

# Q&A With Vinnie From Sponge

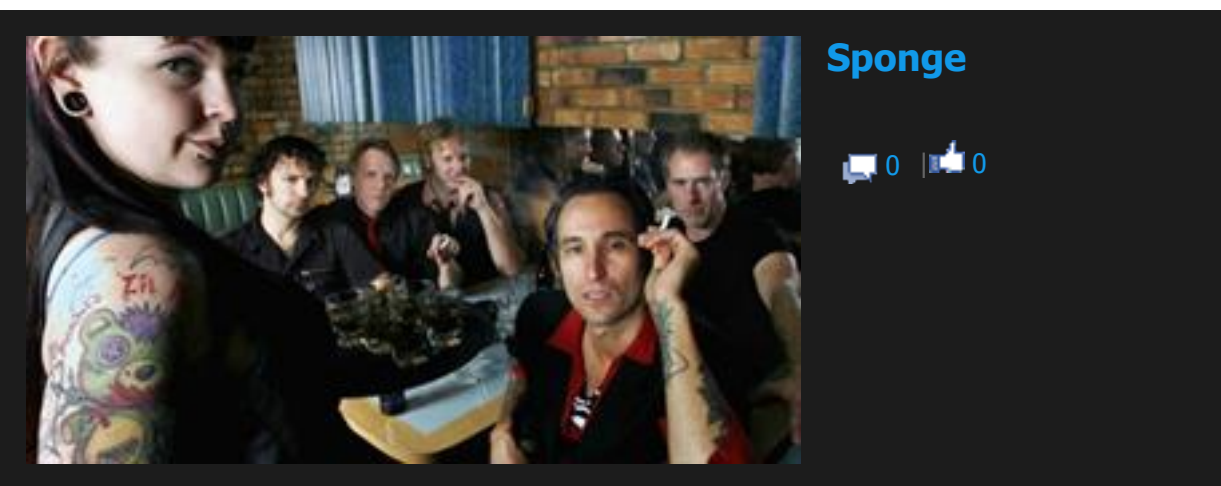
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*Sponge* frontman/founder and Detroit native Vinnie Dombroski talks with Pollstar about the band's new album, taking care of business, Motown's economic woes, and how "idle hands" often lead to ... beer.

Currently on the road as part of the "Summerland Tour" with Everclear, Live, and Filter through July 28, *Sponge* has a new album, *Stop The Bleeding* dropping Sept. 17 via the band's new label partner, The End Records. Along with Vinnie, today's *Sponge* is made up of Billy Adams on drums, bassist Tim Patalan, and guitarists Kyle Neely and Andy Patalan.

Detroit will honor the band with a special "Sponge Day" slotted for Sept. 13 that includes a VIP barbeque/meet-and-greet and a gig that night at the Diesel Concert Lounge in Chesterfield Township.



*You're the founder, frontman and the public image for Sponge. But are you also the businessman behind the madness?*

For better or worse, yeah.

*Do you handle all decisions, from the artwork on the album to traveling plans? Does all of that cross your desk?*

Yeah. To be quite frank, management has never been a very sexy job., you know what I mean? I am that guy ... who does all of those things.

*Do you split the day up between creating music and taking care of biz?*

It's been all business [on the tour]. When I'm back at [home] I have time to sit down and focus on recording and writing. However, there's been a couple of moments out here "when I] get some good ideas for lyrics and whatnot [and] I jot some things down. We're fortunate enough to have a guy who has worked with us for many years who takes care of the group. But as far as tour managing, managing and accounting, that's kind of on my shoulders.

*It all sounds very overwhelming.*

It's a really welcome situation. Idle hands are the devil's workshop. If I got time [when] I'm not working or staying busy, I'm sitting in a bar. I was very grateful that you bumped up the call time [for the interview] because we're kind of running on the second beer of the day. So I figure if I have three beers down [while] talking to you, I'm just talking sideways.

