SPECIAL ISSUE: BLUES IN THE 90s

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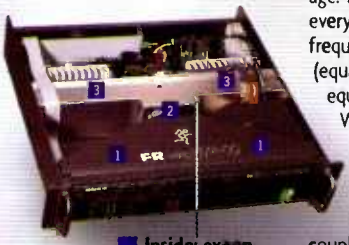

Inside: expensive, state-of-the-art TO-3PBL-case power transistors with perforated emitters for maximum gain linearity. (Some amps use cheap, 20-year-old-technology metal TO-2 transistors... possibly due to lack of robust cooling resources.)

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Wallace Roney
Village

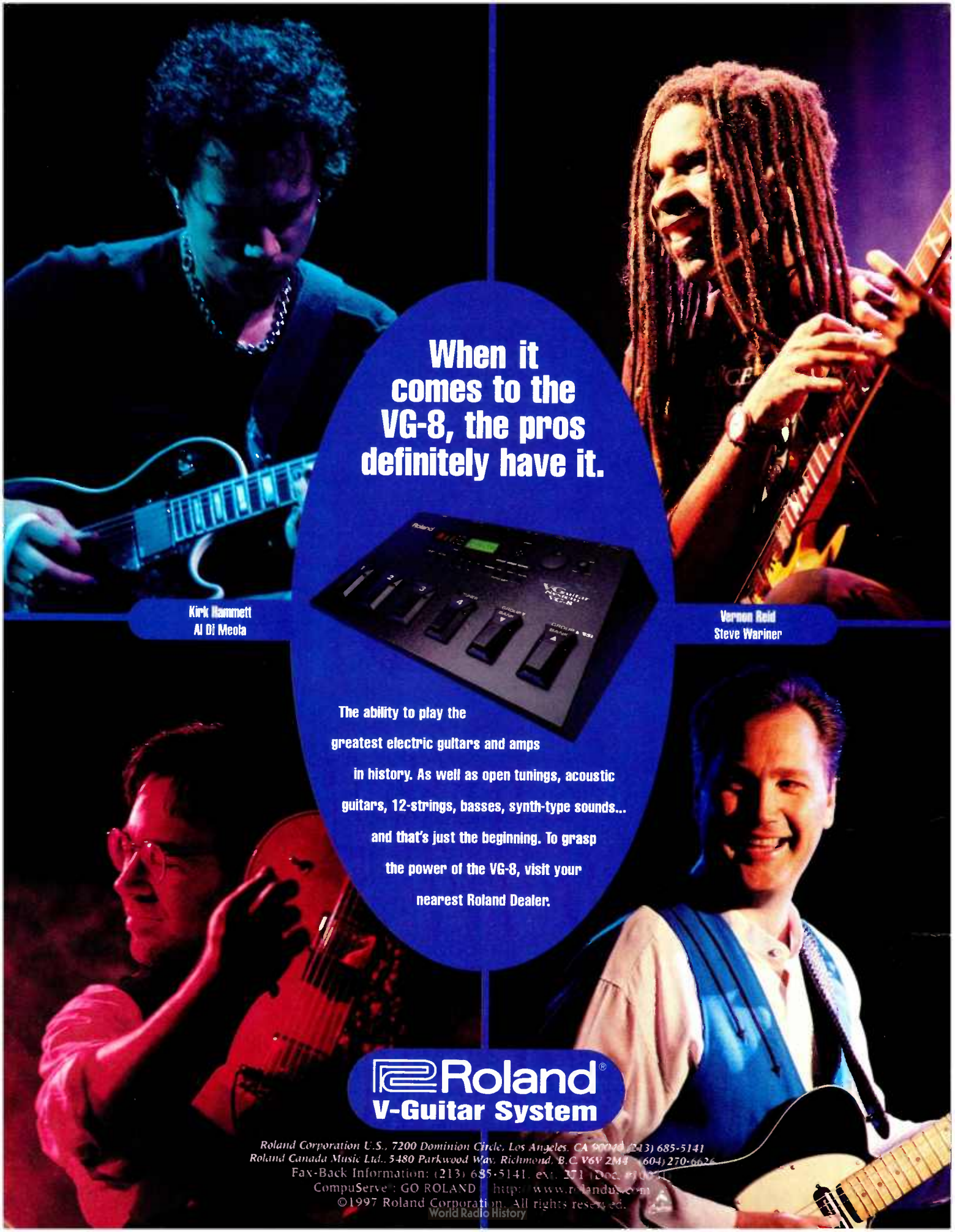
Wallace Roney's Village stands as the culmination of his solo work to date. Ambitious and innovative, it draws influence from the 1960's work of Miles, Clifford and Freddie, extending that legacy in surprising and completely original form. Climaxing in an epic polyrhythmic suite that forms the second half of the album, Village is an astonishing testament to Roney's gifts as instrumentalist, composer and bandleader. Featuring an incredible cast of musicians, including Chick Corea, Pharoah Sanders, Lenny White, Michael Brecker, Antoine Roney and Geri Allen. (Jazz buffs note: this is the first time that Chick Corea and Pharoah Sanders have ever played together on an album). The State-Of-Art, as declared by Wallace Roney—his finest yet, for now...
Produced by Matt Pierson and Lenny White.

Kevin Mahogany
Another Time Another Place

Hailed by *Newsweek* as "the stand-out jazz vocalist of his generation," *Jazziz* Readers Poll winner Kevin Mahogany returns with Another Time Another Place. From jazz standards "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat," and "Parker's Mood;" to traditional pop classics "In The Wee Small Hours Of The Morning" and "Nature Boy." Randy Travis duets on the witty, rollicking blues original "I Believe She Was Talkin' 'Bout Me." With musical backing featuring acclaimed saxophonist Joe Lovano and pianist Cyrus Chestnut, it's Mahogany's most compelling album to date. *Produced by Matt Pierson.*

As the quintessential venerated tenor, Moody's mood embraces the legend Henry Mancini (Grammy's most honored tunesmith). After meeting Henry and discussing the idea of doing a recording of his work, James received his songbook, personally marked indicating some of the songs he felt James would like. The result is a brilliant interpretation of the work of one of America's greatest composers, featuring stellar arrangements of such classics as "The Pink Panther," "Moon River" and "Charade." *Produced by Matt Pierson and Gil Goldstein.*

James Moody
Moody Plays Mancini



contents

Musician Magazine/October 1997/Issue No. 227

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letters

aerosmith: the bottom line

In Mark Rowland's article on Aerosmith (Aug. '97), bassist Tom Hamilton claims his Sadowsky five-string has a long scale so "the string tension is loose and doesn't beat up on my fingers." Actually, the main purpose for extended scale length on a five-string is to let the low B string resonate more naturally. Many bass players with low B strings complain that it sounds dead in comparison to other strings on the bass. This is mainly because its diameter (typically .120 to .130 inches) is too big in proportion to the scale length along which it can vibrate (34"). This distorts the harmonic profile of the string, causing it to behave more like a clamped rod than a vibrating string.

Luthiers are finally addressing this problem by increasing the scale length of basses with low Bs, usually by one inch (to 35"), thereby lowering the ratio of string length to string diameter. Check it out; it works.

Any longer than 35" scale, you run into the problem of running out of string, since the wrapping at the end of most strings often starts about 35" down the string. Some string companies (GHS, for one) have extra-long-scale strings, but my experience has been that 35" scale length actually works *better* than 36" scale length in terms of sustain, clarity, and intonation.

And remember, the longer the scale length, the *greater* the string tension. Sorry, Tom.

chris haller
santa monica, CA

roadie redux

I must take Dinky Dawson to task for suggesting that a band set the levels on the P.A. just below the threshold of feedback ("How To Be Your Own Roadie." Aug. '97). The threshold area is there for emergency use only; if your band doesn't know where that is, you should get to know your equipment first by setting up in the practice studio and tweaking the levels there. It's also a good idea to use the same equipment for both rehearsal and performance, so that there will be fewer surprises.

All too often I'll see a band who may be very good but you'd never know it, due to their excruciating loud volume, lack of headroom between instruments and vocals, and generally lousy EQ (or none at all!). I also know that mixing FOH levels from the stage is impossible. When my band plays gigs and gets compliments from owners and management on how good we sound without being too loud, I know I've done my job well.

lisa gorlin
lraven@chatlink.com

live music, r.i.p.?

I can't quite decide if Mark Dery is welcoming the cyberization of the world with open arms or taking sides with those of us who still reside happily in the tangible world ("The Death of Live Music," Aug. '97). I got into a band to play for real people, feed from their energy, and show them their own lives and emotions. I can't imagine having that experience duplicated by a machine, yet some people would almost rather have their emotions fed to them intravenously through phone lines than get out in the dangerous world of real life. At the risk of sounding pretentious, I think the poet R. M. Rilke said it best about the public's fascination with the phony: "People really are strange: They prefer to hear castratos in boy choirs. But God himself comes and stays a long time when the world of half-people starts to bore him."

elisabeth eickhoff
chattanooga, TN

brand new errata!

Paul Santa Maria (Letters, Aug. '97) has his A&R executives confused when he says he wrote "to Epic's then A&R chief Michael Rosenblatt." Michael is senior VP of A&R at MCA; he has never worked at Epic. Michael *Caplan*, on the other hand, has been with Epic for fifteen years. Today he's senior VP of A&R at 550 Music, one of the labels in the Epic Records Group of Sony Music.

andy schwartz
director, editorial services
epic records

Contact information for Sadowsky Guitars was inadvertently omitted from the September product index. You can contact Sadowsky Guitars at 1600 Broadway, #1000, New York, NY 10019. Tel: (212) 586-3960. www.sadowsky.com

Send letters to: *Musician*, 1515 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. Email us at: editors@musicianmag.com

From the Editor

Twelve bars. Two lines, the first one repeated. Three chords. Add water, and *presto!* You got the blues.

Well, not exactly. What you have is the skeleton of the blues form. Over decades and generations, artists have pulled and pushed this structure, experimenting with instrumentation, melodic construction, and approaches to improvisation. The genius of the form is its flexibility. With connections to African vocal nuance and European harmonic movement, the blues was a brilliantly simple synthesis of multicultural elements. And though the message of the music drew originally from the experiences of black America, it communicated to listeners in all stations of life and all parts of the world.

That's why this issue of *Musician* is devoted entirely—actually, *almost* entirely—to the blues. In every situation, at almost every job, from country dives to country clubs, at some point the time comes to play the blues. It's part of every musician's experience. Which means it's perfect material for *Musician*.

But like all vital art forms, it's changing—and with change comes controversy. To many recent initiates, blues has become the playground of young guitar gunslingers, whose fast-note duels and Billy the Kid images have little connection to the literary side of the music. Are the quick-lick artists confusing image with life experience? We asked Dan Forte to put the question to four of the top blues kids—Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Monster Mike Welch, Nathan Cavaleri, and Jonny Lang. You'll be surprised at what they have to say for themselves.

That's just the beginning. British correspondent Paul Tingen tracked down the elusive Peter Green, whose early exploits with Fleetwood Mac and recent emergence from twenty years of mental illness establish him as both a survivor and a legend in British blues.

Perhaps most important, we tell you what you need to do to find work on the blues circuit, and Alligator Records head Bruce Iglauer clues you in on what it takes to record for a blues label. We've even got a lesson for electronic artists on how to do your own high-tech blues album.

There's plenty for everyone, because the blues is as universal as music can get. It's part of who we are and how we play. So let's go back to the well and drink deep.

—Robert L. Doerschuk, editor

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Simply put, Geri Allen is viewed by the jazz critical community as one of the most important pianists and writers on the scene and this release will only solidify her incredible reputation. Here she has stripped her band down to the bare essentials, allowing her clear and ingenious compositions to shine like rare gems. And her collaborators are some of the most famous in jazz—ORNETTE COLEMAN heard here in two duets with Geri, WALLACE RONEY on trumpet and percussionist CYRO BAPTISTA.

PETE (LA ROCA) SIMS *SWINGTIME*

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KEVIN HAYS - *ANDALUCIA*

55817

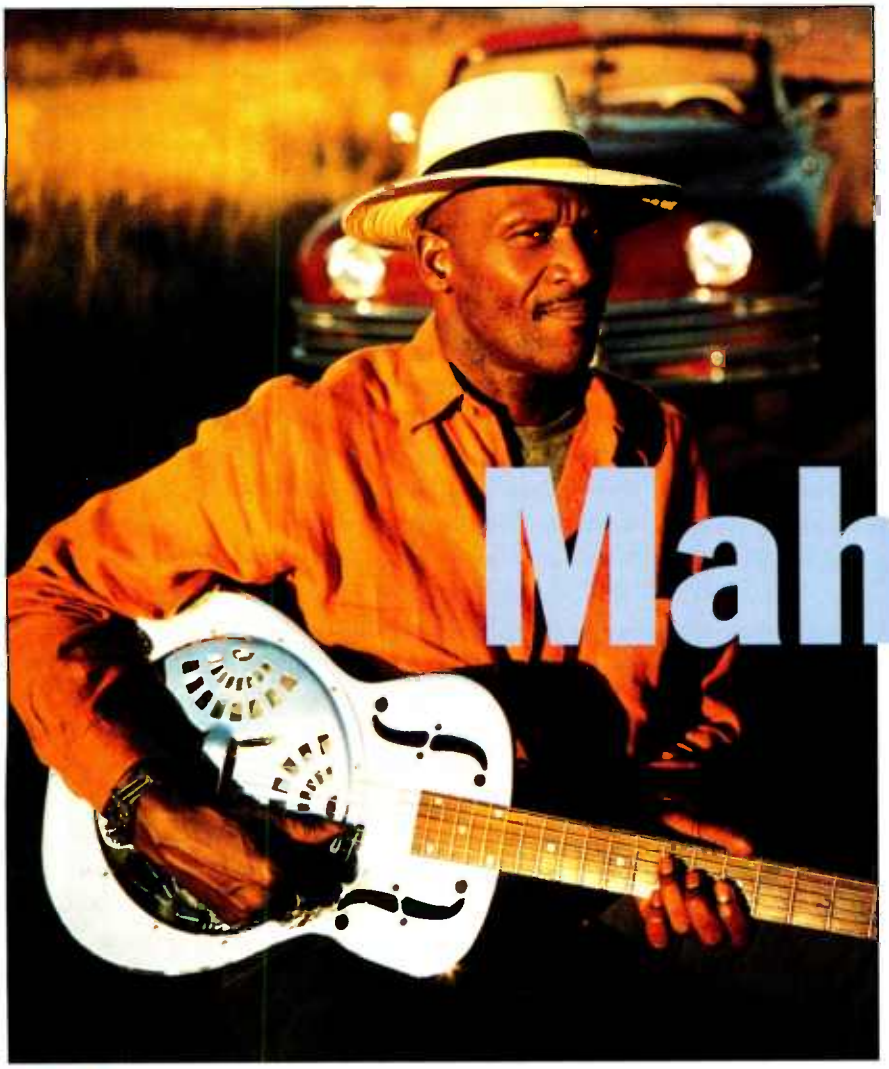
For his third Blue Note release, pianist KEVIN HAYS chose to record with a rhythm section of the highest caliber: bassist RON CARTER and drummer JACK DEJOHNETTE. With this combination of stellar jazz talent, Hays affirms his stature as one of the greatest young talents to approach a keyboard in the last twenty years. Produced by Bob Belden.

