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MUSICIAN



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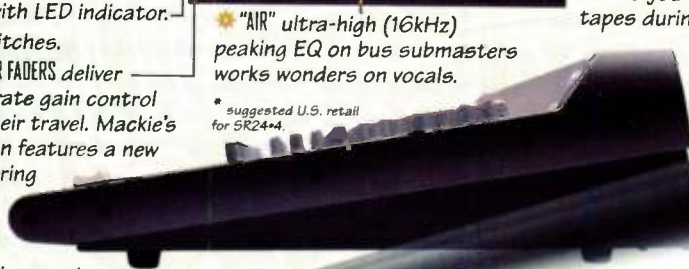
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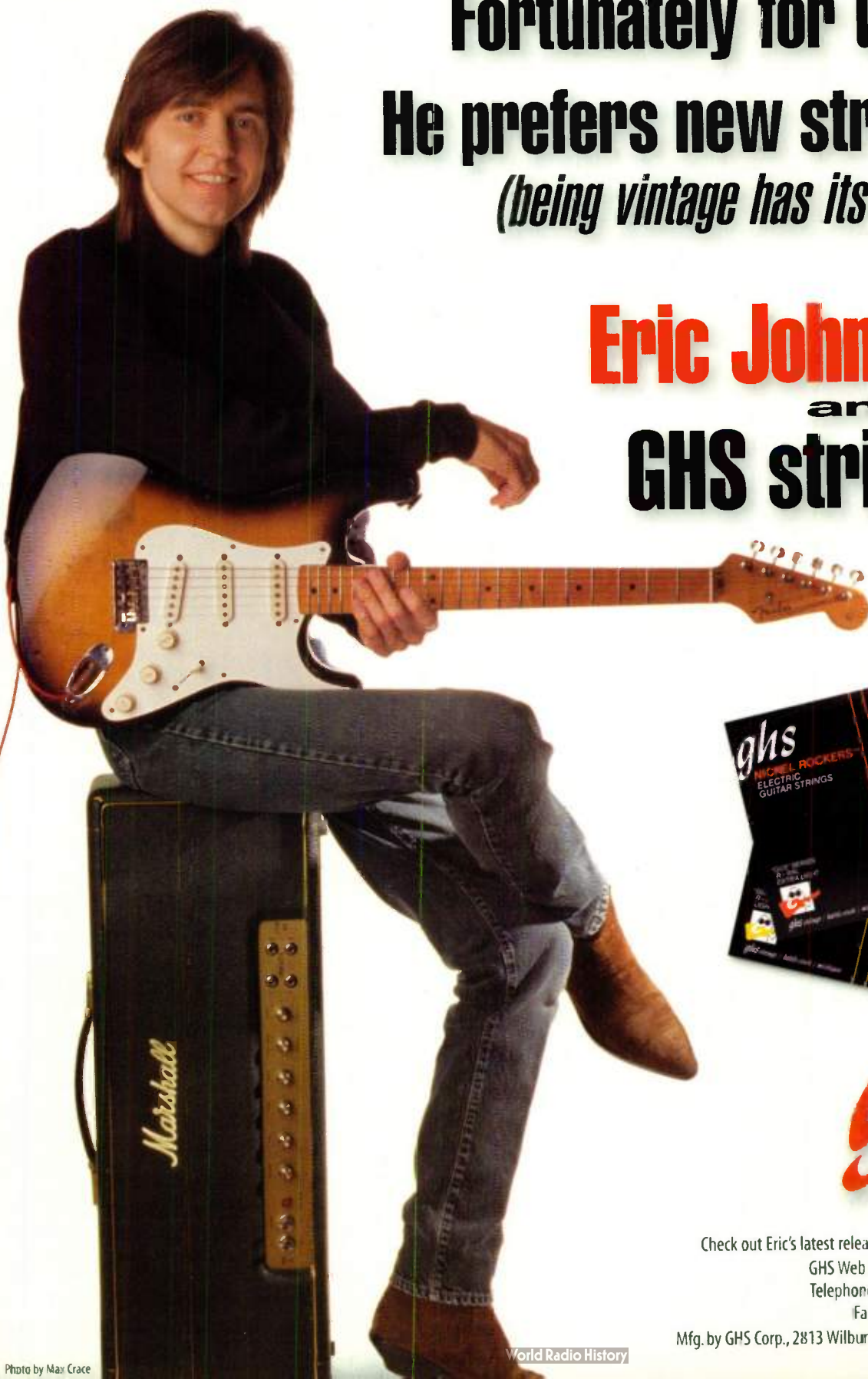


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ALESIS

the ex-prince

Kudos 2 Robert L. Doerschuk for sticking 2 the music throughout his interview with the Artist. Far 2 much ink has already been wasted on the former Prince's supposed eccentricities, but as anyone who really listens to his music will tell u, not nearly enough has been revealed about his motivations for songwriting and his remarkable dexterity as a player. And after nearly twenty years of astoundingly prolific output under various names (Jamie Starr, Alexander Nevermind, Joey Coco, Christopher, Camille, Paisley Park, and a forgettable identity as Prince), the question is whether the name matters as much as the heart and soul behind the music. There is only one other question I wish Doerschuk had asked: Now that the Artist has the freedom to release new music when *he* wants to and does not have to answer to Warner Bros., how soon will it be b4 we get to hear the hours and hours of music already stockpiled in his legendary vaults?

shawn farrell
hamburg, NY

You deserve special recognition for getting the Artist to speak up about his studio techniques. I've waited years for this kind of an interview! Robert L. Doerschuk got the Symbolic One to open up like never before. Well done!

robbie l. smith
san pedro, CA

live

Your interview with Chad Taylor of Live (Apr. '97) left me scratching my head. As inspirational as were his words about band solidarity, his obliviousness to guitar fundamentals was appalling. Here's a guy with a terrific, multiplatinum band, and he can't even tell you what note he's playing. Not only that, he seems proud of his limitations; if Jimi Hendrix, John Coltrane, or even Eddie Van Halen had restricted themselves to two or three notes in their solos, I doubt they'd have made any kind of impact. And Taylor's suggestion that a knowledge of "written music" gets in the way of one's "purity" as a musician was as lame a justification for ignorance as I've ever heard, in or out of music.

Secret Samadhi rocks, but as long as Live builds its music on the foundation of Taylor's limitations, they'll just be retracing their old footsteps in years to come. As the Artist says in the same issue, "Man, learn your instrument!"

herb wall
baltimore, MD

david bowie

I've just re-read your interview with David Bowie

(Frontman, Apr. '97). It's great to see that the thin white trendsetter hasn't rested on his laurels. Many artists who reach the age of fifty are quick to retreat into their back catalog in order to sell out their tour dates. David remains vital and, as usual, years ahead of his time. It's a wonder that at half a century he is being emulated by a new generation of rockers, such as Nine Inch Nails, Blur, and Suede. Rock on (and forward), Mr. Bowie—jungle style!

marco conelli
queens village, NY

mac gollehon

I recently subscribed to *Musician* and got my first issue last week. I was seven pages past the table of contents when I saw your Sideman interview with Mac Gollehon (Apr. '97), which included the pull quote "Playing for a sampling session was like

Thank you very much for doing an interview with the Artist (Apr. '97) that focuses on the music. The controversy that surrounds him is part of the fascination so many of us have with him, but in the long run the music is what matters. The Artist is clearly driven by the music, and many fans such as myself can forgive his eccentricities because his music is so meaningful. At his worst his music is better than most of what we hear today. This is why I was thrilled to finally read an article that illuminates what is most important about the Artist.

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being raped." Sure, playing a few notes so they can be electronically manipulated and duplicated later is perhaps a soul-sickening experience. Yes, it's an awful thought that the personal side of the music is obliterated in sampling. But *raped*? Does Gollehon know what it's like to be raped? It's obvious that Gollehon recovered from his experience. Rape victims *never* do.

His comment was really offensive, but your decision not only to include it but to glamorize and glorify it like gospel above the article is equally so. I'm not cancelling my subscription yet, but I will wait and see if this is a trend in *Musician* before throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

a. r. engelhardt
MHellhound@aol.com

if i were a carpenter ...

The letter from James Kieffer in your Apr. '97 issue is just too irritating to ignore, particularly when he enjoins Charles M. Young from criticizing "this

album or ... any future Karen Carpenter releases." I'm not one to speak ill of the dead, but the Carpenters' music is like a mouthful of powdered sugar. Let's face facts: Even when sung or played brilliantly, crap is still crap, and schmaltz is a base instinct. That's why they sold so many units.

kent hamele
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big head todd

In his review of Big Head Todd & the Monsters' latest release *Beautiful World* (Apr. '96), Jon Young missed the whole point of the music. It's not about any one instrument or solo; it's about creating a mood and a groove. Your reviewer drags Todd Park Mohr through the mud on his soloing efforts, but instead of focusing on that or on how he sings, he should concentrate on the fact that the whole album is a band effort, and this whole band rocks! Besides, anyone who has listened to past efforts knows that Mohr can rock a solo on songs like "Bittersweet" or "Kensington Line" with some very creative chords and ideas. I've seen these guys live several times and followed them for years, and it's a shame when the only press a band this good gets is this negative crap.

drew perkins
40wattstation@msn.com

pusherman vs. throwups

I have a few thoughts regarding the Throwups, who's rather nasty letter in the Mar. '97 issue slammed Dev Sherlock's profile of the English band Pusherman (Talents, Jan. '97). While I wasn't at the Detroit Pusherman show, I have seen them twice and I can tell you honestly that they renewed my faith in music. Not only do I find their music and performances invigoratingly fresh, I also happen to think that Dev's description was fairly accurate. (I'm a big fan of "the Verve on blotter acid" as well.)

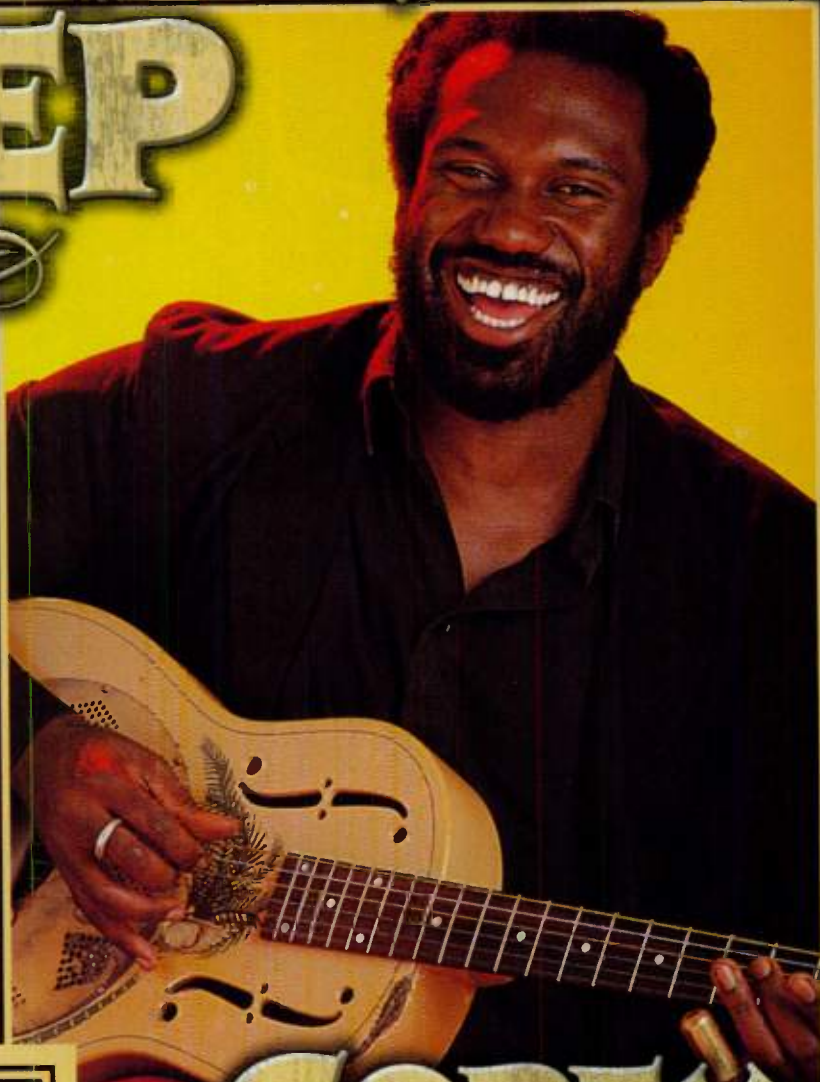
Who are these twerps to say that Pusherman is in it for the bucks? It's not like they have some rock star attitude and they're selling records in droves. They're not some pretentious MTV band who's completely overexposed. They're underground artists who have huge potential, unlike any band that would call itself the Throwups.

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KMG0820@ecuvn.ecu.cis.edu

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frontman

You've gone on record recently declaring the Britpop movement finished, kaput.

I was saying I don't feel very sympathetic to what's going on in Britain. There's not a great deal of intelligence in it.

You've also said that things changed for you after the last Blur tour, a change that's evident on the new album, Blur. Why did your outlook shift?

It was simple. I'd been changing, and I felt a need to sing about myself. I started listening to music which was far more different—people singing about themselves, I suppose. From that point onwards, we severed our [Britpop] links. The band just wouldn't have carried on if we'd continued like that—it would have imploded. We had to try and find some new reason... Well, not new *reason*, actually, because the reason for being in a band basically stays the same. But it's down to how much of your soul you're prepared to exhibit.

Once you decided a musical change had to be made, how did you execute it?

Well, we stopped using strings and brass. That was the first thing. I've always written songs in a sort of automatic way; I do a demo and sing whatever comes into my head. But what I've tended to do in the past is discard that when it came to finishing off a song, replacing it with something more coherent and narrative. But this time I didn't. I let what first came into my head stay. They say first impressions are never wrong, and I'm beginning to believe that, you know. Like "Strange News From Another Star"—that's totally the demo I did. The only bit that's changed is the part at the end where the "dugga-da-dum" bits come on.

You're fascinated with disguising your voice on this album. Like on

"Our album doesn't lend itself to the perpetual rise of Britishness."

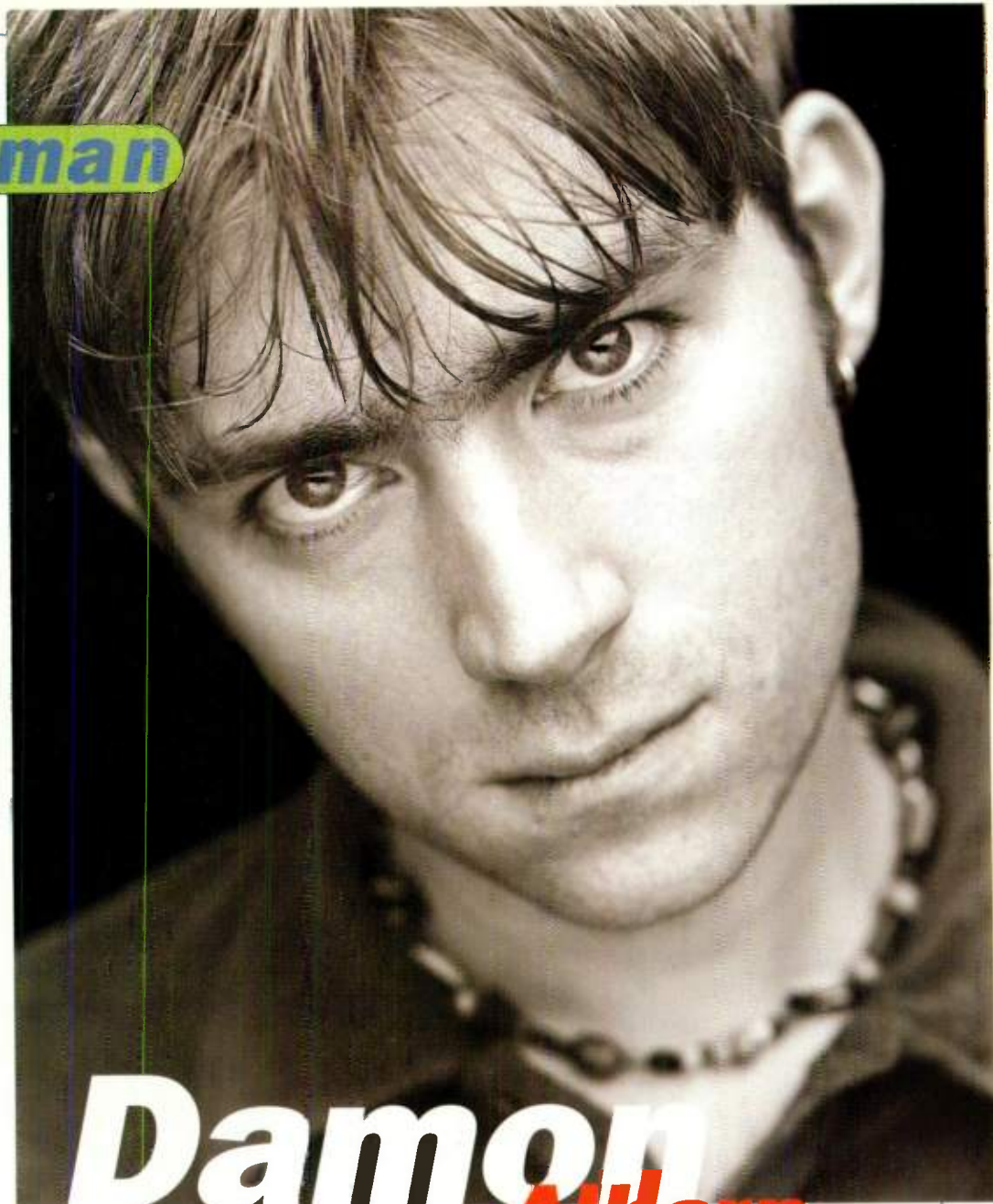
"Country Sad Ballad Man," where you sound all gramophone-tinny.

That was sung through something as small as this [picks up micro-cassette recorder] and then miking it up. For me, it's a pleasure to hear things like that. I get a lot more joy out of listening to my voice when I can hear it from a different perspective.

You'd think the whole Oasis vs. Blur fiasco would've died down by now. But there were Liam and Noel Gallagher again, making false wedding announcements in the press, reportedly to steal your headline thunder the same week Blur was released.

I don't know if that was the case, but you could have perceived it in that way. They're off in their own little world, so who cares? That's not what we made [the album] for, but it seems pretty evident to me that it doesn't lend itself to the perpetual rise of ... Britishness. Not in that cartoon sense where everyone's either the Beatles or the Rolling Stones.

—Tom Lanham



Colin Bell

Lili Haydn

How did you break into the session game?

I found some jobs through sitting in with local bands, jamming on songs. It was the first time many people had seen a violinist jump up and jam. I've never been promiscuous, but my mother says I'm a "jam slut." I was rabid, insatiable about them. I would stand at the edge of the stage and point to my violin. "Eggs," my other says, meaning "balls." I tried not to use feminine wiles; I'm sure that had *something* to do with it, but they wouldn't have asked me back unless I had something. All my work now is word of mouth, so I was really planting seeds then.

Had you played a lot of rock & roll when you began sitting in?

I didn't listen to rock music until college. I started playing violin at age eight. My training was with a woman in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, so it seemed to me that the only way to make a living as a violinist was to be in a symphony orchestra. I didn't want to be part of an ensemble that didn't have room for my creative impulses.

What was your first gig?

I accompanied my mother [performance artist Lotus Weinstein] in night-clubs. It was a blast. I got to improvise a little.

What was your first non-family gig?

My senior year in school, I played with Sandra Bernhard in Boston. She's a friend of my mom's, and she called and asked me to sit in for two nights at the Berklee College of Music. Later, she flew me to Los Angeles for a week of shows at

"My mother says I'm a 'jam slut.'"

the Henry Fonda Theater. It was such a welcome break. People knew about it at college, and it began to be my new identity.

Was there one specific gig that launched your career in the L.A. studios?

My mom told me I had to hear a singer named Danny Peck, so I went to Genghis Cantina, where there was a crowd of about ten people. She knew him and asked if I could sit in. Then other people came up to ask me to play with their bands that night. The next week, I started playing with other people. It snowballed each time I played. It was thrilling.

How did your first session go?

It was a complete catastrophe.

The band was Whose Image, at the Record Plant, for Quincy Jones' Qwest label. I had met the band at a club but had never played with them live. They made me wait the entire day, and then I had only fifteen minutes to play three songs, none of which ever came out. It was not an auspicious beginning, but a good lesson. I knew

I needed to brush up on my sight-reading.

How did you end up onstage at the Forum, soloing on "Kashmir" with Page and Plant?

I knew the leader of the Egyptian ensemble with the band, Hossam Ramzy, because I had played with him in England. I took a train down to San Diego for their show there, but I didn't bring my violin. I couldn't get near to Page or Plant, but Ramzy remembered me. He introduced me to Robert Plant, and I gave him a flyer for my show the next night in Los Angeles. Afterwards, Plant invited me out the next night, and I asked him if I could sit in at the Forum concert. They were impressed with my chutzpah. We rehearsed it in sound check, then I played on "Kashmir," a ten-minute version with three huge solos, in front of twenty thousand people.

—Chris Rubin

résumé

Hootie & the Blowfish	Natalie Merchant
Bill Laswell	Herbie Hancock
Daniel Lanois	Tracy Chapman
Don Was	Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan
Porno For Pyros	Spearhead

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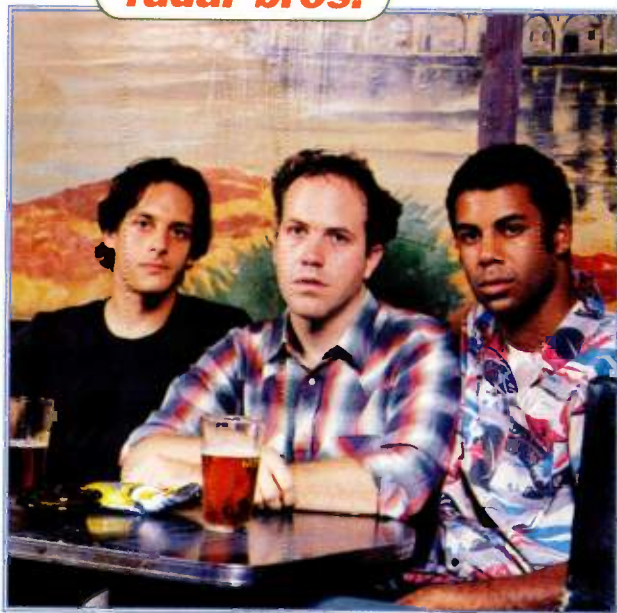
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talents

radar bros.



William Howard

The less you know about recording, the better. Then there's more room for happy accidents." So says the leader of L.A.'s **Radar Bros.**, Jim Putnam. Not only the band's singer, songwriter, and guitarist, but also their producer and engineer, Putnam played guitar in noisy indie-rock bands like Medicine and Maids of Gravity, until he decided that maybe the world should hear his own very different material. "For a long time I wasn't ready to put myself out there," he says. "I still don't know if I'm ready, but I'm doing it."

Following in the footsteps of his father, who engineered recordings for legends like Ellington and Sinatra, Putnam set up a 16-track studio in his garage—"one of those 1920s garages that's really skinny, made for the Model T." There, over the course of about a year, Putnam and his cohorts (bassist Senon Williams and

drummer Steve Goodfriend) put down the lazy, hazy sound of the band's self-titled *Restless* debut.

Distinguished by stately slow tempos, expansive guitar arpeggios, and high quavery vocals, the Bros.' songs fit into the "slow-core" subgenre best represented by Acetone and Low, yet also suggest the influence of Neil Young and *Meddle*-era Pink Floyd. Several feature odd ambient noises, from heavily reverbed whistling to tremoloed amp hum that sounds remarkably like a keyboard patch. "Once a song's become a song in the studio," Putnam explains. "I like to say, 'Okay, the hard part's down, let's do some experimentation with sounds that might bring it to another level.'" Putnam's also learning trumpet to lend his compositions a more orchestral tone.

Though he'll admit that doing quadruple duty as writer/player and producer/engineer is exhausting, Putnam wouldn't have it any other way. "I'm working on ways to make it easier," he says. "By the time I'm sixty, I should really have it down."

—Mac Randall

Sometimes it's a tricky combination, but business and pleasure are a potent mixture for power pop band **Thin Lizard Dawn**. Experienced at producing energetic tunes packed with hooks and shimmering harmonies, the amigos are ready to spring their eponymous debut album (RCA) on an unsuspecting American public.

"We're four friends that happen to be in a band," explains vocalist/guitarist Greg Lattimer. "Like when you read a book and you realize, 'Holy shit! Someone else thinks the way I do!' That's kind of the philosophy behind the band."

After meeting at Skidmore College, the band members graduated to the mean streets of NYC's East Village. There, Lattimer, guitarist

Saluting David Crosby's paean to Sixties angst, "Almost Cut My Hair," **Tranquility Bass'** Mike Kandel keeps the torch burning for today's furry freak nation. His Astralwerks album *Let the Freak Flag Fly* is a weird trip through Latin big-band jams and hallucinatory hip-hop epics. Recording at a secret island studio off the Washington coast, Kandel imbued his music with the aroma of all-day rock festivals, spoken-word strangeness, and an enigmatic cast of thousands.

Kandel's two-year detachment from "civilization" fostered the album's sense of time displacement, as if P-Funk had landed in the Hawaiian islands only to move in with a native tribe living in a Seventies freak-lore utopia. Besides playing and programming, Kandel sampled old records for kooky lines like "freedom inside your minds" and the Marge Simpson-ish "I know it's hard sometime."

Ask Kandel about his sampling sources and, like a true survivalist, he replies enigmatically. "I pull them from obscure sources, then mask them in any way I can. I used some Christian albums for tripped-out samples, but please don't confuse me with any of that ideology."

tranquility bass

From the planet-surfing vibe of the title track to a cover of Jimmie Rodgers' "Soldier's Sweetheart," Kandel's work brims with warped grooves and curious references. But the *Tranquility Bassman* only explains his world view, not the music's inner workings. "The album is about the nation of freaks, about doing whatever you want to do as long as you're not hurting anyone. No one should tell you what to do if you're just doing your own thing." —Ken Micallef



Brad Miller

Howie Statland, bassist Mike Gagliardi, and drummer Dave Berk shed their own bright light on a scene known for dealing heavily in goth and grunge.

Unafraid to wear skinny plastic ties on stage, Thin Lizard Dawn started winning over listeners who could appreciate colorful melodies, bouncy rhythms, and the frequent joke. "Sexual Dynamo" is a quick-moving, richly textured tribute to the reproductive process. Meanwhile, "Space" exuberantly stops, starts,

one of the guys in Oasis said they wrote better songs than John Lennon," Lattimer says indignantly. "So I thought just as a joke I would write a song more Beatlesque than they could imagine, saying that they suck."

Assuming they stay out of dark alleyways in the U.K., Thin Lizard Dawn expect to hit the road hard and spread the pop gospel. And if there's a formula for achieving huge rock & roll dreams, they're not going to kill themselves trying to find it. "I

thin lizard dawn



gurgles, and rolls to a spirited declaration of independence.

The band better be ready to explain "Sucks," a not-so-subtle stab at a particular band from England. "I read an interview, where

think we've already had success—the fact that we can do what we do," Statland observes. "If we're lucky enough to please ourselves and an audience, then we're totally psyched." —David Weiss

After a year of strumming his guitar and staring into space on the Left Coast, Jordan Mokriski was ready to bail. "Every other person in L.A. seemed to have a band. I had written four songs, but the singer I wanted to work with was back in New York."

That was Verena Wiesendanger. Only one problem: Mokriski had never actually heard his former Vassar classmate sing.

"I just had known her for years," he says, "and she just seemed right. I was like, 'Oh, I'm sure she can sing well enough.' It turned out that she was the perfect singer for the kind of songs I was writing."

With bassist Gary Graf and

drummer Jason Harmon, Jordan and Verena founded **Semi Gloss**. On *Teenie*, a recent EP, and their album debut, due out on Dirt in May, they offer an intimate sound, with crystalline Telecaster lines and understated Farfisa organ pads. Even their most aggressive tracks, like "Wild For You" and "Eight Mile

lion Strong," go down smooth and easy.

"This one singer who opened for us said we sound like the Velvet Underground on Ecstasy instead of heroin," Mokriski laughs. "But I think we're tied to bands like the Ramones too. A lot of our riffs are punk but played at clean settings with brushes instead of sticks."

Delivered, of course, by a singer in elegant formal attire. "Well, I'm French," Verena explains. "And it helps me if everybody rushes toward me before the show and says, 'You look fabulous!' If I know that people at least think I look good, I can sing with confidence."

—Robert L. Doerschuk



World Radio History

Whether labeled Americana, country rock, or "hardcore honky-tonk," there's one description of the Raleigh-based **Backsliders** that incontestably sticks. Says guitarist and co-founder Steve Howell, "I guess the number one comment we get when we hit a new club is, 'Damn, you guys are loud!'"

What the Backsliders aren't is a bandwagon-sque alternative country act. "I've never owned an Uncle Tupelo record," marvels Howell at the bumper crop of twangcore bands that have surfaced in the wake of Wilco and Son Volt, "but all of a sudden you'd think these guys were the Beatles."

Recorded in eight days and mixed in five, *Throwing Rocks at the Moon* (Mammoth), the band's debut, showcases them as keepers of an older, fiercer country flame.

There's a hard-boiled eloquence in their tales of heartache and desolation, lust, murder, and drunken downfalls, all played with shaggy-haired heart and shit-kicking zeal. Their traditional influences range from Buck Owens to Gram Parsons, extended all the way to include the Rolling Stones, Jon Spencer, Elvis Costello, Dave Alvin, and the Blasters. "We're just as comfortable covering a Ramones tune as we are a George Jones song."