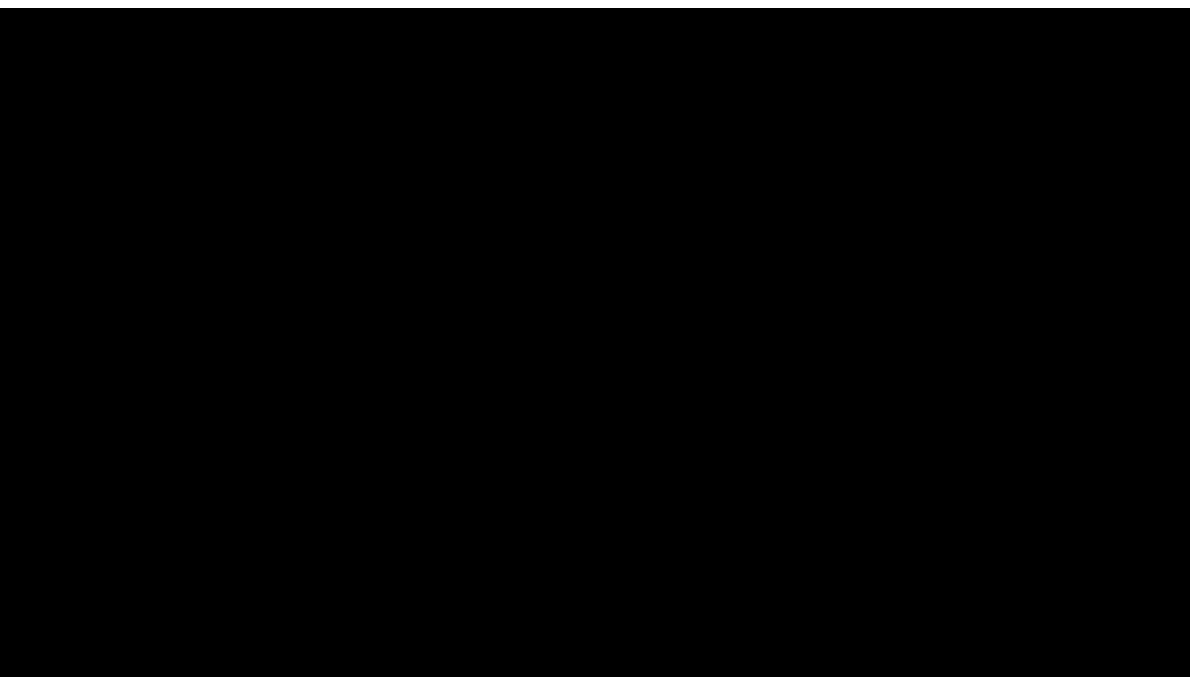
*Do you still call Detroit home?*

Yes. I spent 32 years in Detroit proper, a product of the public school system out there. However, the town pretty much beat my ass. So after 32 years I moved just outside of Detroit but I'm still on the east side [with] plenty of family, plenty of friends.

*A lot of great rock acts have come out of the Detroit area – MC5, Iggy & The Stooges, Ted Nugent, Bob Seger. Did you draw any influences from the Michigan rockers that came before you?*

The MC5 has always been a touchstone for us. Even back in the day when a lot of what they called, I guess, "alternative" bands at the time were out there cutting their teeth, a lot of the bands weren't necessarily interested in the performance or the "rocking" aspect of rock 'n' roll. When you look at the MC5, I mean, they influenced everybody. The Who was influenced by the MC5, for God's sake. And what greater performance rock band was there than The Who? We carry on a legacy of Detroit bands, is how we always felt. So when we get out there it's no-holds-barred rock 'n' roll. That's what it's about.

Were we influenced by the MC5? Absolutely. Were we influenced by [Alice] Cooper? Absolutely. Iggy? Absolutely. These are just some of the great [acts]... we touch on. It's part of our language, our history. ... There's a tiny bit of a lot of these artists that make up what a Sponge show is. It's unavoidable for us because we revere those bands so much.



*Sponge toured with KISS in 1996, which included a date at the original Tiger Stadium. Since Detroit figures prominently in KISS' history, as a Detroiter, what was the biggest thrill about playing that show? Opening for KISS? Playing Tiger Stadium?*

I certainly think of two things. One, we had the great chance to hang out with our friends [in] Alice In Chains. [It] was probably one of the last shows Layne [Staley] did with the group. To see him, hang out with him and talk with him, to see how well he was, how well he looked at the time, how great he sounded, was something I'll never forget.