SHERMAN IRBY - *FULL CIRCLE*

52251

Let's get serious about the alto saxophone. Sherman Irby, a veteran of the Lincoln Center Jazz Band and currently touring with Roy Hargrove, swings hard and takes no prisoners. *Full Circle* marks a truly auspicious recording debut by a player who must be heard.
JAMES HURT-piano
ERIC REVIS-bass
DANA MURRAY-drums
With special guest Charli Persip.

BENT NOTES AND BROKEN RULES. SINCE 1939.



"I'm sorry, an 11-year-old kid is not gonna understand [the blues]."

Taj Mahal

You have a reputation as a scholar of the blues as well as one of its leading performers. When you began playing, was your interest in the music mainly academic?

Not really. My family came from the South and the West Indies, and they were all very vocal about their culture lines. But I didn't have a lot of time to learn about that from my grandparents, so the blues people were like surrogate grandparents to me. I sought to make connections with Jesse Fuller, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, and those people. They looked over my shoulder and told me what I was doing right. I didn't have a wall full of gold records to say I was doing well, but the comments from those people were what counted to me.

Why was meeting these people so important?

Because they had recorded every kind of way that's possible ... but what did they *think?* I'd ask Sleepy John Estes, "What was goin' on with you and Yank [Rachell] when y'all was playing?" "Well, I'll tell you ..." And four hours later, he's still rollin'. You don't know how that's gonna come up in a song or affect you individually, but it does.

Has that kind of insight into the music been lost?

Yeah. I'm sorry, an eleven-year-old kid is not gonna have the understanding of a forty-year-old who's got kids and a mortgage and is trying to work on relationships, doing bad, doing good, getting drunk. Somebody told me about one of these youngsters who was out there playing. Everyone was whoopin' and hollering, but there came a point where he got stuck, and he started looking around the stage like, "Dad! Help! What's the next lick?"

So they're more interested in imitating somebody's licks than learning about the sources of the style.

Sure. They're framing what they do on what they hear from records, but that's only a slice of that thing. Maybe the guy on that record never played that song that way again in his life, so the kid is stuck with the idea that what this individual was about was this one song. That's why I wanted to talk to these guys and to know what they thought, all the stupid stuff, all the great stuff.

A lot of the old masters have passed on. Will today's players lose touch with these roots?

No, because it's a living tradition. Why did Robert Johnson sell a million copies sixty years after he died? It's like, Americans have been going out to the South of France, here and there, and all of a sudden they go, "You know, I've never been to the Grand Canyon. In fact, I've never been to Clarksville, Mississippi." There are still guys thirty miles off the blacktop road, beating it out. They've never made a record, don't care to make a record. But that music is still there. You want to go further? Go to Mali. Go to Senegal. There's a long line that's connecting them, and it ain't been broken. It's all about how Africans have reassembled their lives since their deportation to other parts of the world. Poetry, frustration, resentment, joy, damnation, crucifixion: We've got it all in there, every story you want to hear.

What's the greatest misconception about the blues?

That it's easy to play.

—Robert L. Doerschuk

James Minchin III

David Maxwell

"There's a temptation to play many notes, but that ignores what the blues is all about."

résumé
Freddie King
James Cotton
Bonnie Raitt
Buddy Guy
Junior Wells
Solo album:
Maximum Blues Piano
(Tone Cool/Rounder)

How did you break into the session business as a blues piano specialist?

Freddie King came to the Jazz Workshop in Boston back in 1972, and I went there with Bob Margolin, who joined Muddy Waters a little bit after that, to hear him. We just rose in our seats simultaneously when Freddie came out with his first number. The next night Freddie allowed me to sit in. Afterwards he said he had already picked out some piano player from New York to join him, but he'd changed his mind and wanted me to come out on the road with him instead.

How has the blues club world changed since then?

Well, back in the mid-to-late Sixties there was a crossroads where blues musicians were playing in their own clubs on the so-called chitlin circuit. But when I got into it they were already moving into coffeehouses, festivals, and other venues which were associated more with a white middle-class audience. With a few exceptions, that's been the market that's sustained them, although recently I've noticed more young black performers and listeners gravitating toward the blues. And the music itself has changed from a form where you had the musicians interacting with each other behind a dominant guitar player. The white blues/rock influence has changed that considerably.

Has this decreased the influence of the old masters you used to jam with—Muddy Waters, Otis Spann, and so on?

Certainly. Many of the musicians who are associated with that earlier era have changed their music, *à la* Buddy Guy, to make it palatable to a whiter audience. You don't have as much of that attraction that made it more a music from the black cultural experience.

Because of the archival nature of the blues, is it harder to innovate within the style than it would be if you were mainly playing jazz?

You know, I struggle with that question all the time. I try to use the language and the material of the blues in fresh ways, because I really have a jazz improviser's spirit. Yet I won't cross the two styles. When I play with blues musicians I try to adhere to the form yet make it fresh; I try to depart from the usual riffs that people expect. Sometimes you have to play where the emotional force will be accessible to the audience, but I do that in different ways, drawing from influences such as Middle Eastern, Indian, or Asian music.

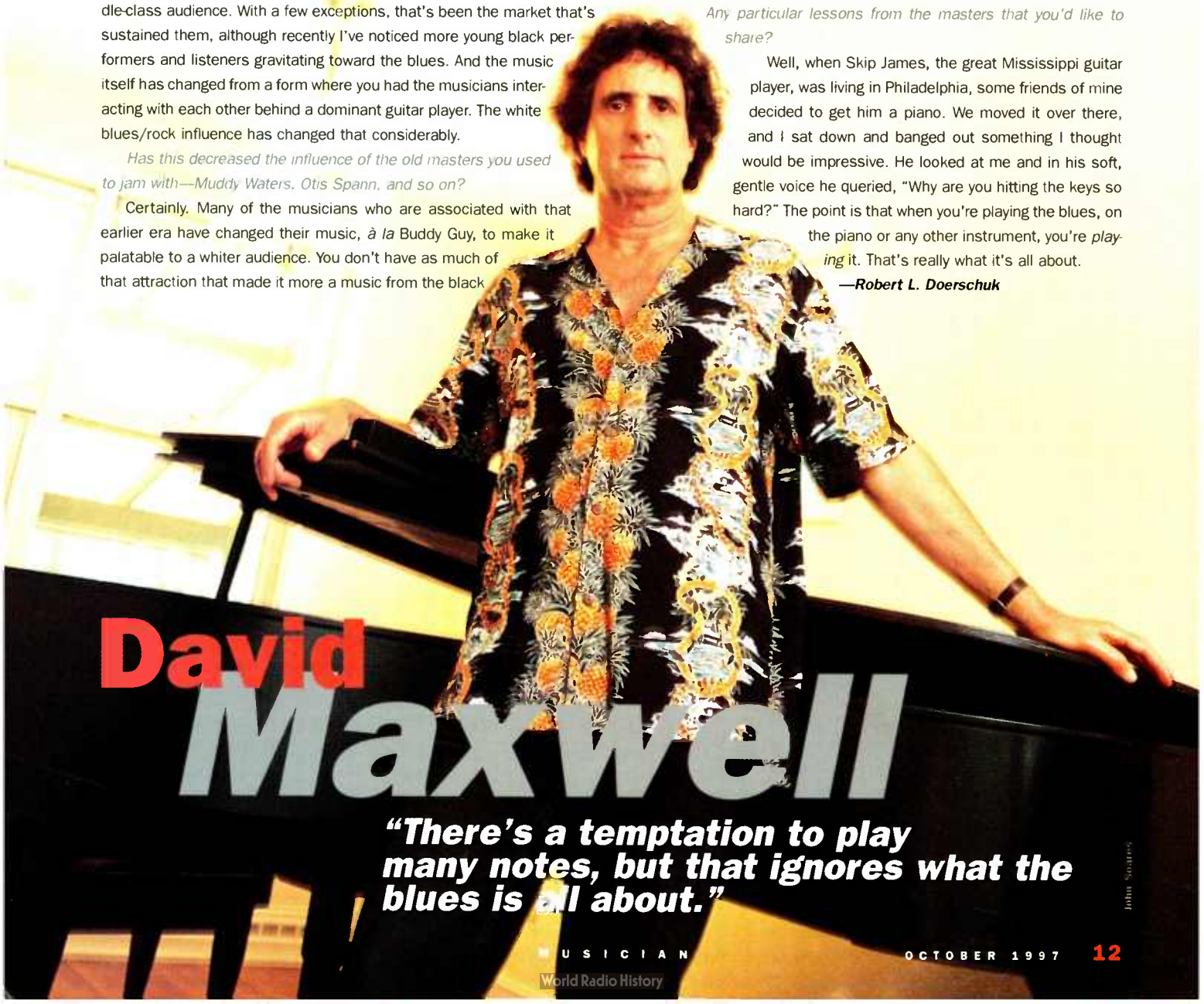
Is part of the blues learning curve learning to stay within that idiomatic line?

Absolutely, especially in terms of leaving spaces. There's a temptation to play so many notes, but that ignores what the music is about. It took me years to understand that the key is to approach the blues with a vocalist's sense of phrasing.

Any particular lessons from the masters that you'd like to share?

Well, when Skip James, the great Mississippi guitar player, was living in Philadelphia, some friends of mine decided to get him a piano. We moved it over there, and I sat down and banged out something I thought would be impressive. He looked at me and in his soft, gentle voice he queried, "Why are you hitting the keys so hard?" The point is that when you're playing the blues, on the piano or any other instrument, you're *playing* it. That's really what it's all about.

—Robert L. Doerschuk



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talents

chris duarte

John Falls

"Coltrane is my idol," admits Austin-based guitarist **Chris Duarte**. "Everything he did was pure music." In light of his debut, the very Stevie Ray Vaughan-inspired *Texas Sugar Strat Magik*, Duarte's knowledge of Coltrane is somewhat surprising. But the guitarist goes deep with 'Trane. "You listen to how he plays and you try to play in the spirit."

That relationship with the jazz giant might make more sense after listening to *Tailspin Headwhack* (Silvertone), Duarte's follow-up. Not that the guitarist has decided to play jazz. Rather, like 'Trane, he soars with confident new expression and style. Forget labeling him as a blues guitarist: "I'm a musician and I explore music," he states. "For people to label me as a blues guitar player, that's cool; it's the way the system works, but it doesn't do me or what I do justice."

You got that right. Produced by David Z., a member of Prince's Revolution, *Tailspin Headwhack* showcases Duarte's monstrous chops, from funk to punk, from Hendrix ("Drivin' South") to B.B. King (a send-up of "The Thrill Is Gone"), all marked by Duarte's percussive, in-your-face Strat sound and a subtle use of samples, loops, and electronics.

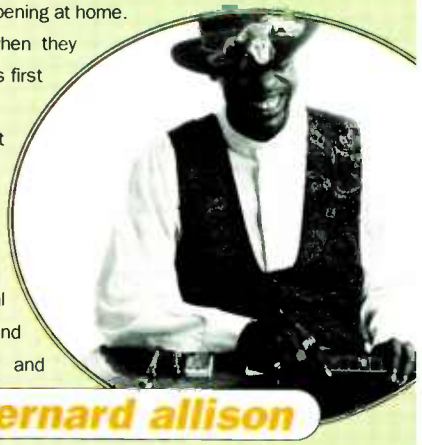
After earning numerous accolades for his debut, Duarte is a little unsettled with his growing reputation as "guitar hero." "It's something you always want, but when you get there you look back and wonder, 'Do I want to go back to comfort and anonymity?'" For the guitarist, though, the allure of heroism is great. "I like being somebody who'll influence music and younger players. Every true musician should want to make a mark on music," he says with a laugh. "It's like when people say, 'This sounds Hendrixian or Mozartian.' When they hear me, I want people to say, 'This is a Duarte-ism.'"

—Bob Gulla

As the guy who put his name and mad-daddy persona behind the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, Jon Spencer is the trio's most salient member, but guitarist Judah Bauer is most responsible for putting the blues in the Blues Explosion. It was Bauer who took the Blues Explosion south to Mississippi, where they hooked up with blues legend R.L. Burnside, learned the idiosyncratic cadences of the region's folk blues style, and recorded on Burnside's *A Ass Pocket of Whiskey* (Fat Possum/Epitaph). Last fall, Bauer journeyed back to the Mississippi hills to dig deeper into the red clay soil for another roots fix, resulting in the self-titled full-length debut by **Twenty Miles** on Fat Possum.

Blues fans who've heard *Keepin' the Blues Alive*, ***Bernard Allison***'s recent U.S. album debut on Cannonball Records, might credit the guitar slinger's assured command of classics like "Rocket 88" and Freddie King's "Young Boy's Blues" to his blood lines: Bernard, 32, is the son of Chicago blues legend Luther Allison. Actually, there's a simpler reason: experience.

"Most of my work is in Europe," Allison explains by phone from Paris, where he moved to join his father's band seven years ago and has since gone on to lead a group of his own. "They're very respectful here, big fans of the blues. But I'm ready to see what's happening at home. Hopefully, people will be surprised when they hear the record—like, 'This can't be his first album,' you know?"



bernard allison

In fact, *Keepin' the Blues Alive*, cut last Christmas in Chicago, is album number five for Bernard, who mixes the driving rhythmic attack and stinging tone of Texas house rockers like Albert Collins with sonic and textural flourishes more suggestive of Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Like Vaughan and Hendrix, Allison tunes his guitar a step low to give his throaty baritone vocals more warmth and range. "Then when you get to that rockin' type of blues, I can give you that Johnny Winter growl," he chuckles.

Though clearly proud of his lineage—he tries to include at least one of his father's songs on each album—Bernard stresses that he's no purist. "Guys like Lucky Peterson and Kenny Neal, we're all in the same place. We're not trying to forget our roots, but you have to try new ideas, whether it's writing a song in 24 bars or using rock or reggae influences. You have to take a chance. That's the only way this music is gonna survive."

—Mark Rowland

Though the disc is credited to Judah and his older brother, drummer Donovan Bauer, Twenty Miles features cameos by a formidable cast of folk heroes, including drummer/guitarist R.L. Boyce and octogenarian fife player Othar Turner and his drum corps, on a selection of tunes that comes closer than the Blues Explosion ever have to capturing the scrappy voodoo groove that haunts the Mississippi hills. By design, Twenty Miles isn't purely for the blues purists—Bauer couldn't help but let some of his own garage punk roots slip into the mix—but it was ultimately a blues experiment that Judah hopes will turn more people on to the region's native sounds.

"It's a drag that people don't know more about the hill country style," says Bauer, who was introduced to the music as a kid by his harmonica-playing father. "John Lee Hooker is the most famous of those guys, but there are so many other great players. It's amazing stuff. I mean Othar's 80 or 81, and he's probably the last person in America who's playing that fife-and-drum tradition. He's a national treasure. When he goes I wonder what's going to happen. I guess people will learn it from records."