Though he shows a bit of enthusiasm for the currently hip, tight-suited Nashville anachronists BR 549, Howell points out that they may not be what country ultimately needs to break free from the grip of bland radio playlists. "The road they're on is a tough one. They're certainly mining that retro field, something we're avoiding. We don't grease our hair back in pompadours and dress like somebody who just stepped out of a time warp from 1954. We're just trying to take all our influences and turn 'em into something that's going on right now. Who knows? Maybe someone will emulate us in fifteen years." —Chris Smets



backsliders

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World Radio History



newsignings

The stakes for new signings are high. Even as they approach talent with unprecedented caution, the industry leaves few stones unturned in their search for the act that will turn business around. And when one stone starts looking pretty good to a lot of people, the currency for whatever's under it skyrockets and something like a gold rush begins.

So it was with Radish, a neo-grunge Texas trio led by a fifteen-year-old phenomenon named Ben Kweller. Backed by drummer John Kent, seventeen, and 29-year-old bassist Bryan Blus. Kweller rocks, no question. But the mystery with this band isn't musical; it's financial. By the time they made it to New York to play a series of showcases last year, Radish literally had the feds of the industry at their feet, waving contracts in their faces. How'd they do it?

Connections. For all of his gifts, Kweller might not have found himself fielding invitations to hang out with Madonna or visit Brian Wilson's house had his father not grown up with Nils Lofgren. Long before his sideman stints with Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen, the guitarist was playing his first rock gigs with Ben's dad Howie on drums. "I've known Ben his whole life," Lofgren says, "and by the time he was eleven or twelve

RADISH

DEBUT ALBUM:
RESTRAINING BOLT
LABEL:
MERCURY
RELEASE DATE:
APRIL 22

MUSICIAN

JUNE 1997

you could tell that his music was turning into something more than just a hobby. He could have made a career out of it even by the time he was thirteen."

When Lofgren got a copy of Radish's self-produced CD, *Dizzy*, in October 1995, he sent it to Roger Greenawalt, who had previously produced Lofgren and made a name for himself as an independent talent scout. "Ben was good at music but inartistic," the pro-

ducer recalls. "But there was something there, so I took a trip to Greenville to see if they had the capacity for the kind of commitment that stands cosmopolitan scrutiny. However, Ben's Kurt Cobain showed through too largely when I finally met him."

Even so, Greenawalt took some time to work with the band before going back to New York. On his return to Texas two months later to begin rehearsing the guys on a three-song

demo they had agreed to make with him, Greenawalt was, in his own words, "shocked. Ben had solved every, and I mean every, problem I had brought up. He was writing at a level where about half the time he came up with a solution as good as I would have found. Twenty-five percent of the time his solution would suck, and 25 percent it would be better than anything I could have done. His learning curve was eerie, Mozartean and freaky."

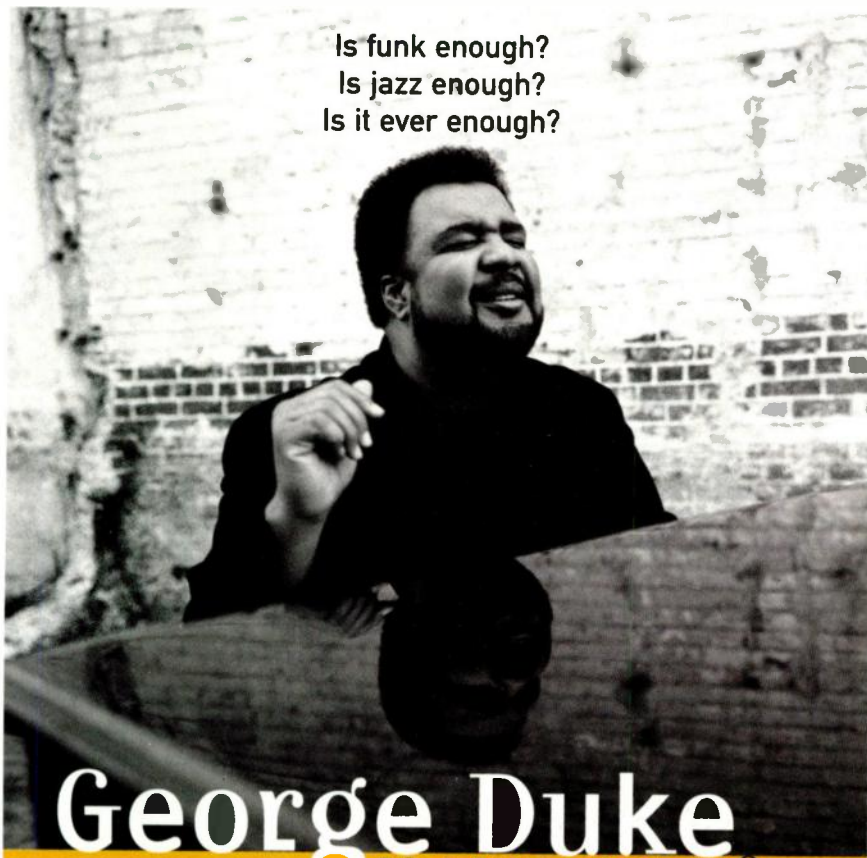
Subsequent sessions in New York confirmed Greenawalt's belief that Radish could make it. Once the demo was finished, the producer began blitzing the industry with copies and follow-up calls. In no time he had created a buzz that inspired major labels to concoct offers that one might consider disproportionate even for a band of this calibre.

Danny Goldberg, president of Mercury Records, was one of a crowd of label Olympians gathered at Don Hill's to hear Radish at one of their New York showcases. "There were more industry people there than normal fans," he recalls. "Maybe two or three times over the course of a year there's that much interest in a new artist."

Reports have been published that Radish eventually signed with Mercury for \$1 million; other sources quote a price as high as \$2.2 million. Kweiller shrugs off questions about his deal: "That was all rumors. I'm not gonna see anything until I'm eighteen anyway."

Goldberg also denies these reports. "If you want to add up all the things we're going to do to market the record, and add that onto the recording costs, the advances paid, the manufacturing, and all those things, you could get to a million dollars. But even on a launch of a new artist on a typical low-end deal, you're looking at least at half a million dollars before you even blink an eye."

Whatever the details of the deal are, a talented band can only benefit from the efforts of someone like Roger Greenawalt, whose efforts reportedly made this one of the hotter pro-artist contracts of recent times. "If you get a small deal, the label is gonna treat you like crap—and if you get a huge deal, they're gonna do the same. So if you're in a position as I've been with acts where you're dropped before the record even comes out, it's just better to come out of it with some money in the bank." —**Robert L. Doerschuk**



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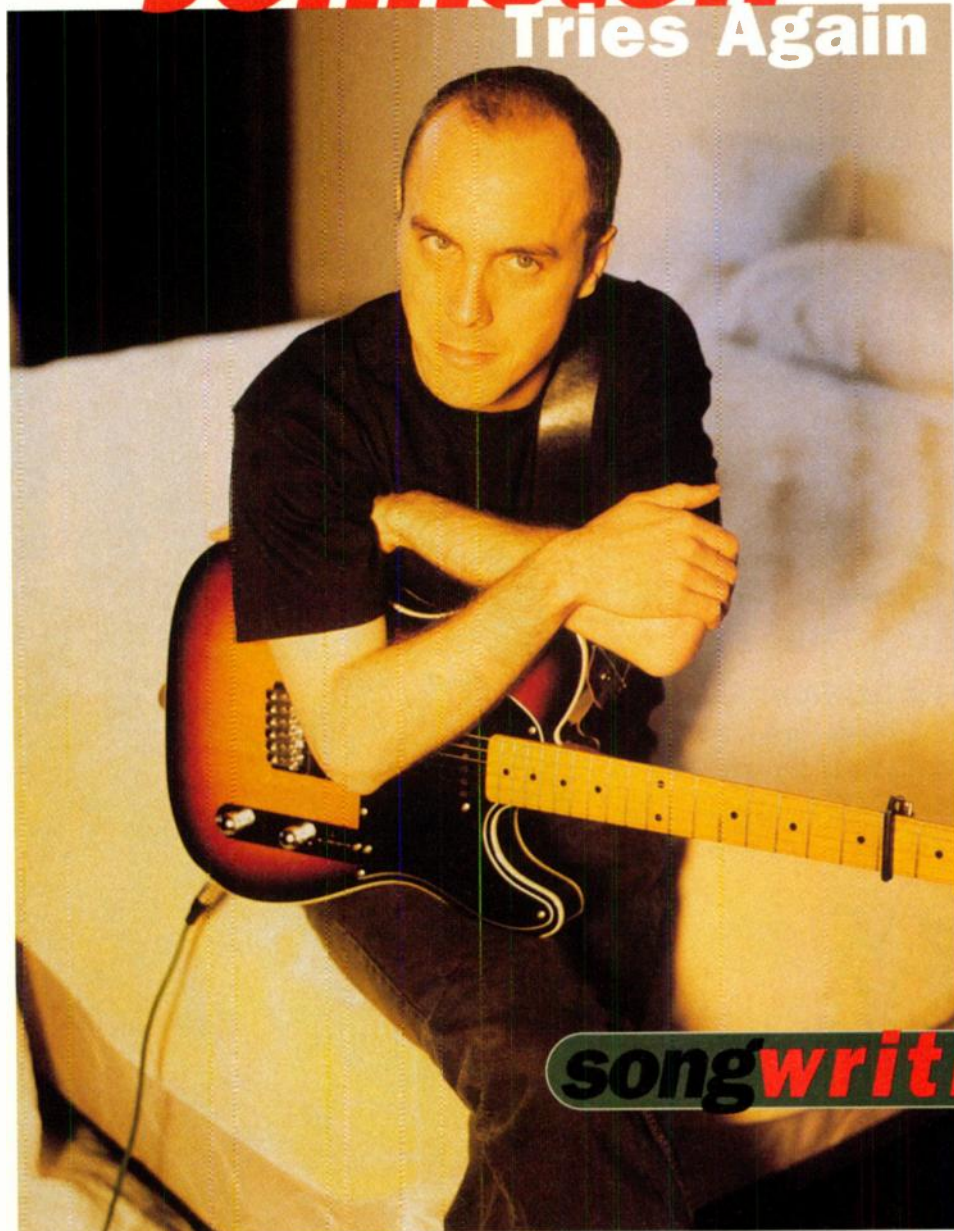
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what he
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Freedy Johnston

Tries Again

by mac randall



songwriting

To get at the essence of Freedy Johnston's songs, you don't need to do a lot of research. Just cue up "Trying to Tell You I Don't Know," the first track of his second album, *Can You Fly* (Bar/None, 1992). The song's been widely celebrated because of its opening line ("Well, I sold the dirt to feed the band") and its basis in reality—Johnston did sell the family farm in Kansas to finance his musical career. But more interesting for our purposes is what it says Johnston's doing now that he's sold the dirt: "Trying to sing what I can't say/Trying to throw my head away/Trying to cry with a red light on/Trying to tell you I don't know."

Three of those four lines throw a lot of light on the songwriting process, not just Johnston's, but every songwriter's. We sing it because it's too hard to say it; in order to sing it right, we have to get rid of our overly self-critical tendencies; and even when we do sing it right, we don't get any answers from it—we've just found a new way of

looking at the question. The remaining line—the one about crying with a red light on—describes a terrain that's more exclusively Johnston's. For on most of his songs, he is crying; the characters he creates are nearly always in turmoil, and devastating loss and sadness lurks either in the past or somewhere on the horizon.

But it would be misleading to say that Freedy paints every subject in somber gray. Another line, this one from "I Can Hear the Laughs," the closing track on *This Perfect World* (Elektra, 1994), adds a crucial detail: "I can hear the laughs/And it hurts so bad I have to smile." Even Johnston's saddest lyrics—especially his saddest ones—smile at us. The smile is, of course, the glorious pop melody to which the lyrics come attached. Rarely have such downhearted words been wedded to such life-affirming music. To say the results are bittersweet is obvious; to say they're also transporting is not an overstatement.

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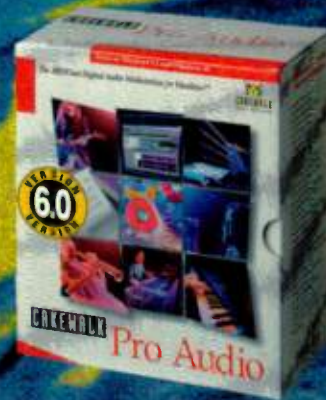
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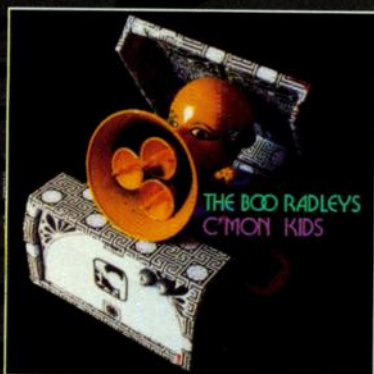
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World Radio History

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the low-down,
baby left me,
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behind every one of Freedy Johnston's songs. But we'll leave the elucidation of that to the songwriter himself, who spoke with us shortly before the release of his finest collection yet, *Never Home* (Elektra).

Your singing on the new album is the smoothest it's ever been, but with urgency.

Three, or maybe more, of the vocals I did at home. We redid some tracks later on because I'd rewritten lyrics or written new ones. So I took dubs home on ADAT and did vocals and guitar there. Some of the more, as you say, urgent-sounding ones were done there, and I realized how little I usually put out when I'm making demos. I just [*in hushed tones*] kind of sing the song, and that's it. But for this I was singing for the record, and I was *singing loud*. I'd do it in the middle of the day, take the cans off and think, "My neighbors must be so tired of this," because I'd been singing the same lyrics loud for an hour and a half. Very different from singing on demos.

You've always written songs onto tape, so to speak.

Yeah, I was always the loner songwriter in a room with my four-track. I was never a band-oriented guy. I didn't know how to deal with a band—I was self-taught, so I couldn't speak music-ese, and it seemed like the band could never get what I had in my head right.

Is your home studio complicated?

No, just an ADAT and a Mackie, like everyone else. And I want one ADAT, not two—I don't want to get too far into it. I just sprung for a MiniDisc four-track, and I love it. But the most valuable recorder I have is my little mini-cassette recorder, 'cause that's where the first ideas are put down. It's for dictating, not music; if you can get a song across on one of those things, that says something about the song. I'm learning how to record with the built-in condenser mic—you have the amp here, and you keep your mouth this close to it, and then you get a good mix. But I need the ability to do full-fledged demos at home, because I want to be able to relate the song arrangement in my head to the band, rather than go into the studio and say, "Oh, play a drum beat like this." Especially with the bass line, and if there's supposed to be a guitar riff, I want to have at least first crack at coming up with it.

You must have lots of tapes.

I have all these scratch tapes that I'll be going through for my life, using either as parts for other songs or who knows what.

All of it's written on guitar?

That's all I play. On one or two songs, I've written the bassline first. But now I have a four-string tenor guitar that I bought at the New York Guitar Show as a novelty, and I ended up writing and playing three of the new songs on it—"Gone to See the Fire," "Western Sky," and "He Wasn't Murdered." I just tuned it to something like a tenor banjo: A-E-B-F#. It's capoed up on the record too, so it sounds like a mandolin. Basically, that sound made those songs possible.

So the toughest thing...

...is to get the damn lyrics done. That's my cross to bear. But that's fine. It's a job, but it's a good job. And I'm getting better at putting in the time ... before the deadline, although I don't want to pat myself on the back about it. I did get the record done, that's the best thing I can say.

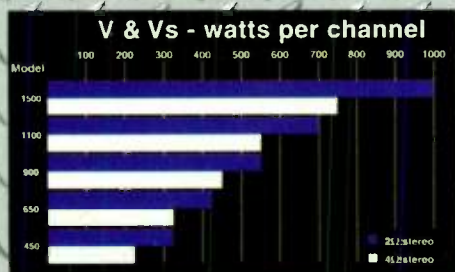
How much did the lyrics get revised this time?

I don't know percentage-wise. A lot of it was single lines, single words. There are some songs where a line or word was sung at home. Sonically you wouldn't know it, because we flew a lot of stuff in using Pro Tools. I couldn't have finished the record without that, because having to slice and dice two-inch tape—it would be too much.

Most of your songs deal with characters that we see only at a pivotal moment. Do you have a sense of what happens to them before and after that moment?

I don't think about that too much, because I focus on what's going on then. I think about how they look, how they act. I see the room they're in. I have a video for every song in my head. It's important for me to have that. It's like the way scientists use virtual reality gloves to figure out how molecules are built. They have these models of molecules that they can feel, so they can see how the different parts go together. I need to be in that virtual reality world of the song to put it together, to see the sky or the window over there. It's not like a film that I'm watching. I'm in it. And if I want to see that room again, I can always go there.

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private lesson

Tony Williams

Wisdom & Technique

by ken micallef

The late Tony Williams' drumming was a perpetual study in grace and power, from explosive tom-tom flurries to a time feel that was weighty yet propulsive, like a fully-fueled zeppelin soaring at breakneck speed. "For my time feel I listened to Art Blakey, Philly Joe Jones, and Jimmy Cobb," he told us, one morning early this year. "If you listen to their early records and understand how they played the time, it's a straight line. You have to be able to play time, above all things, as completely consistent.

You have to play the ride cymbal; that is the center of the universe. Everything is secondary to my right hand playing the ride cymbal."

Williams was passionate over areas of technique that he saw often abused. The jazz ride cymbal pattern, traditional stick grip, and upper body movement: For Williams these fundamentals were all-important.

"I used to practice everything without changing the cymbal beat," he said, rolling a fat Cuban cigar between thick, muscular fingers. "You play the ride pattern consistently, then play the other things without changing that. If you can only play by constantly mixing up the ride cymbal beat pattern, you'll never sound good. And you have to hold the stick with the back fingers—all the fingers, all the time, never letting the last fingers come off the stick. Letting those fingers drop off the stick sucks big time."

Though Tony's drumming was volatile and forceful, he seemed to use very little energy when playing. His arms were relaxed, his

torso straight. "When you play, it's important to not move the upper body in time," he explained. "A lot of guys, especially Jeff Watts, are always moving their body when they play. When you see him you're supposed to think, 'Wow, he's really swinging.' It's not true; it's wasted energy. That takes the focus away from your hands, and the more you take away from your hands, the less you're going to play."

In his final days, Williams was working on a fifteen-part video series "documenting how to play the American dance band drum set ... The drum set is an American invention, but the accordion is afforded more dignity than the drum set. I'm doing this so when drummers want to know how to play in the year 2138, it will be there, explained for them. A lot of the knowledge is disappearing; many of the authentic players are dying. I'm going to be gone one day too, so I want to document everything I've learned. You have to learn not only what a guy played, but why he played it."

The program begins with Drumming 101. "I teach guys how to hold the stick. I send them out with these exercises; they have to come back and be able to play them without shaking their head, without moving their arms, without tapping their feet. And it has to be traditional grip. Something happens when you hold the stick with the traditional grip. You

play certain things that you won't think of with matched grip. If you can't play traditional grip, you're denying yourself an ability."

When I raised my hands in what I intended to be the traditional grip, Williams corrected me, moving them into position so that the hands are a straight extension of the arms. "When you hold the sticks it should be like you're shaking hands.

Final words from a giant of jazz drums

It's straight lines; I teach straight lines. It's the same with the ride cymbal; that means evenness all across the set. When I say 'Lift your hands up,' your arms are straight, not angled or bent. That's all you need to do to play."

Picking up a pair of Zildjian Tony Williams sticks (2B size), he sat behind his red and yellow DW drums, complete with three floor toms, and played a series of exercises that address dexterity, consistency, and smoothness. For Example A he rolled up and down his three floor toms in tempos that range from slow to a hypnotically fast blur. Example B is similar, with added snare drum.

"You have to play these exercises for at least ten minutes, at different tempos and volume levels," he explained. "Consistency is the name of the game when you play any instrument. To be able to sound in half an hour the same that you sounded the first time you played it, that's consistency."

Is there a way to adapt these exercises to two mounted toms and one floor tom? Williams acquiesced and played Examples C through G. They seem simple enough, a similar pattern that goes through minor variations. Then Tony ratcheted up the difficulty level. "In clinics I will play the patterns in eighth-note triplet form. Then I go into sixteenth-note triplets, then thirty-second-note triplets. It's all in time. Don't do things faster; faster doesn't get you anywhere. You have to play in time, in context. Pick a meter and play it, then triple it. Do it in eighth-note triplets, sixteenth-note triplets, thirty-second-note triplets. Don't play arbitrarily faster or slower. It has to be in time."

Williams snapped his fingers,

then continued. "The goal is to play clearly. If you don't, you're not expressing yourself; you're not playing something that people can hear. When I first recorded myself playing as a kid, I thought, 'This is not what I played. It sounds nothing like that.' I realized that you have to play things that are clear to you so they will be clear to somebody else. That seems to be one of the things that people like

played a certain way because of those guys. I wasn't playing around in a vacuum; I reacted to those situations. People forget the times when those records were made."

Unlike many prodigies who have

A MM = 60-180 All alternate sticking

LT RT FT1 FT2 FT3

R L R L R L R L *simile*

B

LT snare RT FT1 FT2 FT3

C On snare and two mounted toms, one floor tom

snare LT RT FT1

D

E

F

G

LT = left tom
RT = right tom
FT1 = first floor tom
FT2 = second floor tom
FT3 = third floor tom

LT ○ RT ○ FT3 ○ FT2 ○ FT1 ○

about my playing, what they call precision. What it is, is clarity."

Recalling the clarity that sparked his work with Miles, his own Lifetime records, and many quintet albums. Williams spoke candidly: "Many people want to hear me as I played with Miles. They think that was my best work. Well, I'm not playing with Miles anymore. I



lost their way and plunged into obscurity or worse, Williams knew how to guard his gift. "From when I was a child, I have been an impressionable person. A lot of artists don't like to look around, because you get influenced and then you start becoming a caricature of yourself. But I've always wanted to dump stuff. I've had to say to myself, 'If I'm not going to play that figure in that spot anymore, what am I going to play?' You have to come up with a new view of things. I play music because of that feeling I get when I play. I don't want to lose that."

Tony Williams died February 23 from a heart attack. Contributions to his surviving wife and mother can be made c/o the Tony Williams Memorial Fund, Box 1429, Pacifica, CA 94044.

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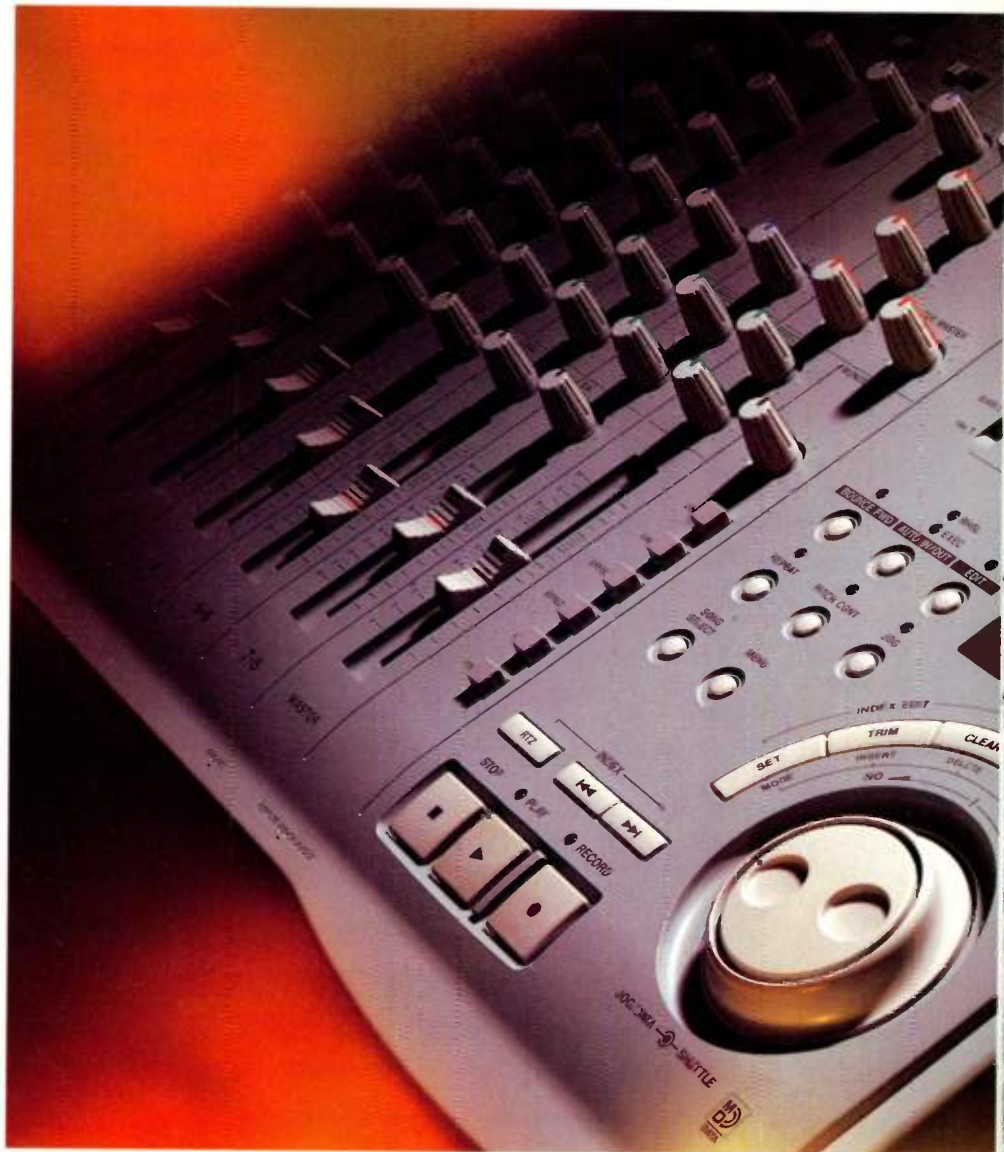


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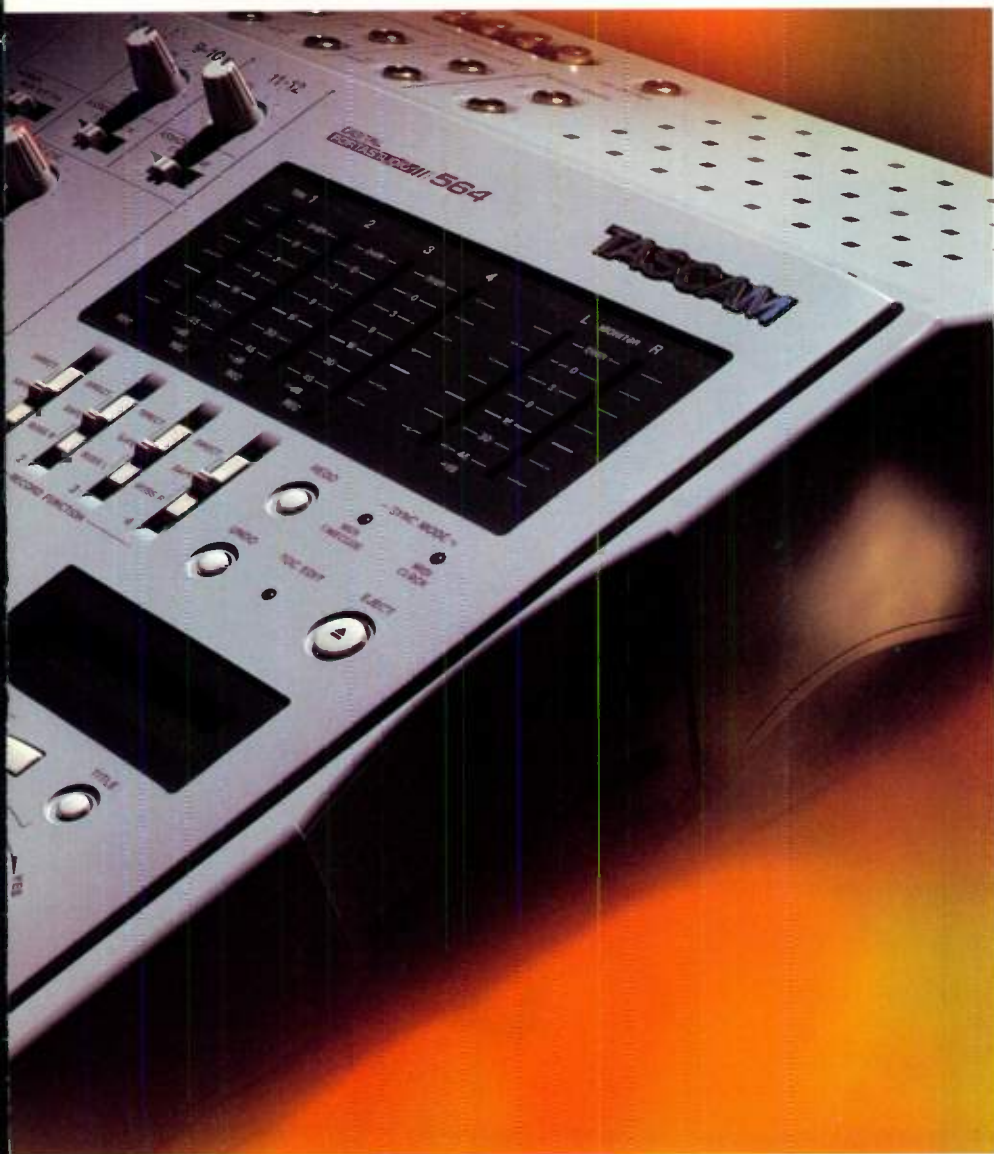
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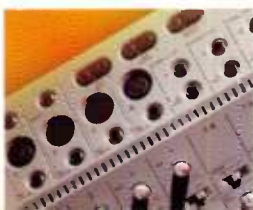


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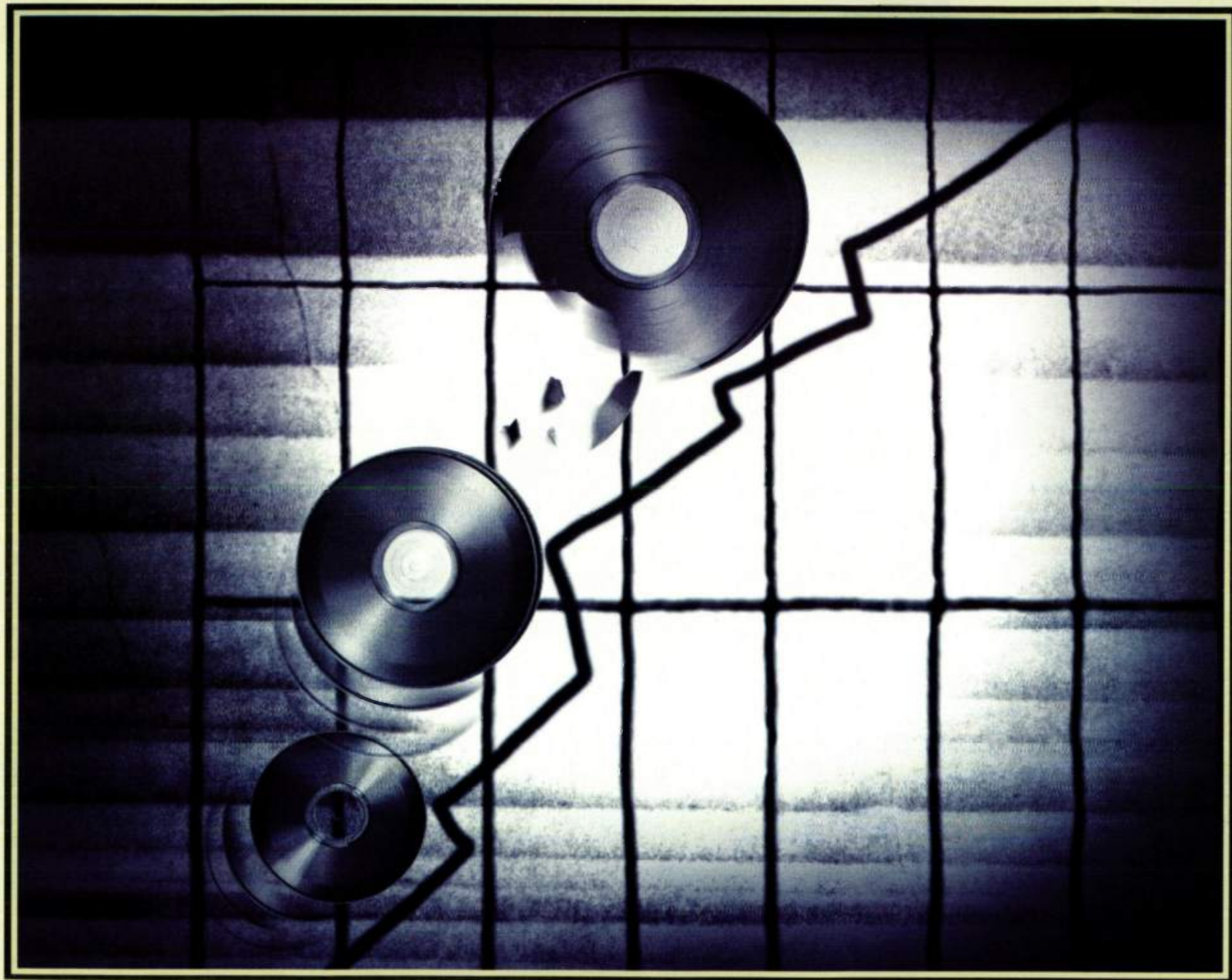
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PICKING UP PIECES

**After
ten years of
unbroken
success, the
record industry
wonders:
Are the good
times over?**

**By Chris Morris
Photographs By William Duke**

1996 was the year the record business stood still. The numbers told a sobering tale. According to *SoundScan*, which supplies data for *Billboard's* weekly charts, album sales were almost perfectly flat: 616.6 million records were sold in '96, versus 616.3 million in '95. Figures supplied by the Recording Industry Association of America were nearly as depressing: Domestic shipments in all recording formats—the measure of the industry's overall annual worth—were valued at \$12.5 billion, an increase of only 1.7 percent.