The other thing, I think, was looking at all these kids who were in Gene Simmons makeup, Paul Stanley's make up. Those kids are out there dressed like Gene and they're singing "World Of Human Wreckage." In your hometown that's pretty cool.

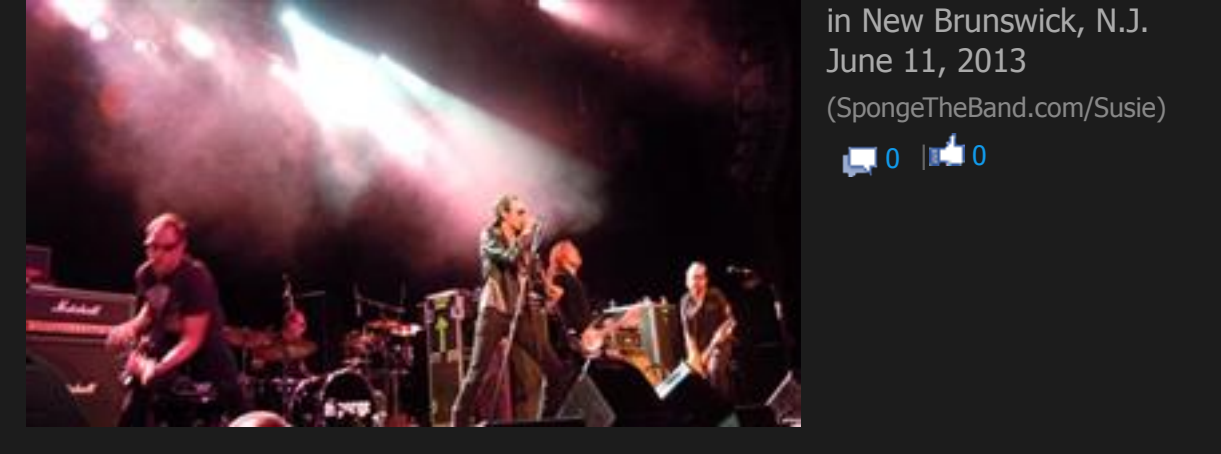
*How do you create Sponge music?*

It's kind of an interesting question when I think, for example, how we wrote a song like "Plowed." The song was written on a Sunday afternoon. I was outside shoveling snow. It took five minutes to write it. ... It hit you like a bolt of lightning. I called the guy that's playing bass for us, our producer as well. I said, "Tim, I got this new song. We got to record it." And he said, "Come in at midnight."

So I drove to Ann Arbor to record the actual version that's on the record. The song was written that day, recorded that night, probably in a couple of hours. Done. That's kind of the typical writing process. It hits you like a bolt of lightning then BOOM. You got a song. That's how it rolls with us.

*Are you saying spontaneity plays a part in Sponge's music?*

I think there's a certain urgency ... any song that has a certain urgency about it is much more valid. You're excited to play [it], excited to get it out of your head. Unless the song is out of my head it keeps on looping around and around. [Recording] is almost a way of exorcising the song out of the head. It's got to be put someplace else other than the head.



in New Brunswick, N.J.  
June 11, 2013  
(SpongeTheBand.com/Susie)

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*How about the opposite? Have there been songs that took days, weeks or months to complete?*

Yeah, but probably not the better songs [laughs]. When they linger it's like old meat. It starts to smell.

*The new album coming out in September, Stop The Bleeding, will be released 19 years after Rotting Piñata. Since you're entrenched in the business side of Sponge as well as the music itself, what's different regarding marketing the new album compared to the band's first disc?*

It's more dependent on ... I think [with] any new artist today, it's about your social networking. We're fortunate enough to be partnering up with a label [The End Records]. Of course we're going to release [the new record] on our own label, but we felt they were a bit more equipped to deal with some of these new aspects of marketing a record than we were. So we're teaming up with them, we're hitting all the social networking that we can possibly handle. It's vitally important.

Years ago it was two things. It was radio and MTV. There was no internet, nothing. We would roll into a town years ago and go to Kinko's and print up flyers or something and paste them on car windows. That was as much Facebooking as we could do back then.

