work to a boardroom filled with twenty “suit-and-ties.” “I didn’t know a lot, but I knew the quality of our work was undeniable. I am such a perfectionist when it comes to the art... I took the cover off our ad banners, and the whole room gasped,” he says with a smile. “It was a cool feeling.”

He immediately received a call from Virgin’s Head of Marketing, who tells him, “Out of the 15-20 [a guesstimate] years I’ve been here, I’ve never heard our board meeting gasp. What do you guys want? We want you,” DJ recalls. They beat out “106 professional agencies,” and would rake in about \$20,000 a month as Virgin’s Agency of Record. DJ was able to pay James back in full two weeks later. While touring with Sixx:A.M., DJ juggled working for Virgin from out of his hotel rooms. “At that time, it was that whole thing of painting that we were this bigger than life corporation to them [Virgin]. I remember getting an 800 number that literally got forwarded to my cell phone. It was all perception at that point... They’re like, ‘You guys are the best agency we’ve ever had,’” he tells me. Ashba Media worked on marketing and branding for every Virgin Megastore worldwide till the economy left them no choice but to shut their doors five years later.

Leading brands continued to reach out to Ashba Media for their expertise, but DJ decided to put his company on the back burner to focus on Sixx:A.M. “I got off the first tour for Sixx:A.M., the song was #1 and I got a call from Guns N’ Roses’ management.” They wanted him to audition for the lead guitarist spot. “I didn’t think much of it. I was like, ‘I’d love to come down and say hi and meet everybody.’” The night before the audition, DJ began to get “cold feet” and almost talked himself out of it. What DJ didn’t know was that when Axl heard he was coming in, he told them to just give DJ the gig when he shows up. “When I walked in I didn’t know all this. As soon as I got in my car and left, I got a call, ‘Axl wants you in the band!’... It’s the best decision I ever made. I’ve had the best time playing. I’m going on my sixth year now. Toured the world six times over and it’s just been awesome.” Guns N’ Roses recently released their DVD, *Appetite for Democracy 3D*, filmed live at Hard Rock in Las Vegas.

In the background, Ashba Media continued to simmer, so in 2008, DJ moved his sister, Kari, from Illinois to L.A. to be his “right-hand person” and pick up some of the slack at Ashba Media and jump start his clothing company. “She really helped me turn Ashba Clothing around —done a 180 with it. It just started making tons of money,” he says. As Kari got

BORN TO CREATE

“They’re always telling me, ‘Wow, it’s crazy ’cause you always get in here [Ashba Media warehouse] sawing boards, drilling stuff.’ I’m up on ladders hanging stuff. I used to run a construction crew back home [Illinois], so I love to work. There is something about building and creating. I can’t just kick back and take it easy—so it’s very easy to leave the rock star on stage. When I’m at my house you’d never know that I play in a band... I never really talk about the band / music side of my life. I’m always talking about a new t-shirt design that I came up with or a new concept for this casino or this show, that’s the joy I get out of my life.”

that up and running, DJ, while away on tour, decided he was ready for a change of scenery. He had lived in L.A. for twenty-one years, and felt that Las Vegas should be his next home base. He called up Kari to get this plan into gear. “I go, ‘Get a realtor and find the best three gated communities and the 10 best houses you can find... I flew in on my day off and this house was the sixth one I walked into. I just fell in love with the layout and the courtyard. The whole vibe about it was just very me. *This is it. This is my house.*” The two of them moved to Vegas, and DJ resumed touring for eight months.

As soon as he returned from tour, there was another pivotal knock (literally) on the door, this time from Lou D’Angeli, Director of Marketing and Public Relations for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. Again, DJ’s reputation had preceded him. Lou had done his due diligence, and was interested in securing DJ for marketing and branding. “At the time, I was so kinda removed from Ashba Media, but I knew when I had it running it was a gold mine, and all of a sudden that creative bone came back... Cirque du Soleil is so up my alley, I started getting so inspired. I love that kind of twisted world—that’s always been my sense of reality.” He laughs.