This virtual standstill served as a stunning exclamation point to a decade of explosive growth. Back in 1987 unit shipments were valued at only \$5.5 million. For nearly ten years after that, a euphoric expansion took place, fueled to a large degree by the growth of the compact disc market on the one hand and by the eruption of the alternative rock business during the early Nineties on the other.

Obviously this kind of success can't last forever. But the perplex of economic figures and aesthetic imponderables that coursed through 1996—giant retail chains filing for bankruptcy, the underwhelming response to new records by old reliables like Pearl Jam and R.E.M., the fading interest in "alternative" bands with no genuine alternative in sight—led observers to comparisons with 1979, the year disco went bust and brought a period of high-flying industry activity to an end.

Did 1996 signal the harbinger of worse times to come, or was it just an inevitable plateau following a decade of unmatched success? A survey of reports from retail, radio, major and indie label representatives, and MTV, suggests that the answer has more to do with whether one sees the glass as half empty or half full. But it's clear that the problems that currently infest the music business have been building for a long time. Barring the unlikely if much-hoped-for arrival of a savior along the lines of Nirvana, they're not going away anytime soon.

The Crisis at Retail

Over the past twelve months several big chains—Camelot Music, Wherehouse Entertainment, Strawberries, and Musicland—have

either filed for bankruptcy or appear ready to seek bankruptcy protection. (See sidebar on page 34) And the word on every record wholesaler's lips in 1996 was "returns." Overstocked chains, many of which were closing unprofitable stores to stay their losses, flooded distributors with albums returned for credit. Some returns bounced back into warehouses after retailers' "price and position" campaigns—in which labels actually buy space in store displays and on consumer listening posts—failed to attract sales.

Andy Allen, president of Alternative Distribution Alliance (ADA), Warner Music Group's three-year-old independent distribution company, gives some indication of the magnitude of the crisis: "The first six months of the year, we had tremendous returns; they actually began in November of the previous year. It was, to that point, pretty unheard of to get returns in November and December, when forty percent of the business is done. So we knew then that we were going to have trouble in the first part of '96, and we did."

Alicia Rose, general manager of the aggressive young independent distribution company the Northwest Alliance of Independent Labels (NAI), pinpoints the root of the problem: "It's easy to place records, but it's not easy to sell through records. Major labels have the power to place records in the marketplace and then, if the record is worth its salt, it usually will sell through. If it's not, they'll get 'em back. Part of the problem last year was that people put out a lot of shitty records."

Record companies put out a lot of records, period. In 1995 the RIAA estimated that about 27,000 different albums were released on labels large and small, a figure that probably grew in '96. But only 56 of those albums totaled sales of a million or more. That's a lot of leftovers.

If these problems weren't enough, retailers were rattled by price competition from so-called "white goods" chains like Best Buy and Circuit City, which under-sold conventional music chains on the best-selling and thus most profitable new titles, turning these records into "loss leaders" to draw consumers into stores.

Mike Drees, chief operating officer of

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The question isn't whether giant record store chains have gotten too big too fast and now stand at the brink of collapse. The question is, should anyone care?

"Retail is in trouble," admits Tower Records executive Stan Goman, who proceeds to collar the usual suspects: dwindling profit margins, cookie-cutter alternative bands pushed by major labels, and lowball pricing by combination hardware/software retailers like Best Buy.

But the real problem is that the growth of enormous, impersonal record chains helped create a climate that's at odds with what made record stores attractive in the first place. Indeed, rising national chains like Best Buy and Border's Books, Music and Café have set their sights on luring upscale baby boomers by catering to their comfort zones. For Best Buy the attraction is pricing and the convenience of shopping for

audio and electronics equipment as well. For Borders it's a cozy environment that bundles music, books, magazines, and coffee.

All this adds up to a challenge for the traditional record retailer. And there's more competition on the horizon. Jason Olin, a Brown University graduate, launched CDnow in August '94 with \$387 worth of sales on the Internet. In '97 Olin expects to gross \$12-\$18 million. The CDnow Web site (<http://cdnow.com>) provides a virtual environment, including artist biographies, album reviews and ratings, references to similar artists who might interest the consumer, news groups, chat rooms, and links to music sites on the 'Net.

Part of CDnow's strength is its ability to build a comprehensive database on every customer who visits the site while delivering any piece of ordered product—from CD to vinyl record to T-shirt to import LP—within 24 hours. Customer service is just as important in cyberspace as it is in the old-fashioned "brick and mortar," according to Olin: "We're able to tear you apart, figure out what you want, and put the correct product in your hands. If someone buys from us

once, they'll buy from us forever."

Full-scale digital delivery of music is definitely on the way. "Everybody should be making some arrangement to be part of that process," says Ron Phillips, vice-president for purchasing with the Sacramento-based national indie distributor/wholesaler Valley One-Stop, which fulfills orders for CDnow and N2K's Music Boulevard online sites.

Still, Olin doesn't see a mass exodus from the labels anytime soon. "The artist creates the music, the manufacturer makes the CD, the record label and distributor know how to get the music onto the radio and into the stores, and the retailer knows how to get it into the hands of the consumer. Each of these layers provides an expertise which comes at a cost."

Retail veterans like Goman and Phillips believe that opportunities remain for well-run,

small chains that cater to a tastemaker clientele. "These are the people who got into retail because they are passionate about the music," says Phillips. "And they generally attract a more loyal group of customers. There are independent retailers who break records but aren't given the support or attention because they aren't *SoundScan* reporters."

Goman insists the industry needs to go a little faster to midline pricing, retain the cassette format as a budget item, and take a stand on lowball pricing before retail can experience a turnaround. And if that doesn't work ...

"When I started out in retail, records were sold in departments of other stores," says Goman. "At worst, records can go back to being carried by places like Wal-Mart, Price Club, Best Buy, or Costco. Difference is, back then, they weren't a loss leader."

Concludes Valley's Phillips, "People will never quit buying music. We just have to be smarter at how we're approaching it. That goes for the labels as well as the retailers: If anyone needs to cut their overheads, it's the labels."

Contributors: Roy Trakin is senior editor of *Hits* magazine.

Record Stores Battle For Survival

By Roy Trakin

the Boston-based Newbury Comics chain, observes that the chains dug their own grave by blithely giving the electronics mass merchants an opening: "To allow a one-year or two-year price war to knock the major players out of the industry is ridiculous. Why didn't they have the financial strength and the merchandising strength and the wherewithal to figure out tactics to combat that? The answer was that [the chains] were expanding at a breakneck pace with things that probably wouldn't have worked even if these white-goods people hadn't existed."

Is Alternative Rock Kaput?

But perhaps even more alarming to industry observers than the problems experienced by retail chains in '96 was the marketplace eclipse of "alternative" rock, which had been the music business' cash cow since '91, when the breakthrough of Nirvana's *Nevermind* led to an orgy of signings of punk-oriented bands by major labels. Of the ten top-selling albums last year, only two—No Doubt's *Tragic Kingdom* (4.4 million) and Oasis' '95 release (*What's the Story? Morning Glory?* (2.6 million)—fell into the alternative rock genre.

Two highly anticipated releases, R.E.M.'s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi* (released after the band's reported \$80 million re-signing with Warner Bros.) and Pearl Jam's *No Code*, were viewed as major flops: While both sold in excess of a million units, they disappeared off the charts in less than six months.

Mark Kates, the Geffen/DGC A&R executive whose acts include Beck, Hole, Sonic Youth, and Elastica, says, "There are no more rules like, 'Oh, they sold two million last time, so we should at least go gold [500,000 sales].' Not anymore."

Alternative rock's plummeting stock has triggered a lot of soul searching among label execs—many of them vital to the commercial ascent of the style as young A&R scouts—and among radio and video programmers. Some of those intimately involved with the development of the genre think that things may have gotten too big too fast, leading to careers that burned brightly but burned out rapidly.

Bill Gamble, program director at the powerhouse Chicago alternative rock station WKQX (Q101), says, "The life cycle [of a band these days] is unlike anything I'd ever seen. It has accelerated: 'Oh, who's Green Day?' 'They're a four-million-plus band.' Boom. And then, 'Who are they again?'"

Radio's embrace of modern rock spurred the labels to play a new game by old rules. The record companies signed a horde of alternative-sounding bands,

which they proceeded to market by ramming a radio-friendly song through the commercial alternative format. This led to the rapid ascent and subsequent disappearance of a legion of groups—Weezer, Nada Surf, and perhaps even Nerf Herders, last month's New Signings, perceived by many as the Nineties equivalent of yesteryear's "one-hit wonders."

The Outpost label's Mark Williams, whose signings at Virgin included the very successful Smashing Pumpkins, notes,



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"The explosion of the modern rock radio format created a necessity for programming, to the point that they reacted to pop-song-oriented singles, and therefore record companies were all too glad to feed that. The fallout is that you're not left with anything of substance. You're left with a song that's great on the radio, and if somebody's driving around in their car and punching buttons it sounds nice. But does it inspire them to go spend \$15.98 to explore the rest of the album? The public's tastes have gotten a little more sophisticat-

ed, to the point where they want more. The blame can come back to the record companies: We sign too many acts without putting the proper development into them."

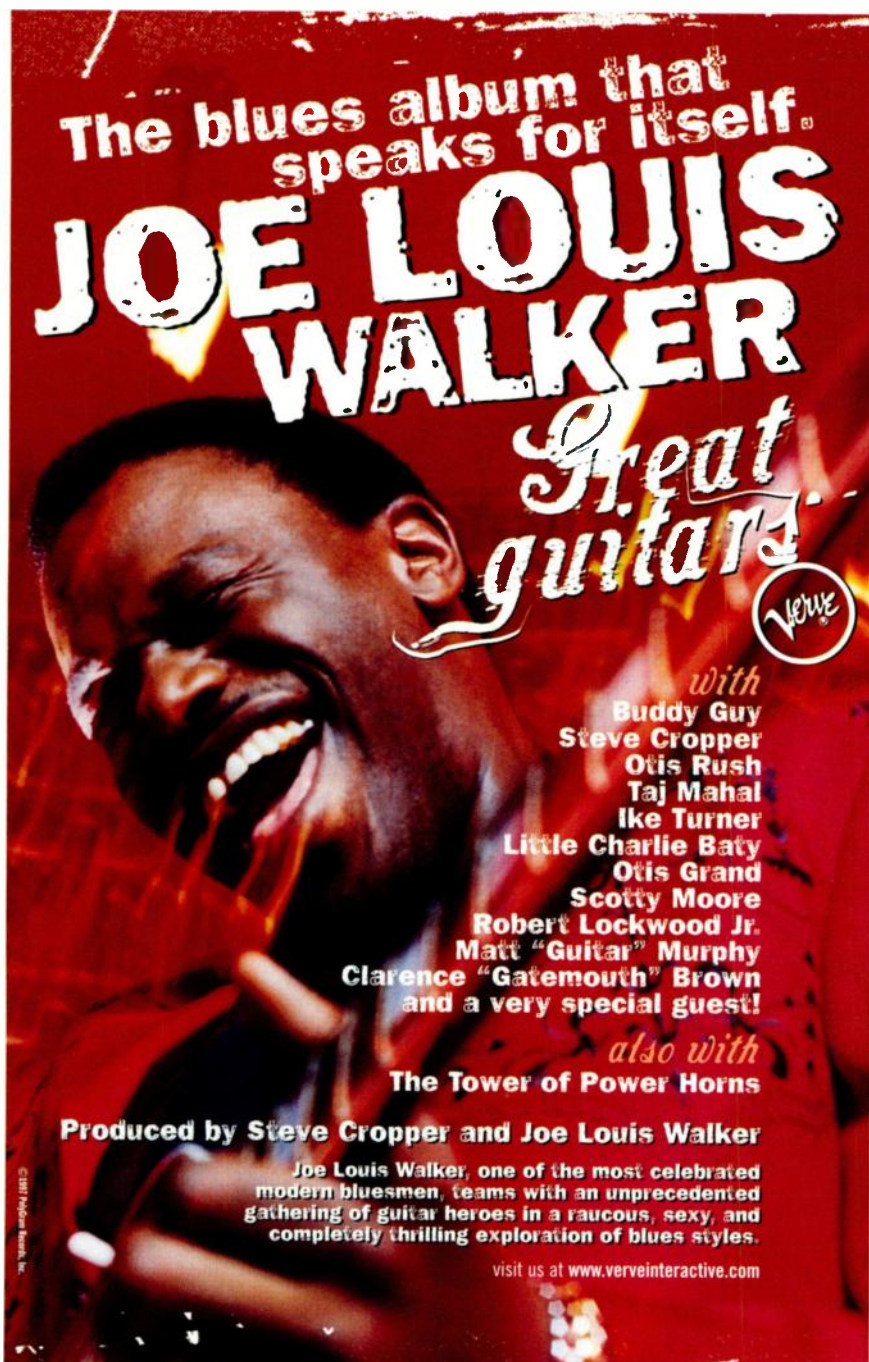
Mark Kates—whose biggest act, Beck, had to fight the perception that he was a one-hit wonder after his '94 top-ten breakthrough *Loser*—says, "We're all very lazy in this business. We think that things can turn around with one song, and they can, but it doesn't happen as often as we'd like to believe it does. When the

radio format started to expand exponentially and to go into cities where, to me, it was questionable that you could buy some of these records, let alone find anybody who cared about them, it was bound to flatten out. To be honest with you, I'm surprised it hasn't flattened out more."

As alternative rock grew more and more to become radio's answer to pop, its growth led to a suffocating homogeneity on the record dial. "I think the most played record last year was [Dishwalla's] 'Counting Blue Cars,'" Gamble says. "It's a great song, but it's played on [the alternative] format, it's on the light stations, it's on the rock stations. We used to have a saying that if it's on the station that your mom or your grandma listens to, maybe it shouldn't be on an alternative radio station. I'd go up and down the dial in Chicago and say, 'Okay, there are *literally seven stations* playing 'Counting Blue Cars.' What's going on here?"

By late '96 it was apparent to many that the alternative rock format had maxed out. The best bellwether of an imminent change in generic direction within the industry emanated from MTV. In early November, the music channel's president, Judy McGrath, formally announced sweeping changes in the network's programming to attendees at *Billboard's* annual Music Video Conference in San Francisco. At the time, McGrath told the trade paper's music video editor Brett Atwood, "We feel like we've ridden the alternative/hip-hop, Kurt Cobain/Dr. Dre family tree pretty far. There's still plenty of good things happening in those formats, but we feel it is time to see what else is out there."

MTV executive vice president of programming Andy Schuon echoes McGrath's comments today: "The alternative cycle seemed to be softening. We felt like '97 was going to be a time of exploration in the music business, and we felt like we had to widen our net, add shows like *The Amp*, put [the new left-field satellite channel] M2 on MTV, play more things, and sort of facilitate the next big thing so that when it comes along we'll be there for it. In the next ninety days we'll be rolling out the rest of our new music programming. It represents a total revamp of the channel and the way we present music."



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The new MTV programming will include *Indie Outing*, focusing on indie-label bands; a "mosh show," *Enter the Pit*; and *Popular Videos People Prefer*, focusing on pop music videos.

The New Buzz: Electronic Music

If any of MTV's fresh programming can be viewed as a harbinger of things to come, it is *The Amp*, a late-night block devoted to electronic music.

While electronica and techno have been bubbling outside of the mainstream for a decade as part of the underground rave scene, the precipitous commercial downturn of alternative rock has led many industry pros to believe—or pray—that some form of electronic music will prove the salvation of a stagnant industry.

With songs like "Setting Sun" by the Chemical Brothers (featuring vocals by Noel Gallagher of Oasis) and the Prodigy's "Firestarter" garnering airplay on modern rock stations, an A&R stam-

pede to sign electronic acts has already begun. The highest-profile signing to date has been former indie act the Prodigy, which signed a reportedly multimillion-dollar contract with Madonna's Maverick Records early this year. One tip sheet's A&R columnist sneeringly noted that talent reps whose strong suit is modern rock bands will soon be as obsolete as the scouts who signed big-hair metal bands in the late Eighties.

But even the executives who are actively recruiting electronic bands for their labels admit that these acts may not have the jump-start impact for which some observers hope. Kates, a self-confessed Anglophile, says, "Over the course of the last year I've gotten very caught up in the electronic stuff, which I think is dangerous. We all want to know what the solution is, but it's never that simple. Just like Elastica and Oasis didn't save the music business, I don't think the Prodigy and the Chemical Brothers will either. But at least they give us somewhere to look."

The Outpost has signed electronic unit Crystal Method and has a venture with the electronic label City of Angels. But Mark Williams remains guarded about the genre's prospects: "Electronic music has been around for a long time. Right now the climate is such that it has the best chance it's ever had to take the next step forward, but whether any of these acts have a chance to sell more than a million records, that remains to be seen."

"I don't think, however, that in any way it's going to replace rock bands," he continues. "There is a large majority segment of the population that loves rock & roll. As everyone is proclaiming the death of rock as we know it, we're having our most success yet with Veruca Salt, which went completely the other way and made a big, bombastic rock record [*Eight Arms to Hold You*], using Bob Rock, one of the most successful producers of the Eighties."

Bettina Richards, who operates the small but widely admired Chicago indie label Thrill Jockey, is even more skeptical about electronic music. "You know what's gonna happen," she remarks. "They're going to drop *en masse* all these rock bands, talented or not talented, and move on to gobble up everything that's made



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World Radio History

with a synthesizer. If you chase after the 'next big thing' and figure that if you gobble up as much as you can something's going to hit—which is not every label's attitude but probably [that of] many—well, you might put out something good but, sticking out that fishnet, you're going to get all the garbage floating around too."

But Richards, a former A&R rep for Atlantic (where she signed Eleventh Dream Day, now a Thrill Jockey act) and London (where she handled the Meat Puppets), also releases work by such forward-looking acts as the electronic group Rome, and has issued sets by the electronic acts Oval and Microstoria through a licensing agreement with the German label Mille Plateau. "MTV is now playing the Oval video [on *The Amp*], which blows my mind," she says. "I can't see that happening, because they have no vocals or structure. It's not radio-friendly at all, and many people would not even find it user-friendly."

Beyond the potential breakthrough of electronic styles, some believe that simple pop music, like that of England's prefabricated Spice Girls, could be the shape of

things to come. "In its own weird way, that could be fresh," Williams admits. "Back to the fun and back to simple pop songs for pop radio and the general public."

Programmer Gamble agrees: "What am I betting on this year? Pop records again."

Back to Square One

As the industry's major players sort through the consequences of thinking big through the late Eighties and early Nineties, many onlookers suggest that there is much to be learned from thinking small. Some, in fact, offer the opinion that avoiding the major label game entirely and growing out of the independent sector is the best insurance for the long-term health of an artist or a band.

Mike Dreese, whose retail firm operates its own Wicked Disc label, points to Ani DiFranco, the much-covered singer/songwriter who has rejected the blandishments of major labels and stuck with her own independently distributed imprint, Righteous Babe Records. "There's a model for success," Dreese says. "That comes on making money the old-fashioned way, touring 150 dates a year. It's not about labels making a *Firestarter* video. That's lost on kids who've been given \$50,000 in advances on publishing deals when they're 22 years old. The expectations of the artists are just so overblown."

For bands who stand at the edge of a record deal, he counsels, "If you're doing okay, try to build on that. Try to have an extra year on the road before you even try to do a major deal. The vast bulk of bands come out of the box way too early. There are bands that draw \$500,000 deals yet can't draw fifty people to a nightclub. That doesn't work for the average Joe, because that's only gonna happen to 100 bands a year, and there are two thousand being signed."

Distributor Alicia Rose of NAIL, whose company has grown in two years from a regional startup to a firm with national reach handling labels like Grand Royal, Epitaph, Time Bomb, and SST, urges neophyte musicians to keep going

on a local or regional level before racing toward the big time: "I get bands calling me all the time with their very first record, which basically isn't even a record; it's a glorified demo. They're all hell-bent on getting into chains. I tell them, 'Look, your records aren't going to sell if they're only in Musicland. Who goes to Musicland? Maybe your mom, but not anybody else you would know.' What you need to do is to focus on the stores that are going to take your records on consignment first. I would rather that a band build up its strength in the market by going to stores around the area, putting its records on consignment, and selling a hundred. If they can do that within six months, they're ready for a distributor."

"I ask bands for five undeniable reasons why I should carry their record," Rose adds. "Those five reasons aren't, 'We're great, we're really cool, our guitars are big, and we've got big hair.' The reasons are, 'I've had records on consignment at Tower in Seattle for the past six months and I've sold three hundred, we play shows every week and we sell out the biggest club in Seattle once a month at least every month, we tour constantly and we go into record stores to make sure they have our records ...' Those are the reasons I need."

In the end, according to Mark Williams, a combination of a sure-footed approach to signing talent and a tough-minded, realistic assessment of its approach to doing business will be essential to restoring health to the industry: "As long as record companies really get down and focus on finding the best long-term talent out there, that's where it has to start. Then we need as a business to start examining our practices and seeing how much of this we brought on ourselves, how much of this was over-extension, how much was coasting on some laurels and just letting things build up, not being very smart. Any good business, no matter what you're selling, has to take an honest look at itself every few years." ☛

Contributors Chris Morris is senior writer at Billboard, where he writes the weekly "Declarations of Independents" column.

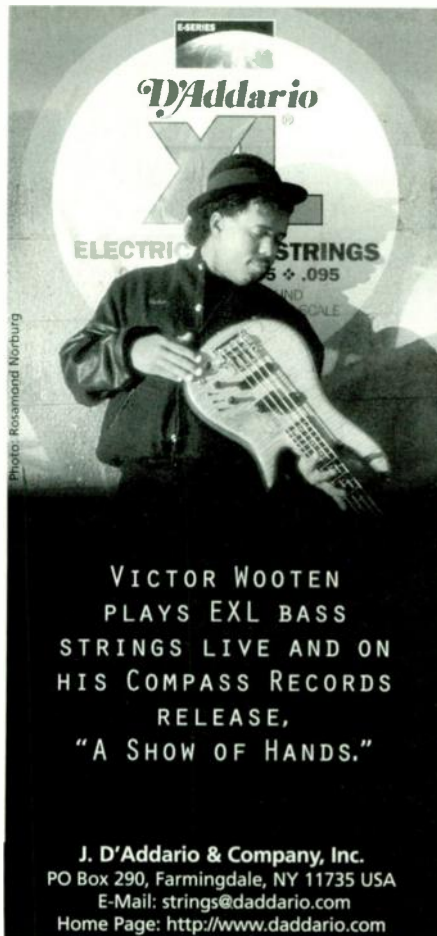


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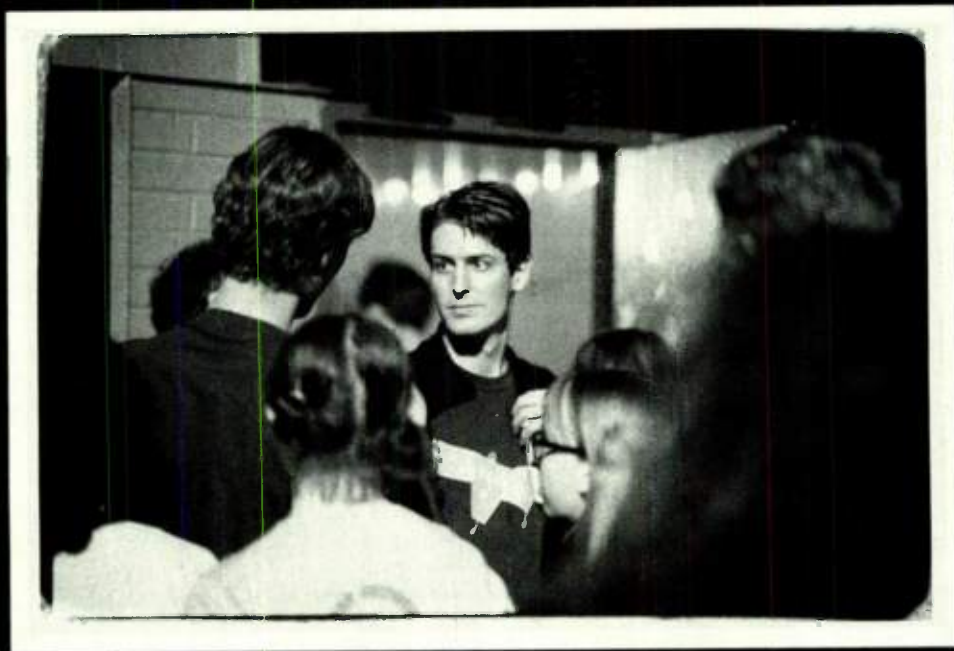


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walking on a wire

pavement's curious balancing act.

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD A PAVEMENT album all the way through was a memorable experience. I was riding shotgun in Trey Anastasio's Range Rover as we cruised down the back roads of Woodstock, N.Y. The flame-haired Phish guitarist felt like taking a break from recording sessions in nearby Bearsville; for some time, he'd been talking up the virtues of Pavement's second album, 1994's *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*, and when I told him I wasn't all that familiar with the band, he popped a copy into the tape deck and sang along with the winsome strains of "Gold Soundz" and "Range Life." "These guys are my favorite band right now," he yelled over the tunes. "They've just got that *thing*."

Strange, isn't it—a member of the planet's leading jam band going gaga over the planet's leading indie-rock underachievers. Yet maybe something else Anastasio said that day can help explain his infatuation. In reference to group improvisation, he mentioned how important it is not to be afraid to play

by mac randall

badly at times. He called it "embracing the concept of lameness."

Now this is important. For in a way, embracing the concept of lameness is exactly what Pavement do. Their singers can't really sing that well, their guitar players often sound out of tune with each other and themselves, their rhythm section is frequently hesitant, their songs lurch inelegantly from one idea or phrase to another, and they're legendary for playing sloppy

live shows. Yet they don't apologize for these failings. Instead, they embrace them, almost as if they were implicitly acknowledging that the moments that work (of which there are many) couldn't exist without the ones that don't.

Some might say—and have said—that Pavement go beyond merely embracing the concept of lameness, that they are in fact lame, and that they are lame on purpose. They're all talented players, the wisdom

goes, and Stephen Malkmus may be one of the best songwriters of his generation, but the band can't be bothered to actually sound good—because if they bothered, they'd lose their we're-too-cool hip cachet. Say that to any member of the band, though, and you'll get a vociferous denial. "It's just not true," says percussionist/key-boardist Bob Nastanovich. "That's been a great misconception. We're always trying hard to not make mistakes. There are plenty of flaws, but they're not intentional."