These days, Facebook is such a big part of us going out there and doing stuff along with anything else that could be comparable. That, and teaming up with the new label as a partner – we're able to get out there and maximize everything that is not dealing with radio, MTV, video or things like that. Make no mistake, we'll deal with those things, but it's not as simple as it used to be. It's not as simple as booking gigs, getting a song on a radio station and having a video on MTV.

*Business-wise, is there a company called "Sponge" that sits on top of your universe?*

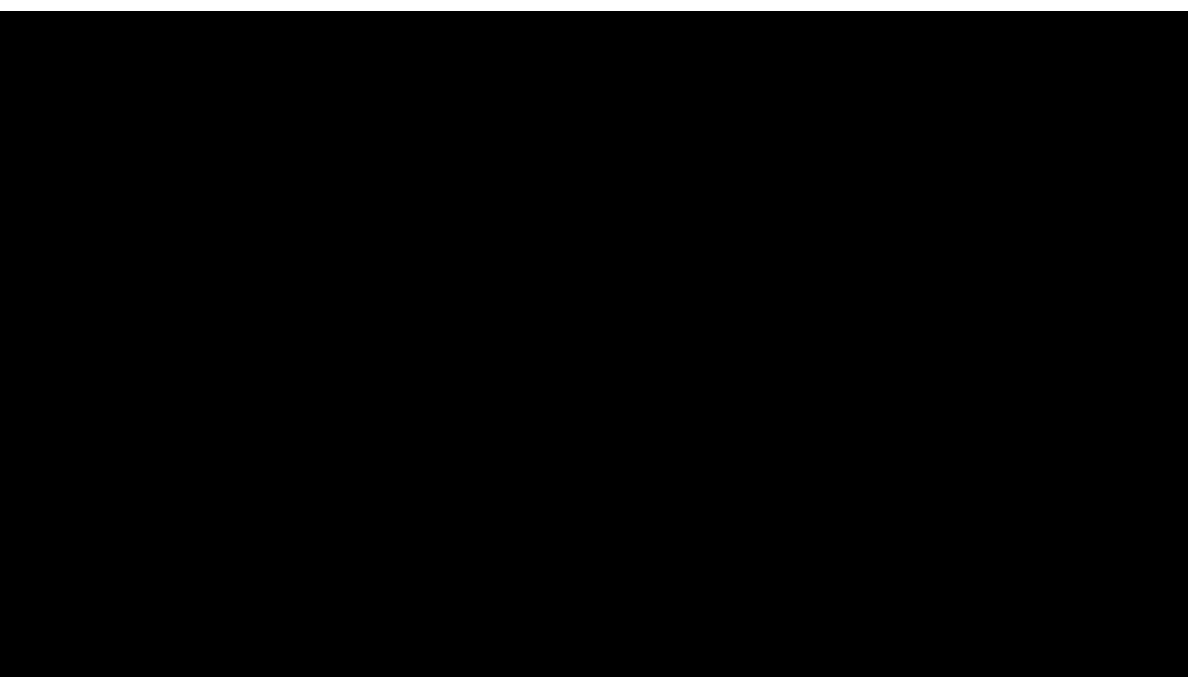
We have a collective of people we've assembled around us. We're an independent arm, pretty much. We have great, talented folks that we decided to bring into our world to help us with what we do. We have a booking agent (Popular Music's Michael Rand in Southfield, Mich.) that's been with us for the last 12 or so years which is unheard of for a band that lives in the indie world as we have. We've been fortunate enough to assemble a whole team of people helps us do what we do. And maintain that, too. Maintain the relationships, not only with the folks internally, but folks we do business with out there in the world.

[Michael] is a guy who has believed in the cause for many, many years. You can't buy belief. This guy has belief in Sponge. We thank our lucky stars for this fellow every day. This is a guy who has been booking us through thick and thin because he's believed in the cause. All these years later we're here because of a guy like Mike Rand.