—Matt Ashare

twenty miles

The pull of the blues is strong—strong enough to draw **Kelly Joe Phelps** from his life as a postbop/free jazz bassist in Portland, Oregon, into the swamps and hollers where the ghosts of Robert Pete Williams and Blind Willie Johnson reside. On his major label debut, *Roll Away the Stone* (Rykodisc), Phelps summons these spirits with husky, intimate vocals and a slide guitar technique that's capable of chilling the spine, if not raising the dead.

Chris Strother

kelly joe phelps

According to Phelps, there isn't actually that much distance between, say, Fred McDowell and John Coltrane. "When I first stumbled across a Fred McDowell recording, it sounded to me like a musician in the style of Ornette Coleman who sang. I heard in McDowell a way to play music that's essentially free, spiritually and otherwise, but that's built around this anchor that people from different circles can identify."

That anchor is the blues form, flavored with gospel phrasing. Playing an old Gibson Folk Jumbo, Phelps recalls Rev. Gary Davis in finger-picked originals like "Footprints" and, with the guitar flat in his lap and a Stevens slide in his hand, breathes holy spirit into traditional tunes like "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder" and the "Doxology" hymn.

With so many blues musicians plugging in and turning up, Phelps' acoustic nuances are an anomaly—a fact this artist contends with each time he performs. "The question always comes up: 'To uphold the tradition, do you play the old stuff in the traditional way?' Well, to people like Fred McDowell and Skip James, it was important to be honest, which is what made them original. So my hope is to understand the past enough to bring it along with me as I push into the future, because that's what my heroes always did."

—Robert L. Doerschuk

Call it getting sidetracked, but blues belter **Deborah Coleman** hasn't taken any clear-cut path to her smoke-flavored debut *I Can't Lose* (Blind Pig). Playing guitar always took a back seat to such diversions as a back-breaking electrician's job, a later nursing career, and the birth of her daughter, when Mom boxed up that old six-string for good. "It was really hard to do, but I had a priority thing there with my family coming before the music," Coleman claims.

"As my daughter got older," she continues, "I was finally able to start playing part-time around my area on the weekends. The more I did that, the more I wanted to do it full-time."

Coleman entered the Charleston Blues Festival's National Amateur Talent Search a couple of years ago. Spotlight shining, microphone waiting. "I was shakin'. I was so nervous," she chuckles. "It was my first time singing before a crowd, but the applause told me, 'Hey, I'm doing alright here!'" She enjoyed warbling so much she even improvised lyrics to her set's scheduled instrumental. Now all those sidetracks are finally paying off. "Just the other night, I broke a mic cord, didn't have another one with me, and had to break out the old soldering iron to fix it — I knew exactly what to do."

deborah coleman

Does Coleman's daughter—now sixteen—appreciate her mother's new musical career? "No," Coleman sighs. "She doesn't wanna have anything to do with the music business, probably from watching me have to leave home to tour so many times. She likes it when I bring the money back to her, though. She'll ask me, 'Mom, I need some money,' and I say, 'I don't have any.' And she says, 'Well, you better get to pluckin' them strings, then!'" Why, it's enough to make a lady sing the blues....***—Tom Lanham***

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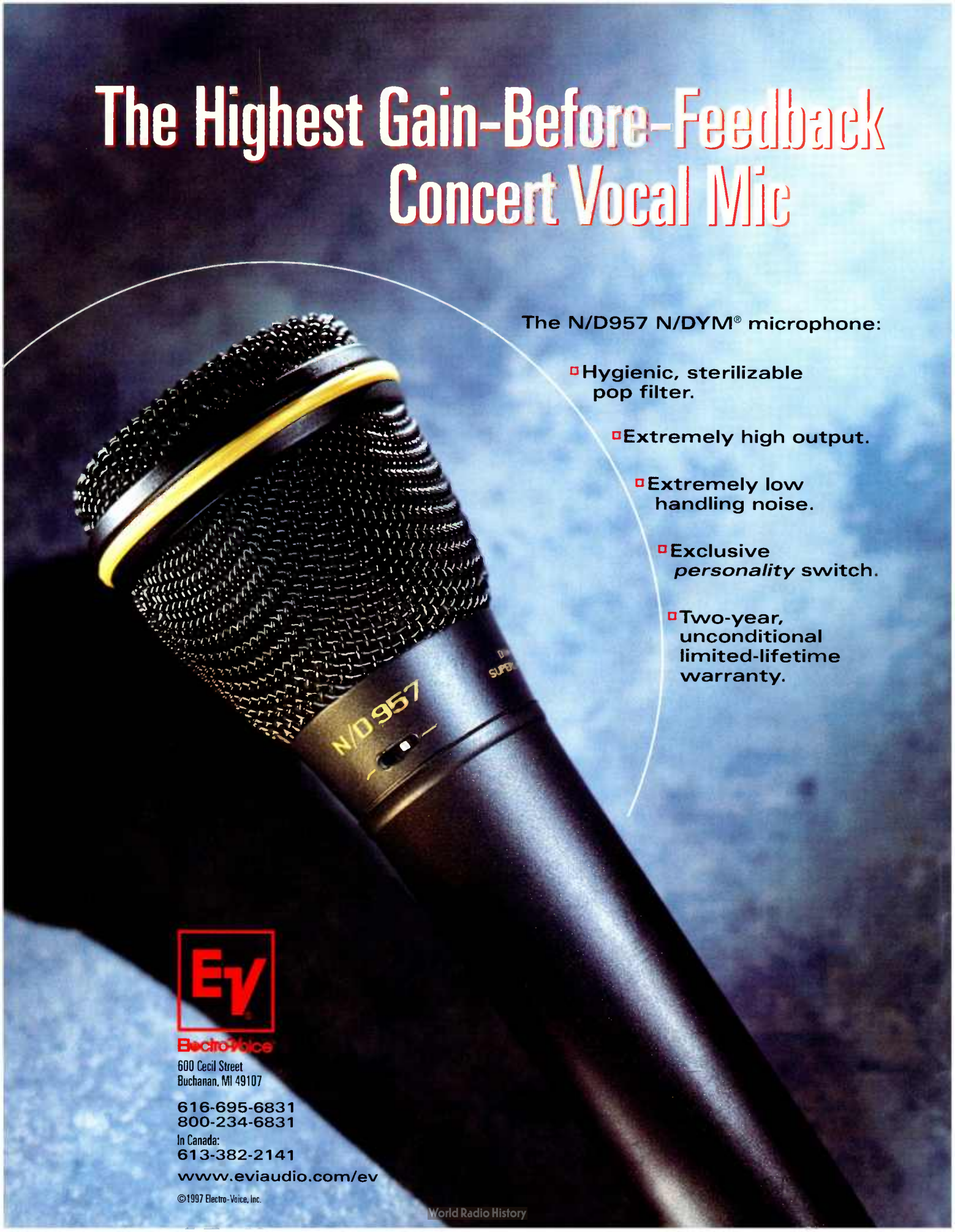

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This is the heart-warming tale of a rock & roll band and its faith in an A&R guy. The story of a group that got together in San Francisco six years ago, changed their original name because some other group grabbed it first, changed their lineup when they couldn't duplicate the sound of their first demo onstage, and changed their record company just *after* completing their major label debut, thanks in part to the kindness of one of the industry's biggest moguls. You know, that kind of story. As drummer Bill Shore summarizes, "We've been through so much shit together."

The tale begins with guitarist John Wells and bassist Jason Loekus, whose band was called, fittingly, American Dream. When Shore joined on drums, they changed their name to Combine. When another band called Combine protested, they changed their name to Cola. When they recorded a demo with too many guitar parts to replicate live, they added guitarist Tim Bass, who eventually evolved into the lead singer. They cut more demos, got nibbles from several labels, and opened for their pals Counting Crows at L.A.'s Viper Room. The next morning they were hanging out on the 22nd floor of a Century City corporate tower, signing up with attorney Allen Lenard, who in turn introduced the group to Direct Management. So far, so swell.

A round of showcases back in San Francisco caught the attention of Arista's veteran A&R rep Steve Ralbovsky. "I had developed a friendship with Adam [Duritz] and Dave [Bryson, of Counting

COLA

DEBUT ALBUM: WHATNOT
LABEL: INTERSCOPE
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Crows] a few years before," Ralbovsky explains. "I knew that Dave had worked on one of Cola's demos. Having regard for his work, that piqued my curiosity, so I listened to the tape and was struck right away by a couple of songs. I thought they were very well written and that the singer had a strong character in his voice. I went out to San Francisco and met with them. The next day I went to their rehearsal space, and they played a group of songs for me. I was very taken by their musicianship and the high quality of their playing ability."

The regard was mutual, and after a competitive bidding war Cola signed with Arista. "Ultimately it's about a relationship and feeling comfortable," says Tim Bass. "Steve was the first guy we felt comfortable with; unfortunately, he was with the one label that everyone and his mother was telling us not to sign with. It's a great label, but everyone we knew in the rock establishment said, 'Look, there's a series of broken carriages along the road here.' But we kept coming back to Steve. In the end it boiled down to the fact that we didn't want to be on a label where we kind of liked everybody but we didn't feel like there was one guy who would really be our champion."

After signing what Ralbovsky describes as a traditional multi-album deal with good recording funds and royalties, Cola went into the studio with producer Andy Wallace. By the end of November '96 their first record was complete.

And then the call came.

"I don't think we were home for even 48 hours," Shore remembers. "It was two days before Thanksgiving."

"We thought Arista was calling to sequence the record," Bass adds.

In fact, the label was calling to tell the band that Ralbovsky had moved to Interscope.

Looking back, Ralbovsky says that working with Cola had almost convinced him not to make the jump. "This was one of the hardest things about leaving Arista, because I had become very close to these guys on a friendship basis as much as a working relationship. I felt terrible to have spent that much time with them, signed them, made a record with them, and become good friends with them, only to leave them behind."

Once again, the feeling was mutual. In December the band consulted with their management team. Then they met with Arista's owner Clive Davis. "I think it bears saying that Clive did give us his blessing and let us go," says John Wells. "Hats off to Clive, he's a good man. I really believe he was thinking about what was best for us." Ralbovsky, the rest of the band, and their management echo this sentiment.

"We let the guys push the pencils and phone each other, and we demoed up some more songs," Shore explains. "Some of those demos ended up in the hands of Interscope; they wanted us to add another song to the record. So in April, Andy flew back out, we did another song at The Plant's Studio D, and we tagged it on.

"We stuck it out over six years to do this," the drummer concludes. "We've been through hell and back to even be sitting here and telling you about it. I think a lot of bands would have tossed in the towel a long time ago."

—David Farinella

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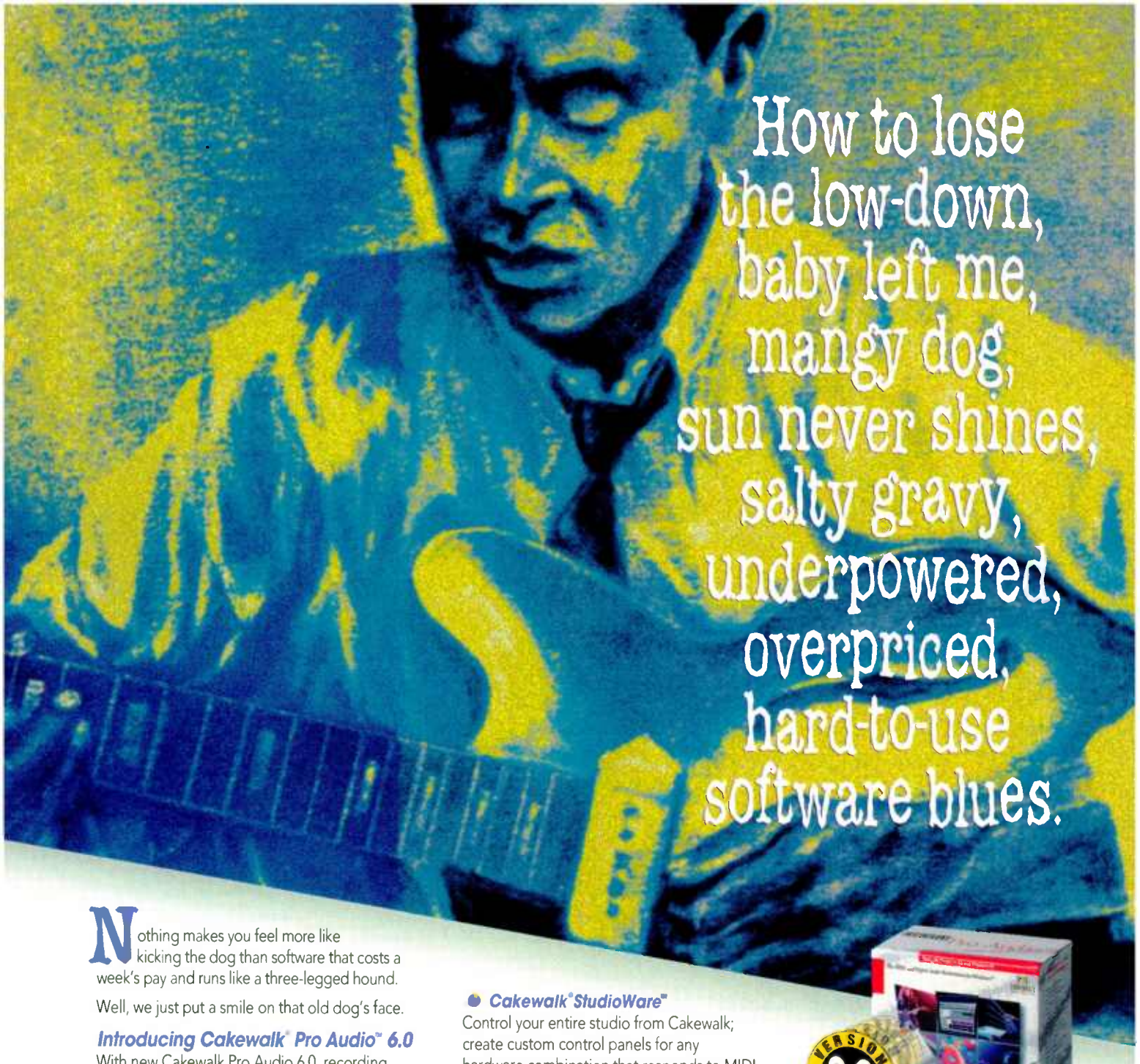