Pavement don't even mind the idea of turning into professional musicians—up to a point. "We want to become pros only in that we want to give the people their tickets' worth," drummer Steve West says. "You don't want to feel like you've short-changed the fans who paid money to see us. At the same time, I don't mind playing sloppy shows if they get across what we're about. We don't want to get *too* good at it, because then all the surprise is gone."

There's a sense of uncertainty behind these statements, a sense that here is a rock & roll band that doesn't want to behave like one. The five members of Pavement can't even be called a band as such. They don't hang out together much (and since none of them lives in the same state, it would be tough if they wanted to), and they're led, at least in spirit, by a fellow (Malkmus) who has severe problems with the idea of leading a band. Is it any wonder that their whole career is something of a balancing act? Fall over to the left, and you're slackers, with interesting ideas but lacking execution. Fall over to the right, and you're just another rock group, tight and well-rehearsed but missing that special spark of inspiration. How professional is too professional? That's the question at the core of Pavement. And it's a question that any rock band on the indie scene would do well to ponder.

When they first started, Pavement were more an idea than a band. They drew attention on the underground scene not for their live shows, but for their records: the odd bursts of noise cut by melody that made up their early EPs and singles (compiled on the 1993 Drag City disc *Westing by Musket and Sextant*) and the extended piece of six-string heaven that is *Slanted and*

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On tour in Seattle: Stephen Malkmus with hat

Enchanted, their 1992 debut album on Matador. Even the identity of the musicians was mysterious; at the time, Malkmus called himself "S.M." and fellow guitarist/singer/songwriter Scott Kannberg went by the more picturesque "Spiral Stairs."

Things began to change with the second full-length album, *Crooked Rain, Crooked Rain*, which garnered a great deal of press. One has to put this down at least in part to the rock-culture references peppered throughout—in the harsher light of hindsight, it will surely be seen as one of the more overrated records of the Nineties. Indeed, on a purely musical basis, both *Crooked Rain* and its followup, 1995's *Wowee Zowee*, are letdowns compared to the bright promise of *Slanted and Enchanted*, full of songs that start out magnificently but lose their opening fire within the first minute or so.

Such is not the case with the band's latest release, *Brighten the Corners*. West calls it "the first real Pavement album," and it's easy to see why: For the first time in their history, the full five-piece band recorded together in the same room at the same time. Not only that, but they rehearsed the songs at West's house for several weeks beforehand (between bouts of barbecuing, croquet, and computer golf). You can hear the difference—this is the most together

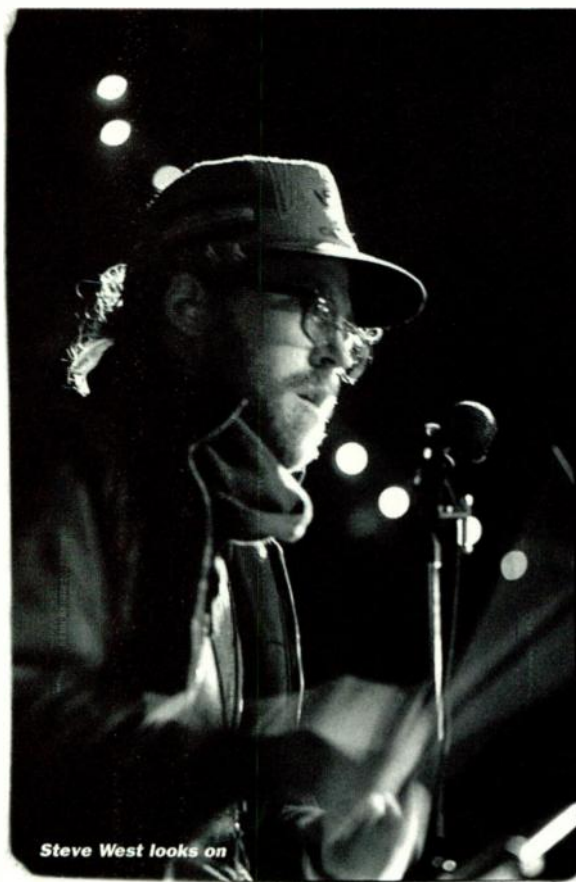
Pavement's ever been on plastic.

Certainly, recording with the legendary Mitch Easter at his studio in North Carolina didn't hurt. (The Pavement boys nobly refrained from asking Easter too

more uptempo tracks from the running order because he was dissatisfied with West's performance. In his own defense, West says, "It's hard to record with four other people playing at the same time, some of whom are just learning the song. If you get the basic feel of the drum tracks, you should stop, not keep going and lose the freshness because someone else might be able to do their part better. [Bassist] Mark [Ibold] or Scott can overdub their parts later. I can't."

Malkmus now rationalizes his decision to excise the fast songs by saying, "Trying to capture energy in a studio is so fake. That's why we ended up playing slower stuff, because it sounds better in the studio. A lot of the energy's from the give and take of an audience and from being nervous. I don't feel that nervous in a studio."

Nastanovich, who considers himself more a live contributor than a studio player and has been absent



Steve West looks on

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from most previous Pavement recording sessions, says he was "a bit more involved" this time. "I always play some stuff, and then I leave it up to the others whether they want to use it. Sometimes they tell me what to play. I trust their tastes. A lot of times I'm just cheering them on."

Listeners who are new to Pavement may be initially struck by Malkmus' lyrics, which throw together a dizzying number of cultural namechecks and enigmatic

asides, making a whole that's not often linear but always witty. According to the composer, however, words are usually an afterthought; most of the time they're made up at the last possible moment.

"I'm sure people could use some better, wiser, or more cohesive lyrics from us," Malkmus says. "But I don't listen to lyrics—they just pass me by. I tried to keep a journal for lyric ideas this time, but it really doesn't interest me to write down my

thoughts. Something that I sing along with the song might be the first lines, and then I'll build around it. When you build a house, there are some parts that aren't so beautiful, but they're functional. There's a lot of functional bridges in our lyrics, where I'm trying to get to a good part. It's all about letting it come out naturally—unfortunately, I don't really have anything to say, so I'm not going to force it. I could do more historical narrative japes, but that would be corny to me."

More important to Malkmus are arrangements and chord progressions. Many of these emerge from his experiments with altered tunings. "There's a lot of variations on dropped-D tuning," he explains, "sometimes with the G string tuned up to A. Then there's a tuning with the low E string down to C and the A string down to G. And then there's one which is basically an open A# chord: The A string goes up to A#, the E strings go up to F, the D stays the same, the G goes down to F and the B goes down a half step. That one's real good, it's on 'Pueblo,' 'Stop Breathing,' and 'We Are Underused.' I'm working on some new ones right now. It's the only thing that's really going to change the way we sound," he says with a smile.

Musician meets up with Pavement during the course of a three-night stay in New York, part of a short residency tour coinciding with the release of *Brighten the Corners*. This tour will be followed over the next couple of months by a European jaunt and a longer U.S. excursion. The idea of starting out in fairly small venues and staying in one area for at least two days was Kannberg's. That's not surprising; while S.M. may be Pavement's principal creative force, Spiral Stairs is the band's main organizer, and has been ever since the first single, for which he handled mail-order sales.

The first round of interviews takes place with Malkmus and Nastanovich at a restaurant on Bleecker Street the day after the mini-tour opener at New York University's Loeb Student Center. The show hadn't gone so well. First, it had been delayed for over half an hour due to security considerations; every member of the audience had to go through a metal detector. "People had trouble just getting in the

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Entries must be postmarked no later than 8/15/97.

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3. Contest is open to amateur and professional songwriters. Employees of JLSC, their families, subsidiaries, and affiliates are not eligible.

4. Winners will be chosen by a select panel of judges composed of noted songwriters, producers and music industry professionals. Songs will be judged based upon originality, lyrics (when applicable), melody and composition. The quality of performance and production will not be considered. Prizes will be awarded jointly to all authors of any song; division of prizes is responsibility of winners. Void where prohibited. All federal, state and local laws and regulations apply.

5. Winners will be notified by mail and must sign and return an affidavit of originality/ownership rights/publicity release within 14 days of notification date. The affidavit will state that winner's song is original work and he/she holds all rights to song. Failure to sign and return such affidavit within 14 days or provision of false/inaccurate information therein will result in immediate disqualification and an alternate winner will be selected. Affidavits of winners under 18 years of age at time of award must be countersigned by parent or legal guardian. Affidavits subject to verification by JLSC and its agents. Entry constitutes permission to use winners' names, likenesses, and voices for future advertising and publicity purposes without additional compensation.

6. To ensure anonymity for judging purposes, entrant's name should appear only on the entry form. Do not put name or address on cassette or lyric sheet. Cassettes and lyrics will not be returned. Winners will be determined by December 15, 1997.

I have read and understand the rules of The John Lennon Songwriting Contest and I accept the terms and conditions of participation. (If entrant is under 18 years old, the signature of a parent or guardian is required.)

Signature _____ Date _____

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door," Nastanovich says. "It was more inconvenient for the audience, but it affected the whole vibe of the evening."

Then, to top it all off, the band was ragged. "It was hard to hear everybody, and we really struggled," Nastanovich continues. "But it's nothing to dwell on. We're not a well-oiled machine—it would be easier on us if we were, but we've never been able to manage it. I never know what a show's going to be like until it starts. I still get really nervous beforehand, and I'm always envious of musicians who can take the stage with confidence, either because they do the same thing every night or because they've mastered their instru-



The genial Bob Nastanovich

view situation. Because he's so talkative, he'll gladly take on any question that the more aloof Malkmus doesn't feel like dealing with. As time goes on, however, the guitarist does seem to enter the conversation more frequently.

ment to the point where they know they're not going to screw up. I've never had that feeling. But fortunately, our audience is very supportive—they nurse us along sometimes. And even our bad shows aren't as humiliating as they once were."

It quickly becomes clear that the stocky, effervescent Nastanovich is Malkmus's best friend in an inter-

"I think we'll take more time to record the next album," he predicts. "I'm gonna be a little bit harder on certain members of the group. I tried doing the slack thing this time and the results were pretty good, but I'm afraid the whip's coming out again for recording next time. We just lost a lot of songs on this record because the effort wasn't there. I'd explain things, and Steve didn't want to do the songs anymore—he was just mad. So I settled for what we had because I'm not gonna be a jerk and make a huge fight about an album. Maybe we need to listen to each other more, and rehearse more, maybe we need a different attitude, a more free attitude at the start. There's a lot of room for growth."

"But that's what happens when you do it the way we do," Malkmus continues after a pause. "In this band, everyone has a separate life from the band—except me. Other bands get everything formulated; each member knows exactly what you have to do. Maybe that's easier. But then you just have boring rock."

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(Peak Pink Noise)	900 Watts	900 Watts	900 Watts	1800 Watts
Nominal Impedance	8 Ω	8 Ω	8 Ω	4 Ω
Sensitivity: 1W, 1m	99 dB	99 dB	100 dB	102 dB
Nominal Dispersion	90°H x 45°V	90°H x 45°V	90°H x 45°V	90°H x 45°V
LF Driver:	1 x 380mm (15 in)	1 x 380mm (15 in)	1 x 380mm (15 in)	2 x 380mm (15 in)
HF Driver:	Pure titanium Diaphragm Compression Driver: liquid-cooled	Pure titanium Diaphragm Compression Driver: liquid-cooled	Pure titanium Diaphragm Compression Driver: liquid-cooled	Pure titanium Diaphragm Compression Driver: liquid-cooled
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JBL compression driver is built to add clarity.

The JBL compression driver is made with a pure titanium diaphragm. Being light weight yet rigid, Titanium maintains the true characteristics of sounds while adding crispness & clarity.

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The TR 125 is a front-loaded two-way loudspeaker with a 15" LF driver and a JBL compression driver. Being front-loaded, this speaker is built to a size, weight and balance that is more manageable to transport.

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TR 126

The TR 105 is a two-way stage monitor with a 15" LF driver and JBL compression driver. It can be used horizontally as a stage monitor, upright as a stage speaker or mounted on a pole as a raised sound reinforcement speaker. With a well-controlled coverage pattern and 45 degree operational angle, the TR 105 directs more sound to the performer and reduces annoying feedback.



TR 105

All speakers in the TR Series are built with a plastic baffle that integrates an HF constant directivity horn and bass ports. The plastic baffle allows for a larger horn in the cabinet. The advantage here is that a larger horn controls a greater range of frequencies. This in turn, results in an even sound throughout the entire listening area.

The baffle design adds to even sound.



World Radio History

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Years of experience went into making the TR Series. It was our goal to make a more affordable JBL speaker, not a cheap one. Which is why you'll find a combination of features in the TR Series that you won't find in other speakers at this price. Features brought over from JBL's high-end concert touring and live performance systems.

For instance, each TR loudspeaker houses a liquid-cooled JBL high frequency compression driver made with a pure titanium diaphragm and JBL's patented diamond surround that delivers crisp highs and increased system clarity. And for even sound throughout your entire listening area, the TR Series is designed with JBL's "Optimized Aperture"™ horn which was first used in our popular concert touring systems.

And while the woofers in most systems in this price range have a 2" voice coil, the TR Series comes with a 2 1/2" edgewound voice coil for greater power handling capabilities. JBL pioneered the use

of the flattened wire, called "edgewound", in voice coils to give speakers greater output sensitivity (AKA more sound per watt). What's more, the output sensitivity in the TR speakers is further enhanced with a hefty-sized magnet.

To insure balanced sound, the TR Series utilizes a crossover network that is engineered to survive years of road use and offer outstanding acoustic performance. A special "multiple-slope" crossover design for the TR225's dual woofer, delivers extra low-frequency punch while simultaneously reducing unwanted interference between the drivers. And for added convenience, all models have multiple input connectors that allow you to "loop through" to additional cabinets without the need of additional "home run" cables to the amplifier.

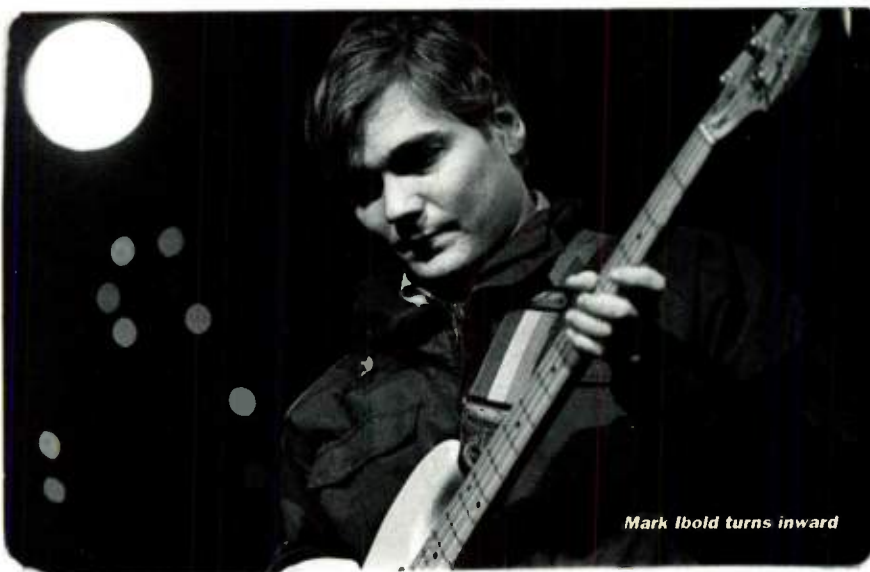
So just by looking at the price, you may not believe that the TR Series is actually a JBL. But take a listen. It's loud. It's clear. It's consistent. It's JBL.



The new TR Series speakers are made for the way you play.

The second round of interviews takes place the following day with Kannberg and West at the Holiday Inn in Chinatown, after a gig at CBGB's. (Ibold, the band's sole New York resident, bows out at the last minute because of an emergency at home—three days after repainting his apartment, the paint's still wet.) Reports are that the previous night's performance was a big improvement over the NYU show. "The sound was much better," Kannberg says. "That NYU show was also the first of the tour, so you've got to take into account first-show jitters."

By now, just about every member of the band has mentioned nerves or jitters in connection with performance. This talk simply doesn't jibe with the general media view of Pavement. If they were really lackadaisical performers who couldn't care less, why would they be so nervous before a gig? "If I don't know what's going on," West says, "if I know we're not properly prepared, then I get nervous." Kannberg offers another reason for stage fright: "It's



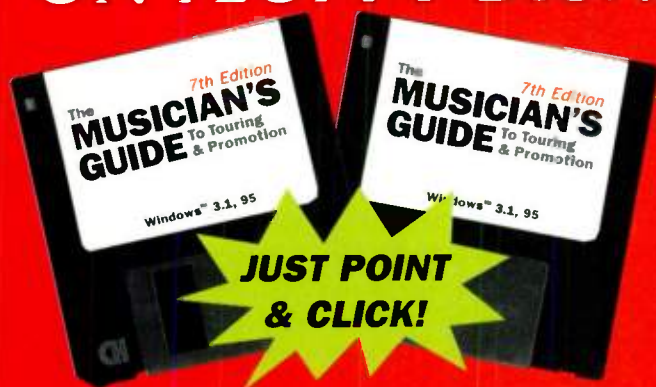
Mark Ibold turns inward

the crowd. Looking at all those people freaks me out. I start thinking, 'What am I doing? I look stupid up here!'"

What started out as an interview turns into a friendly chat, with Kannberg mulling over ideas for future band T-shirt

designs and West showing pictures of his new house in Virginia. (West's recent real-estate purchase officially puts every member of Pavement in a different state; while Ibold stays in New York, Kannberg lives in San Francisco and Nastanovich resides

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in Louisville. Malkmus, the wandering type, claims his current home's in Portland, Oregon.)

"In bands," Kannberg says, "everybody's always looking to a leader. Sometimes Stephen leads, and sometimes he doesn't. That can make it hard to get a foothold on what direction we're going in. But that's us, that's our generation. We put everything off till the last minute. But we do work hard."

The final show of Pavement's Manhattan residency is a jam-packed affair at the Westbeth Theatre. Seeing all five members up onstage, it's surprising to discover that the live focal point of the band is Nastanovich. In the middle of a song, he'll lunge madly from drums to keyboard, pausing occasionally to bellow into a mic; in between numbers, he spends his time swilling beer and looking confused. "It's tough for me to

play sober," he says with a chuckle.

West gives off maniacal vibes too as he wallops his drums, but you don't notice it as much until the moment when he rises

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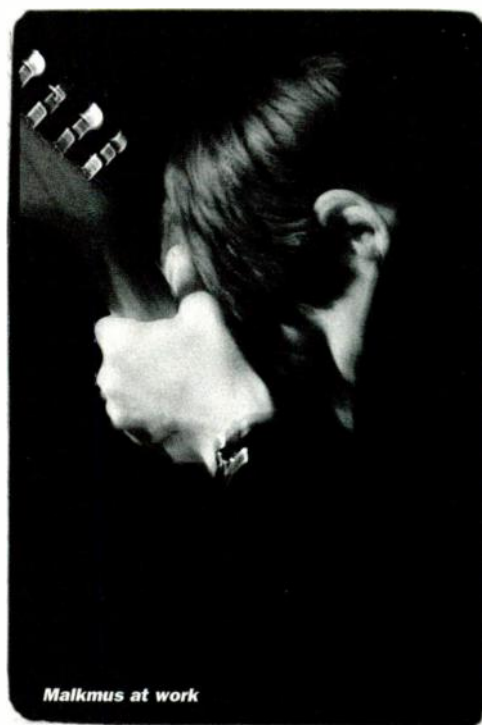
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from his stool, arms waving in the air, neck craned upward, looking for all the world like he's going to dive over the kit and attack somebody. This moment occurs several times during the show. In comparison, the frontline of Malkmus, Kannberg, and Ibold are the definition of laid-back, moving languidly, communicating with nods and half-smiles.

You can't say that Pavement put on a stellar show. It's a rare moment when every member knows what the next song is supposed to be. Most intervals between numbers turn into extended intra-band negotiations. (It could be worse; in the days before they had a guitar tech, Malkmus and Kannberg would have to retune their guitars between songs.) "We usually have set lists," Kannberg comments, "but Stephen will totally change them once we're up on stage anyway."

The members of Pavement also have a hard time agreeing on the endings of songs—most finish with an uncoordinated thud, and you can be pretty certain that someone's going to keep playing after the other four are done. Malkmus starts up "Transport Is Arranged," stops the band

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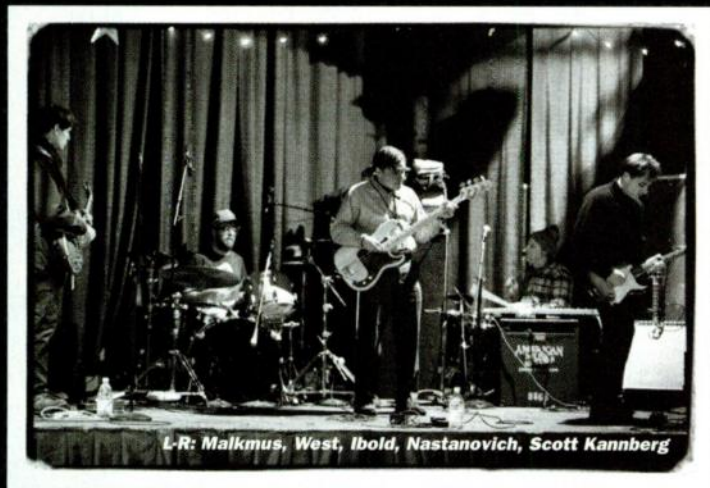


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L-R: Malkmus, West, Ibold, Nastanovich, Scott Kannberg

Date With Sam Ash

Though **STEPHEN MALKMUS** might be a bit laconic discussing most subjects, when you start mentioning gear he gets excited in spite of himself. "We don't get to talk about this stuff so much," he says by way of explanation. Malkmus's road guitars are a '71 goldtop Gibson Les Paul Standard with stock P-90 pickups, a refinished '65 Fender Jazzmaster, and a mid-Seventies Fender Stratocaster. He's also got a Seventies Travis Bean (the kind with the wide aluminum neck), but he doesn't tour with it because of its weight. The guitars go through an early-Seventies Orange 120-watt head with a custom master volume switch installed by Matt Wells ("that way you can get a little crunch without turning it all the way up") into a 1970 Marshall cabinet. His pedals include a fuzzbox called the Hotcake (made in New Zealand by an ex-member of Split Enz), a Roger Mayer Voodoo Bass, and a Mu-Tron wah/volume. As for strings, at the moment Malkmus isn't too particular, as long as they're heavy. "Generally, it's got to be something like .011-.052—they have to be heavy for the different tunings." Speaking of tunings, Boss' TU-12H tuners are very important for both Pavement guitarists.

SCOTT KANNBERG's guitar collection includes a Mexican Strat copy ("I call it Old Reliable"), two Fender Mustangs, and two early-Eighties Gibson Sonex-180s. His only effect onstage is a ProCo Rat pedal, and he cranks everything through a pristine-condition '66 Fender Super Reverb amp. Dean Markley .010-gauge are his strings of choice. The 12-string Kannberg played on *Brighten the Corners* "Date With IKEA" was a vintage Fender Electric XII, borrowed from producer Mitch Easter.

MARK IBOLD plays a Seventies Fender Precision Bass through an Ampeg SVT head and cabinet (the head's new, the cab's from the Seventies). He also uses two fuzzboxes, a ProCo Rat and a Japanese pedal called the Companion. DR strings are his faves.

The drum set that **STEVE WEST** thrashes is all Fifties Gretsch, except for a Twenties Ludwig Black Beauty brass snare. His cymbals are "generic, 'cause I break 'em," with the exception of his flat ride and 14" hi-hat cymbals, which are by Zildjian. Stick brands are no concern of Steve's—they've just got to be long and thick. Now that West occasionally sings backup, he hooks a DigiTech digital delay pedal up to his mic for extra fun.

Because **BOB NASTANOVICH**'s rickety old percussion setup is, in his words, "not worth bringing on the road," he prefers to rent equipment for live work; if he can get a Ludwig snare, Yamaha floor tom, and Peavey keyboard amp, he'll be happy. Two things he does haul along from home are a RhythmTech tambourine and a Clavia Nord Lead synth. His drumsticks are made by Zildjian, or so he believes—he's used the same pair for about 300 shows, and not surprisingly, the name's worn off.

because he can't remember the words, then starts again. (The twittery Chamberlin part that distinguishes the song on *Corners*—originally played by Malkmus—is conspicuously absent. "I've almost got it," Nastanovich had claimed earlier, but apparently it still wasn't under his fingers by showtime.) Malkmus also shows a pronounced unwillingness to sing anything that requires effort. For the big chorus of "Stereo," he steps back from the mic; this cues Nastanovich, who overcompensates by screeching out the lines without a trace of subtlety.

You'd think that such sloppiness would get irritating. But strangely, it doesn't. In fact, it's endearing. The atmosphere gets more and more casual as the night wears on, less like a concert than a hang with old friends.

And it's all justified at those moments when everything comes together. It happens tonight on "Shady Lane" from *Corners*, "Grave Architecture" from *Wowee Zowee*, "Cut Your Hair" from *Crooked Rain*, and several others: All of a sudden, the band latches onto a groove or a hook or an atmosphere and plays as one. West shuts his eyes, lost in the feeling. Ibold turns from one guitarist to another with a broad grin, but Malkmus and Kannberg are too busy to notice, wrapped up in the ornate tapestry woven by their interlocking guitars. The offhandedness of these moments is part of what makes them so stunning—one minute the group are slogging through the muck, the next they're levitating.

If Pavement were your typical well-polished band, would they lose that essential casual transcendence? That's debatable, but the band members themselves seem to think they would. And as long as they think so, they'll continue to walk that thinnest of wires, separating the rough from the smooth. Such an approach probably won't lead to megastardom, but as Nastanovich points out, "We've never had lofty aspirations of being rock & roll stars. I'll never feel like one—I can't imagine what the guidelines are for feeling like a rock star." In the end, it doesn't matter where that privileged information is stored; the rock star trip's a bore anyway. Pavement's going somewhere far more interesting.

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D I A R Y

JOSEPH ARTHUR'S

REAL WORLD

Several years ago *Musician* was introduced to a young performer and songwriter named Joseph Arthur. In those days he was pretty much your typical struggling artist, armed only with a guitar, a growing catalog of songs, and the knowledge that his calling, for better or worse, was music. On paper, his was a familiar story, with no guarantee of a happy ending.

But there was a difference, something unusual in the swirling cyclical patterns of his songs, and in the way he brought his vivid repetitions to life onstage. From the first time we heard him, we felt that Arthur was destined to make an impact.

Our impression was confirmed early this year, when we caught his solo set at Brownie's in New York. Following a raucous bluesy quartet, he stood before the spare crowd, acoustic guitar in hand, squinting into the lights and looking awkward at first. Arthur is tall, a bit gangly; he looks something like a young Pete Townshend. The room felt restless as he strummed a few chords and did his mic check.

Then the music began, and within a minute customers quieted down and began to listen. Arthur led them through chord streams that spiralled over droned strings and danced through hypnotic rhythms. With clustered harmonies and subtle tempo shifts, he built complex lyrical structures that climaxed in mantric repetitions: "Your history acts as your gravity acts as your history acts as ...," he sang over a 6/8 pattern in "Pick Up The Phone." In these hallucinogenic cycles Arthur used his voice to emphasize key lyrics: "If I find my own

way, how much will I find?" he chanted in timbres that alternate brassy clarity with velvety insinuation.

By the third or fourth song, the crowd was mesmerized. Seeing me take notes in front of the stage, one listener wandered up and asked, "Who is this guy?" In this question the answer presents itself: Joseph Arthur is an artist worth

asking about. He's been where many of us live, on the outside. uncertain of whether a career in music was actually in the cards. And now, though the Brownie's clientele was only beginning to understand why, he's played a winning hand, with a debut album, *Big City Secrets*, on Real World, Peter Gabriel in his corner, and a panorama of opportunity opening before him.

When we first met Arthur, we asked him to keep a journal that would document his climb to what seemed to us like his inevitable success. Then, during a European tour early this year, he referred to this journal in writing the following piece

**FROM STRUGGLE
IN ATLANTA
TO SESSIONS WITH
PETER GABRIEL,
JOSEPH ARTHUR
TELLS HIS OWN
UNLIKELY SUCCESS
STORY**

for us—a documentation of dark times and bright in the growth of an artist. Parts of it are unusually personal, but Arthur made it a point to write from the heart. His story, like his music, is for you and all other musicians living the life.—Robert L. Doerschuk

BY JOSEPH ARTHUR PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIOTR SIKURA



**My dreams, fears,
and love live
in my music. This is
the story of
how it's becoming
my career.**

by Joseph Arthur

I lived in a ground floor room of an apartment house, top floor doubling as chambers for a couple of ladies working along the street called Ponce de Leon, a fiery vein pulling blood from the heart of Atlanta, Georgia. It was a point of isolation: my band disintegrated, no more band camaraderie, split from my girlfriend of three years. Essentially everything I had invested my energy into had dissolved. I was separate and fragile, like an egg rolling in awkward circles until it begins to crack.