*There are some bands that you cannot imagine continuing without the original members. But Sponge has had several personnel changes over the years, leaving you as the only original member. Is it your vision, your concept of the band that drives Sponge forward?*

I would like to tell myself that it's my vision. Guess what? I think it's something even simpler. It's the songs. It's still songs. These songs would be on me. I just stay out of the way, I write songs, we write songs. As long as we're out there with our hearts in the right place, we're out there doing gigs, taking it to the people, it's the songs. Vision? I think that's a lofty perspective but it comes [down] to these songs. I've always believed the songs will take care of us, guide us through the way.

Lemmy [Motörhead's Lemmy Kilmister] said, and I hope I'm quoting him correctly, "It takes one song to beat the bastards." What he means is it takes one song and everything changes. All of a sudden you got a song, you got a hit, you got a path, you got a gig, it's the song. Me being like some kick-ass visionary, I go, "Man, I write songs." That's the most important thing. Songs. It's as simple as that.



*Was that the mindset when you started out?*

Abso-stinking-lutely. We had no idea we had any kind of hit in a song like "Plowed" but we knew it was good and we knew we were excited about it. That's all it took. It was as simple as that then, it's as simple as that now.

And things you're excited about. You're excited talking about music with people, getting out there, playing shows and hanging out.

*As a performer, you put a lot of energy into the performance. But can you turn it off when you walk off stage or do you have to burn it off somehow? I'm guessing you just don't turn off the light and call it a night.*

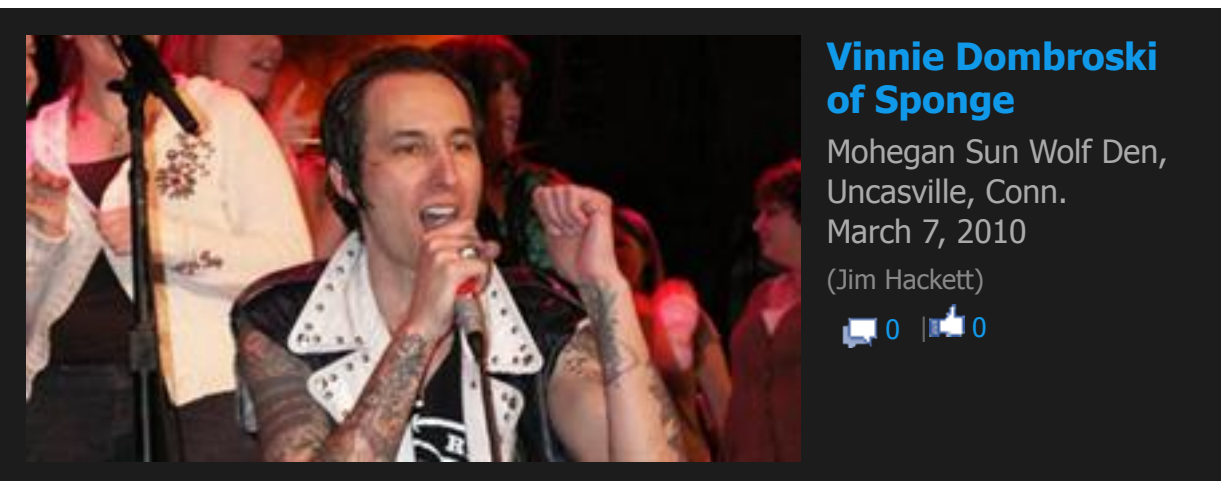
Like I said earlier. Idle hands are the devil's workshop. Like last night in Nashville, we were done by about 8:30 p.m. We were like, "What do we do until 2 a.m.?" We hung out, we went to a couple of bars and then we had this big ol' dance party in the back of the bus. We're pumping everything from Prince to Social Distortion and we had dozens of people in the back lounge dancing. That's it. Listening to music, dance, have a couple of drinks ... that's it.

*Do you enjoy doing things like meet-and-greets with fans on show nights, or posing with promoters for music industry photos?*

If someone is taking care of the drinks, I'm OK.

*You've had a ringside seat to all the changes the business of music has undergone during the past two decades. What do you think is one of the best aspects of today's music industry?*

The best thing I can think of, quite frankly, is the ownership of your masters, the ownership of your music. If you can possibly maintain that, probably one of the better things. Like a lot of us, back in the day we signed away a lot of stuff whether it was publishing or the rights to masters and whatnot. Of course, we still have fun playing music, but as far as the business aspect, one of the things is ownership of what we create. Definitely the best [thing].