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songwriting

Keb' Mo' Takes It To The Stage

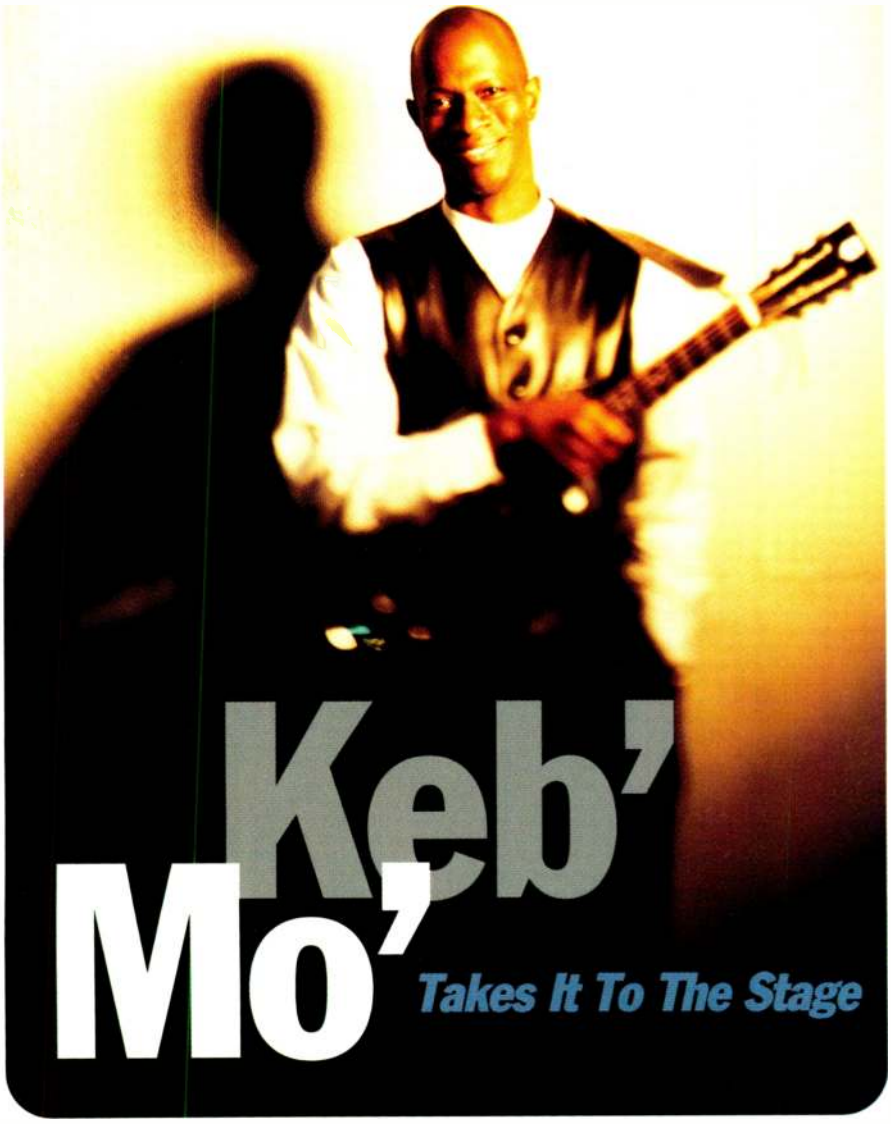
A modern blues master faces the challenge of writing a "bluesical"

by mac randall

Many listeners, and even many players, think of the blues merely as a basic formula, a vehicle to carry emotion. Once you know the formula, the emotion becomes the primary consideration—it's in your gut, you've got to get it out, and how it comes out is governed to some degree by its quality. If you look at the blues in this way, then the songwriting craft involved takes a back seat.

But what if you've got to write your blues to fit a story? And what if it's meant not for you to sing, but for a bunch of actors playing characters onstage? Keep in mind that the actors' brief is to break into your song between delivering lines and somehow convince an audience they're for real. Oh, and by the way, you've got to write nine more tunes, all due tomorrow. Better get in touch with your craft—and fast.

An unusual situation, but much like one that Kevin Moore, a.k.a. Keb' Mo', had to deal with just recently. He was commissioned by the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, to write music and lyrics for a production of Keith Glover's play *Thunder Knocking on the Door*. The play, which Glover has termed a "bluesical," centers around the family of a mythical performer named Jaguar Dupree, the greatest bluesman never to have recorded, and their spooky encounter with a guitar-wielding stranger called Marvell Thunder twenty years after Dupree's death. Though the production closed at the end of May, further runs are being planned.



Moore, who won a 1997 Grammy for his last album *Just Like You* (Okeh/Epic), had never written songs for a musical before. As the following interview proves, the assignment was challenging in more ways than one.

How did you get introduced to this project?

Keith Glover heard one of my albums. He wanted original music for the play, rather than what he'd been doing [in previous Dallas and Baltimore productions], which was taking old blues classics and intermingling them with the dialog. So Keith hunted me down; he's kinda persistent. Most of it I did during my spare time—and a lot of it I did on the way there [*laughs*], on the plane. But I was prepared; I'd read the script over and over till I really got a feel for the play and what each song was about, and I saw another production of it too, in Dallas. So when it was time to write, all this stuff just came out. And it came out good.

How many songs did you write?

There are ten songs in the play, and I ended up writing six, maybe seven—I forget. The others that we used were pieces I had done before. One was "Rainmaker," from an old obscure album that I did back in 1980 [*Kevin*

Moore]. It's not that bluesy, but I felt the play needed some releases. You can't just blues people to death.

So there are some variations.

I get bored fast. If I hear two songs in a row that are I-IV-V and twelve bars, I'm outta there.

What music was used in the Dallas production that you saw?

They used "Evil" by Howlin' Wolf and some old R&B things. I used those songs to figure out where Keith was going, and then I had to take the situations where they came up and make [the new songs] counter that situation. They had to be an extension of the dialog without saying the same thing; it was kind of funny.

It sounds more challenging than funny.

Well, the Howlin' Wolf song sticks out in my head because that one was the most intimidating. It's like, "What do you want me to do? You've got Howlin' Wolf here!" But even though it was a real go-getter, it didn't belong in the play. So I wrote some things about this Thunder character that pointed towards the perception of him as something evil. I was going for something that sounded like it could've come out of the Sixties. And since you're talking about the greatest blues guitar player who never recorded, you've got to have a feeling about the music like, "Wow, if this guy had had a record, it would've been so cool." That's a hard one.

What instrument did you write on?

I wrote away from instruments. I wanted to get the words going first. I used to write the music first, but now it's always motivated by a lyric idea rather than a riff. That's where the blues turned my writing around; if you start out with the lyrics and you can get the same realness that a blues song has, then you can go somewhere else with it musically.

How did you present the finished songs?

I did some demos on my computer at the house, an Atari with old software—Cubase 3.0, I think—just enough to map it out. Then I'd put the sequence down on tape and overdub live guitar and vocal on top. That's just to get the feel of the song; I didn't want [the musicians] to do it note for note.

Did you make any changes in the music during rehearsals?

Oh no. The actors hate you if you do that. They've got so much work to do—they're trying to remember lines, blocking, choreography. I even tried to make it so that nobody had too many words in a song, 'cause they're in hell.

So you didn't give them too much grief.

Well, you gotta inflict *some* stuff on them. You just go, "Okay, I'm sorry [*laughs*], but I gotta tell you this..." The hardest thing is to get 'em to sing the blues. People come in and think, "Oh, it's just blues," and go, na-*na*-na-na, my mama done this, and you tell 'em it's different, and they'll fight you all the way. But I understand that. I mean, *I* don't sing the blues that good. Put me up there with Bobby "Blue" Bland or Little Milton or B.B. King, and I'm a total wannabe.

Will you stay involved with the play in future productions?

Absolutely. The music's not totally finished; it's still a work in progress. The next time it goes up, we'll fine-tune it, change a few things, and keep going until it's a wonderful piece and it's playing on Broadway for years and years to come. Hopefully [*laughs*].

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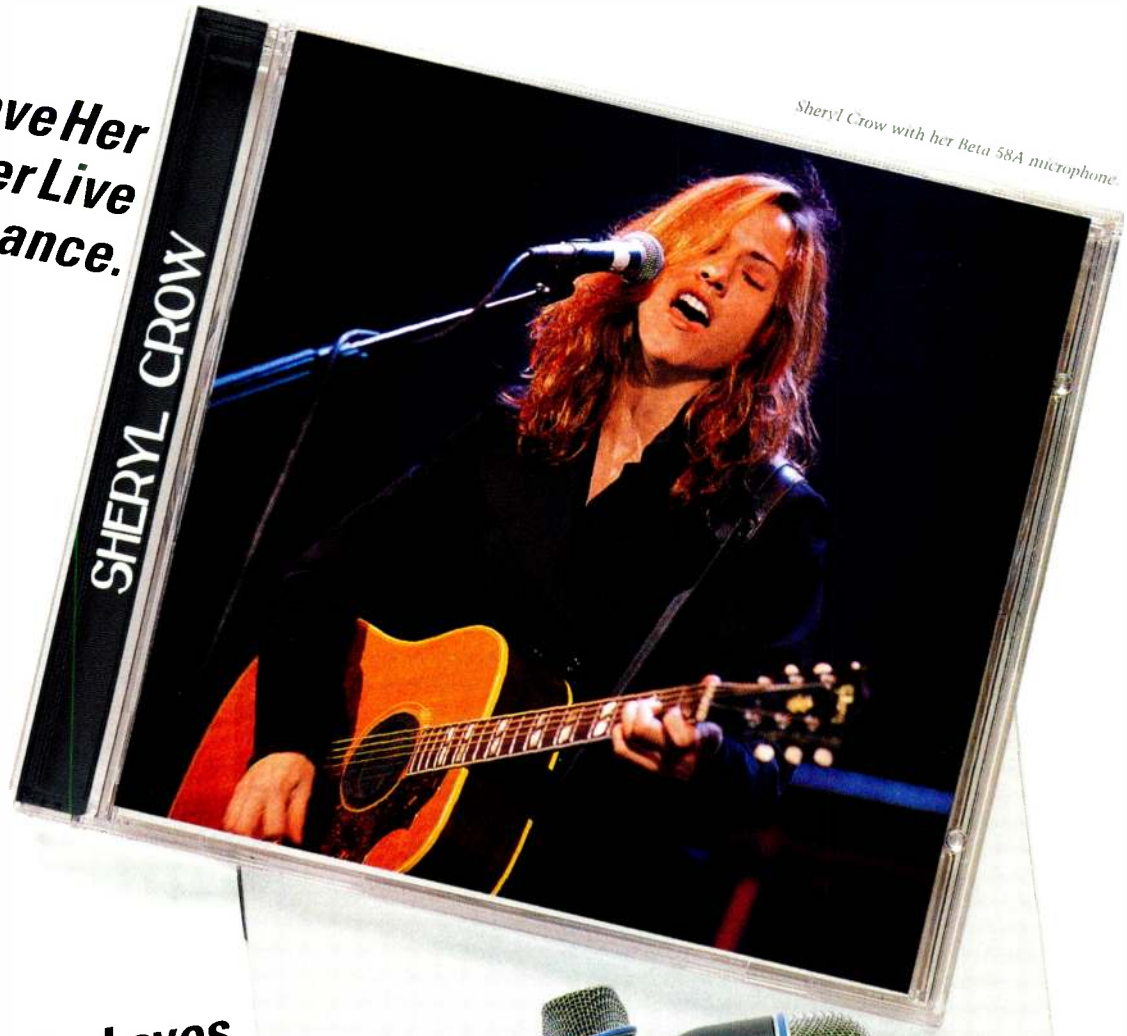

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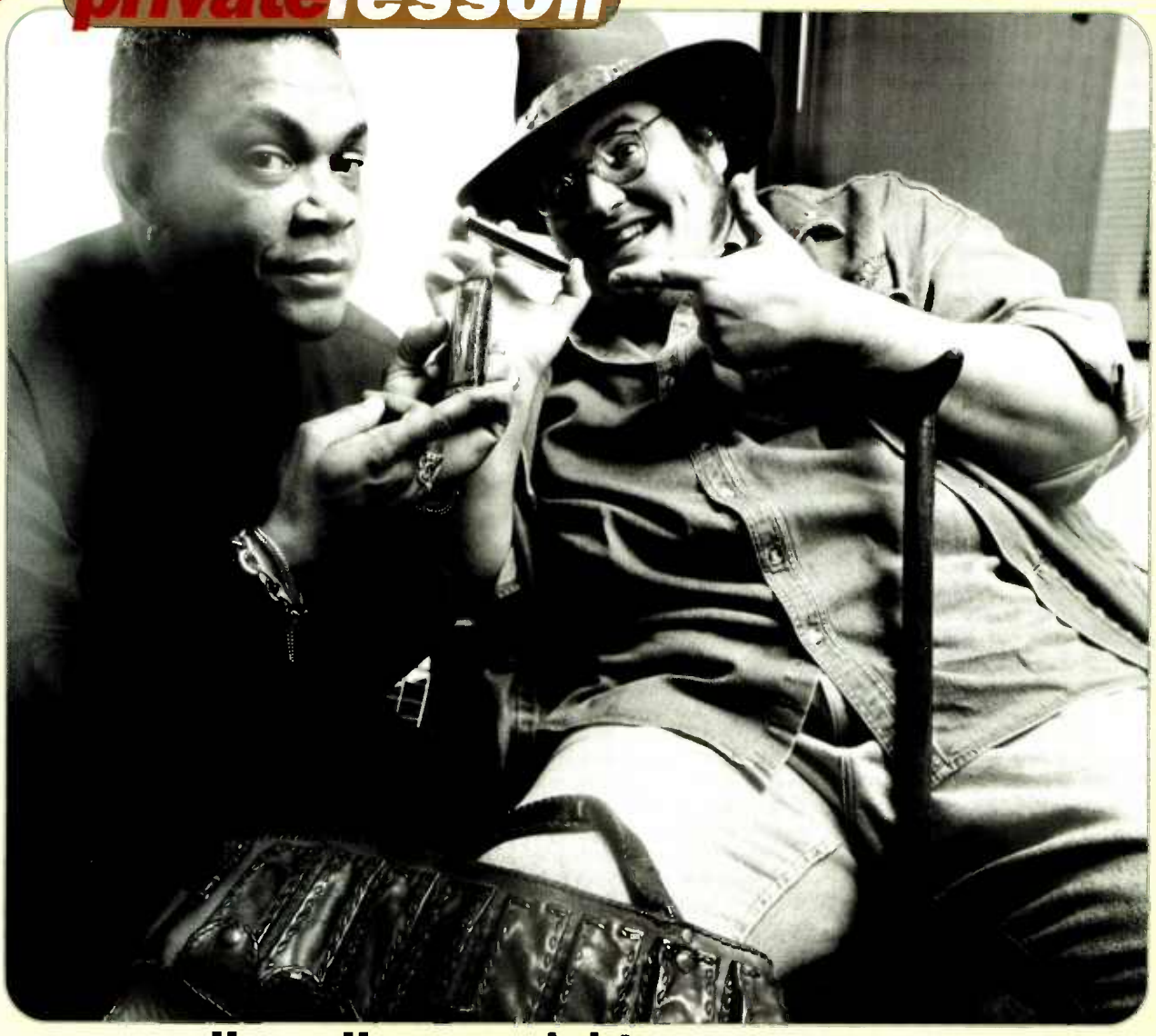

Harp Heavyweights JOHN POPPER & SUGAR BLUE: Blood On The Reeds

by robert l. doerschuk

John Popper's eyes light up as a door down the hall at A&M Records opens. "I think I see the man coming now," he says. And sure enough, there he is, Sugar Blue, fresh off a delayed plane from Chicago, clothed in icy blue from head to toe, with a handsome leather "gunbelt" packed with harmonicas strapped around his waist.

"The harmonica is like life. Sometimes you blow, sometimes you suck."
—John Popper

"Awright!" crows Popper. He rises from the chair, an imposing figure, crowned by a gambler's hat studded with Hohner harmonica logos. He and Sugar approach each other like quick-draw rivals in the dust of Dodge City. But no bullets fly, no blood spills. Instead, meeting for the first time, the two giants of blues harmonica embrace and begin talking shop.