In this case I cracked with Play and Record pressed down on my four-track. In the desperation of the days I couldn't be anything but honest in my work, too tired and lonely to try and protect myself. I was like a dam that had broken. I wrote and recorded ten songs that month, spending the days working on the music and nights working the door of a club. I was pure focus and drive to get what's inside out with as little fear as possible. I was obsessed, like some crazy butterfly collector of the soul, all day running around, waving my net in the sky—pinning, in

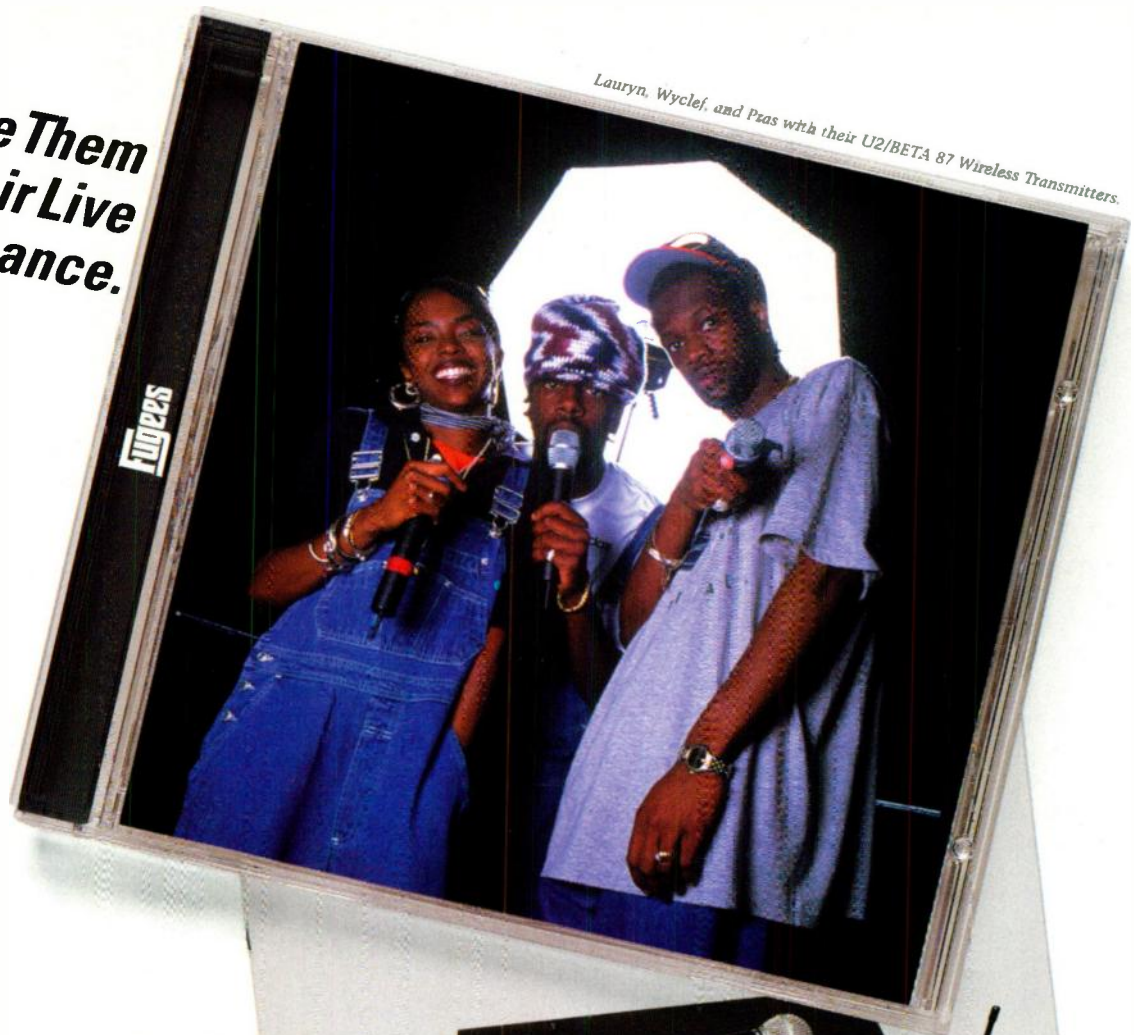
the night, each innocent creature that let me catch it. It was a time of wonderment and glory, discovery and trust. It was like puppy love with the muse.

A few friends expressed their concern at my strange behavior. They would come visit me in the middle of the day, in my room, the windows covered with old sleeping bags stapled to the wall to cut the view from the street, candles scattered and lit all over, and me brimming with enthusiasm over the last object of my insanity. I would force them to listen, then carefully analyze their every movement and facial expression, decide in foolish haste that they didn't love it enough, become offended, make them leave, and begin the whirlwind of mad music making again. Of course they could have acted as if they had been touched by Jesus and it wouldn't have been enough. I was so sensitive, paranoid, and deeply involved with this music that I began alienating the people still close.

After the waters calmed I decided that the obvious con-

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**"I was face-to-face with a man I so wanted
to impress that I stood no chance of being myself."**

clusion of my labor was to make copies of these songs which were at once so dear and vile to me. The idea was to pass them to friends and musical acquaintances around town. I needed some feedback after living with this music day after day for what seemed like forever. I had lost all perspective. I really couldn't tell if something was great or embarrassing. I did know that it was close to the bone and vulnerable and that it took a great deal of courage to deliver it to my world. But in spite of myself I passed it around town, like a fatal disease to the relationships I had with those who would receive it. The only cure was absolute approval of my efforts. Anything less—or, God forbid, criticism—and I would forever distance them. It was like passing out my heart to be rejected or embraced. There was no in-between; It never occurred to me that some may not even have listened to it, because in my three-pound universe it was the only thing going.

Months and months passed, and I started to calm down. I had gotten enough return. I was confident my direction was correct. Slowly I started becoming human again, meeting with other people and all. I got a job working at Clark Music, selling guitars and listening to southern youth interpret "Smells Like Teen Spirit" in one thousand and one different ways. I did my best, but I'm afraid I was the typical bitter music store employee, not out for helping budding punks try out a range of the latest fuzz boxes—or, worse, all the Stevie Ray Vaughans serenading me with their afternoon blues, which were closer to neon than indigo. (Karma payback for all the times I played the role of Lil' Louis Johnson at Akron Music.) Manager Ted said that I was the worst employee in Clark Music's history but never fired me. God bless him.

One day I left the music store in the typical head space of "I can't do this for much longer," fantasizing over the criminal means by which I could put food on my table and in general deluding myself in whatever way was necessary to endure another day closer to oblivion. Once home I parked my bike in the bathroom and checked my messages: "Hi, ahh, Joseph. This is, ahh, Peter Gabriel. I got a

copy of your tape from Harvey in New York. I've been listening to it a lot and think you write great songs. Ahh. I'm not at a number where you can reach me, so I'll try you back later, great stuff," click ...

I must have sat in that room listening to that message for an hour, reading meaning into each word, each pause, and each breath. Finally, in a state of shock, taking the mini-cassette with me, I went walking into the night alone, an ecstatic secret pushing my feet along. Seeming so dim and bleak the night before, the streets were now transformed into funky versions of the yellow brick road. The whores looked like angels and the bums like saints. I gave away all my spare change and put a smile on the face of all who passed me. I was lighting up the streets, all glow and wonder. It took me three days to get to sleep, and even then I was floating a foot off my mattress.

"Rock is mainly about beginnings, about youth and uncertainty and growing through and out of them. And asserting yourself way before you know what the fuck you're doing." —Lester Bangs

The Night Peter Brought Lou Reed To See Me Play

This, my first meeting with Peter, felt like an audition. Half an hour before show time at the Fez in New York, Anna (Peter's daughter) informed me that her father was running late. He was picking up Lou. Lou, a family friend. Lou, coming with his DAT to record the show. Lou, a great source of inspiration. I became numb inside and anxious. My mouth was dry. I needed water. I needed air. I needed out. I wanted to go back to Clark Music, back to the safety of monotony.

I went into the bathroom and locked the door behind me. Staring at myself in the mirror, slapping cold water on my face. I got on my knees to pray, slipping through time like in a dream. Everything became animated and exaggerated. I was excited and could see humor, as if the cosmos were playing a practical joke on me. I started giu-

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ing myself a pep talk as only a mind as soaked in pop psychology as mine could: "You'll be fine. Just be yourself. Don't try too hard. It's all happening for a reason." Etcetera. None of which calmed my nerves. I was thoroughly wound up, all adrenaline, ambition, and doubt.

I saw Peter and Lou walk in. I quickly turned away to look as unassuming as possible. They were like photographs blown into flesh, interpretations of themselves, moving toward me. Their energy spread all over the room. Lou went to confer with the sound man, and I approached Peter with the grace of a duck on fire. "I imagined you a lot shorter," he said, smiling wide. I wish I was, I thought, or even invisible, or small enough to fall through the cracks between the floorboards. But as we chatted through formalities I felt myself becoming bigger, swelling like infected skin, self-conscious as a zit you can't bring yourself to squeeze, just throbbing in the lulls of conversation.

Face to face with a man who represented the opportunity of my dreams, a man I so wanted to impress that I really stood no chance of being myself.

It was show time. We excused one another with shaking hands. I stepped onstage with my acoustic guitar and an army of butterflies going mad in my gut. I started my song, quickly leaving my body, walking around myself, over-

analyzing my movements, judging harshly the sounds and holding scorecards in front of my eyes, blocking the view to my heart. Imagining what Lou and Peter were thinking, my mind wouldn't leave me alone. Forty-five minutes of cat and mouse with the rodents of my soul. It felt like failure, though audience reaction disagreed, a response that seemed, in my paranoia, very charitable.

After The Photos And Goodbyes

I found myself seated between Peter and Lou at a restaurant a block down from the Fez. Dolly Parton was seated in the booth next to us. I thought, if I was to interpret reality the way one does a dream, what would Dolly Parton symbolize? She stood and walked by. Peter stood up and addressed her. They chatted for a moment, with Lou, Annie, and Harvey giggling to my left. She continued to the powder room. Peter sat back down.

I got up, excusing myself, to discuss the absurdity of my life with myself in the bathroom. I looked at the mirror. My image was gone. Around the space my body typically occupied was a bright red glow; otherwise I was invisible. More cold water on my face, and an image slowly came into focus, like a Polaroid developing. It was an awkward shot, me smiling, innocent and wide, like the picture of a man walking into his surprise party.

THE MORNING AFTER . . .

It's a gray, drizzly day. Joseph Arthur sits in a coffee shop near Times Square, staring at a plate of scrambled eggs and a tape recorder on the table before him. He seems a little distracted. We've just asked him if he could remember the first song he ever wrote.

"Uhh. I think I wrote a song in second grade, about the colors of the rainbow. You know, 'red is for ...'" His voice trails off.

"Red isn't a rainbow color."

Arthur wrinkles his brow. "Hmm. I guess I was taking poetic license even then."

I'd just finished reading his article, and I wondered if he wanted to add anything for those readers who are where he once was, taking those first steps in chasing the dream.

He answers slowly. "You have to reach a point of creative honesty. You can be introspective only so much before it starts to have negative implications. You have to join the world and get your babies out there."

"The picture you painted of yourself, becoming obsessive and alienating your friends, suggests that you might not have been able to overcome those negative implications without having Peter Gabriel ride into the picture."

Arthur nods. "He really opened me up. You do need positive reinforcement; without it, maybe you do become a little bitter and twisted. But the main reason why things worked out for me is that what I do is so important in my life. It means everything to me. There's this trend toward the idea that

it's better to be distant from what you do, kind of cut-off and cool about it. But I really care about what other people think."

"So," I observe, "instead of driving your friends in Atlanta crazy, you're driving your friends at Real World crazy."

"Right." Arthur laughs. "I've grown up a lot; I've developed more of a skin. But I still have to believe in my work. That way, if somebody says 'I hate your music,' even though that might sting, I know inside that the work is legitimate. If I don't really believe in it and somebody says 'I hate it,' then I'm crushed..."

"... because they found out you're fooling them?"

A smile. "Yeah. And you really can't fool anybody."—Robert L. Doerschuk

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1 Martin OM-42 Paul Simon guitar

Add another marquee name to the growing list of players honored with a Martin signature model acoustic guitar. The OM-42 Paul Simon Limited Edition guitar (\$8000) was designed in collaboration with Simon, who favored a combination of a smaller, OM-size body with a long scale length (25.4 inches). Select East Indian rosewood make up the sides and back, while the top is quartersawn Sitka spruce. And the tortoise colored bindings make for a real eye-catcher. The edition's limited to 500 guitars, each one signed by Simon and Martin's CEO C.F. Martin IV. ► **Martin, P.O. Box 329, Nazareth, PA 18064-0329; voice (610) 759-2837, fax (610) 759-5757.**

2 RainSong acoustic bass

Famous in the acoustic guitar world for getting a remarkably wood-like tone out of graphite and epoxy, the folks at RainSong have now applied their expertise to an acoustic bass guitar (fretted \$4000, fretless \$4250). Standard features include a single-cutaway body, 844mm scale-length neck, Schaller tuning machines, and a Fishman Prefix preamp/transducer system. Small amounts of Kevlar in the soundboard construction control acoustic damping. As with all previous RainSong products, there's hardly a trace of wood.

► **RainSong, 300 Ohukai Rd., C-214, Kihei, Maui, HI 96753; voice (808) 879-0434, fax (808) 879-4261.**

3 SWR California Blonde

Continuing this month's unplugged theme, along comes SWR with its first amplifier aimed at acoustic players. The California Blonde (\$799) is a 100-watt amp with a custom 12-inch speaker and high-end driver; channel one offers instrument and stereo inputs, while channel two boasts balanced mic and unbalanced aux inputs. Channel one also incorporates SWR's famous Aural Enhancer circuitry, redesigned for acoustic instrument applications. Other features include spring reverb, side chain stereo and mono effects loops, XLR balanced output, and tuner send mode. ► **SWR, 12823 Foothill Blvd., Unit B, Sylmar, CA 91342; voice (818) 898-3355, fax (818) 898-3365.**





ward

4 Yamaha Beech Custom drums

You don't find it used for drums as much as birch or maple, but Yamaha believes beech has a tone to match those more famous woods, and they're out to prove it with their Beech Custom drums. The drums' shells are all beech, with Tour-style lugs, steel triple flange rims, YESS mounts, and a high-gloss lacquer finish. Six finishes are available: Pure White, Solid Black, Blueberry, Red Apple, Lime Green, and Pear Yellow. Best of all, Beech Custom kits are more affordable than birch or maple kits; five-piece sets with hardware go for approximately \$3000. ► **Yamaha, P.O. Box 6600, Buena Park, CA 90622-6600; voice (714) 522-9011, fax (714) 522-9587.**

5 PreSonus Blue Max compressor

Is compression getting you down? Are you tired of dealing with threshold and ratio, attack and release, soft knee and hard knee? Well, get this: PreSonus has just released the world's first full-featured "smart" compressor/limiter, the half rack-space Blue Max (\$249.95). The unit's fifteen presets include ideal settings for vocals, percussion, fretted instruments, and keyboards—just turn the knob to the preset you want and the Blue Max does the rest. If you prefer being in complete control, switch to manual mode and the parameters are yours for the twiddling. ► **PreSonus, P.O. Box 84008, Baton Rouge, LA 70884; voice (504) 344-7887, fax (504) 344-8881.**

6 BPM CR-95 microphone

German studio microphones = serious studio microphones. Any arguments? We hope not. And we don't think anyone can argue with BPM Studio Technik's CR-95 transformerless condenser (\$1199.95). Designed for acoustic instruments and vocals, the CR-95 features a dual-diaphragm one-inch capsule assembly. The switch on the front of the mic selects the polar pattern (omni, cardioid, or figure-eight), while the back switch can either insert a 10dB pad or add low-frequency roll-off. It looks like a high-performance mic, sounds like a high-performance mic, and it's from the right country, so check it out. ► **BPM Studio Technik, 235 Lincoln Rd., Ste. 206, Miami Beach, FL 33139; voice (305) 531-1276, fax (305) 532-0276.**



Choice HARD DISK Recording

Customer: I'd like to buy some cigarettes. Shopkeeper: Certainly, sir. King size or regular? Customer: Regular, I guess ... Shopkeeper: Filtered or unfiltered? Customer: Um, filtered, I think ... Shopkeeper: Mentholated or non-mentholated? Low-tar or high-tar? Flip-top or hard pack? Recessed tip or charcoal? Designer label or non-designer label? Customer: Never mind. I've just quit smoking.

A musty old joke, I know, but it makes a point. It seems like just yesterday when a musician looking to buy a multitrack recorder had only two options: open reel or cassette. Today there's a bewildering number of choices to make. Do you want to stick with tried-and-true analog or jump on the digital bandwagon? If you opt for the former, you've not only got to consider open-reel vs. cassette, you've then got to work out how many tracks you want, what tape width, what kind of noise reduction to add, etc. If you decide to take the plunge into digital heaven (or hell, depending on how you look at things), you'll need to consider linear (tape-based) vs. random (hard disk) systems, as well as the type of recording media (if linear, S-VHS or Hi-8? If random, fixed hard disk, removable cartridge, or MiniDisc?) and number of tracks, not to mention mixer and effects interconnection issues. In addition, many hard disk recorders require a host computer, which brings up a whole new universe of questions and potential problems.

Hey, it's a jungle out there. But the folks at Roland are looking to make your life a little easier with their VS-880 Digital Studio Workstation, a complete integrated package that includes a stand-alone multitrack hard disk recorder and digital mixer, plus optional onboard effects. The VS-880—which was the best-selling hard disk recorder of '96 and has recently received a major "V-Xpanded" software upgrade—is lightweight and portable (about the size of a laptop computer) and, with most competing products priced at or around three grand, it's one of the least expensive ways to get into hard disk recording (list price is \$2695). It comes complete with a 1-2 gigabyte hard drive, though you'll want to back up your work, most likely to an external removable hard drive, connected via the 880's built-in SCSI interface, before starting a new session. (There is a DAT backup routine provided but it's time-consuming.) The optional VS8F-1 effects expansion board (which installs in seconds, no tools

or technician required) will run you another \$395, but I highly recommend it: It not only completes the system, but the effects themselves are stunning.

The VS-880 offers either six or eight tracks, depending on the audio quality mode selected. This, along with the sampling rate (32kHz, 44.1kHz, and 48kHz), determines the maximum available recording time. The highest audio quality mode, called Mastering, is standard uncompressed 16-bit linear PCM, as used by DATs, ADATs, and pretty much every other kind of digital recorder. In this mode, six tracks are available: You'll get approximately thirty minutes of recording time per track at 48kHz. The three other modes use data compression, which tends to degrade audio quality somewhat, even though in this case Roland's proprietary R-DAC—one of the best algorithms out there—is utilized. These three compressed modes yield progressively longer recording times, plus they allow use of all eight tracks. In all cases you can only record up to four tracks simultaneously at any one time, a limitation which may make the VS-880 less than ideal for live or rehearsal recording. In addition, there are eight virtual tracks ("V-tracks") associated with each of the physical tracks. You can, of course, record anything you want on these, but V-tracks are particularly useful for recording alternate takes in order to compile ("comp") a master track.

But you can't switch between V-tracks during playback; you have to momentarily stop, which is, frankly, a drag.

In practice, even the lowest-quality audio mode sounds pretty good when used with a 44.1 or 48kHz sampling rate, and in Mastering mode the VS-880 sounds

Roland's VS-880 fits a complete digital studio into one box.

by howard massey



every bit as good as an ADAT-XT (our May '96 Editor's Pick). The artifacts in the three compressed modes primarily take the form of a high-end sizzle, which ranges from barely noticeable to just slightly annoying, depending on the mode selected and the source material. The sizzle can rise to unacceptable levels when bouncing tracks (since the audio gets compressed twice), and the owner's manual advises that compressed modes not be used if you think you'll be doing much of this. It's too bad that the VS-880 doesn't provide some kind of automatic compression override when bouncing tracks; such a feature would make these modes significantly more usable.

The front panel of the VS-880 can be intimidating, with an abundance of buttons (most with multiple functions assigned to them), faders, knobs, and LEDs. But there are also familiar tape-recorder-like transport controls (though since this is a hard disk system, you'll never have to wait for anything to rewind or fast-forward); locate/marker controls (32 locator and 1000 marker points can be set); a large notched dial for entering in data, setting the playback point, and scrubbing audio; and an LCD display (which is, unfortunately, way too small and not backlit). Due largely to the nested menus and the unorthodox way that the mixer is implemented, there's a fairly steep learning curve overall, but that's the price you pay when working with a feature-laden compact device. Perhaps in recognition of this, Roland not only includes an owner's manual, but throws in a quick-start guide, a set of supplemental notes, and a training video.

The primary advantages to random-access digital recording systems like the VS-880 over tape-based MDM (Modular Digital Multitrack) systems are, in rough order: (1) no tape to chew up (though hard drives can, and do,

crash on occasion); (2) no wait times for shuttling; and (3) increased editing capabilities. In this latter category, the VS-880 offers a number of features, including the ability to cut, copy, and paste sections of audio within a song (a well-implemented scrubbing feature assists in locating precise areas) and the ability to shift individual tracks forward or backward in time. This isn't as straightforward here as it is in graphics-oriented computer-based hard disk recorders, but it works well enough and, hey, you just saved yourself the cost of a computer. One very hip feature normally found only in computer systems is the provision of 999 (!) levels of Undo, so it's extremely difficult to accidentally screw up your data.

Surprisingly, there are no individual track outputs, which means that you'll be doing all your mixing on the VS-880 itself. (You can output your final mix via the unit's S/PDIF digital or unbalanced analog master outputs.) The automated mixing functions provided by the new "V-Xpanded" upgrade (which, by the way, users of older VS-880s can add for just \$125) are formidable: all level, pan, and aux and effects-send settings can be dynamically recorded in real time or stored in scene memories. There's even a very hip "gradation" function whereby the VS-880 performs a smooth cross-fade between any two adjacent marker points. Physical faders and pan knobs are provided for each of the eight tracks, plus there's a master fader and a dedicated aux send knob for sending signal to external processors. There are, however, no aux returns, so you'll have to use one or two of the six input channels (four of which are analog and two of which can only be



accessed from the S/PDIF digital input) for this purpose. If the VS8F-1 expansion board is installed, its effects are returned internally and can be routed either to the mix bus or to any of the eight track buses so that you can record tracks with effects if desired.

One nice touch is that you can mix together the signal from the VS-880's eight tracks along with live signal coming in via the six inputs. This means you don't have to eat up tracks recording MIDI instruments; just sync the VS-880 to your MIDI sequencer (there are numerous advanced sync options) and connect your MIDI instruments to the 880's inputs, either directly or via a second mixer. There are separate "Track Mix" and "Input Mix" modes that enable the eight faders to switch function, meaning up to fourteen different source signals (eight tracks and six live inputs) can be combined. Each of the fourteen channels has 2-band parametric equalization, and 3-band parametric EQ can be applied to any eight channels. Each channel also has two aux sends, as well as two internal effects sends if the VS8F-1 is installed. Effects sends can be routed pre- or [cont'd on page 76]

home

studio

by marc weingarten

photographs by dan corrigan

Ed Ackerson's uptown Minneapolis apartment is a dingy warren of cramped rooms overflowing with unseemly clutter, yet this explosion of stuff seems to have its own internal logic. The same methodology applies to his cubbyhole of a studio, a 9'x10' patio crammed with digital and analog gear. It is within these claustrophobic confines that Ackerson, primary sonic architect for psychedelic popsters Polara, recorded large portions of the band's major-label debut, *C'est La Vie* (Interscope).

"I've been in this place for four years now, but it's mutated a lot since I set it up," says Ackerson between languorous draws from an unfiltered Camel. "It started out as a Tascam four-track deal and kinda grew from there. The stuff in here is always changing."

Keyboard sounds lie at the root of Ackerson's compositional technique. His **Roland XP-80** ① is the studio's workhorse: He uses it to create Polara's organ, Mellotron, and string sounds; along with a **Mac Powerbook 5300c** ②, the XP-80 also controls his MIDI programs and monitors his **Nord Lead Physical Modeling Synthesizer** ③. "The Roland's really great for creating vintage keyboard sounds," says Ackerson. "I also use it as a sequencer. And the Nord is really amazing because they figured out the actual electronic process that goes on in analog synthesizers. It's got great Moog and Oberheim sounds. Plus it's got all the knobs of an analog synth, so it feels like the real thing."

Jutting against the Roland/Nord combo is Ackerson's prized possession, a **Serge Modular Synthesizer** ④. Vaguely resembling one of those Seventies 500-In-One science kits, it's the wackiest synth in his arsenal. "The Serge was given to me by [Restless Records co-owner] Phil Heim a couple of years ago," says Ackerson. "Every point is individually patchable, so you can either use its internal oscillators to make sounds or plug anything you want into it. There are also tunable, heat-sensitive touch pads that allow you to play notes like a normal synth."

Two other geriatric keyboards lie within arm's reach of the Serge: a **Minimoog** ⑤ and a **Wurlitzer** electric piano ⑥. "I've had

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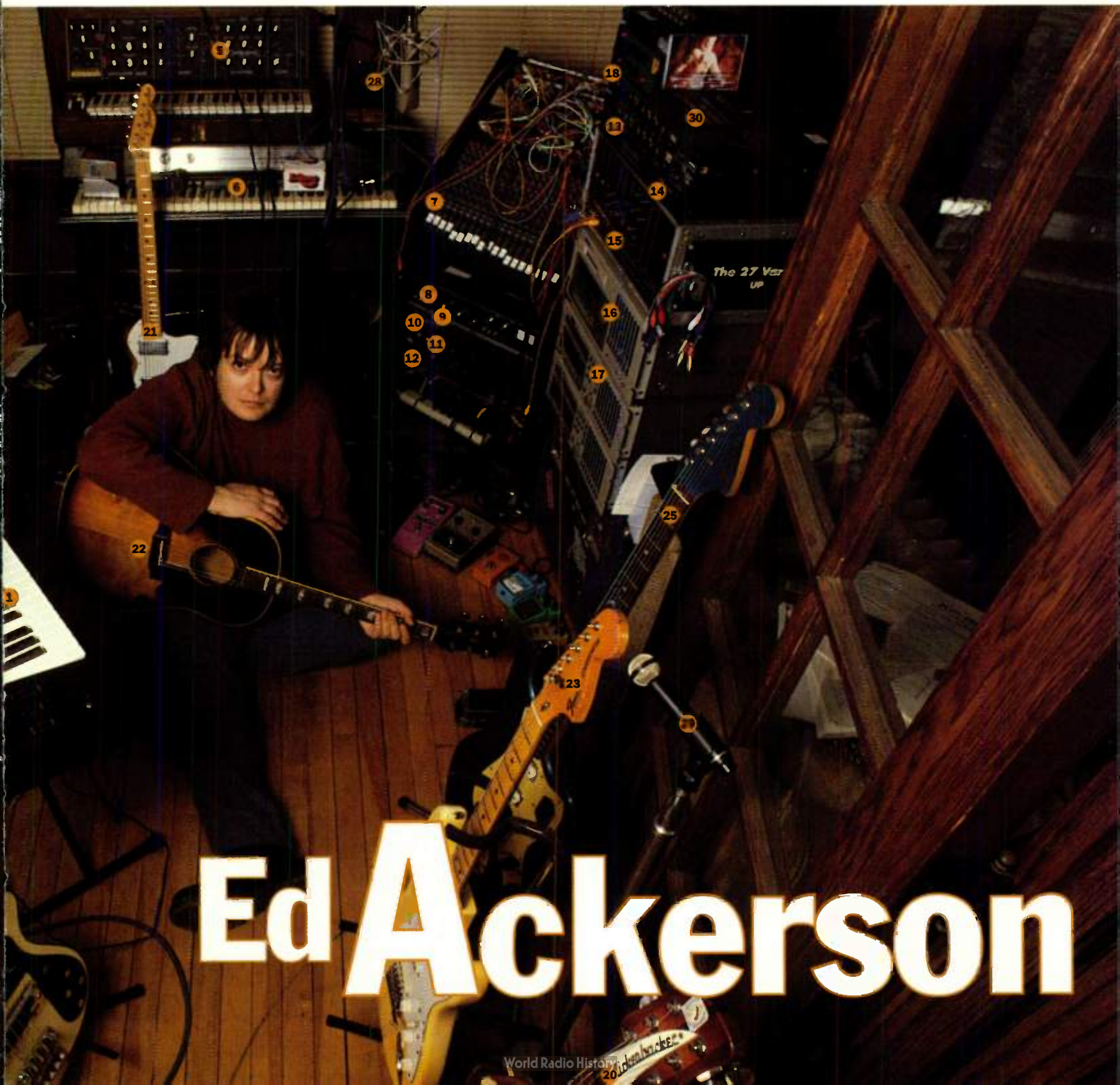


the Wurlitzer since I was in high school," says Ackerson. "It's a total warhorse. It gets used continuously, but it's also been eaten up. You know when you loan somebody something for a week and they wind up keeping it for a year?" Ackerson swears by the Moog "because the bass quality is unsurpassed."

Ackerson's mixer is a **Mackie CR 1604** ⑦. "It's not awesome, but my space limitations are pretty severe," he explains. "It's the only way I can handle a large amount of tracks in a space this size." A distortion and reverb fetishist, Ackerson has an impressive effects rack, which includes a **dbx 165** compressor/limiter ⑧, an **Alesis Miniverb II** reverb unit ⑨, a **Roland SDE-1000** delay unit ⑩,

a **dbx 160A** compressor/limiter ⑪, and a **Lexicon Vortex** modulation effects unit ⑫.

A **Drawmer 1960** compressor ⑬, a **Yamaha SPX90** multi-effects processor ⑭, and a **dbx 900** compressor ⑮ sit on top of three **Tascam** tape machines: one **DA-88** ⑯ and two **DA-38s** ⑰. "The SPX90 was a real catch-all unit during the Eighties, but the presets are really good and easy to call up. It also has a preamp where you can shape the tone before it goes to the effect." Ackerson's **Joemeek Studio Channel** compressor ⑱ is another favorite effects unit. "It's a really radical compressor; you can smash things into it and it gives everything a puffy, expansive sound."



Ed Ackerson

Ackerson's guitar collection is too large to run down in this space; he owns forty. But the ones pictured here—a '56 **Gibson ES225** ¹⁹, '81 **Rickenbacker 360** ²⁰, '73 **Fender Telecaster Thinline** ²¹, '66 **Gibson J-160E** acoustic ²², '78 **Fender Stratocaster** ²³, and '73 **Rickenbacker 4001** bass ²⁴—are all cherished and frequently used. "I rotate the guitars around, depending on what I'm doing," he says. "I really make a conscious effort to use them all." Ackerson positively glows when discussing his '62 **Fender VI** six-string bass ²⁵: "If you listen back to those old Beach Boys and Byrds records, the bass tones are rubbery and clanky because they used the six-string. I love this thing. It's got a tremolo bar and a shorter-scale neck, so it's easy to wail on."