He hired Frank Marano (the award-winning sculptor who had just created his life-size Jason Voorhees figure for him) as well as Frank’s wife, Lisa (an award-winning Special Effects Artist) to work at Ashba Media, and moved their family to Vegas. “It was like a puzzle piece fitting, finalizing the big picture that I had in my head. I started thinking, ‘Wow, I could do something that’s never been done in Vegas. I rendered up a bunch of ideas for Cirque... and we got the job. Within a year and a half, we went from doing that one show [Zarkana] to getting all eight Cirque shows,” says DJ.

Ashba Media has created some of Vegas’ most impressive installations, including a ten-foot pyramid with Criss Angel hovering above it for his Believe show at Luxor, a 26-foot column with two huntsman from the K&A show at MGM, a 25-foot glass window display for The Beatles Love show in The Mirage, and, most recently, the retail store for Jeff Dunham at Planet Hollywood. “Nobody is doing the stuff that we’re doing... It’s neat to know and have the confidence that no matter what it is that I think up, I have a company that can build it... Doing Virgin we were all digital, very creative ads and store banners. Now, it has turned into physically producing things you can touch.... where you step into their world for a second, and take a photo.”

When walking through the casinos, DJ is surrounded by his imaginative visions, I had to ask, what’s that like? “It’s the only thing that gives me the gratification like being on stage seeing fans sing back the songs or wearing clothing in the

crowd that I created—it’s really cool that people are enjoying it. It gives me the same happiness when I write a hit song...” He talks about this passionately for a few minutes before stopping himself. “I’m just blabbering on,” he says as he shifts uncomfortably. “Now, let’s talk about you.” We both laugh. He apologizes, and smiles. It’s this self-deprecating, Midwestern sincerity that makes DJ even more fascinating. Beneath the tough rocker façade, there is a sensitive and humble artist. As he continues his story, I notice he uses ‘here’ when referring to L.A., but we are in Vegas, which prompts me to ask if he means L.A. or Vegas. He laughs. “I think I’m going to wake up one day and realize I don’t live in L.A. I’ll be like, ‘Fuck, I *did* move to Vegas!’” He laughs.

BALANCING ART & MUSIC

“Music has always done well, but to have both running like an engine side by side, it’s just awesome. I know I can go on tour and still work out of my hotel with the company... They’ll send me a picture of a box office and they’re like, ‘This casino wants to know what you see,’ and I’ll send back five different renderings. It doesn’t take me long to put it in Photoshop. They usually pick one of them and we go to work.”

Ashba Media has gone from being operated out of DJ’s garage with Kari (she is their CFO) to a 7,000-square-foot warehouse with over twenty handpicked employees. “I put together not a company, but a family. After work, everybody hangs out together, BBQs—it’s awesome.” Taking that leap to a substantially larger space was a daunting move. “I had just purchased this house,” he points out. “But if we don’t go for it, I’ll always kick myself and go, *what would’ve happened if I went for it?*” He compares this risk to how he felt when he left Illinois to follow his dreams. “That was the hardest move I ever made in my life. I remember leaving the only girlfriend I ever had. She’s crying and I’m crying. I get 3-4 blocks away, stop my little minivan and sat there going, *I can always come back. If I don’t go, I’ll never be able to live with myself.* Had I not just went for it, none of this would be a reality, so that was a huge lesson in life I learned. If you believe in something enough, others will too.” The warehouse houses everything from the clothing line and props department to the wood and metal shop. With business taking off, he moved his brother, Klint, out to Vegas from Illinois last year to step into the role of Project Manager.

Ashba Media also produced the Gibson DJ Ashba Signature Les Paul, the Ovation Collection series, and The Ashba Limited Edition Dodge Challenger with West Coast Customs. The prolific creative agency currently has a number of irons in the fire, and was recently approached by the WWE to create some of their outfits. What else does DJ foresee for Ashba Media? He would ultimately like to infiltrate the TV/film industry, particularly the horror genre (he scored the theme song for Eli Roth’s new movie, *The Green Inferno*). At the top of his wish list is working on FX’s *American Horror Stories*. “I want to open up another Ashba Media in L.A., just doing props and special effects for different horror movies, and movies... There’s so much I want to do. Hopefully even do some acting, eventually,” he adds.