**Vinnie Dombroski  
of Sponge**

Mohegan Sun Wolf Den,  
Uncasville, Conn.  
March 7, 2010

(Jim Hackett)

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*Have you been able to retain ownership of all your recordings?*

A great part of them over the last 13 years. There's still some stuff I'm dealing with.

*Reversing the question, what do you think is one of the major low points of the music industry in 2013?*

Maybe the lack of understanding about what it takes to do what we do. People just can't get a clear vision of what it is. I always get movies like [where] Jeff Bridges plays the down-and-out country singer – "Crazy Heart." I don't think that was dark enough, I can explain it that way. [People] think it's all, "Oh, man. It must be great to hang out there, play songs, talk to women and all that kind of stuff." But I just sit there and go, "You know what? Go watch [Mickey Rourke in ]"The Wrestler" and then come talk to me. What's going on now is the last jump off of the top rope in that movie.

*Everybody has had some type of day job back in the day. What were some of your non-music gigs?*

Early on I just wanted to play music, it was all I wanted to do. I remember getting a record deal, I got my first record deal while I was a young man in my 20s. I was cooking in a restaurant. We all got this record deal and I said to myself, "Man, this is fantastic."

So I got what my share of the signing bonus was, \$10,000. We did a shitty three month tour, the band broke up, we lost our deal and I was right back cooking after that. That was it. Then we got another deal and that was Sponge.

*Was the first deal kind of like a training ground for when you got the Sponge deal?*

That was perspective, yeah. ... So you made what? 10 grand? Like a lot of broke bands like we were, negotiating a deal on a pay phone. Use Google Earth, go [to] Park Grove & Gratiot and take a look at what that is. It's truly a bombed out war zone. That's where I negotiated my first deal.

*If Hollywood ever does the story behind Sponge, who should play you?*

I always look back at movies and guys that play Elvis or Sinatra and I just [think] everybody is falling short. I don't think [an actor] to play me has been born yet. Who the hell would that be?

But if I had my choice, a young Marlon Brando, perhaps.



*Although this interview took place approximately 48 hours before news of the city filing for bankruptcy became public, Vinnie contacted us shortly after with his thoughts on the subject.*

"The news that the City Of Detroit has filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy protection is truly bittersweet news.

"On one hand the potential end of the decay of this old friend is extremely welcoming.

However the emergency manager brought in by Governor Snyder despite the repeal by Michigan voters of Public Act 4 is disturbing.

"Public Act 436 was put in place of the repealed Public Act 4 (the will of the Michigan voters) via the Governor and the Michigan legislature and what you have is politicians doing what they feel is good for us – the voters – who they feel don't know what's good for themselves.....DISTURBING!

"Our future, our families, city, state and country's future is dependent upon our participation, our vote and voices being heard.

"And no matter how well meaning, NOT the single voice of a government official.

Long Live THE D!"

Upcoming Sponge shows:

July 24 – Fayetteville, Ark., Arkansas Music Pavilion (AMP)

July 27 – St. Louis, Mo., The Venue @ River City Casino

July 28 – Bonner Springs, KS Cricket Wireless Amphitheater

Aug. 17 – Lake Odessa, Mich., I-96 Speedway (Down N' Dirty Rock Fest)

Aug. 24 – Cobden, Ill., Rustle Hill Winery

Sept. 5 – Long Branch, N.J., Brighton Bar

Sept. 6 – Pennellville, N.Y., Oswego County Event Center

Sept. 7 – West Chester, Pa., The Note

Sept. 13 – Chesterfield, Mich., Diesel Concert Lounge

Sept. 14 – Detroit, Mich., Tiger Stadium (National Anthem)

Sept. 19 – Seabrook, N.H., The Honeypot

Sept. 20 – Auburn, Maine, Club Texas

Sept. 21 – Quincy, Mass., South Shore Music Hall

Oct. 11 – Raleigh, N.C., The Pour House Music Hall

Oct. 12 – White Marsh, Md., House Of Rock

Please visit [SpongeTheBand.com](http://SpongeTheBand.com) for more information.

*--Jay Smith*

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