His studio is strewn with effects pedals, including an Electro-Harmonix Big Muff II and a Vox 9-3700 fuzz/wah pedal, but the DOD 680 analog delay is integral to Ackerson's distorted aesthetic. "It's got a brutally narrow bandwidth," he says. "It also


has a feedback knob. When I record vocals, I'll set up a good mic, plug it into the pedal, and manipulate the delay as I'm singing. I like to work an effect while I'm laying down the performance. It's great for the vibe."

Perched on a shelf near Ackerson's **Realistic Concert Mate** synthesizer ²⁶ is a **Supro Super Amp** ²⁷, another prized pawn shop acquisition. "That's actually the same amp that Jimmy Page used on Led Zeppelin's first album," says Ackerson. "It's incredibly crude, but when you turn it on it's ferocious." A Fender Champ amp is propped up on a couch pillow in Ackerson's living room: "I bought that amp for \$80 in Liddick, Indiana, and it really rips."

The mic setup is fairly fundamental, and mostly Neumann. ("I don't keep many expensive mics here," Ackerson explains. "Most of the good ones are at the big studio.") He is partial to the **Neumann TLM193** ²⁸, partly because its cardioid pattern lets him record decent-sounding vocals without picking up room tone. "It's a bit less flexible

than other mics, but then again, you don't want to accentuate what the room is doing," he says. Ackerson also favors the **Beyerdynamic M160** ²⁹ for home use.

A **Roland R8** drum machine ³⁰ rounds out Ackerson's sonic arsenal: "It's got great 808 sounds, which we use a lot because it sounds great with real drums. I figure if you're gonna use synthesizers and drum machines you should make them sound like what they are, which runs contrary to my notion of guitars, which is not to make them sound like guitars. Plus I speak Rolandese better than I do Korgese."

For mixdown, Ackerson chooses his Panasonic SV-3800 or Sony TCD-D7 DAT machines. Two Yamaha NS-10s in the living room are his main monitors, but he prefers to listen to everything through a pair of Sennheiser HD-560 headphones. "When I was a kid, there was no question of there being any noise in the house," he says. "So I became really adept at listening through headphones. Force of habit, I guess." 

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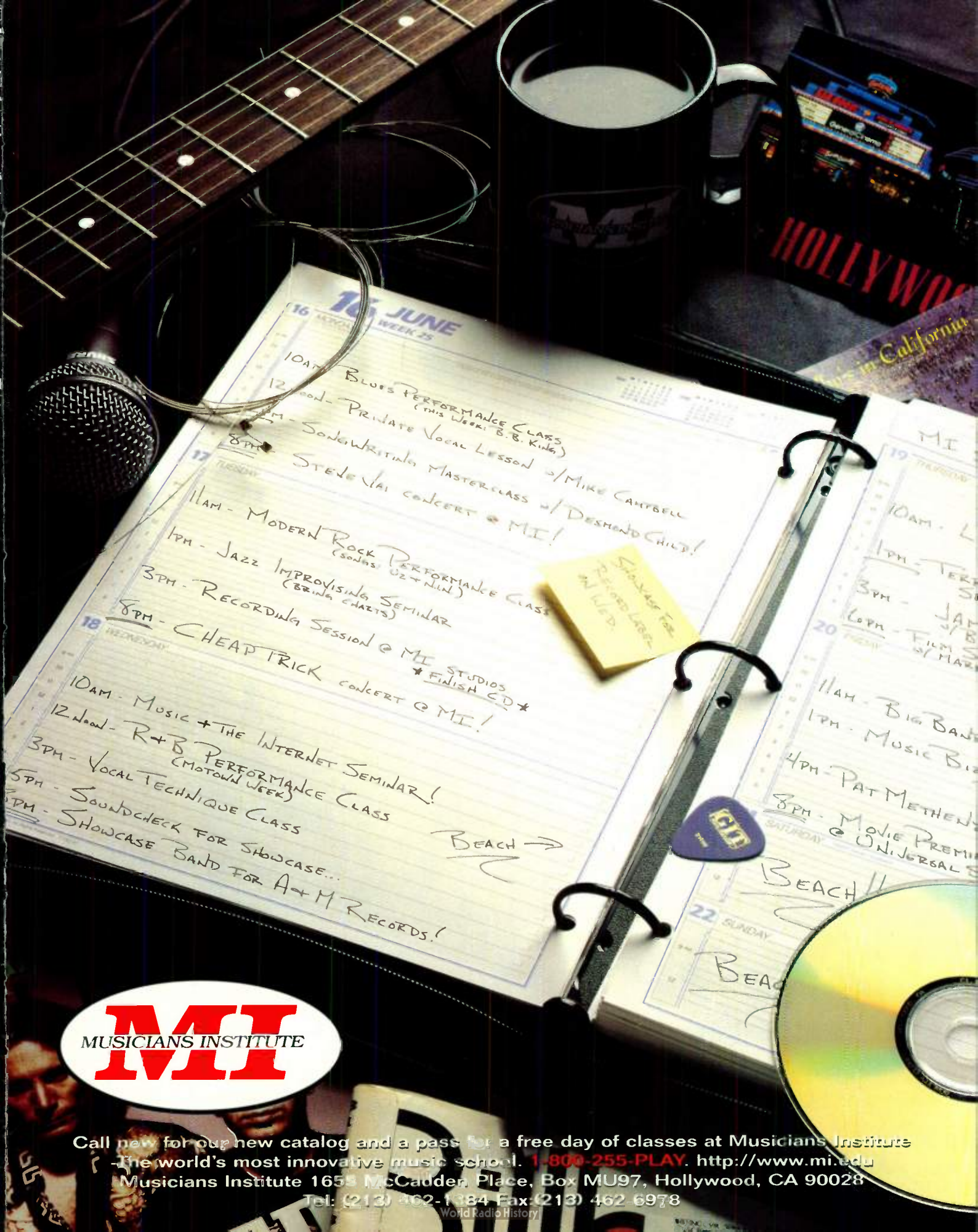


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8PM - STEVE JAI CONCERT @ MI!

11AM - MODERN ROCK PERFORMANCE CLASS (SONAS, U2 + NIN)

1PM - JAZZ IMPROVISING SEMINAR (BRING CHARTS)

3PM - RECORDING SESSION @ MI STUDIOS * FINISH CD *

8PM - CHEAPTRICK CONCERT @ MI!

17 MONDAY

10AM - MUSIC + THE INTERNET SEMINAR!

12 noon - R+B PERFORMANCE CLASS (MOTOWN WEEK)

3PM - VOCAL TECHNIQUE CLASS

5PM - SOUNDHECK FOR SHOWCASE...

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5PM - SOUNDHECK FOR SHOWCASE...

8PM - SHOWCASE BAND FOR A+M RECORDS!

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19 WEDNESDAY

10AM - L

1PM - T

3PM - J

6PM - F

20 THURSDAY

11AM - BIG BAND

1PM - MUSIC B

4PM - PAT METHEN

8PM - MOVIE PREMIERE @ UNIVERSAL S

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technology

It's All Too MUCH (almost)

by mac randall & howard massey

We pushed and pulled. We twiddled and tweaked. We cut and pasted. But no matter what we tried, there was no way we could fit all the information about the new musical equipment we saw at the Winter NAMM show into one issue of *Musician*. And that's why we're back for round two, including a look at guitar, bass, drum, and amp introductions, plus computer and MIDI news. But before we jump into those categories, a brief *nostra culpa*: We neglected to mention the reintroduction of **Tascam's** 564 Digital Portastudio in last month's Recording Equipment section. Although the MiniDisc four-track had been previewed at earlier shows, it wasn't quite ready to ship before, and in the interim the company added something no other MiniDisc four-track on the market has: an S/PDIF digital output, which lets you hook the 564 up to another digital machine without degradation of audio quality. For \$1499, not bad at all.

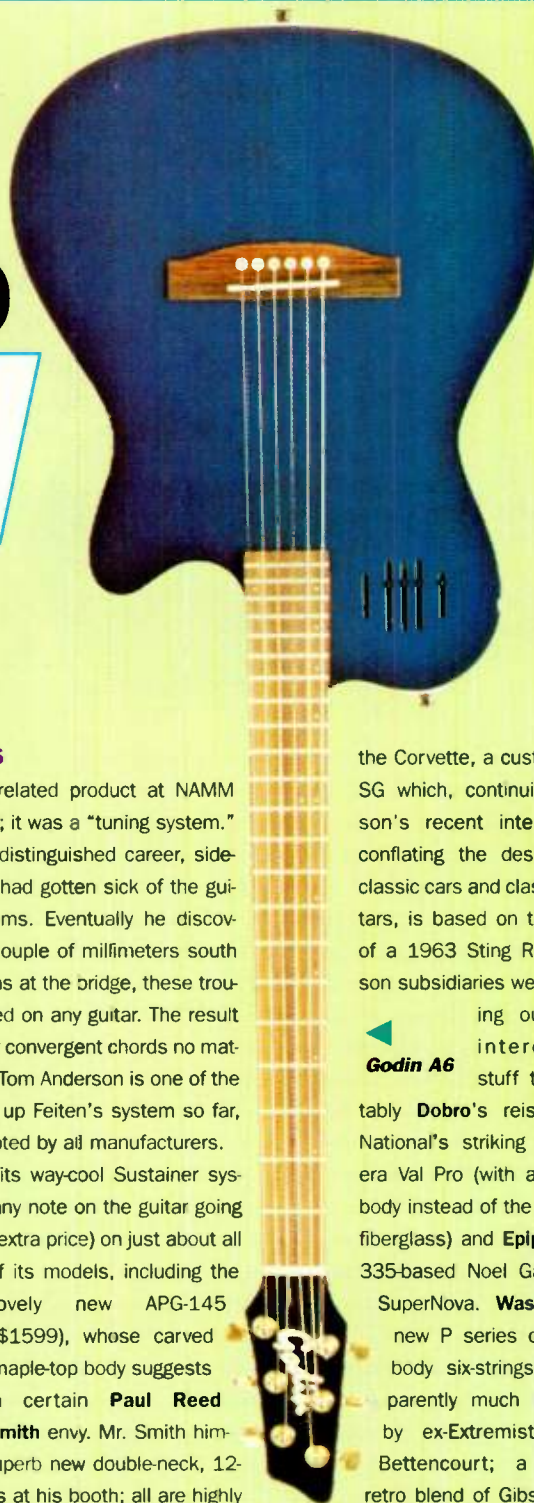
More Big News From The NAMM Floor

GUITARS, BASSES, & AMPS

The most impressive guitar-related product at NAMM wasn't really a product at all; it was a "tuning system." Over the course of a long and distinguished career, sideman extraordinaire **Buzz Feiten** had gotten sick of the guitar's inherent intonation problems. Eventually he discovered that by moving the nut a couple of millimeters south and making some compensations at the bridge, these troubles could miraculously be solved on any guitar. The result makes for lustrous, harmonically convergent chords no matter where you're at on the neck. Tom Anderson is one of the few guitar builders who's taken up Feiten's system so far, but Buzz hopes that it'll be adopted by all manufacturers.

Fernandes announced that its way-cool Sustainer system, which allows you to keep any note on the guitar going infinitely, is now available (at an extra price) on just about all of its models, including the lovely new APG-145 (\$1599), whose carved maple-top body suggests a certain **Paul Reed Smith** envy. Mr. Smith himself was busy showing some superb new double-neck, 12-string, and semi-acoustic models at his booth; all are highly limited editions at the moment, but a little nagging might get him to see the light. Meanwhile, the **Parker** Fly series was expanded with the Fly Concert (\$2950), whose one-piece spruce body is intruded upon by only one pickup, a Fishman active piezo—nice tone, and still only five pounds.

Over in the **Gibson** area (no way you can call something that huge a booth), eyes were popping near the vicinity of



the Corvette, a customized SG which, continuing Gibson's recent interest in conflating the designs of classic cars and classic guitars, is based on the look of a 1963 Sting Ray. Gibson subsidiaries were com-

ing out with interesting stuff too, notably **Godin A6** **Dobro's** reissue of National's striking Sixties-era Val Pro (with a maple body instead of the original fiberglass) and **Epiphone's** 335-based Noel Gallagher SuperNova. **Washburn's** new P series of solid-body six-strings is apparently much beloved by ex-Extremist Nuno Bettencourt; a clever retro blend of Gibson and Rickenbacker designs, they're available in various permutations, including one with lipstick-tube pickups (along with sparkly finishes, the major guitar trend at the show—Danelectro lovers of the world, rejoice).



At the **Fender** booth, the biggest fuss was over the new Jimi Hendrix Stratocaster (\$1500—and yes, in case you were wondering, there's a Noel Redding Jazz Bass to go with it). The color (white) was right, but what was the deal with the backwards decal? Anyway, on to more understandable introductions, like the Tex-Mex Strat and Tele Specials, featuring maple necks, a combination of single-coils and humbuckers, and a downright reasonable \$649 list price. On the opposite side of the booth, **Squier** debuted the four-model Vista series—including the Jagmaster (profiled in *Fast Forward* last month) and the pleasantly green Venus, as played on TV (and elsewhere) by Courtney Love—while **Guild** showed their rather elegant Starfire II and Starfire III thinline hollowbody models and reintroduced the D30 acoustic dreadnought (\$1399).

In other acoustic news, **Martin** established a new low-priced Road Series; with prices starting at \$899, they're the cheapest Martins on the market. The company also announced several limited editions for 1997, including the 00-16DB, a dreadnought built specifically for women. Among **Godin**'s debuts were the A6 semi-acoustic with L.R. Baggs ribbon transducer (\$795) and the LGX-SA, which features two Tetrad Combo humbuckers and a 13-pin poly

connector that gets you direct access with any Roland guitar synth, including the fabled VG-8. **Ovation** introduced two high-end Custom Elite models (both go for \$1999) and stuck an E tuner into the Elite Standard (\$1349). **Takamine** added a solid spruce top to its popular G-330 and came up with the G-330S (\$469.50), while **Alvarez** debuted two Timberline Professional models with quarter-sawn mahogany bodies and solid spruce tops (\$625 for the satin-finish 5030, \$650 for the gloss-finish 5031).

On the down low, **J.B. Player** introduced a slick new line of Quake J-Series basses, with solid ash bodies and Badass bridges, retailing for \$699. **Ibanez** debuted its ergonomically shaped Ergodyne basses, made of a composite material called Luthite, designed specifically for electric fretted instruments. Other notable bass offerings included **Aria**'s AVB-40, featuring a four-bolt maple neck and lightweight alder body; **Ampeg**'s reissue of its AEB-2 and AUB-2 four-strings, with scroll headstock and through-body

◀ Drum Workshop 25th Anniversary drums

Fholes; and **Peavey**'s Cirrus line of neck-through, 35-inch scale models, in four, five, or six strings.

The most exciting guitar news from **Yamaha** this NAMM was the introduction of the DG1000 digital preamp (\$999). Not only do its eight separate simulated tube gain stages all sound mighty chunky, but its old-fashioned front panel knobs are motorized, making the switch from one to another of the 128 programmable memory locations a treat for the eyes as well as the ears. **Marshall** added the JTM600 head (60 watts, two E134s, four 12AX7s) and JTM410 speaker cabinet to its JTM60 amp line, while **Trace Elliot** continued to expand its line of acoustic amps with the TA30R. **ART**'s Classic Series amps—Model 820 head and Model 825 2x12 combo, to be precise—look like old Marshalls but sound futuristic, thanks to a DST-Eighty/Eighty powered processor. In another case of back to the future, the look of **ADA**'s new Rocket is based on the 1940s design of an amp found at a garage sale.

Roland debuted the JC-90 Jazz Chorus amp, which offers the same stereo chorus effect as the legendary JC-120 in a smaller 80-watt package with two 10-inch speakers. Also on the smaller side was **Fender**'s new Frontman series of guitar and bass amps, starting at \$105 list. The quality of **Hiwatt**'s amps continues to improve under the Fernandes umbrella; their new dual-channel 40-watt combo, the Bulldog (\$1299), can easily rock your world. And in case you don't happen to have an amp handy, the **Nady** AX-1000 FM wireless transmitter (\$79.95) lets you play your guitar through any FM radio.

In the miscellaneous category, **Telex** unveiled new ProStar VHF and UHF wireless guitar systems; **Roland**'s latest guitar synth, the GR-30, features an "intelligent" harmonizer; **EMG** has begun to mass-produce the pickups on David Gilmour's main Strat under the DG-20 model name; and **Celestion** introduced a series of low-cost speakers for guitar amps, the Silver Series, ranging in price from \$69 to \$109.

◀ Fender Frontman amps



DRUMS AND PERCUSSION

Yamaha celebrated its 30th year of drum production with the introduction of limited-edition 30th anniversary sets, featuring Maple Custom shells, 2.3-mm DynaHoop steel rims, small-body chrome lugs, and some real sparkly finishes. On the electronic side, the company also introduced version 2.0 of the DTX percussion system, with many software improvements such as improved sound balance and optional simultaneous surface/rim play, plus new additions like an independent cymbal bell trigger pad.

Down the hall, the folks at **Drum Workshop** had an anniversary of their own to commemorate. Their 25th Anniversary Collector's Series drums feature fiddleback maple lacquer finishes, all-maple proportionate-ply shells, and DW's True-Pitch tuning system. They're available both separately and in sets, but only for as long as 1997 lasts. Meanwhile, **Remo** attracted attention with its Mondo drums and Mastertouch Power Edge Series kits, incorporating Acousticon R shells and molded bearing edges. **Mapex** unveiled a line of Black Panther snares, including 38 different models, eight different materials, and three different hardware finishes. A smaller company, **Rocket Shells**, debuted a new Road Series kit, going from 5x14 snare to 18x22 kick, all featuring carbon fiber/graphite construction.

Peavey continues to infiltrate the drum market with its composite Radial Bridge technology, which connects all hardware to the drum bridge but not to the shell. The RadialPro 500, 750, and 1000 series are their latest offerings, featuring stainless-steel lug inserts and thin shells (mainly maple, except for the 500's tempered-steel snare). **Pearl** released the limited-edition MHX kit, with four-ply, 5mm mahogany shells and maple glue rings to help strengthen bearing edges. **Sonor** introduced its S-Class drums, made from a combination of birch and maple and available in five stain finishes. And **Tama** upgraded its Rockstar kit with Accutune bass drum hoops, one-piece high-tension lugs, and higher-end tom mounts.

COMPUTER AND MIDI NEWS

The big MIDI news came from the annual MMA (MIDI Manufacturers Association) and IA-SIG (Interactive Audio Special Interest Group) technical meetings. As predicted in our "Future of MIDI" article two months ago, an addition to the MIDI spec called DLS Level One (DLS

stands for "DownLoadable Sounds") was officially ratified. (DLS Level Two—a more advanced version—will probably follow next year.) DLS allows custom sounds to be shipped along with MIDI sequences. Because DLS-compatible instruments will then download those sounds into RAM, the end result—at least in theory—is that MIDI files will play back exactly as the composer intended, without any ambiguities caused by manufacturer A's "HonkyTonk

Piano" differing from manufacturer B's interpretation.

These technical meetings also featured a talk and demonstration from Thomas Dolby, who is quickly becoming an Internet guru of considerable renown. Dolby's company, **Head-space**, has released a Web-centric music editing and playback system called Beatnik, which utilizes a proprietary file format called RMF (Rich Music Format). The feature set of Beatnik

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Cheap Trick records

partially overlaps with DLS (though it adds significant interactive capability), so there are some compatibility issues to be worked out, but there should be room for everyone in the great big Internet tent, right? (Cue sound of cynical Webheads shuffling their feet nervously.)

You wouldn't normally expect the "Brooktree Division of **Rockwell Semiconductor Systems**" to be exhibiting at a music show, but the times they are a-changing, and a-here they were, demoing their Endless Wave technology in conjunction with sample library developer **East-West**. The basic concept here involves the use of computer caching to enable huge samples to be downloaded ("streamed") in near real-time (there is a short delay while the downloading process begins, but it then proceeds quickly). The implications of this are potentially large, particularly in conjunction with the adoption of

the **Unicorn** had two major software upgrade announcements for their Digital Performer and FreeStyle products. Both provide significant new features, with the former including sample rate conversion and the latter including a Sense Tempo function that allows user input without having to listen to a metronome click or drum loop. **Arboretum Systems** unveiled their slick new Ionizer software (\$600), described somewhat obliquely as a "real-time dynamic spectral reshaping tool." Take heart, folks, what it really is is a Mac plug-in that adds noise reduction, a highly advanced equalizer (up to 512 bands) and frequency-dependent compression and expansion to your audio editor. And **Steinberg** launched a unique new software product called XPose (\$399), described as a "MIDI visual sampler." This allows you to "play" still images or QuickTime movies—you can even apply real-


"The most impressive guitar-related product wasn't a product at all—it was a tuning system."

DLS as an industry standard, and, in their booth, the company was showing the possibilities of such a technology by playing a 1.5-giga-byte acoustic piano sample, downloaded as needed from a standard hard disk into computer RAM.

Seer Systems is one company that is certainly angling for a position in that brave new world. At NAMM, they were showing their Reality software synthesizer for Pentium PCs (\$499). A few software synths are beginning to appear on the market (including a lower-level version of Reality being marketed by sound card giant **Creative Labs**), but this version uses physical modeling, analog, FM, and other types of synthesis as well as simple wavetable playback.

Digidesign demonstrated their long-awaited Pro Tools version 4.0 software, which adds a slew of new features to the popular hard disk recording system. These include a number of dynamic automation features and a redesigned graphic mixer window. They also showed their impressively retro LoFi/SciFi TDM plug-in, which provides "down-processing" controlled signal degradation and analog synth effects. **Mark of**


time effects—all from your MIDI keyboard.

Hip new Windows music software products included **Passport's** Master Tracks Pro Audio (\$249), a full-featured MIDI sequencer that seamlessly integrates up to four tracks of digital audio, and their music@passport software package (\$129), which combines pitch-to-MIDI conversion and notation to enable users to publish their music on the Internet. **Cakewalk** announced that the upcoming version 6.0 of their popular Cakewalk Pro Audio software will add pitch shifting and time stretching and will support the Microsoft ActiveX standard, making it possible to add third party audio plug-ins. **Q Sound** unveiled their QTools/AX ActiveX plug-in. **Synttrillium** demonstrated their new Cool Edit Pro software (\$399), which turns any Windows computer into a hard disk recorder and audio editor/mixer. And those of you into alternate tunings will want to check out the **Justonic Pitch Palette** software package (\$199), which listens to incoming audio signal, analyzes the pitch, and then automatically corrects its tuning as the signal plays back through the computer sound card. 

editor's pick

[cont'd from page 67] post-fader, or effects can be inserted across a single selected channel. You can select effects presets with MIDI program change messages and can even edit effects parameters in real time with continuous controller messages.

A word about the optional VS8F-1 expansion board is definitely in order. The 200 factory effects it provides (based on thirty different algorithms) range from just plain excellent to most-totally-we're-not-worthy excellent, running the gamut from smooth, clean reverbs to killer choruses, flanges, and phasers. Its dynamic processing (compression and limiting) is unusually good for a digital device, and there are numerous multieffects algorithms optimized for vocals, drums, guitars, and bass. As an added bonus, there are several RSS (Roland Sound Space) 3D sound presets as well as a selection of physically/acoustically modeled guitar amp/speaker simulations from Roland's phenomenal VG-8 guitar synthesizer (our Feb. '96 Editor's Pick). New effects added by the "V-Xpansion" upgrade include voice transformer and vocoder permutations (including a very cool robot effect that removes all pitch from the input signal); extensive multi-band graphic and parametric equalization options; and, for all you hip-hop and retro freaks, a "Lo-Fi" processor for digitally degrading audio signal. There are even several microphone modelings that can add "air" to a line-level input (making it sound as if it were miked) or give your el-cheapo dynamic mic the tone response of a much more expensive condenser. There are tons of adjustable parameters and 100 slots into which you can store your own custom effects settings.

Because each of the VS-880's analog inputs has wide-range sensitivity, you can literally plug in your guitar, bass, or microphone (dynamic only; there's no provision for phantom power) and wail away. If you've had any experience with a multitrack, you'll find recording on the VS-880 straightforward, and with just a little investment of your time you'll soon be performing advanced operations galore. Welcome to the wonderful world of hard disk recording! 

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Good bass sound, or my bass sound?" quips Lemmy Kilmister of Motörhead. Well, good bass sound—whether it be Lemmy's multi-Marshall onslaught, Marcus Miller's spongy jazz-funk leads, or the concise grooves of the Meters' George Porter—is a matter of personal taste.

Yet there are some universals. Bass players generally want a sound deep enough to drive the rhythm—what L7's Donita Sparks calls "groin-hitting bottom"—but with enough highs so that you can hear the notes. The first link is the instrument itself and what the player does with it.

Standard Fenders are good enough for most of the players and producers we interviewed, though they generally preferred older models, with frequent complaints about the excessive high end in newer basses. Lemmy says the new Rickenbacker pickups are finally gutsy enough for his taste, while Graham Maby (Joe Jackson, They Might Be Giants, Freddy Johnston) swears by his Spector five-string.

As a rule, rock players generally use a pick and round-wound strings for aggression and articulation; fingers give a warmer, rounder sound, but it's less likely to cut over guitars. Butch Vig of Garbage (who produced L7's *Bricks Are Heavy* and Nirvana's *Nevermind*) says he used to want bassists on his sessions to use a pick, but that finger-style playing locks with the drums better. Reggae-oriented players like Jan Wobble (PIL, Brian Eno, Sinéad O'Connor) and Donald Dennis (Luciano, Shabba Ranks, Capleton) use flatwound strings. Wobble turns the treble control on his bass all the way down and emphasizes pulling the strings, not hitting them. For dub, says producer Bill Laswell, there's no need to change strings "unless they break."

On sessions where there's more than one track available for bass, using both DI and amp sounds is common. Producer Dave Jerden (Social Distortion, Alice in Chains) and Vig both split the bass between a Tech 21 SansAmp DI and miked Ampeg SVT cabinets. Vig says the SansAmp's mild overdrive adds character and helps avoid "clacky or brittle" sounds; Jerden runs his through an old Ibanez TS-808 Tube Screamer distortion box and blends the

distorted and clean signals.

As far as amps go, Ampeg SVTs, with their 300-watt tube heads and refrigerator-sque 8x10 speaker cabinets, are as ubiquitous as P-Basses; Vig says he's used them on nine out of ten records he's made in the last five years. Sergio Vega, of New York's now-defunct Quicksand, used one SVT cabinet exclusively for feedback on their second album. "When I touched the headstock to it, it set off everything." The Rollins Band's Melvin Gibbs, on the other hand, feels that SVTs have become clichés for bass sound. He records on three tracks, one direct—he likes the quick, percussive response of an Avalon solid-state DI—and two from a Mesa/Boogie tube amp, including one from a 4x12" guitar cabinet for extra presence.

Another Ampeg studio staple is the B-15; Maby says he ended up selling his because it was too small to play live and "all good studios have a B-15." Lemmy, of course, uses Marshalls.

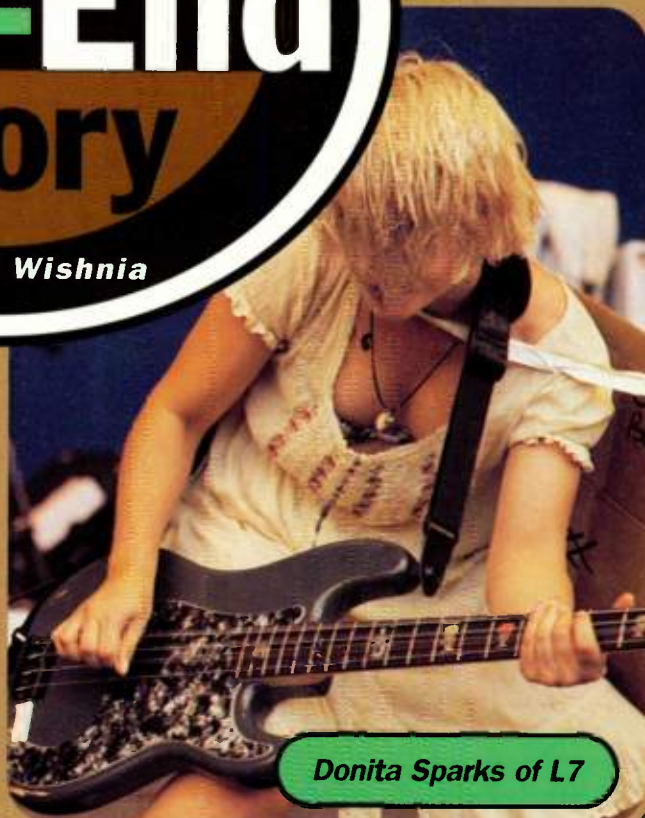
Seventies JMP Super Bass tube heads; they give extra sustain, "not really as far as distortion, but it isn't normal either."

Vig generally uses only one mic on the cabinet, because using more would cause phasing problems. His favorite is the Neumann FET 47—"It can take a lot of level, and has nice definition

Top players and producers reveal the secrets of good bass sound

The Low-End Theory

by Steve Wishnia



Donita Sparks of L7

Jay Blakesberg

SOMETHING WICKED ...has arrived

In the beginning, all guitar necks were made pretty much the same way. Maple and mahogany met rosewood or ebony, and so it was. The necks proved too weak to stand up to the stress of strings, so the truss rod was born, and it was good. Except that one guitar sounded rather like the next. Gone was vibrant, individual tone. Gone was, well, the individual. Much time passed, and the land was abundant with, shall we say, similar things. Enter Genesis™. An entirely new way to think about guitar.