Popper, the front man for Blues Traveler, speaks first. "You know, I saw you play when I was in high school, at this bar in Trenton. I was sixteen years old and a really great harp player, but when you started playing, man, I started thinking, 'Sugar is the sum total of all harmonica players. Someday we're

gonna have this huge duel. If he wins, I'm gonna sell all my clothes and become his apprentice. And if I win I'll take my rightful place as King of the Blues!'"

John Popper vs. Sugar Blue. That's on the scale of Oscar Peterson against Art Tatum. In terms of technique, each is a monster. Popper's tone is lighter, Sugar's more substantial. But each plays with blinding velocity, executing runs that could keep pace with Charlie Parker's and nearly match Bird's grasp of playing through the changes. While Popper enjoys high visibility through his band's string of hit albums and road gigs, Sugar is more of a connoisseur's delight. Blues fans were aware of his early work with Brownie McGhee, Roosevelt Sykes, and other major leaguers; those who follow more mainstream currents know his reed-busting solo on the Rolling Stones' "Miss You."

How did they develop their chops? For Popper, it was a matter of old-fashioned drills. "I worked on rudiments, and I got the sextuplet thing down, where you speak in threes instead of one." He blows a three-note, up-and-down pattern, two inhalations and one exhalation. "Then I'd tag on six beats"—he doubles the length of the line. "I hadn't heard anybody do that, except for *this* guy," he says, nodding at Sugar. "Once I got that down, I found I could use those six notes to play scales. I based my attack on the way bebop guys play triplets: *da*-da-da, *da*-da-da. When you start getting around comfortably, then you start to see how scales connect."

Sugar followed a different regimen. "This was back in the days of LPs, and I had a turntable that I could cut back to 16 rpm. I'd put on, say, 'Straight, No Chaser,' and I'd wear out the record until I figured out the head and the first two or three solos. After you get to the bottom of a tune like that, you've figured out a whole lot of music."

"You had 'Straight, No Chaser,' but I was working on 'Miss You,'" says Popper. "That tag at the end is hip, but when you start going up on the melody, it's beautiful. Usually a harp player who goes up high sounds kind of lost, a little nervous, trying to land the plane."

"Well, it amazed me that people wouldn't use the last four or five notes of the instrument," Sugar smiles. "The harmonica is only four or five inches long, and there's only twenty notes built into it. So I figured, hell, you're already limited, so you'd better use every damn note you can find on this sucker! I realized I could work the top range into second position ..."

"That's like when you're using a C harp to play in G, so you get the flatted seventh," Popper points out.

" ... so I started mixing modes," Sugar says. "When I could do that and not get lost, a whole new world opened up for me. To play the top end of the harp with timbre and tonality, you have to learn to strike each note with the same power and accuracy that you hit the bottom notes with. Otherwise it'll sound weenie."

This is all very interesting, but what can we say to beginners, to guitar players in blues bands who want to learn enough harmonica to play a chorus or two in a song? How should they get started?

Popper shrugs. "Try everything. You can try things out on the harp because it gives you some gratification right out of the box. You don't need an elaborate embouchure to make a sound; you get something just by breathing. The idea is not just to accept it there; you want to go further."

"Remember when you were a kid, how you would make airplane or car noises in your throat?" Sugar says. "Try that again, but take the sound out, put the harp in your mouth, and the air will give you those same kind of effects. A flute player taught me that, because that's how he got his vibrato."

Another technique is what those in the trade call tongue-blocking. "You can set a chord against every note by tongue-blocking," Sugar points out. "You block out three holes on the left and blow your note through the hole on the right side. Then when you want the chord, you lift your tongue and play it back. That was totally alien to me, because I learned to do that by squinching up and widening my lips, but now I realize that if you keep your mouth open and use your tongue, you get a fuller tone. That's because you have a wider resonant chamber."

We veer into a discussion about mics. "Everybody used to tell me I'd get this down-home sound with the Green Bullet," Popper says, "but I always thought that was just a great way for Shure to sell a bad microphone. I love the Shure 58, with its high overtones."

"Yeah?" says Sugar. "Well, since I love the shape of the Green Bullet, what I do now is I take the element out of the Shure 58 and put it into the Green Bullet. That way it fits my hand."

Popper laughs out loud: "Wham! Neat trick! Everybody used to say I had to use a Green Bullet because that's what the blues guys used. With a Fender Bassman amp."

"I never liked the sound of Fender amps," Sugar grumbles.

"Me neither! Too weak, man. I blow through Mesa/Boogie stacks with a Goff Leslie."

Sugar leans over and slaps hands. "Boogie! Alright! That's what's up."

The Blues Traveler bus is racing its engine outside the building. Popper reluctantly lumbers to his feet.

Sugar stands too. They embrace one more time, and Sugar invites Popper to sit in with him on his next album. Popper eagerly accepts, but Sugar gives him a sly look.

"Maybe we'll finally get into that duel you wanted." Ringside seats, anyone?

Melanie Weiner

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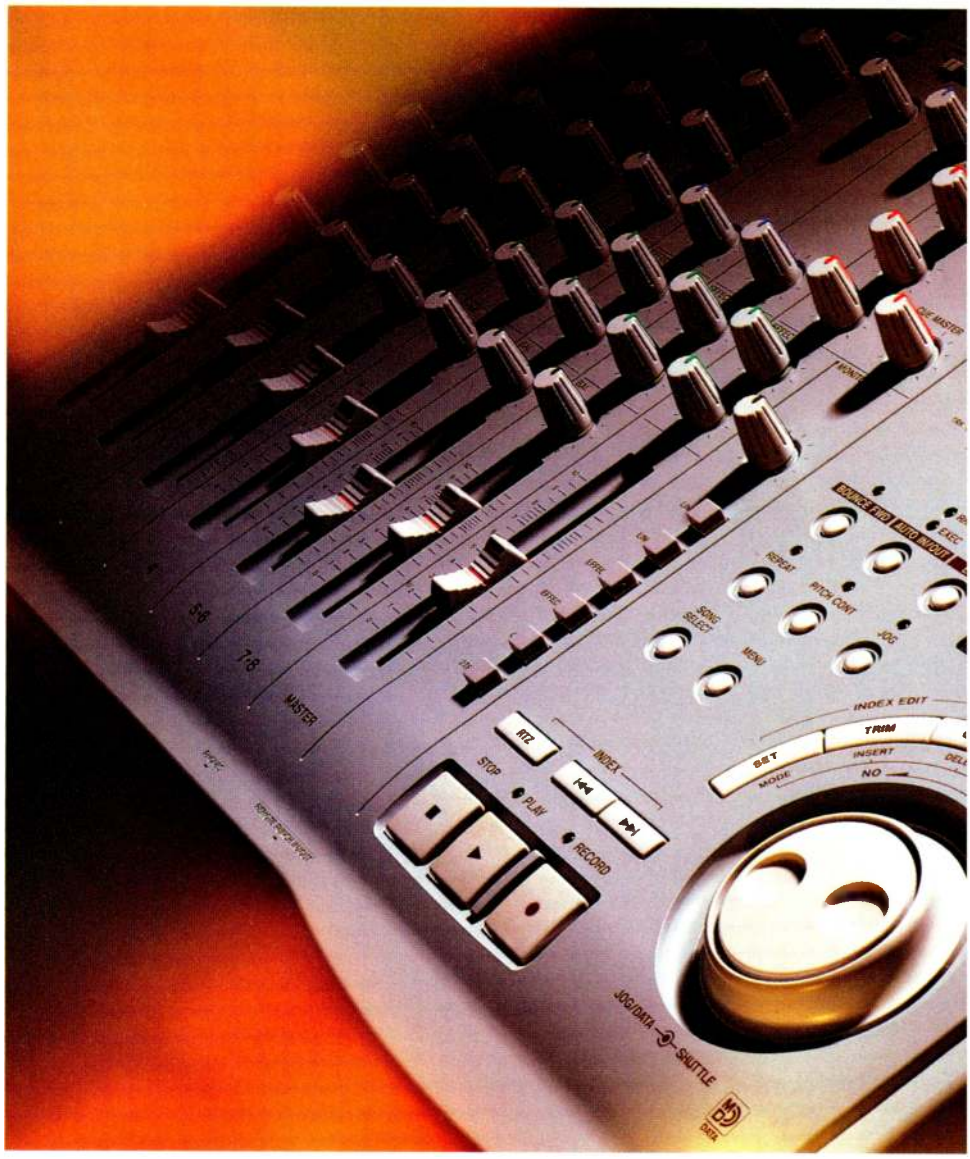

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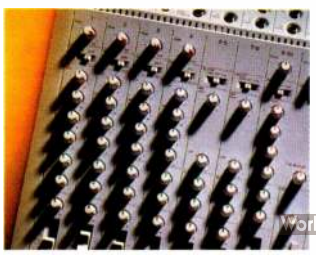

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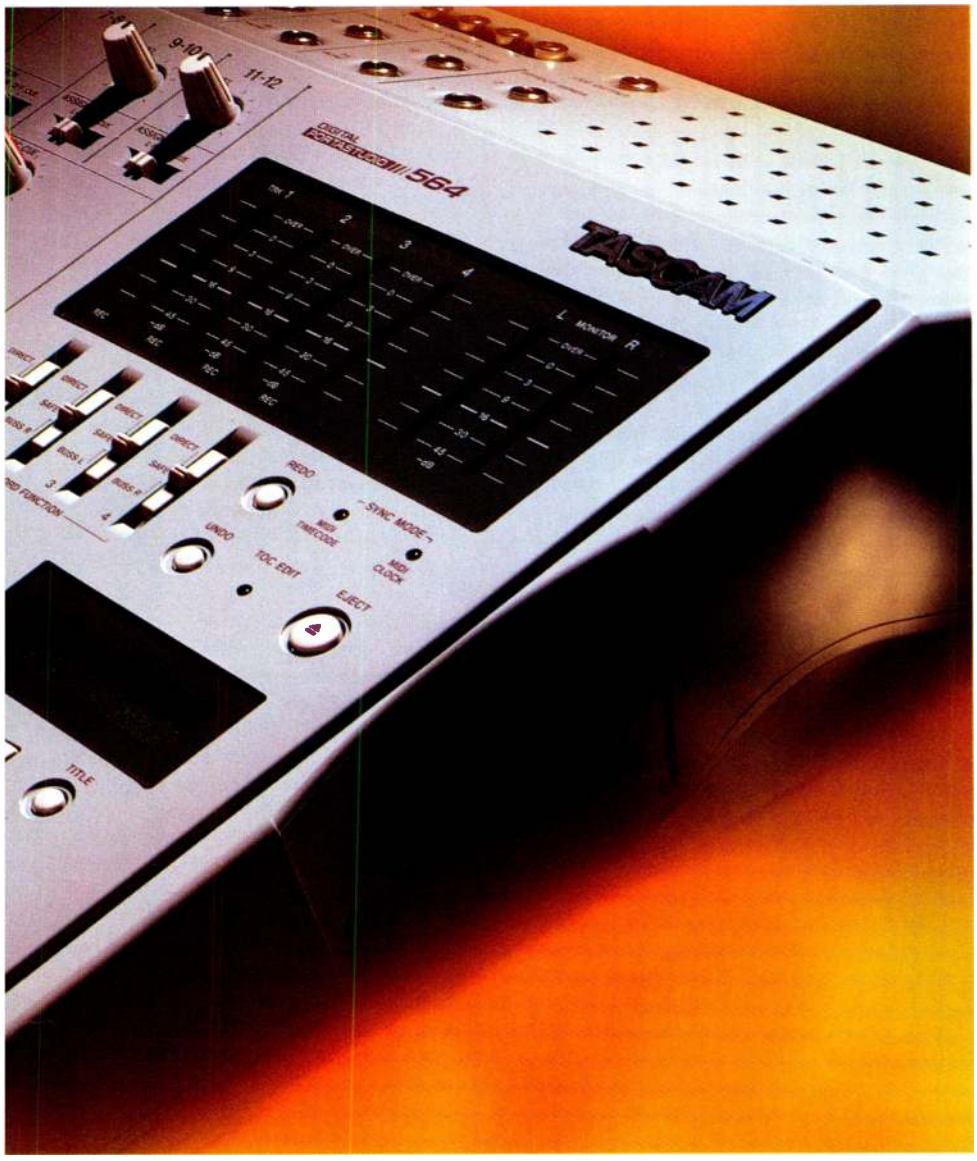

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BY PAUL TINGEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JILL FURMANOVSKY

There was a time when Peter Green was considered by many to be the greatest white blues guitarist alive. Even within the fertile British scene of the mid-Sixties, crucible for such legends-to-be as Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Jimmy Page, the tone and feeling Green invested in his playing, first with John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and more famously with the original edition of Fleetwood Mac, riveted the attention of young rockers and seasoned blues veterans alike. He was cited as an influence by players as disparate as Joe Perry and Carlos Santana, whose hit version of Green's "Black Magic Woman" remains a classic to this day. No less an authority than B.B. King cited Green as the only other blues guitarist who made him "sweat." • But Peter Green remains a mystery. By the late Sixties, a combination of drug abuse and improperly diagnosed mental illness led to his almost complete withdrawal from music. Leaving Fleetwood Mac in 1970, he literally rejected both fame and fortune, refusing royalty checks and giving away his earnings while taking on work as a cemetery gardener and a hospital orderly. He recorded erratically, then stopped playing entirely after 1984. By the Nineties Green seemed about as likely to stage a comeback as Benny Goodman. • Yet in 1996 Green took to the stage again, touring Europe with a band called Splinter Group. Audiences greeted him with two-minute standing ovations even before he played a note. Reviews were mixed, some dismissing the group as a "pub rock band" and others hailing Green's performance as "some of the best and most subtle blues guitar work ... heard in years." In early '97 a CD of blues classics, titled Peter Green Splinter Group, was released, again to an ambivalent reception.

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Taylor, who cheerfully announces that Green couldn't stop buying "hats, shoes, and guitars." The guitarist gives me a nervous glance, briefly shakes my hand, and quickly retreats to his bedroom, where his collection of twenty-odd guitars is stored.