His stories pour out fluidly and before we know it an hour has elapsed. “I hate talking about myself,” he says self-consciously, “but I never get to talk about this side of my life.” We hear a door open. His wife, Nathalia, just got home. “Hey, love!” he calls out to her in the kitchen. “She made the best pumpkin pie the other day. I almost ate the whole other one, took me everything I had not to,” he affectionately raves. He picks up where he left off, and entertains me with a few more anecdotes.

At the time of our interview, DJ was in town focused on his media company. “We’ve got a lot of jobs going on, so that’s been a lot of work. It’s great. When I’m not on tour, it’s just such a nice break, head break. I can go into my art and create things. And then music is a nice break from that. Without one I would probably go nuts, one balances the other,” he pensively replies. Sixx:A.M. (whose album *Modern Vintage* was released last year and is their third album in a row to

debut at #1) begins touring this month through the beginning of May, and then Guns N’ Roses will likely start their tour at the end of May through December, DJ tells me.

The sun has gone down. It’s dinner time now, as another half hour has passed. So that I don’t take up anymore of his time, I wrap up the interview, but not before asking if there is anything else he would like to cover. “I think we covered way more than I thought we would. I just kept talking. Talked your face off.” He laughs. “It was exciting, ‘cause every interview I do, it’s always the same shit, *How’s Axl Rose?* [For the record, I didn’t ask any questions like that. Sorry, Axl.] There’s so much more to me than the guy they see on stage... There’s more to me than just the guitar. Hopefully my story was not too boring to listen to,” he chuckles. I assure him that it was not—far, far from it. I leave, after his beautiful wife snaps a photo of us, utterly fascinated and inspired by his American-dream-come-true story, and as a true admirer of his work and positive vibe.

MORE ABOUT DJ

Do you ever find yourself just sitting around not doing anything? Watching TV? Or are you always working on something?

"I do. I do." He laughs. "My wife has been really good about making me stop and smell the roses. I'm such a workaholic, it's just in my blood and I love it. My sister and brother are the same way, so it's like the three of us, we're all alike. We'll work as long as it takes."

What do you think fans would be surprised to find out about you?

"I love camping (laughs)... I've become an eBay addict. They know more about me than I do. I actually go online just to learn about me. I'm like, *Holy shit, really?* Every picture I post, I go on my Facebook and find a cool one that they posted... I went on there and there's this whole photo shoot I did with no shirt and I was like, *Ohmygod, I wish I had never done that.*"

You like crows, is there any significance to them?

"My dad left when I was 4, I had a real shit childhood. Everywhere I went as a kid there would be a crow. I know this sounds crazy, but it was very comforting, like a guardian angel was following me. Obviously I found out later, it wasn't the same fucking crow (we laugh). It's always been one of those things where you have a shit day and you look up and there's a crow staring at you. Living on your own when you're 16, you don't really have friends, so you kind of make friends with a bird that doesn't talk to you," he laughs. "I've always had a killer guardian angel. I probably should've died a few times through life, so I gave the credit to the crows. It's kinda dumb, I know."

Are you a spiritual person?

"I am. I believe in God and I was raised in a very Christian family, but I don't feel like I need to go to church to believe in God. I don't need to go hang out with people I don't care about to get on my knees and pray. I do pray every day and I'm thankful for what I have. He's helped me through a lot of stuff. I just try to be good to everybody and do the best I can —probably failing miserably (laughs), but I'm trying."

People dream of being a rock star —did you always think it was possible?

"Absolutely! It was never a doubt in my mind. I just didn't know I was going to be in Guns N' Roses. I knew for sure that I would play music for a living, whether it was playing in a lounge band somewhere... I know construction, music and art, and that's it. Ever since I was 15 on top of that roof, even though it was all in my head, it felt so real. Here I am, many years later, playing in Guns N' Roses, one of the biggest rock bands in the world... I thought I was going to get the success when I was 23, but it took many, many years of hard, hard work. You get kicked to the ground many times over. I was just relentless." **ML**