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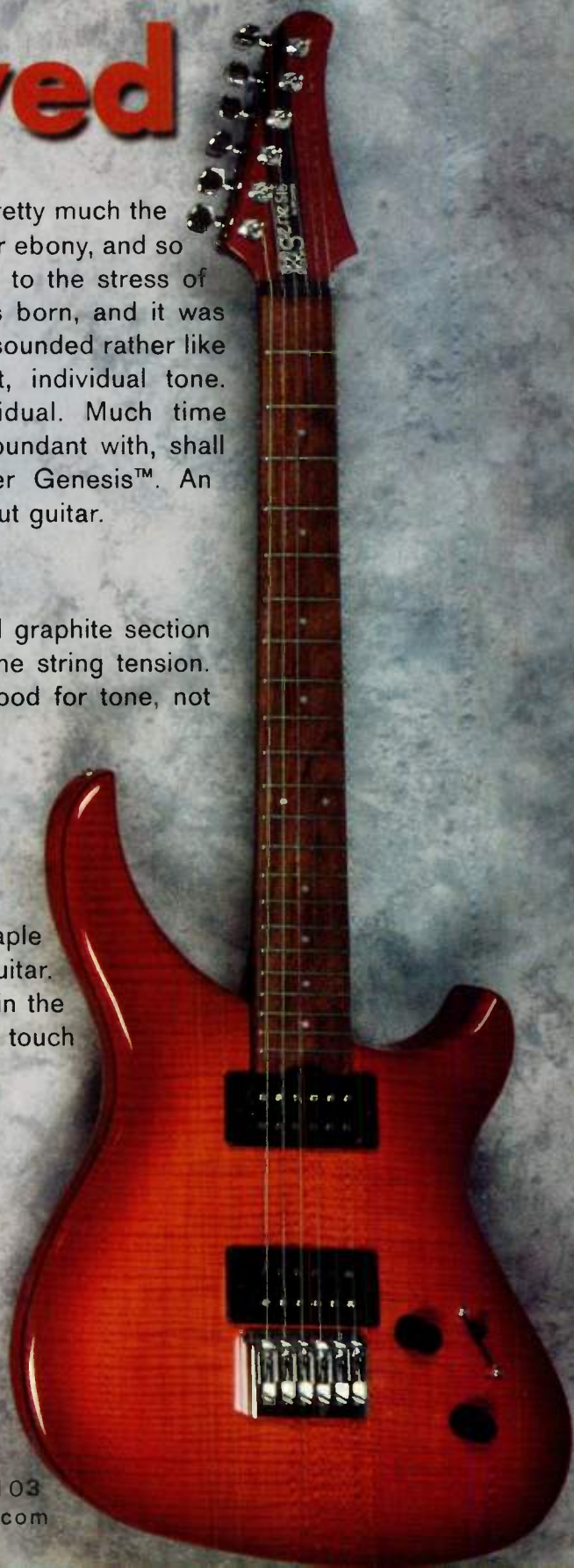
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World Radio History



studiot techniques

in the upper bass and lower mids." Sennheiser 421s give a brighter, clearer sound, good for attack and strings, and he also uses Electro-Voice RE-20s and AKG D12s, both large-diaphragm dynamic mics. Jerden uses 421s on both cabinets in his setup—an SVT and a Sixties Vox Westminster with an 18" speaker—running them into separate preamps and compressors before combining them in a parametric EQ on one track.

Bass sound is deceptive. Many a tone that sounds flaccid and rubbery naked on tape is fine in the mix, while a sound that's beautiful by itself doesn't fit in with the band. Marcus Miller says the key is to put in the "ugly frequencies," the 1200-2000Hz upper-mids that give punch and definition.

"When I started making records," says Butch Vig, "I was into everything being bright. I was shy about putting a lot of low end in. I've done a complete 180°. Crank the low end, baby—you can't get too much of it on tape."

But that doesn't work in some contexts, as L7 guitarist Donita Sparks learned when she played bass on several

tracks on their new album, *The Beauty Process/Triple Platinum*. Finding a sound that didn't get lost under the band's two guitars wasn't easy; the bottom-heavy, distorted bass she likes didn't work. On "Bad Things," she says, "I played a bitchin' bassline, but you can't hear it. You can feel it."

Others express nostalgia for Sixties bass sounds, of Motown and Beatles records mixed so the bass could be heard on tiny, tinny radio speakers. If that's the sound you're after, you might be better off mixing your tape on Auratone five-inch cubes instead of big overhead monitors. The Fairchild and RCA tube compressors used in the Sixties were a key part of that sound, says Gibbs. "You'd be surprised at how much of what we consider classic bass sound is the compress on."

Compressors are like condoms for bass players: It's virtually unimaginable that you'd plug into the board without putting one on. They even out notes, push the bass up in your face, and tighten the bottom end, says Vig. But if they're not used properly, they'll eradicate all the sensual nuances of bass sound—"especially when you're playing funk stuff, it kills the vibe," says Gibbs. Nine out of ten times, he says, if you don't like the sound, the problem is the compressor. The general rule is "try to get whatever's the

most expensive one in the studio." He finds the Urei 1175 punchier, but the LA-2A gives a thicker sound.

Unlike guitarists, the bass players we interviewed don't use a lot of effects. Envelope filters, wah-wahs, and distortion were the most common condiments: the main technique used to avoid losing bottom is splitting the signal and mixing the effect with the clean sound. Bill Laswell gets a deeper sound by playing through an envelope filter but not attacking it hard enough to open it. Dave Jerden used flanging and phasing on Alice in Chains' slower songs to keep long notes interesting.

The musical context is also crucial. Many don't like to change their settings at all, preferring to adapt to the songs by phrasing and playing technique. George Porter rarely touches his amp, getting tonal variety from playing in front of his P-Bass' pickup on ballads, over it for rockers, and near the bridge for short, sharp, funky notes. "It's more than just a sound, it's the character you play with," says Miller, who suggests exaggerating short and long notes "to really get the personality."

Recording fast parts is more difficult. The general rule is to cut the low end or boost the highs and mids so you can still hear the notes. Miller says he backs off the front pickup on his '77 Jazz Bass on busy runs. On punk basslines, according to Jerden, the most crucial element is articulation.

"Especially in newer bands, people don't always pay attention to what they're doing in relation to the guitars and drums. There's so much stuff that's covered up in rehearsals," notes Vig. He likes to take the guitars and hi-hat out of the mix and "force the rhythm section to pay attention."

"If you want to get your personality across, you have to know the process," says Melvin Gibbs. "You can't be bound by the fact that producers know how to get a sound, with certain combinations of instruments." He speculates that the reason so

many bass players become producers is because "they always get shafted with the sound."

That's exactly how Dave Jerden got into recording. "I couldn't find anyone who could get a decent sound on my bass," he says. "I was always arguing with the engineer." Producers also usually do the bass immediately after finishing the drums, when their ears are tired. Jerden spends as much time working on the bass sound at the beginning of a session as he does on the drums. "If those two things don't work," he declares, "you haven't got a record."



▲ George Porter says, "Hands off that amp!"
Jan Wobble prefers pulling to pummeling. ▼



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They *LAUGHED* when I said they could have **Perfect Pitch**

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► The **TRUE STORY** by David L. Burge

It all started in ninth grade as a sort of teenage rivalry.

I'd slave at the piano for five hours daily. Linda practiced far less. But somehow she always had an edge that made her the star performer of our school. It was frustrating. *What does she have that I don't?* I'd wonder.

Linda's best friend Sheryl sensed my competition. One day she bragged on and on about Linda, adding more fuel to my fire.

"You could never be as good as Linda," she taunted me. "Linda's got Perfect Pitch."

"What's Perfect Pitch?" I asked.

Sheryl gloated over a few of Linda's uncanny abilities: how she could name any tone or chord—*just by ear*; how she could sing any pitch she wanted—*from mere memory*; how she could play songs after only *listening* to them on the radio!

My heart sank. *Her fantastic EAR is the key to her success* I thought. How could I ever hope to compete with her?

But later I doubted Sheryl's story. How could anyone possibly know F# or Bb just by listening? An ear like that would give them a *mastery of the entire musical language!*

It bothered me. Did she *really* have Perfect Pitch? I got up the nerve, approached Linda, and asked her point-blank if it were true.

"Yes," she nodded to me aloofly.

But Perfect Pitch was too good to believe. I rudely pressed, "Can I test you sometime?"

"OK," she replied cheerfully.

Now I'd make her eat her words...

My plan was ingeniously simple: I picked a moment when Linda least suspected. Then I boldly challenged her to name tones *by ear*.

I made sure she had not been playing any music. I made her stand so she could not see the piano keyboard. I made certain that other classmates could not help her. I set everything up perfectly so I could expose her Perfect Pitch claims as a ridiculous joke.

Nervously, I plotted my testing strategy. Linda appeared serene. Then, with silent apprehension, I selected a tone to play. (She'll never guess F#!)

I had barely touched the key. "F#," she said. I was astonished. I played another tone. She didn't even stop to think. *Instantly* she announced the correct pitch. Frantically I played more tones, skipping here and there all over the keyboard. But somehow she knew the pitch each time. She was *SO amazing*. She knew tones like colors!

"Sing an Eb," I demanded, determined to mess her up. She sang a tone. I checked her on the keyboard. She was right on! Now I was starting to boil. I called out more tones for her to sing, trying hard to make them increasingly difficult. Still she sang each note perfectly on pitch.

I was totally boggled. "How in the world do you do it?" I blurted.

"I don't know," she sighed. And to my dismay, that was all I could get out of her!

The dazzle of Perfect Pitch hit me like a ton of bricks. My head was dizzy with disbelief. Yet from that moment on I knew *Perfect Pitch is real*.

I couldn't figure it out...

"How does she DO it?" I kept asking myself. On the other hand, why can't *everyone* recognize tones by ear? It dawned on me that most musicians can't tell a simple C from a C#, or the key of A major from F major! I thought about that. A musician who cannot tell tones by ear?! That's like a painter who can't recognize the rainbow of colors on his palette! It seemed odd and contradictory.

I found myself more mystified than ever. Humiliated and puzzled, I went home to work on this problem. At age 14, this was a hard nut to crack.

You can be sure I tried it myself. I would sweet-talk my three brothers and two sisters into playing tones for me, which I would then try to identify by ear. My attempts were dismal failures, a mere guessing game.

So I tried playing the tones *over and over* in order to memorize them. I tried to feel the "highness" or "lowness" of each pitch. I tried day after day to learn and absorb those elusive tones. But nothing worked. After weeks of struggle, I still couldn't do it. So I finally gave up. Sure, Linda had an extraordinary gift: the ultimate ear for music, the master key to many talents. I wished I had an ear like that. But it was out of my reach.

Then it happened...

It was like a miracle. A twist of fate. Like finding the lost Holy Grail. Once I had stopped *straining* my ear, I started to listen *NATURALLY*. Then the incredible secret to Perfect Pitch jumped right into my lap.

I began to notice faint "colors" within the tones. Not *visual* colors, but colors of *pitch*, colors of *sound*. They had always been there. But this was the first time I had ever "let go"—and *listened*—to discover these subtle differences within the musical tones.

Soon—to my own disbelief—I *too* could recognize the tones *by ear*! It was simple. I could hear how F# sounds one way, while Bb has a *different sound*—sort of like "hearing" red and blue. The realization struck me: **THIS IS PERFECT PITCH!** This is how Bach, Beethoven and Mozart could envision their masterpieces—and know tones, chords and keys all by ear—*by tuning in to these subtle "pitch colors" within the tones*.

It was almost childish—I felt sure that anyone could unlock their own Perfect Pitch



with this simple secret of "color hearing."

Bursting with excitement, I went and told my best friend Ann (a flutist) that she too could have Perfect Pitch. She *laughed* at me.

"You have to be *born* with Perfect Pitch," she asserted. "You can't develop it."

"You don't understand what Perfect Pitch is or how it works," I countered. "I couldn't recognize one note before. Now it's *easy*."

I showed her how to listen. Timidly, she confessed that she too could hear the pitch colors. With this jump start, it wasn't long before Ann had *also* acquired Perfect Pitch.

At school we became instant celebrities. Classmates would test our ears, endlessly fascinated with our "supernatural" powers. Yet to us, our hearing was nothing "super"—just "natural."

Way back then I never dreamed I would later cause a stir among college music professors. But when I got a little older, I eventually started to explain my discovery to the academic world.

They *laughed* at me. Many told me: "You must be *born* with Perfect Pitch; you can't develop it." I'd listen politely. Then I'd reveal the simple secret—*so they could hear for themselves*. You'd be surprised how fast they would change their tune!

As I continued with my own college studies, my "perfect ear" allowed me to progress far faster than I ever thought possible. I even *skipped* over two required courses. Perfect Pitch made *everything* easier—performing, composing, arranging, sight-reading, transposing, improvising—and it skyrocketed my enjoyment of music as well. I learned that music is definitely a HEARING art.

And as for Linda?

Oh yes—I'll backtrack. Time found me at the end of my senior year of high school. I was nearly 18. In these three and a half years with Perfect Pitch, my piano teacher insisted I had made ten years of progress. But I was not fully satisfied. I still needed to beat Linda. Now was my *final chance*.

Our local university sponsored a music festival each spring, complete with judges and awards. To my horror, they scheduled me as the last person to play—the *grand finale* of the entire event.

Linda gave her usual sterling performance. I knew she would be tough to match, let alone surpass. My turn came, and I went for it. Slinking to the stage, I sat down and played my heart out.

Guess what? I scored an A+ in the most advanced performance category. Linda only got an A. *Sweet victory was music to my ears*—mine at last!

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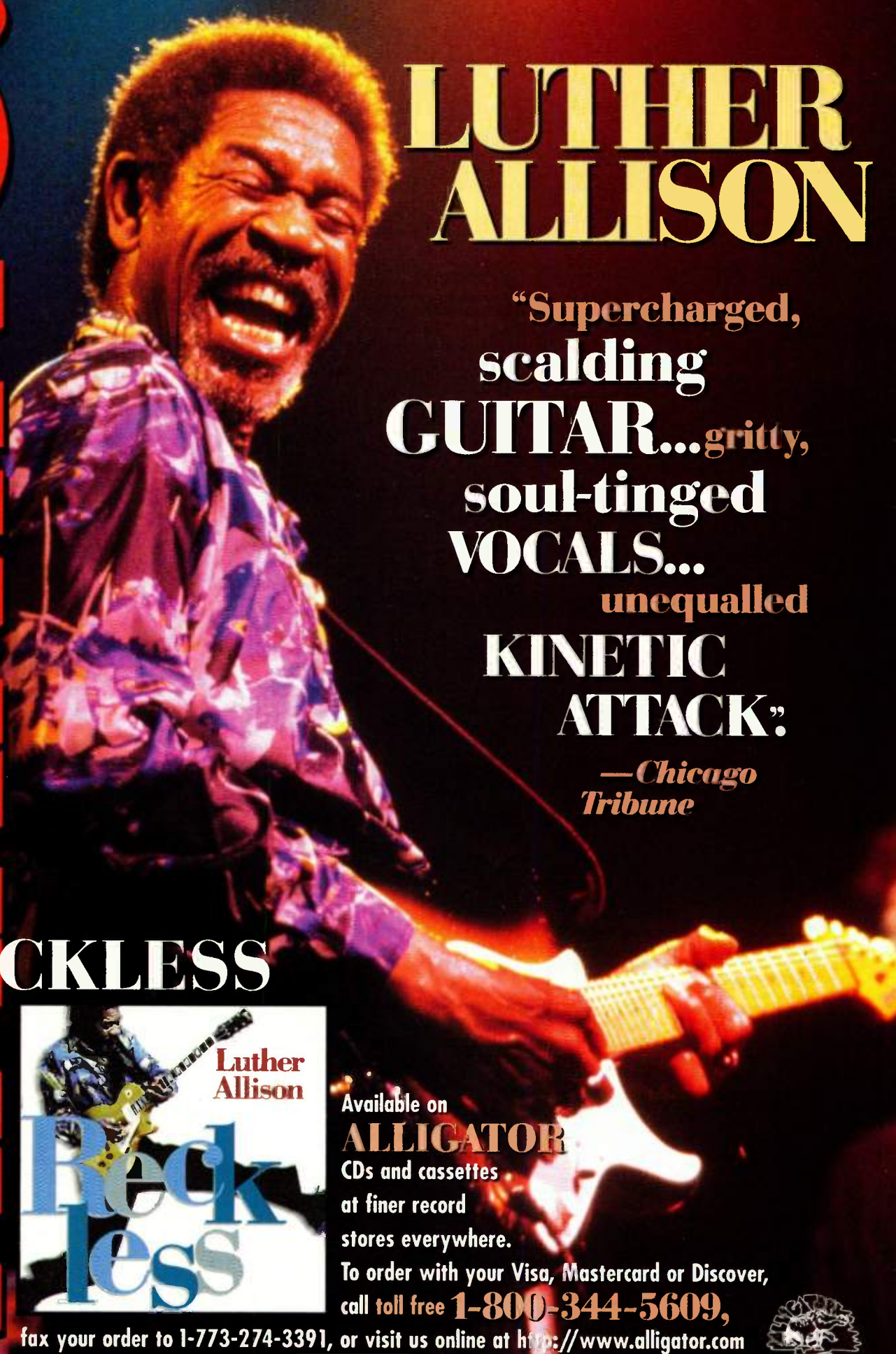
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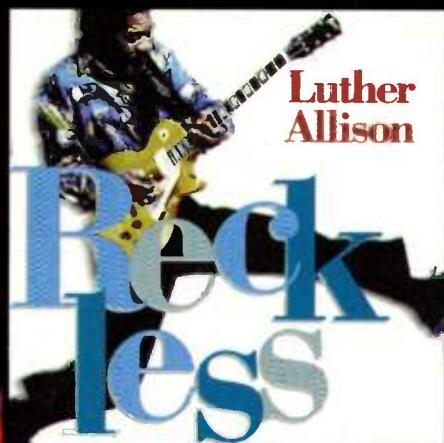


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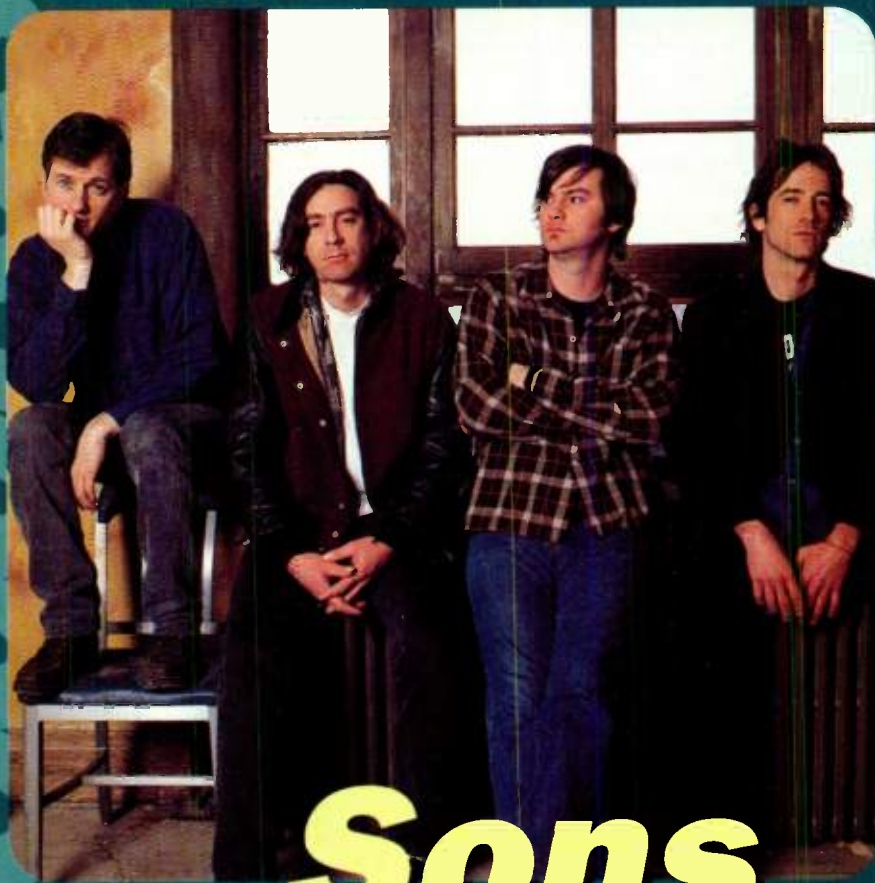
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Sons of the Pioneers

Son Volt

Straightaways (Warner Bros.)

OP8

featuring Lisa Germano

Slush (Thirsty Ear)

It all seems so plain and simple—the chunked-out chords, the steady, mid-tempo rhythms, the tasty lead licks, the unassuming vocals. So how is it that the songs of Son Volt's Jay Farrar have such a powerful effect on a listener, often inducing choked-up gullet, misty eyes and a hankering for three fingers of something strong?

On *Straightaways*, the follow-up to the band's 1995 debut *Trace*, the 'how' becomes a little clearer. With one scuffed boot planted firmly in folk and country traditions and the other plunked down on the smarter side of rock & roll, Farrar tends to his muses with more honesty and respect than your average electro-angst wranglers and punk-poppers have either the inclination or haircut for.

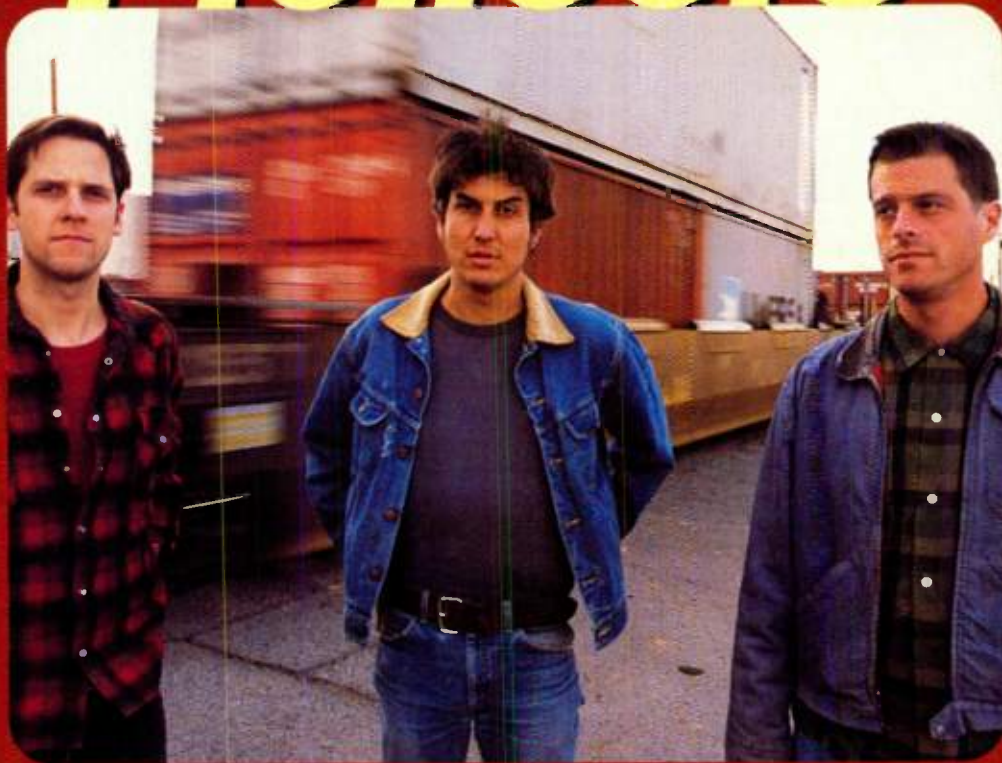
Straightaways follows through on the vibe of *Trace*, kicking up clouds of melancholy with

every verse and chorus. Farrar's varied takes on hard times, heartbreaks and breakdowns are strikingly brought to life by the band's elegant support. The jangly momentum of rockers like "Caryatid Easy" and "Cemetery Savior" easily gives way to the lifting ache of more subdued pieces like "Back Into Your World" and "Left a Slide," and when it's all over you've spent forty minutes feeling really good about feeling sad. Without a hint of affectation, *Straightaways* is entirely affecting.

Dusty vibes and the power of simplicity are further explored by OP8, a Giant Sand side project that includes the fiddle, vocal, and songwriting talents of Lisa Germano. Over the years, main Sand-man Howe Gelb has cultivated a "roll tape and let's play" recording aesthetic that seems to be in effect here, and the ambient drifts and dribbles of the minimalist tunes are often oddly engaging. With a bit of acoustic guitar, restrained drums, and just enough sonic garnish to keep things interesting, tunes like Germano's "If I Think of Love," Gelb's "Crackling Water," and the covers of Neil Young's "Round and Round" and the Lee Hazlewood curiosity "Sand" are transporting listens.

It's simply a matter of where you'd like to be taken: While Son Volt conjures a rolldown sad roads, OP8 captures the alternately disorienting and comforting feel of being half-asleep in a hammock.

—Chuck Crisafulli



Buckshot LeFonque

Music Evolution (Columbia)

Branford Marsalis Trio

The Dark Keys (Columbia)

Jazzman and pop musician—that's the way Branford Marsalis' career seems to split. *The Dark Keys* delivers angular heads and questing solos, while Buckshot LeFonque gives him the chance to cash in on the tricks he's learned from Sting, the Dead and Public Enemy. Simple, right?

Except it doesn't really work like that. Sure, *Music Evolution* serves up healthy portions of hip-hop, funk, and jungle, but what comes through in these tunes is Marsalis' interest in pop forms, particularly rhythmic ideas. "James Brown (Part I & II)" comes across less as a tribute than an examination of how Brown's influence is felt in R&B today, moving from live funk in Part I to samples and scratching in Part II, with Marsalis and guest David Sanborn pushing the envelope harmonically all the while. "Jungle Grove" translates the jungle to acoustic instruments and bebop harmonies for what can only be described as hyperbop, while "My Way (Doin' It)" whips funk, metal and rap into the sort of fusion TAFKAP has long lusted after. Toss in the Sting-style "Another Day" and the Stevie Wonderish "Better Than I Am," and *Music Evolution* seems an ideal pop album for thinking musicians.

Things are both more straightforward and convoluted with *The Dark Keys*. As the punning title suggests, there's more going on here than is apparent at first glance, and the way the title tune deconstructs the tonic/minor-third/tonic/fourth pattern of "A Love Supreme" is itself worth the price of admission. But the album's greatest strength is the extent to which Marsalis and his playmates—bassist Reginald Veal and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts—recognize that rhythm remains jazz's most essential element. So long as they keep the pulse straightforward and steady, even the most arcane harmonic ideas go down easily. Which, when you think about it, isn't that far from what Buckshot LeFonque does. Hmmm.—**J.D. Considine**

Pulsars

Pulsars (Almo Sounds)

The Nerk Twins

Either Way (Broken Records)

Blimely! Just when you think those bratty Brits have pop music all sewn up in a neat Union Jack bag, along ambles a couple of cocky Yankee outfits to score goals for our side. Naturally, both Illinois groups—Chicago's bleeping Pulsars and Zion's chimey Nerk Twins—steal shamelessly from overseas in the process.

Firstly, props must be given to Pulsars siblings David and Harry Trumfio for not only dedicating a song to obscure, early-Eighties English quartet the Silicon Teens, but performing it in that group's cheesy, all-synth style as well—an homage that

works even better as sharp-fanged irony. Likewise, when the duo sandwiches its first three cuts together in a stream of fuzzy feedback guitars, the reference points are so pointedly Jesus And Mary Chain that you almost have to laugh; job well done boys, now let us stand you a pint at the local pub.

The most wonderful facet of *Pulsars*, though, is that there's a genuine respect for the whole daunting art form of pop standard composition: Anybody can ink a sloppy, dissonant perambulation, but how much trouble do you think ABBA had scripting a glossy piece of ear candy like "Waterloo"? The Trumfios understand the discipline involved, and have methodically calculated a sing-song silly bubblegum record that's as alluring as anything in the ABBA catalog. Sure, you can dissect the whole process, but why spoil the fun?

About the same time the Silicon Teens were hitting their first bubbly keys, guitarist/producer Jeff Murphy already had a slew of power-pop masterpieces under his belt with his Midwest band Shoes (most notably 1979's stunning *Present Tense*).

And he's kept Shoes, along with a busy production schedule, going for nearly two decades. So it seems proper that Murphy and his old popster pal Herb Eimerman get the chance to cut loose a little for this Nerk Twins side project. Like the Trumfios, this team adores spinning a good hook. But they've been at it a lot longer, and consequently have mastered such difficult stylistic shifts as the hoedown-rural "I'm Broke," a rain-stick-reggae "I Love Jamaica," and the happy Everlys harmonies of "2 Women." Murphy is a joy

Breaking Up is Hard to Do. THE JAYHAWKS RETURN

It's the one-year anniversary of the Jayhawks' amicable divorce, and former band members Gary Louris, Marc Perlman, Karen Grotberg, and Tim O'Reagan have reunited to record a new album, due in April on American. Though secretly recording under the name 6 Green Olives, the band retained the Jayhawks name after the departure of singer/songwriter Mark Olson. But will the group's country/roots-rock style survive as well?

In fact, the album roams the stylistic spectrum of American music. Titled *Sound of Lies*, it was recorded mostly live with few overdubs, at the Terrarium Recording Studio in Minneapolis. The band enlisted assistance from a few friends, including guitarist Kraig Johnson of Golden Smog, George Drakoulis (who produced the band's last album) on Chamberlin, Matthew Sweet doing a vocal cameo on "Sixteen Down," violinist/violist Jessie Green, and percussionist Pauli Ryan of Garbage.

We're in Madison, Wisconsin's Smart Studios in October '96, where producer Bryan Paul brought Louris and Perlman to mix the finished songs. While Perlman lounges on a couch, lost in the pages of *Black Market Beatles*, Louris punches up the DAT of a track titled "Dying on the Vine." The echo of surf guitar fills the studio with a rhythmic chime over a persistent groove. ("This is one of the weirder ones on the album," warns Louris.) The song features unpredictable dynamics and an inventive, murky guitar solo. As the song hits its rather abrupt ending in the midst of a fade, Marc looks up from his book: "Gary, what

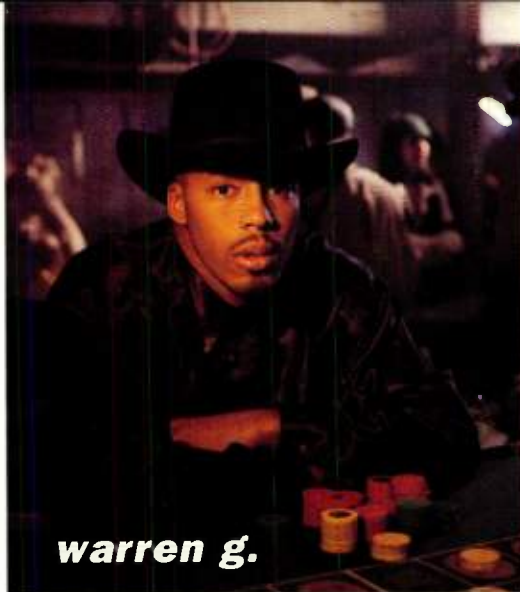
happened to the fade? We've got to fix that." Back to the board it goes.