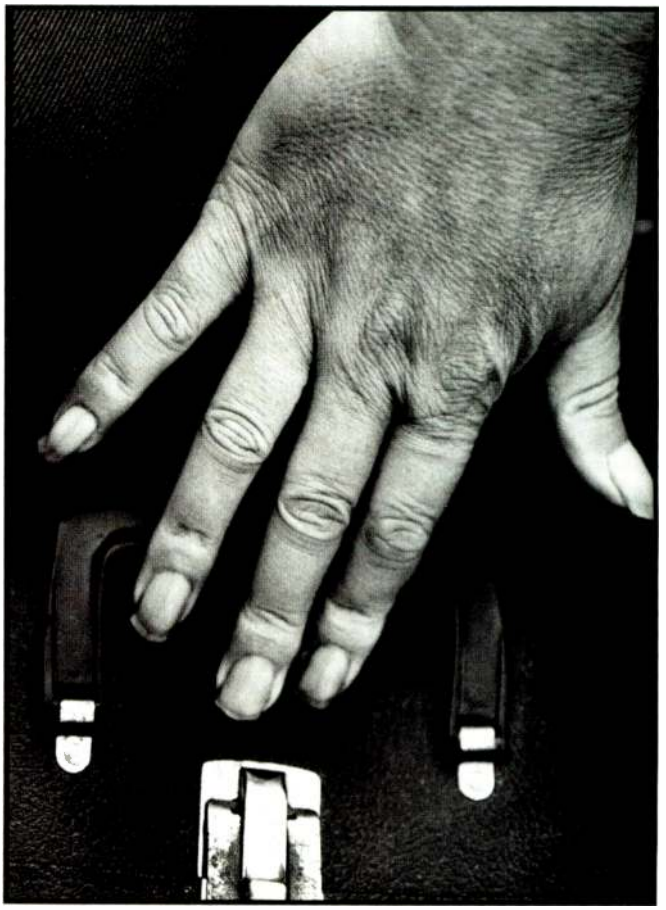
Seeing Green in the flesh is slightly unnerving. At age fifty, with pot belly, balding head, longish gray hair, and mutton-chop sideburns, he looks more like a village butcher than a legendary musician. His eyes are striking, but they never meet mine for more than a few short, nervous glances. But his hands are elegant, with unusually long fingernails on his left hand.

Long fingernails play a part in the mythology of Peter Green. His mental problems began during an American tour with Fleetwood Mac, when Augustus Owsley Stanley III, drug contact to the stars, gave him LSD. Repeated trips with acid and other drugs soon loosened Green's grip on reality. He started identifying with Jesus, wearing long white robes and trying to convince his band to play gigs for free. In 1974, four years after leaving Fleetwood Mac, Green was committed for the first time to a mental hospital and subjected to electroconvulsion therapy. After that his condition quickly deteriorated. In 1977 he threatened his accountant over the phone, promising to shoot him if he tried to deliver a £30,000 royalty check to Green. This was enough to land the guitarist in jail, and then back in a mental hospital.

In 1979 he made his first comeback album, *In the Skies*, produced by PVK label owner Peter Vernon-Kell. When sessions began for the follow-up, *Little Dreamer*, Green showed up at the studio with such unbelievably long fingernails that it was impossible for him to play. Vernon-Kell desperately tried to cut them off, but even then the quality of Green's performance was only occasionally comparable to what he was doing in the late Sixties. In the early Eighties several groups formed around Green—Kolors, Katmandu, White Sky—all of which led to nothing. By the late Eighties his guitars had been lost, stolen, or given away.

Reynolds believes that drugs were only a catalyst, rather than a cause, of the schizophrenia for which Green has been diagnosed. As far back as his early twenties, when he replaced Eric Clapton in John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, he veered dangerously between relentless self-criticism, arrogant confidence, and a fanatic perfectionism. The sensitive Jewish working-class lad from East London—he was born Peter Greenbaum—found it increasingly difficult to reconcile his humble background and the adulation he was receiving as an artist. "I used to rely on sadness and sincerity in my playing," he told me. "But I'm not so sure about that anymore. Somehow it kind of flattened a bit. I don't know what happened to it."

It's not easy to talk with Peter Green. Long spells of lucidity are frequently inter-



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rupted by moments of absent-mindedness. When asked whether he thought there was space for innovation in the blues, he answers, "I don't know what innovation means." Once the concept is explained to him, he replies, "I don't think I'm an innovator." He draws a complete blank when Watson tries to remind him of how he was indisputably an innovator in the late Sixties, when he moved from the traditional blues playing of Fleetwood Mac's eponymous debut album in 1968 to the elegant white blues of 1969's "Albatross" and the melodic blues-inflected rock of their third album, *Then Play On* (1970).

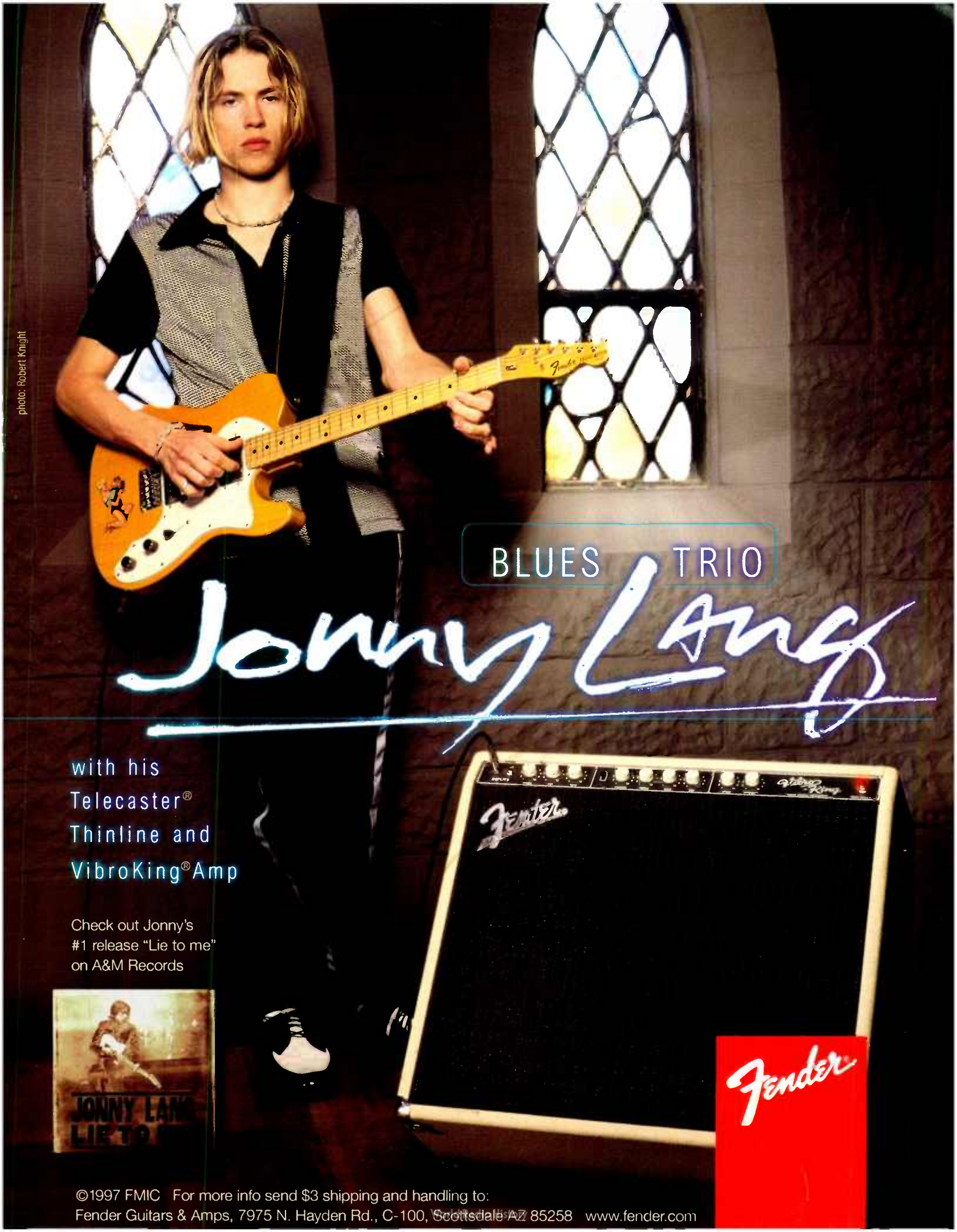
Another example of his difficulty with conceptual issues occurs later in the day. As Green plays his black Gibson Flying V in his bedroom, I ask for insights into blues guitar phrasing, and he answers, "I don't know what you mean." On a further prompt he says, "It's the amount of caution that you take, I suppose. I don't know what it is." Yet only moments before he had, with a few lines on the guitar, effortlessly and masterfully demonstrated the difference between the phrasing of B. B. King, Freddie King, and Eric Clapton. It seems that Green's relationship to music, and probably the world, is completely on an intuitive, feeling level.

For example, in the Sept. '96 issue of *Mojo* Green said that "the blues terrifies me still, and I won't do it, and that's certain." Yet he was already touring the blues with the Splinter Group as we spoke. When this contradiction is brought to his attention, Green seems surprised and says, "No, I'm not scared of the blues. I don't know where I was coming from when I said that." He has also gone on record mentioning new material that he's writing, but in our conversation he adamantly insists that he isn't writing any songs and has no plans to do so. And when reminded of another of his comments in *Mojo*, that guitars have "a real personality," he again switches gears: "No, no, no. The Les Paul has a strong personality, but not these guitars. I don't bother with personality anymore, in case I'm going to sit here and marvel at them."

So it's hard to get a clear perspective on Peter Green. According to Nigel Watson, however, Green decided to change his style the moment he picked up the guitar again in April '95. One of the main changes was his decision to bend notes much less frequently than he had in the past. During his prime in 1968-70, he was known for his slow, deeply soulful playing and the warm, singing, distorted, slightly nasal tone that he coaxed out of his '59 Les Paul Standard (now owned by Gary Moore). His tone was partly the result of luck: After taking the pickups off, he refitted one of them upside down. The effect was that his guitar was permanently out of phase, an unusual sound for a Gibson at that time. But most of Green's sound owed to his capacity for approximating the human voice through bending and vibrato.

When asked if he has any aversion to bending these days, Green initially denies it: "No, no! Who said that I changed my style?" But later, after speaking more indirectly about his playing, he admits to indeed making changes, though his current thinking about the instrument is clearly an extension of his approach in the Sixties: "Some players fall into traps. They don't know whether they can sort their playing out or not, and so they'll be racing around on the guitar forever. In this country they applaud that. But what's the good of it? It's just speed guitar. There's nothing interesting about the notes they play. There's nothing there from which I might say, 'That's you, because only you can play that.' There's no music there. If they played what they were playing slowly, it would sound like a lot of safe notes. Ry Cooder plays the right amount of notes. J. J. Cale also plays the right amount of notes. You have to learn to play the guitar by playing slowly. You can't play fast until you can play slow. A lot of guys ruin themselves by learning to play fast before they're ready."

Green appears to be acutely aware of how guitar players tend to try to "cut" each other rather than play music. Indeed, he wasn't a stranger to the stereotypical guitarist's cockiness: The story goes that he bluffed his way into Mayall's Bluesbreakers in 1966 by claiming to be better than Clapton. Green laughs now at this tale: "No, that's not true. I was a very competitive blues player, and I thought that if I practiced and things went well I would one day be as good as him and be considered a top blues guitarist. But it's not a matter of technique. It's a matter of feel. And Clapton had a good, solid feel."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Unlike those peers of his who have developed their careers without interruption since their early days, Green faces his toughest competition in himself—specifically, in who he used to be. His approach to dealing with this is to ignore the issue. "I don't want to live by any reputation," he insists. "I fight against that. I'm not going to worry about going down well, because that makes you play safe, and I don't want to do that. If the applause isn't tumultuous, that would be a relief in a way, because it would be more natural. I'm just going to play what I want to play.

Green didn't seem receptive to questions about relearning the guitar. "I don't play dramatically different now, just a bit more cautiously. I don't bend notes the whole way up anymore, only one fret, like Big Bill Broonzy rather than B.B. King. I was stuck. I was frightened of what I call middle notes. But now I'm not frightened anymore. What are middle notes? It was something I heard jazz guitarists play, and it sounded so pointless. They're like extra notes, like 13ths. Or like major notes. Mathematical notes that have nothing to do with the tune or melody that you're playing. It's just a note that you put in there to show that you're including that note. Very, very, very, very bad."

This fear of "middle notes" may trace back to a traumatic experience at the very beginning of Green's professional career, in 1965, when he did a gig with a jazz/blues band and found that he couldn't play a note. Today, however, he insists that he wants to move beyond his old blues repertoire. "I'm studying things that I don't know," he says, "things that I used to think you don't need. I am listening to, or watching videos of, all the blues originators, like Freddie King, Lightnin' Hopkins, John Lee Hooker, Robert Johnson, J. B. Lenoir, Muddy Waters, Memphis Slim, Matt Murphy. There are lots of things I want to do in other people's styles. So I'm learning and learning and learning."

There's a healthy dose of realism and groundedness in Green's self-assessment. He doesn't want to reclaim his reputation as the third best guitarist in the world. He still claims that if you don't "come from America and your skin isn't brown and you haven't had people treat you like an animal," you can't really express the full feeling of the blues. But the suffering he's gone through has given him as much license as anyone should need to play this music.

Looking back to the Sixties, he says, "I didn't have the years behind me that people like B.B. King and Otis Rush had. I was a baby, and it was dangerous." Now he admits that he's lived a life that lets him express "the principle of the blues, which is sad." His current playing is only a little more than competent in terms of technique, and the pure passion and personality that illuminated his Sixties catalog has yet to emerge. But a languid, fluid expression and beautifully toned simplicity already distinguishes his playing. It's the sound of a man who has felt the blues, a man who has gone where few of us have, and come back to tell his tale.

Contributors: *Paul Tingen is a Dutch guitarist and writer based in London. He recently released his debut solo acoustic album,* May the Road Rise to Meet You, *on his own Breathe & Smile label in the U.K.*

Then Play This

PETER GREEN doesn't play a Les Paul anymore. He's evasive about the reasons: "I don't know. I don't like the look of it. I want to look at something else." Green now plays an ebony Gibson Howard Roberts Fusion III onstage, as well as a midnight blue Fender Stratocaster with customized body. His stage amps are a Fender Blues DeVille and a Fender Twin Reverb. He doesn't use any effects. His favorite strings are Maxima Golds, .010-.046.

Green is also the clearly proud owner of an extensive and quickly growing guitar collection, which he keeps in his bedroom in Mich Reynolds' house. It includes a Kimbara acoustic 12-string, a white Ibanez Blazer, a Gibson Flying V II, a new Fender Telecaster Thinline, a Fifties Epiphone Zenith, a Gretsch Streamliner (on loan from Bernie Marsden), a new Korean Fender Tele, a Burns/Baldwin Vibraslim, a Gretsch White Falcon, a 1934 National Duolian, a new National Reso-Phonic Dobro-style, a Forties Harmony jazz-style guitar (model name unknown), and an Ozark "cheap Korean" acoustic.

