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# MATT STARR – MR BIG

**Where:** Koko, London **When:** 17 October 2014

**Words:** Gareth Dylan Smith **Images:** John Bull and Jim Templeton-Cross

It's Friday night in Koko, Camden. Mr Big is playing a one-off London show, and the venue is nearly packed. The audience is 95 per cent white and 80 per cent male. Uncomfortably OK with fitting the majority demographic at this chicest of north London music venues – and one of only a handful of places left in the city with a room sized somewhere between a dive bar and an arena – I take a warm Becks in a plastic pint glass to what would be the Circle, if this were still a theatre. It's hot and humid. The band, clearly keen, comes on stage three minutes early to a huge roar from the crowd.

Matt Starr is the archetypal rock drummer. Seated behind large Ludwigs, and framed by the Mr Big logo, he has a moustache, wristbands, and moves big. His single strokes – he rocks too hard for doubles – are high and controlled, frequently starting above his head. He has a tough gig tonight: he is playing in one of rock's most iconic and virtuosic outfits, in the shadow of its 26-year heritage, with the band's hugely respected original drummer, Pat Torpey, on stage with him. Torpey is unable to perform drum kit duties due to the recent onset of Parkinson's disease, so he plays tambourine, sings backing vocals, and joins in occasionally on a mini drum kit set up to the side of the drum riser. It seems like with every move Torpey makes the crowd goes wild. Starr needs to be energetic, totally on it, and respectful: to the band, to the audience, and to Mr Big's slick, well known back catalogue. The audience is full of fans – the guy next to me

plays intricate air guitar to every tune – and most songs are sing-alongs, even the stuff off the band's latest album.

I'm standing about 60 feet from the stage, and the band members all appear younger than they looked in the 90s, with the exception of bassist Billy Sheehan, who looks more road-worn and has staunchly maintained his flowing rock locks where the others have succumbed to the new millennium's preference for a shorter barnet.

The band is faithful to its principles, transporting the audience through a string of classics, back to the testosterone-soaked rock scene of Los Angeles in the early 1990s. Eric Martin's powerful vocals lie somewhere between Bruce Dickinson and Meat Loaf in their size and sincerity. There are no safety nets tonight – no clicks, backing tracks or metronomes – just guitars, vocals, and a man hitting things hard. Starr counts every song in and the band charges, never looking back.

Wasting no time in keeping the legend alive, halfway through the second song Martin hands Paul Gilbert the power drill – the item that made him infamous in shredding circles. Somewhat disappointingly, the drill then lies dormant on the drum riser for the rest of the gig.

The set includes a three-minute epic guitar solo during which everyone else leaves the stage, and more than two-dozen further solos from the greased-lightning fingers of Paul Gilbert. There is an empty-stage, spotlight moment for Sheehan too, and a fantastic set-piece where the two axemen duel, their biting, idiosyncratic tones incising the sticky air of the venue. For the choreographed final song (encores last nearly 40 minutes), the band members all swap instruments – Gilbert on drums, Martin on bass, Sheehan on guitar, and Torpey taking lead vocals. The band lacks a bit of authority without Starr on tub-thumping duty. Gilbert hits the cymbals somewhat apologetically, and Martin's bass playing is pedestrian and

functional. Sheehan shines on guitar, playing with great time and even a highly respectable solo. Starr looks uncomfortable waiting by a mic stand to sing BVs. Maybe for the rest of the tour dates the management will dig him out an acoustic guitar or some shakers.

This gig was a proper, full-on, two-hour rock-out. For Matt Starr it was a bit like playing drums with the original members of Zeppelin, only with Bonzo watching from the sidelines. Starr kills it. If you get the chance to see Mr Big on this tour, I highly recommend it. ●