Mixing hasn't been easy, due to the band's live approach to recording. There's very little separation and a lot of leakage between tracks. None of this causes much concern. "There were some magical moments in this session," says Louris. "We went in with rough sketches and everybody contributed some nice parts. We caught some great things on tape because it was so fresh."



The band's decision to mix the new album at Smart coincides with its recording philosophy. "We tried to make this record a little more homegrown," explains Louris. "Less coastal and more Midwestern. Smart is the closest place to get a great mix."

But Perlman cuts in: "The real story is, we thought Shirley Manson [of Garbage] would be hanging out. Then she gets married and doesn't even show up!" —**Jim Berkenstadt**



warren g.

to hear in any context you could probably lock him away in his home Short Order Recorder studio with a toothpick and a spool of thread, and the next morning he'd have constructed a whole albumful of shimmering gems like the ones on "Either Way." He and Eimerman trade off on vocals, developing a sound that's part Beatles, part Badfinger, but ultimately all-American.

—Tom Lanham

Warren G.

Take a Look Over Your Shoulder
(Reality) (Def Jam)

Killer beats, graceful rhymes, predictable attitudes: On his second album, California MC Warren G. has settled into a tried-and-true routine, which isn't necessarily bad. His striking 1994 debut, *Regulate ... G-Funk Era*, captured a hip-hop auteur already in full command of his skills, crafting a sweeter version of gangsta rap that didn't exactly expand the mind but was impossible to turn off. While *Take a Look Over Your Shoulder* clings to the self-referential mindset that is rap's Achilles heel, the wonderfully funky textures make those limitations seem almost irrelevant.

Like former comrade-in-arms Snoop Doggy Dogg, Warren has a lilting, laid-back style that tickles the ear. Unlike Snoop, whose own second album suffered from unfocused production (and no Dr. Dre), G. produces himself and understands what works. Over uncluttered grooves highlighted by chunky bass riffs, he counsels peace ("Relax Your Mind") and joins crooning buddy Nate Dogg for a tired tale of scandalous womanhood ("Transformers"), observing, "It's hard being Warren G." Mostly he takes multi-platinum success in stride, though Warren eagerly confronts his detractors in "Reality," snarling, "Have you ever sold millions?" as a Sly Stone sample percolates mer-

ily in the background.

Apart from some dopey, mercifully brief comedy interludes, nothing falls flat, though Warren's generous spotlighting of lesser-known—and lesser—performers tends to kill the buzz. The album really cooks when other major talents influence his own soulful goodness. "Smokin' Me Out" alternates Warren's seductive verses with choruses that star the sublime falsetto of Ronald Isley; if this one isn't a hit, there's a conspiracy afoot. An inventive cover of Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff" warns that crime doesn't pay; won't make headlines, but it sounds great.

Better than the average sophomore effort, *Take a Look* suggests that Warren G. might achieve amazing things if he took more chances.

—Jon Young

Collective Soul

Disciplined Breakdown
(Atlantic)

Ed Roland may be clever when it comes to writing catchy songs and arrangements, but what was he smoking when he decided to call his band Collective Soul? Not that I'm knocking this remarkably solid batch of radio-ready tuneage. But it doesn't seem the work of any "collective" other than Ed Roland himself, and soul-wise it's about as whiteboy as rock & roll gets.

This "band"'s double-platinum debut album, 1994's *Hints, Allegations And Things Left Unsaid*, was, by his label's admission, essentially Roland's songwriting demo; the follow-up was called *Collective Soul* because it marked the debut of the "real," same-named band—formed, to get right down to it, because someone had to play "Shine" onstage. But both that album and this new one are so tightly wound, so expertly arranged and filler-free, they sound like the work of one man only; fortunately, he's a man who knows how to make records really well.

Ten listens into *Disciplined Breakdown* and I don't hear a note of Georgia in these Southern guys' music: I do hear odd. Seventies Brit-inspired vocalizing (stylistically midway between Robert Wyatt and Caravan's Pye Hastings) and a whole heap of "Funk 49"-era James Gang—especially on "Full



collective soul

Circle," which, with its punchy horn arrangements, could've topped the charts in 1972 and no one would've blinked. Roland has claimed his two major influences are the Beatles and Elton John, and obviously he's not kidding.

Retro this album and band may be, but in the context of Nineties grungeslugs and beatbox babies, it sounds unique. I hear it, admire its craft, and wonder about this world. Someone has perfected album-rock as an art form—and I kind of dig it. —Dave DiMartino

Jill Sobule

Happy Town
(Lava/Atlantic)

Bitter," the opening cut on *Happy Town*, Jill Sobule's follow-up to her successful '95 Atlantic debut, may well be the sweetest song ever been written about fame—or almost anything else in recent memory. It immediately distances Sobule from a generation of MTV stars who no sooner pick up their platinum records than they stop singing and start complaining. Sobule's honesty is disarming: "I don't wanna get bitter... like you, with the darts in your eyes... you, with disdain for mankind." Yet even more extraordinary than the depth and clarity of

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chuck's cuts

by charles m. young

Masters of Reality

How High the Moon—Live at the Viper Room (Malicious Vinyl)

Guitarist/producer Chris Goss has mastered archetypically weird imagery, not to mention Reality, and thus gets the mystical side of high-energy blues as well as anyone this side of Jimmy Page and Peter Green. If musical fashion and demographics were slightly different, the Masters' *Sunrise on the Sufferbus* would have gone multi-platinum in 1993 and Goss would have the vast army of worshippers he deserves as opposed to the platoon stuffed into the Viper Room for this live set. So instead of undifferentiated coliseum roar at the end of each song, you can hear each individual yahoo. And you can hear some of the most captivating hard rock extant. A great band in a small, sweaty club—imagine that.

Harmonica Frank Floyd

The Great Medical Menagerist (Adephi/GENES Records)

Kin to gangster Pretty Boy Floyd, Harmonica Frank learned his trade playing medicine shows in small Southern towns during the Twenties and Thirties. Known for combining white and black styles of country folk, and for sticking his harmonica in one side of his mouth while singing out the other, he came closest to a big break when he recorded a single for Sun. Unfortunately, Sam Phillips decided to put it out the same month (July 1954) as Elvis Presley's first record. You couldn't make it up, which is why the liner notes are worth the price. Then there's the music: eccentrically ragged guitar and talking blues (recorded by Gene Rosenthal in 1972) that show Harmonica Frank never lost his spirit or his obscene sense of humor ("Lady oh lady I'm gonna fuck your daughter/I'll do it quite well and I'll give her a quarter"). A pre-Parental Advisory gem.

The Byrds

Sweetheart of the Rodeo (Columbia Legacy)

Speaking of Pretty Boy Floyd, the Byrds have a song about him on this reissued masterpiece from 1968. It's a little hard to remember just how surprising the addition of Gram Parsons and Clarence White made this band, surprising because the Eagles took country rock to such staggering commercial success in the following decade. But there was a time before the Eagles, when the Byrds made the steel guitar acceptable to hippies. And it still sounds way better than acceptable. The 20-bit remastering seems to add overtones to everything without adding anything to the price, and the five extra cuts

efit for the Trees Foundation (P.O. Box 2202, Redway, CA 95560). Nice mix of poets, folkies and rockers, some of whom are earnest and some of whom let you off the hook with humor, lest the subject matter get too depressing to contemplate. As Bruce Cockburn points out, the problem is "parasitic greedheads," who aren't going away unless the rest of us get militant. Special approbation to Hank Williams, Jr., for "Kiss Mother Nature Goodbye." His in-your-face attitude truly fits, and it's inspiring to hear him get beyond his previously regressive politics.



Polara

(plus a hokey radio commercial) offer an illuminating glimpse into how they worked. "Am I pushing the high harmony part too hard?" asks Roger McGuinn. Nope.

Various Artists

If a tree falls (Earth Beat!)

Every time I go to Oregon and see another colossal swath of the countryside clearcut, I wonder, "Where are we gonna work when the trees are gone?" Turns out Jello Biafra and Mojo Nixon beat me to writing a nifty rockabilly song about it with exactly that title, which appears on this ben-

when he says "Shake Your Boogie."

Polara

C'est La Vie (Interscope)

Little bit noisy, little bit whimsically psychedelic, mostly pop rock with a generous number of musical ideas doled out per song. Oddly happy in this age of obligatory passive alienation. Guitar-based but nicely varied with synthesizer weirdness. Not afraid of hooks. In fact, they like their hooks, and I do too.

Bill Hicks

Dangerous/Relentless/

Arizona Bay/Rant In E-Minor

(Volces Series/Rykodisc)

Like his semi-mentor Sam Kinison, Bill Hicks made a lot of brutal jokes about death. He was fascinated by its arbitrary nature, although that didn't stop him from wishing it on his artistic and political enemies. Also like Kinison, he's now dead (from pancreatic cancer). And Denis Leary, who worked the same territory, is alive and making the worst commercials on television. Hicks would have loved that irony, and every musician should hear his rant on the evil of commercial endorsements before selling a song to Madison Avenue. As he learned his craft, he evolved into probably the best comedian of the late Eighties and early Nineties, working dangerous issues that kept him off television. Listen to five minutes of *Rant in E-Minor*, and you'll see how politically correct *Politically Incorrect* really is.

Snoopy Pryor

Mind Your Own Business

(Discovery)

At the age of 75, Pryor still plays a virtuoso, slightly understated harmonica. The rest of his band is kind of understated, too. Raucously understated. And they know how to swing, which is the most important thing for any blues band. Sounding a lot like the late Sonny Boy Williamson (the one who played with the Yardbirds), Pryor expostulates with all the authority to which his years entitle him, so you will shake your boogie

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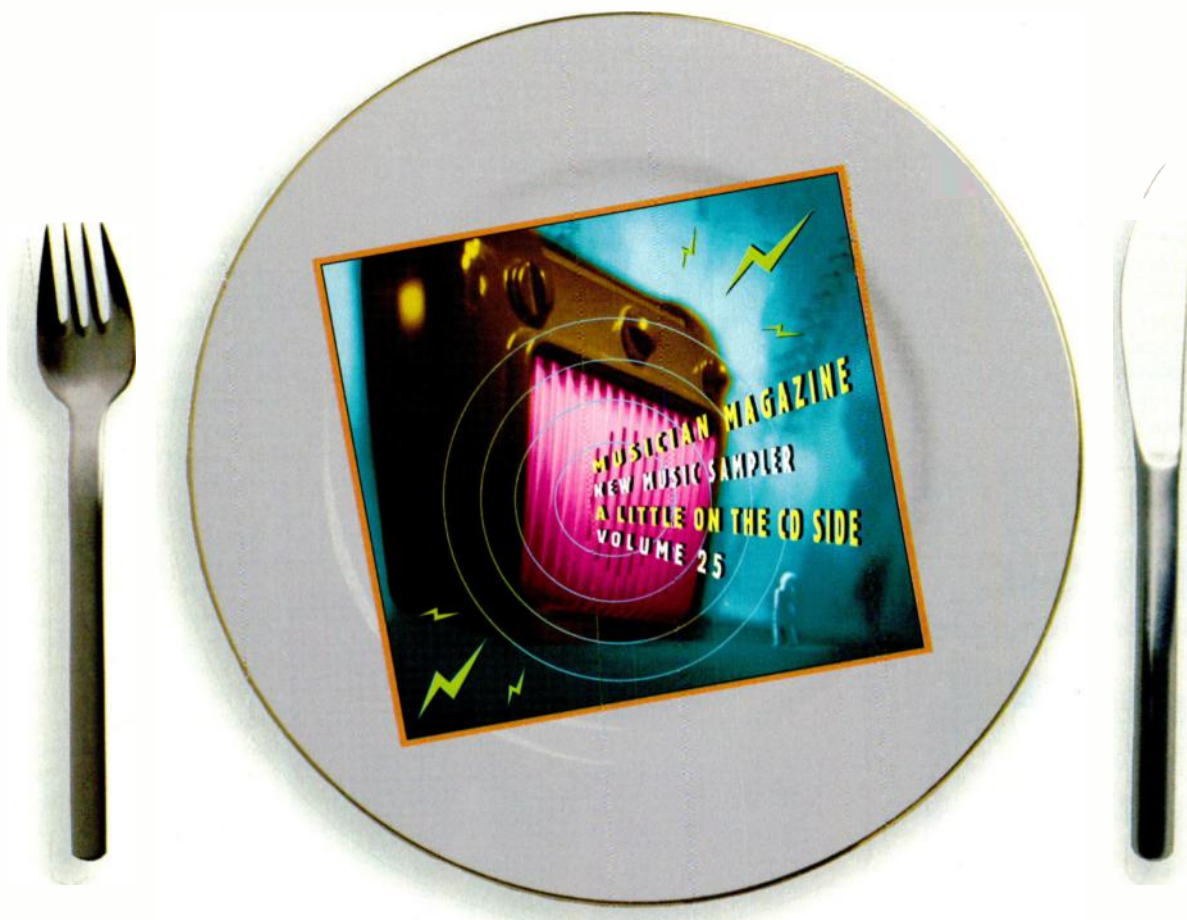
How Bizarre (Mercury)

With occasional help from some backing musicians, Pauly Fuemana sings and plays everything on this pop/folk/dance/rap hybrid from New Zealand. A Nuiean and Maori mixture, Fuemana comes across as a South Seas version of Beck—laid-back, surreal, in love with melodies that don't draw on the usual sources. The great rock storytellers from Eddie Cochran to Tom Petty have all had a natural sense of social satire. Fuemana's got it too.

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these insights are the subtleties of the riffs and arrangements in which they're couched.

Sobule has emerged from the Buzz Bin emboldened rather than unnerved. The drums she plays and loops make "Bitter" every bit as current as Beck—yet this natural born folkie hasn't gone hip just for the hell of it. Rarely have lyrics been set in such appropriate—and diverse—contexts. "Love is Never Equal" is a marvelous, pedal steel-punctuated duet with Steve Earle, whose cragginess is a startling foil for Sobule's deceptively girlish tones and decidedly grown-up ideas. "When My Ship Comes In" is another: Despite a tinkling track that sounds like "Cool Jerk" and "Lowrider" tossed in a blender as background music for a nutty party, the singer is only too aware that there are no finger-popping answers to real life.

For Sobule, the most logical solution is dialing up a dynamite horn section and crawling into the brave beige world of "Happy Town," the magical mystery tour the Beatles might have signed on for if only they'd been gobbling Prozac instead of acid. Few artists have managed to stretch this far with such grace, humor, and utter lack of pretense. Then again, Sobule has the fairly unique experience of reaching her creative peak as a fully formed adult rather than as a brat.

—Deborah Frost

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Al Green

Anthology (The Right Stuff)

This four-CD set collects songs recorded between 1972 and 1984, in the studio and at live venues. The first three tracks date from the period before Al Green's legendary alliance with producer Willie Mitchell and they resound with raw talent: It's interesting and amusing to hear him manipulate the now-famous voice through all kinds of stylistic contortions. Early collaborations with Mitchell during the Memphis years (most notably "Tired Of Being Alone") round out Disc One, and then it's on to hitsville: "Let's Stay Together," "How Can You Mend A Broken Heart," "Love and Happiness" and more, all sounding as buoyant today.

Oddities abound along with the classics; the producers include several cuts from Green's television appearances, such as a live 1978 performance of "Love and Happiness" which is raspy, faster than and just not as good as the studio version (which appears, for good measure, on the final disc). On the other hand, the live version of the Bee Gees' hit "How Do You Mend" holds up well. So do spoken excerpts from promotional albums and from Bob Mugge's 1984 film *Gospel According to Al Green*. A 64-page booklet is a design nightmare, but includes helpful information about collaborators from the Hi Records heyday.

On Disc Three, Green's spiritual/secular conflict begins to assert itself. "The Love Sermon," beautifully evocative, shifts shape to encapsulate a tide of emotions: After opening choruses drift

name, marking his break from Mitchell and renewed fealty to the gospel arena. The last two musical cuts are taken from a television show, a strangely underwhelming way to close this collection.

Green, of course, went on to record gospel albums with and without Mitchell and eventually return to pop; on his 1995 MCA release *Your Heart's in Good Hands*, his voice sounds stronger and clearer than ever. So as career retrospectives go, this one is notably incomplete. Still, there's almost no way to go wrong with an Al Green anthology. Arguably the finest and most enduring male singer in R&B, he is certainly the one from which sheer joy emanates unparalleled. —Karen Bennett

That Dog

Retreat from the Sun (DGC)

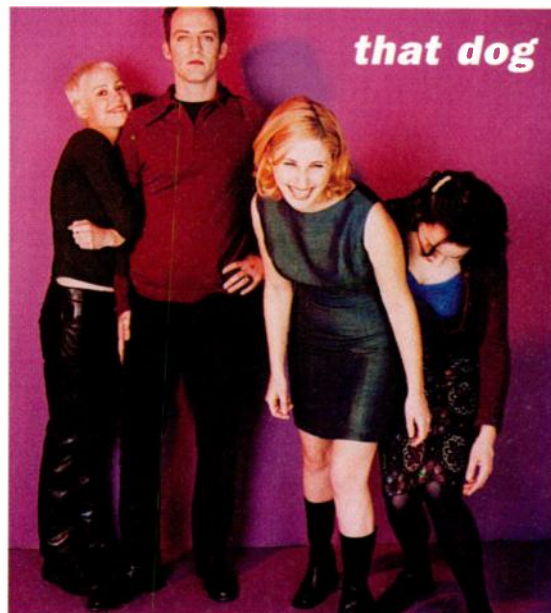
Petra Haden

Imaginaryland (Win)

Like Alicia Silverstone's character in *Clueless*, That Dog spent their first two albums acting ditzier than they really are. It was a pleasant charade that yielded plenty in the way of remedial bubblepunk ditties from coy songstress Anna Waronker, sweeter still for the sprinkling of sugary wondertwin harmonies from Haden sisters Petra (violin) and Rachel (bass). But what started as good clean fun on 1993's *THAT DOG* had taken on the trappings of a noxiously cute after-school special by 1995's *Totally Crushed Out!*.

However, *Retreat From the Sun* finds Waronker discovering the benefits of acting her age (24), putting more craft into her songs, and hiring on producer Brad Wood. Surface-level similarities to Liz Phair and Veruca Salt abound in the shapely yet muscular, "Seether"-style churn of "Never Say Never," the alluring melodic curves of the disc's whip-smarting title track, and the jangle and crunch of "Annie," which splits the difference between the two. But under the glossy sheen, Waronker's not sure whether she wants to be tied up, in the Salt-y "Gagged and Tied," or tied down, as she implies in the Phair-ish "I'm Gonna See You." Songs that ponder experience are far more interesting than songs of feigned innocence, especially when the indecisions are buoyed by sharply styled guitar hooks, wonderful harmonies, and Tony Maxwell's infectious hyperactive backbeats.

The emergence of Waronker's strong songwriting voice here recasts her bandmates in supporting roles. That's especially true of Petra Haden, whose violin takes a backseat to the layered guitars. But Petra takes matters into her own hands on *Imaginaryland*, an oddly compelling col-



toward a more concretized bridge, Green gradually becomes more strident and the song fades leaving, just out of earshot, more wails to come. The final CD is a mixed bag, including both pop tunes and religious material. A funky 1988 remix of "Love Ritual" distinguishes itself through its dense percussion and syncopation. Then there's "Belle," from Green's self-produced album of the same

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lection of solo recordings that lead her well-tempered voice and violin into surreal and beguiling sonic corridors. The disc is dominated by wordless, onomatopoeic, a cappella arrangements, with an Enya tune, some Bach, and a violin reading of her father Charlie's "Song for the Whales." "Cuckoo Clock" and "Apple Juice" may seem like childish regressions, but they're also proof that Petra learned a thing or two as the daughter of a seasoned jazz pro. —**Matt Ashare**

Various Artists

Kerouac—kicks joy darkness
(a spoken word tribute with music)
(Rykodisc)

When I was 10 or so, blissfully ignorant of beat literature, I went to a Halloween party dressed as a beatnik, in beret and scruffy jeans, clutching a pair of bongos, with my mother's paperback copy of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* tucked in a back pocket. Today, others are modeling such naive disguises: On this star-studded homage to Kerouac that mates the writer's work to music, a host of luminaries try on their best boho clothes. On many, they're a bad fit.

Kerouac is a solid tribute subject. The most musical of prose artists, he styled his lava flows of verbiage after jazz improvisations. But *kicks joy darkness* usually takes the most mundane route, melding largely stuffy or misguided readings of Ti-Jean's "bop prosody" to instrumental backdrops that often throw the natural cadences of the work (boldly apparent in Kerouac's own renderings, which are available on a three-CD Rhino Records box) completely out of whack.

Wisely, producer Jim Sompas (Kerouac's nephew by marriage) has enlisted such beat architects as William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and their innate understanding of Kerouac's writing shines through. On the other hand, many of the performers are flatly defeated by the material: Richard Lewis' actorish turn, Juliana Hatfield's *Schoolhouse Rock* approach, and the textbook sobriety of Eddie Vedder and Michael Stipe are especially cringe-worthy. A few display a true understanding of Kerouac's rhythms, such as actors Johnny Depp and Matt Dillon and musicians Warren Zevon and (surprise!) Steven Tyler.

But, hipster posturing is overwhelmingly the norm on *kicks joy darkness*, and the spiritual element at the core of Kerouac's best work is woefully absent in most selections. As Eric Andersen notes in the loving reading from "Brooklyn Bridge Blues (Chorus 10)" that concludes the album, "Without the Eternal Light, you're only a yakking fool." Amen to that. —**Chris Morris**

shorts

Trans Am
Surrender to the Night
(Thrill Jockey)

Trans Am, along with fellow Chicagoans Torroise, are America's answer to all that Krautrock stuff you've heard about. Integrating the sublime circular cadences of Neu! with the humorous logic of Kraftwerk, Trans Am fire up like a warped prog band with a tape loop fetish. While their Casio keyboards hum spastically and their drum machines coo robotically, this trio can also create a red-hot groove with plain old drums, bass, and guitar. Occasionally a punkish instrumental sprawl becomes consumed by a wave of unbearable distortion, or Aphex Twin-like blips and bleeps do a drunken dance. Futuristic soundtracks for a wrecked transistor era. —**Ken Micallef**

The Softies

Winter Pageant
(K)

This Portland, Oregon duo take a potentially disastrous recipe—two girls, two guitars, two diaries filled with troubled relationship tales—and stir it into an ear-pleasing album of charming harmonies and chirpy melodies played on an unadorned pair of interweaving solid-body electrics. When things are bad, they shrug it off, and when things go their way, it's even more irresistible: "I wish I could make this train go faster..." sings Rose Melberg as she speeds to-

ward a missed lover on "Tracks and Tunnels," sounding (refreshingly) more like The Marine Girls, Tracey Thorn's pre-Everything But The Girl band, than any of their angst-y, style-conscious contemporaries. Simplicity is, indeed, beautiful.

—**Dev Sherlock**

Old 97's

Too Far To Care
(Elektra)

Think of that first vintage Rank And File album, back when Chip and Tony Kinman brazenly plugged punk into cowboy music for "cowpunk." Think a West Texas barbecue, where all the guests are New Jersey mobsters. That'll give you a good handle on the twang-tough, spur-'em-in-the-belly genre the Old 97's have resurrected. Nothing new here—it's cowpunk déjà vu, make no mistake, à la peers Slobberbone and The Waco Brothers—but it's done so well, so plumb maniacally, you never doubt these ferocious li'l varmints for one backwoods minute. The hooks, though, are pure city-slick pop on swingin' anthems like "Timebomb," "Barrier Reef," and the hell-with-love ballad "Salome." Leave the Stetsons at home for this one and start slamming.

—**Tom Lanham**

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productindex

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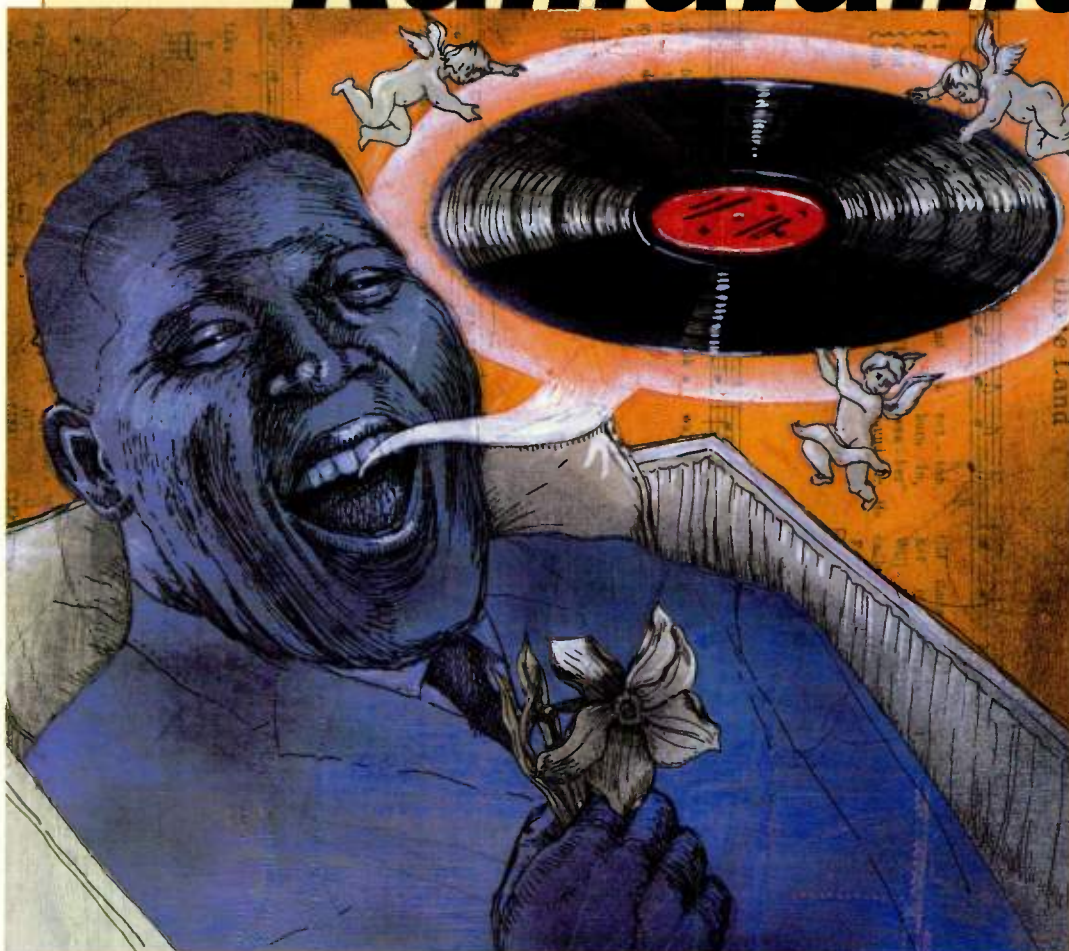
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backside

We Remember

DOO Ramalama



**A Seminal
R&B
Star
Files His
Last
Lawsuit**

Doo Ramalama, one of the pioneers of rock & roll, died yesterday at his home outside Memphis, Tennessee. He was 67 or 68. The cause of death has so far not been determined, although Mr. Ramalama's wife, Sue Ramalama, said that Mr. Ramalama had been feeling down for a long, long time.

Doo Ramalama is best known for his 1956 hit "Doo Ramalama," which introduced the world of popular music to the "Doo Ramalama beat," a "doo dah dih dah dah, do dah dih dah dah" rhythm that would underlie nearly all of his subsequent recordings.

Doo Ramalama was born McHenry Henry in Charleston, South Carolina. He was raised by his grandmother, Agnes Henry, who is credited with nicknaming the young boy Doo. Other sources say that nickname came from a schoolyard accident that led to his being sent home early one day from kindergarten. Still others say that he was named after the Delta bluesman Roo Damalama (Rice Miller). But the most likely explanation is that the name comes from the

Yoruba word *duramelama*, meaning "musician who inspires and exhorts the people with tales of bravery, wisdom, and resourcefulness at the time of harvest and/or year-end festivals."

The subject of Mr. Ramalama's name became a legal issue in 1958, when he was sued by the Cleveland disc jockey Alan Freed, who claimed that he had been chanting "doo ramalama" over R&B recordings since the late 1940s. The case was dropped when Mr. Ramalama filed his first claim of bankruptcy later that year.

There is no dispute, however, over the impact of Mr. Ramalama's hit "Doo Ramalama." A Top Fourteen single in 1956, it earned him appearances on *The Steve Allen Show*, where he was forced to stand onstage and listen while Mr. Allen read the song's lyrics very slowly, as if they were serious poetry, and on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, where network censors asked him to change the lyrics to "True Ramalama" and refused to let the cameras show his legs below the ankle.

Mr. Ramalama's follow-up single, "Let's Doo Ramalama Again," reached only #68 on the *Billboard* charts. Undaunted, he continued to record for nearly forty years. His subsequent singles included "Twistin' Ramalama," "Surfin' Ramalama," "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, Ramalama," "Psychedelic Ramalama," "Disco Ramalama," "Roller Disco Ramalama," "Punk Ramalama," "New Wave-alama," "Aerobi-ramalama," "Rappin' Ramalama," "Born in the Doo S.A.," and "Smells Like Doo Ramalama Spirit." His last single was a duet with Snoop Doggy Dogg called "Dogg Doo Ramalama."

Mr. Ramalama subsequently retired to a nursing home outside Memphis, where he spent his remaining days declaring bankruptcy and suing former collaborators, producers, label executives, and anyone who wrote or said anything about him. He is survived by Mrs. Ramalama, three ex-wives, his sons Lou, Hugh, and Doo Jr., and seven paternity suits.—**Tom Conroy**

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