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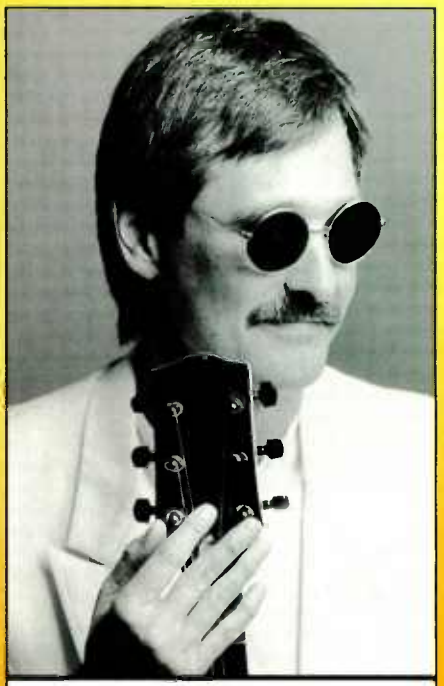

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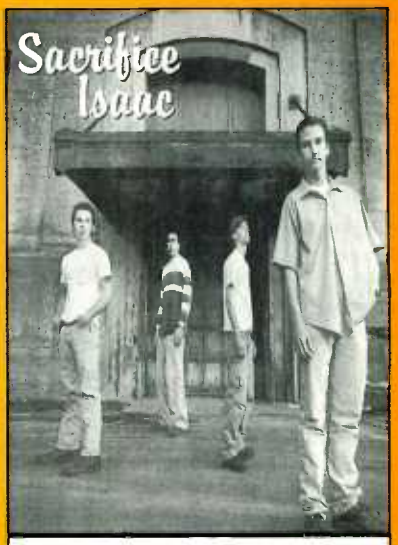

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FROM THE MOUTH

Neil Zlozower

WILL A NEW GENERATION OF TEENAGERS TURN THE BLUES INTO KID STUFF?

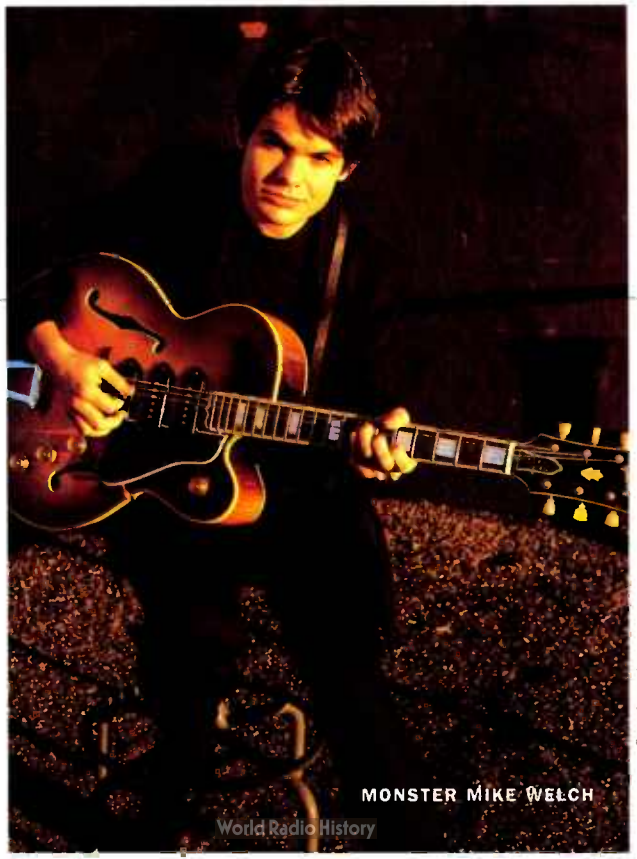
BY DAN FORTE

BABIES OF

Anticipation buzzes through the packed house at Antone's, but it's got little to do with the foursome of forty-ish bar band veterans taking the stage. Horn-rimmed guitarist Paul Gieghel counts off a well-worn Otis Redding vamp and the band marks time until a fat, sweeping blues bend sails in from the wings. Here comes the real object of the capacity crowd's interest: a lanky, baby-faced teenager, looking like a cross between Mick Jagger and Macauley Culkin, catapulting onto the stage, head thrown back, eyes clenched shut, wrenching bend after stinging bend from his blue Telecaster. For the next forty minutes, his showcase at Austin's South By Southwest conference, Jonny Lang displays an abundance of energy and enthusiasm as well as subtlety and intensity. And if his guitar playing is more correct than remarkable, his full-throated singing, which never sacrifices soul for chops, erases any reservations about age or race. By the time Lang closes with Hendrix's "Spanish Castle Magic," the normally jaded audience of industry

JONNY LANG

Michael Crouser



MONSTER MIKE WELCH

Eric Antoniou

IS

insiders is won over—no mean feat.

So how do you follow a sixteen-year-old with the energy of a rollercoaster? Blues harmonica legend Charlie Musselwhite ambles (rather than catapults) to the stage and slowly, steadily gets down to business. His set is relaxed and swinging, his band powerful but loose, the tone of his harp deeply personal. His songs mix humor and hardship just as he and thirty-year-old guitarist John Wedemeyer tastefully mix chops and restraint. By set's end the crowd isn't necessarily bowled over, but it's obvious they've just received a blues master class from the Real Deal.

Needless to say, at 53 Musselwhite has an abundance of one essential that few sixteen-year-olds have an inkling of: maturity. He's put in the miles, more than three decades of them, and it shows. But it also bears reminding that Charlie cut his masterful first album, *Stand Back!*, at 22 (after session appearances with the equally youthful Tracy Nelson and John Hammond), and that he was accompanied by an even younger, radically original voice in blues guitar, Harvey Mandel.

Fact is, music has always had plenty of talented youngsters. Stevie Wonder scored with "Fingertips, Part II" at age twelve; Michael Jackson and Steve Winwood were recording incredibly mature vocal performances at ten and sixteen respectively; Danish bassist Niels-Henning Ørsted-Pedersen played with Bud Powell as a fifteen-year-old; Mark O'Connor was a preteen fiddle champion. Two of rock guitar's founding fathers were actually children: the Collins Kids' Larry Collins (who traded solos with Merle Travis and Joe Maphis on TV's *Town Hall Ranch Part* from nine to thirteen) and James Burton (who played lead guitar on Dale Hawkins' "Suzy Q" at fifteen before joining a similarly youthful Ricky Nelson). Blues has had its share of young blood too, from Luther Tucker, who recorded with Little Walter in his mid-teens, to Shuggy Otis, who debuted on Al Kooper's *Kooper Session* at fifteen. And we're not even getting into the vast numbers of prodigies in the classical world.

There's a difference, though, between most of the artists mentioned above and the musical youth of today. That difference is apprenticeship, or the lack of it. In the high-stakes industry ballgame of the Nineties, the period of incubation and learning that, say, a Charlie Musselwhite surely went through between the ages of sixteen and 22 is being shortened or skipped altogether; in many cases it begins at a much earlier age, even pre-teen. In the wake of Stevie Ray Vaughan's arena-level success, the teens and adolescents he touched (a generation that older black blues artists weren't able to reach directly) are now dreaming about being blues stars instead of rock stars. And a few—like Jonny Lang, Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Nathan Cavaleri, and Monster Mike Welch—are realizing that dream, forming the leading edge of what is threatening to become a teenage blues phenomenon.

> **"IF YOU DON'T LIVE IT, IT WON'T COME OUT OF YOUR HORN."**
>
> **—CHARLIE PARKER**

At twenty, Shreveport, Louisiana's Kenny Wayne Shepherd is the old man of the crowd, but his gold album (more than 500,000 units shipped), 1995's *Ledbetter Heights*, was recorded when he was seventeen. His live shows, which have been described as blues Beatlemania, draw thousands of kids his age and younger. Shepherd grew up entrenched in the music business because of his father's work. Ken Shepherd has long been a fixture in radio, concert promotion, and artist management; his roster now includes his son. "I grew up around different kinds of music because of him," says Kenny. "My dad used to bring me around to all the conventions, and I used to go to the radio station with him, and I could run the board. And I went to concerts pretty much since I was born."

At one such concert, Stevie Ray Vaughan lifted up the seven-year-old and

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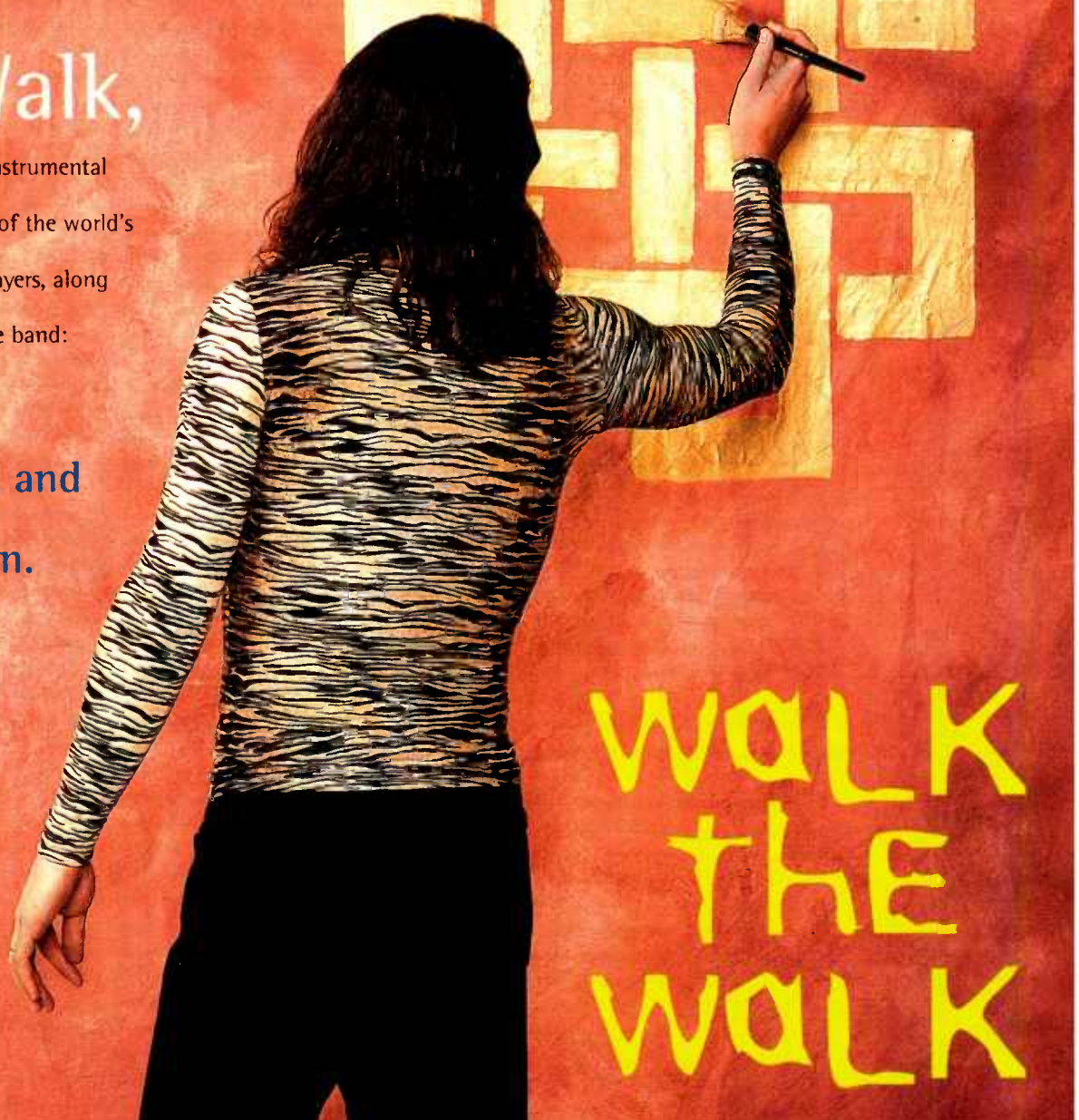

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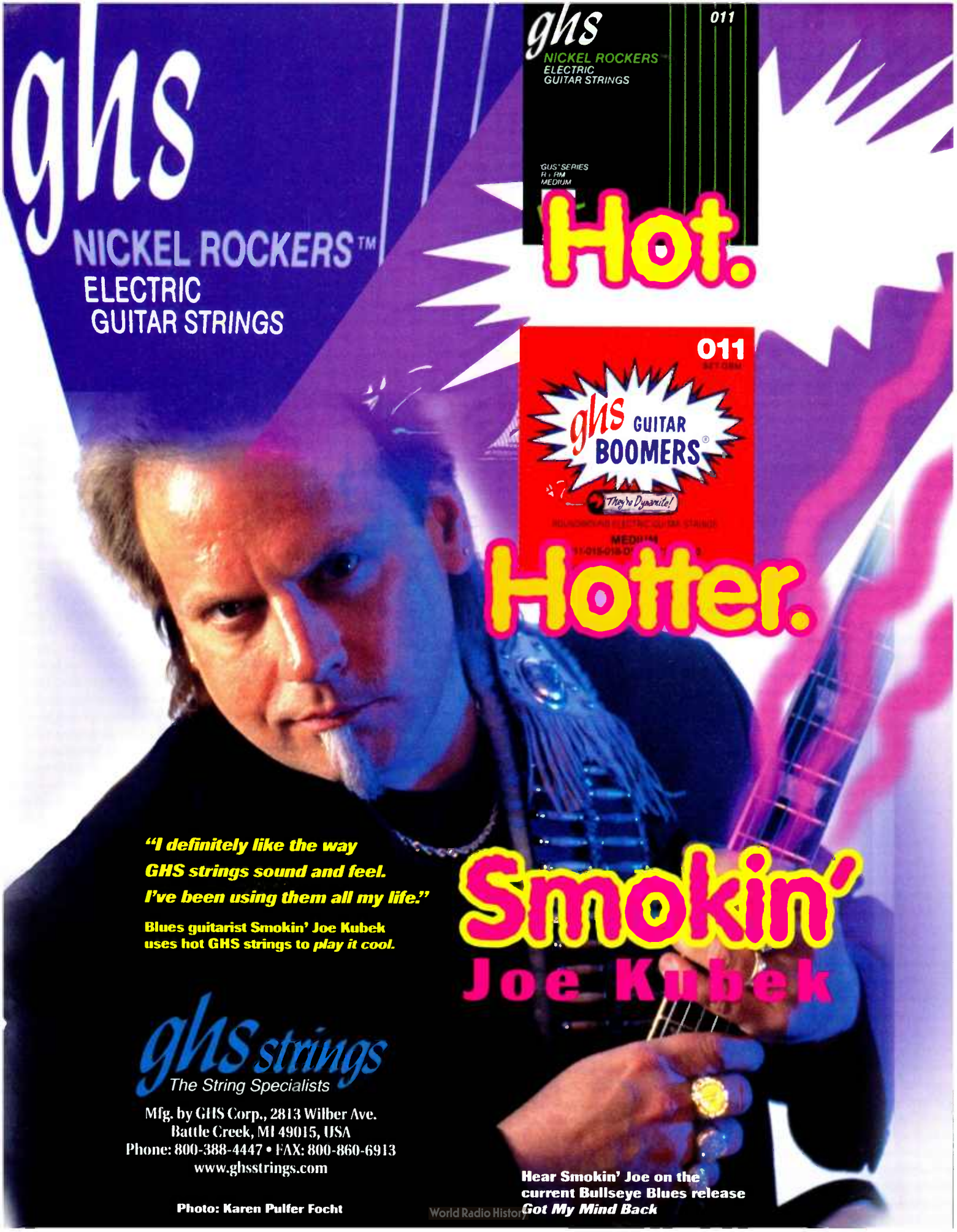

gave him a ringside seat atop an amp case at the side of the stage. "I grew up listening to Stevie, among other blues and R&B musicians," Shepherd points out, "but it was pretty much after the first time I saw him play that I wanted to play guitar." In 1993 Kenny was signed to Giant (now Revolution) Records by Irving Azoff, which set the stage for him to open for the Eagles' European tour. *Ledbetter Heights* was produced by David Z., who was also in the hotseat for Jonny Lang's *Lie To Me* (A&M), an album that was certified gold in June, less than five months after its release, and that was cut when its headliner was fifteen.

Lang discovered the blues in the unlikely setting of Fargo, North Dakota, his hometown. "I went out to see the Bad Medicine Blues Band," he enthuses, "and the guitar player, Ted Larsen, really inspired me. I was twelve, and it was the first live show I ever saw. I had never really heard straight-ahead blues, just kind of rock & roll and dance stuff. It was really cool. I later joined them as their lead singer." As "Kid Jonny Lang & The Big Bang," he and Larsen cut an independently released album prior to *Lie To Me* (which also features Larsen). Asked if dropping "Kid" was a conscious move to avoid the tag years later, he nods. "Totally. We don't want that to be the first thing people notice." (You can't say that Lang's label is helping him out much in this regard. Before the release of *Lie To Me*, A&M sent out a promotional video that included very little singing or playing but plenty of references to how young he was.)

Lang's main heroes are "Otis Redding, B.B. King, and Stevie Wonder, in terms of singing; they're all tied for first. On guitar, B.B. King and Albert Collins. Their playing is so perfect. Their phrasing gets you right in your heart—'Ooh, you put that right in the perfect spot.' They knew right where to put everything. And I love Stevie. What influences me most about him is his fluidness. It's just like a faucet; turn it on and there it was. Not many people have that."

Australia's Nathan Cavaleri, now all of fifteen, cut his self-titled CD for Michael Jackson's MJJ label at eleven and was part of the Lincoln Center Honors' 1995 tribute to B.B. King at thirteen. Cavaleri began playing guitar at an age when many kids are still wetting their training pants: three. His father, who'd played guitar in a "muck-around band," showed him chords and exposed him to old blues records, but it was, once again, Stevie Ray Vaughan's *Couldn't Stand The Weather* that riveted the pre-schooler. "His sound, and the way he plays is really colorful," Nathan, then twelve, said in a 1994 interview. "He doesn't play the same thing over and over again. He's sort of all mixed."

Nathan was improvising by age six or seven—"stuff I picked up off the Stevie Ray albums, but my own version"—and cut an Australian release, *Jamming With The Cats*, at ten. By the time of his American debut, in '94, his ears had been opened up to the more harmonically advanced leanings of Robben Ford, who trades solos with Nathan on the fifteen-year-old's sequel-in-progress. Nathan let others handle the vocals on his first MJJ release (waiting "till my voice has matured up more"), but manager Russell Hayward reports that he's been taking singing lessons for the past two years. "You should hear him now," exclaims Hayward. "It's a whole different person to where he was three years ago. He wants to be a 100% artist."

Lexington, Massachusetts' Mike Welch recorded two CDs—*These Blues Are Mine*, at sixteen, and *Axe To Grind*, at seventeen—before graduating from high school. He got his nickname, "Monster," from Blues Brother Dan Aykroyd, after jamming regularly at the comedian's House of Blues club in nearby Boston. Now seventeen, he's been on his blues mission for about eight years. "When you get a slightly confused nine-year-old kid and put an Albert King record in front of him," he laughs, "seems like all of his problems are solved. So that got me on about a three-year kick of complete blues purism."

Among his many influences, he lists the Beatles, B.B. King, T-Bone Walker, Magic Sam, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy, and Luther Tucker. But, he stresses, "Albert King was the first blues guitar player I really got into. It's just so simple and so perfect. He'd play one of those big squeezes, and the heavens would open up. It didn't matter what song he was playing on, or what the situation was, he always had that perfect Albert King

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Falling under the spell of Boston's blues legacy, largely revolving around the various incarnations of Roomful of Blues and its alumni, Welch eventually hooked up with veteran guitarist George Lewis, who is now in the Welch band. The two co-wrote most of the material on Mike's two CDs on Tone-Cool, a subsidiary of Rounder. As for his next step, Welch says, "I'd love to do some experimenting—maybe even make a CD that's slightly less genre-dependent. I've always loved Clapton's *Layla* album, because everyone on that record could play blues with the best of them, but it doesn't sound genre-limited."

The notion of an impressionable teen playing in blues haunts, of course, raises concerns about these kids being exploited—as with prodigies of any bent. Louisiana slide master Sonny Landreth, in his mid-forties, feels, "It's a double-sided coin. On the one hand, I can see a lot of pressure being put on these kids—like young aspiring gymnasts training for the Olympics—and the potential for disappointment later factors pretty high. On the other hand, you're not talking about your average kid. If they're enormously talented, what are they supposed to do—sit home and look out the window?"

There have always been, and always will be, stage parents, but historically there haven't been many cases of parents encouraging rock & roll, even blues, as their child's career path. Times are definitely changing; whereas Texas blues singer/songwriter Doyle Bramhall remembers being "kicked out of high school several times because I wouldn't cut my hair, and for playing my music," Baby Boomer-aged parents of today (who grew up with the Sixties blues revival) are buying their kids guitars, taking them to nightclubs, and in some cases changing their own careers to accommodate their sons' and daughters' talents. Former farmer Jon Langseth, for example, moved his family to Minneapolis two years ago, so that son Jonny could be part of a more happening music center than Fargo, North Dakota; he now acts as Jonny's road manager on tour. "I don't know that that's such a great idea," warns Landreth, "because you need those role models and boundaries, and you need a home life."

Being surrounded by musicians a decade or more older, rather than kids of the same peer group, has become another norm. "I think it's more fun," Cavaleri says, "because if it's a group of all kids we can't learn nothing—there's no one advanced, above us. Whereas with adults I can learn a lot." Still, Landreth feels Nathan and the others are missing out on an equally valuable experience. "When you're playing with your pals," he states, "and you grow up and do all the changes together, you do the miles together. There's a connection there. When these younger kids are backed by a bunch of older guys, I can see that being a little weird."

Austin guitar ace and Storyville member David Grissom, 37, agrees that it's a trade-off, but says, "Personally, I always hung around guys a little bit older than me, and the best way to learn is to play gigs, and with better players—it makes you stretch. Yeah, you miss out on one thing, but if I had to choose one or the other, I'd say go for it, man. The real test of time will be, will they retain their enthusiasm and not burn out by the schedule. I know what they're in for—they're already there—and it's a pretty hardcore thing. They're in the thick of it, working for a living, and there's a lot of pressure because there's a lot of money at stake. If they never get too far away from what it was that drew them to play in the first place, they'll be all right. The other challenge is to really find their own voice."

Ah, yes, the $64,000 question, as coined by Les Paul: Can his mother pick him out on the radio? Well, in a word, no. Not that Shepherd's sound and approach aren't different from Lang's—which in turn are not the same as Welch's or Cavaleri's—but as yet none has developed an instrumental voice that's more than a mirror of one profound influence (Shepherd sounding so much like Stevie Ray it's almost spooky) or a patchwork quilt of several (as in the case of self-confessed "music geek" Mike Welch). In the words of 57-year-old Luther Allison, "You got to get through the Stevie Rays, the B.B.s, the Buddys, the Luther Allisons, and find Jonny. And that's gonna take a little time."

It should go without saying that coming up with a pentatonic blues lick that no one has played before (if that's possible) doesn't necessarily make one original. It also bears

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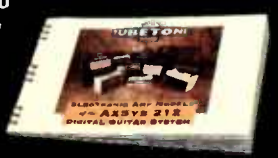

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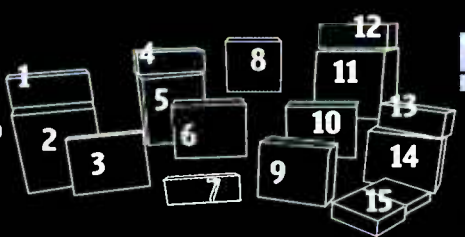

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pointing out that one's musical personality is not always a product of age. Welch astutely observes that at twenty Eric Clapton was "every bit as legitimate as another Buddy Guy or another B.B. King; it was a fully formed style." And encyclopedic knowledge and skill don't always add up to an original voice; in fact, a case could be made that they inhibit it. Musselwhite feels, "Some people get off on the wrong foot when they set about mastering all these other styles, and a style of their own never gets to develop." Welch agrees, citing fortysomething dazzler Duke Robillard: "I don't know what Duke sounds like. I've heard Duke play T-Bone Walker stuff for 45 minutes, so soulful it'll bring a tear to your eye—and I think there's an art in that—but I don't know what his style is."

The Information Age, and the access it gives aspiring musicians to the entire history of music, isn't exactly helping to turn out the innovators of the future either. As Welch sees it, "There's this tremendous surge towards revivalism—which is positive in that it means the old records aren't getting forgotten, but negative in that you see a bunch of guys with pompadours all playing the years 1948 through 1962. Maybe at this point, with a style of music that has so much history and tradition, the best one can hope for is to come up with a new wrinkle on what's already gone before." David Grissom argues that too much knowledge of that tradition is hampering the quest for originality: "The idea of having an instructional video is something nobody would have ever dreamt of when I was growing up."

Doyle Bramhall, himself an ex-teenage bluesman (with the Chessmen, a Sixties band that also featured a fifteen-year-old guitarist named Jimmie Vaughan) and now in his late forties, places part of the blame for so much stylistic sameness on parents and the industry. "Most of the young guitar players aren't encouraged to be themselves," he argues. "It's 'Play like Stevie,' which is sad because inside of anyone that can sing or play like that, the real them is in there. And they're in their prime to start developing. It used to be that you had to be of a certain caliber before you could go to the next step. Now if you're eight and can play at all, it's, 'Let's get out an album—now, before it's too late!' Someday people will look at it and go, 'Maybe that didn't work.'"

Units sold aside, is there a pubescent guitarist out there who can play like Shuggy Otis did at fifteen, or a singer on the level of the seventeen-year-old Stevie Winwood? If there is, he or she hasn't surfaced as yet (though spin doctors may argue otherwise). One thing everybody does seem to agree on, however: Younger

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KENNY WAYNE SHEPHERD's main Stratocaster is a 1962 sunburst, strung with .012-.058 Ernie Balls. His three main Fender amps are: an early reissue Twin handmade at Fender's Custom Shop, a Vibrasonic reissue, and a Tonemaster. Pedals include a Vox wah-wah, an original Ibanez Tube Screamer, a Dunlop Uni-Vibe, and an Octavia by Hendrix technician Roger Mayer. He also plays Guild acoustics. • **JONNY LANG** plays Fender Telecaster Thinlines, along with Benedict Guitars, custom-made in Minneapolis, that are "like a Seventies Tele Thinline, with Fender humbuckers, but one has a P-90 in the middle, and the other has a neck humbucker with P-90s in the middle and rear. That one also has piezo transducer bridge saddles, so it can sound like an acoustic." His amp is a blonde Fender Vibro King. • Mike Welch's monster axe is a blue Strat put together from reissue parts. "It's a Japanese body," he details, "that I had hollowed-out, so it's really loud acoustically. The Warmoth neck is like a V-shaped baseball bat, absolutely huge, which feels natural to me, although I don't have big hands. The pickups are made by Lindy Fralin." He also plays an Epiphone Casino reissue and a custom job by luthier Ron Auclair. His amp is a Fender Pro Junior, "which has maybe 15 watts, a 10" speaker, volume and tone controls. More and more I'm realizing that it's a myth that guitar players have to be really loud." • **NATHAN CAVALERI** uses a straight-ahead, no-frills setup: either his Peavey Axcelerator or a '62 Strat acquired from Robben Ford through a Peavey Classic 50 amp, with a Cry Baby wah-wah for a little extra color. Strings are D'Addarios, .010-.046.

players are fostering a new audience of kids—and that can only help the blues. "That was one of our major points in the first place—to come across to the younger audience," explains Shepherd. "That's one of the reasons I play the music. Nine times out of ten you run into a teenager or twenty-something-year-old and say 'blues' and they think of old people. But if you tell them there's a nineteen-, twenty-year-old guy, they're much quicker to listen to it. They feel like they can relate."

Storyville's David Grissom views it pragmatically: "It's healthy for everybody that there's a new audience out there. When Storyville goes out and does shows on our own, most of our crowd is limited to a certain age group—not a lot of kids under twenty years old. But when we played in Tulsa opening for Kenny Wayne, most of the people were there to hear him, and his crowd loved us, and the next time we played Tulsa on our own we had a packed house." Musselwhite adds, "They're not working if they're not good at it, because you don't get a job if they're not coming to see you. And they're not playing rock & rolly-like; they're trying to be faithful to the style, and are really into the spirit of it."

Luther Allison feels that with success comes responsibility. "Everybody ain't gonna get as lucky as Jonny Lang, being on MTV now," he asserts. "A lot of young blacks out there ain't had no chance to get on MTV, and ain't gonna get no chance actually, unless these kids—white, young—open the door and say, 'I've got some power with my company, and I want to see this happen.'"

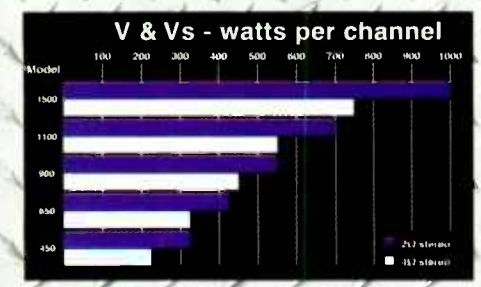
So is youth an advantage or a burden? "It can work to your advantage and disadvantage," says Shepherd. "In the first place, a lot of people are intrigued because you're so young, but at the same time it's hard to get your credibility as a blues artist, being so young. So a lot of people are quick—at least the hardcore blues fans—to question the age and the quality of the music. Fortunately, I ran into some of that resistance, but not a lot. Most people supported me throughout my career. And now that I'm turning twenty, you don't hear much about my age anymore. The music speaks for itself."

Mike Welch concludes, "I'm hoping that because Jonny Lang and Kenny Shepherd and Derek Trucks and I are starting to get our names on records, maybe it will become less of a novelty thing. Maybe being a seventeen-year-old blues guitar player will become just as legitimate as being a 37-year-old. I'm really tired of the whole 'right to play the blues' bit."

But remove the age factor, and judge the music on its own merits, and, as David Grissom muses, "You have to ask yourself, if any of those records were put out by someone 45, would they be getting played on the radio?" The answer may lie in the stacks of stellar albums by veteran bluesmen that go straight from the pressing plant to radio station dumpsters.

The "blues kids" phenomenon raises more questions—some musical, more of them social—than can be easily answered, at least at this stage. As to what these teen wonders will sound like in ten or twenty years, or which will live to be old and prosperous bluesmen instead of casualties and also-rans, only time will tell.

for those about to rock



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On the plus side, there are more joints booking blues. "When I started," says Rishell, "blues bars were outside the mainstream, often run by shady people who thought they could make money or liked the music." Today, they're everywhere, from corner haunts like the Rivermont Lounge in Clarksdale, Mississippi, to showcases like the House of Blues chain. As long as your goals are realistic, and your band has a convincing demo tape, you should be able to find a gig. ● *Your best bet is to start at a small neighborhood bar to develop your chops and a following (and a mailing list). "It's*

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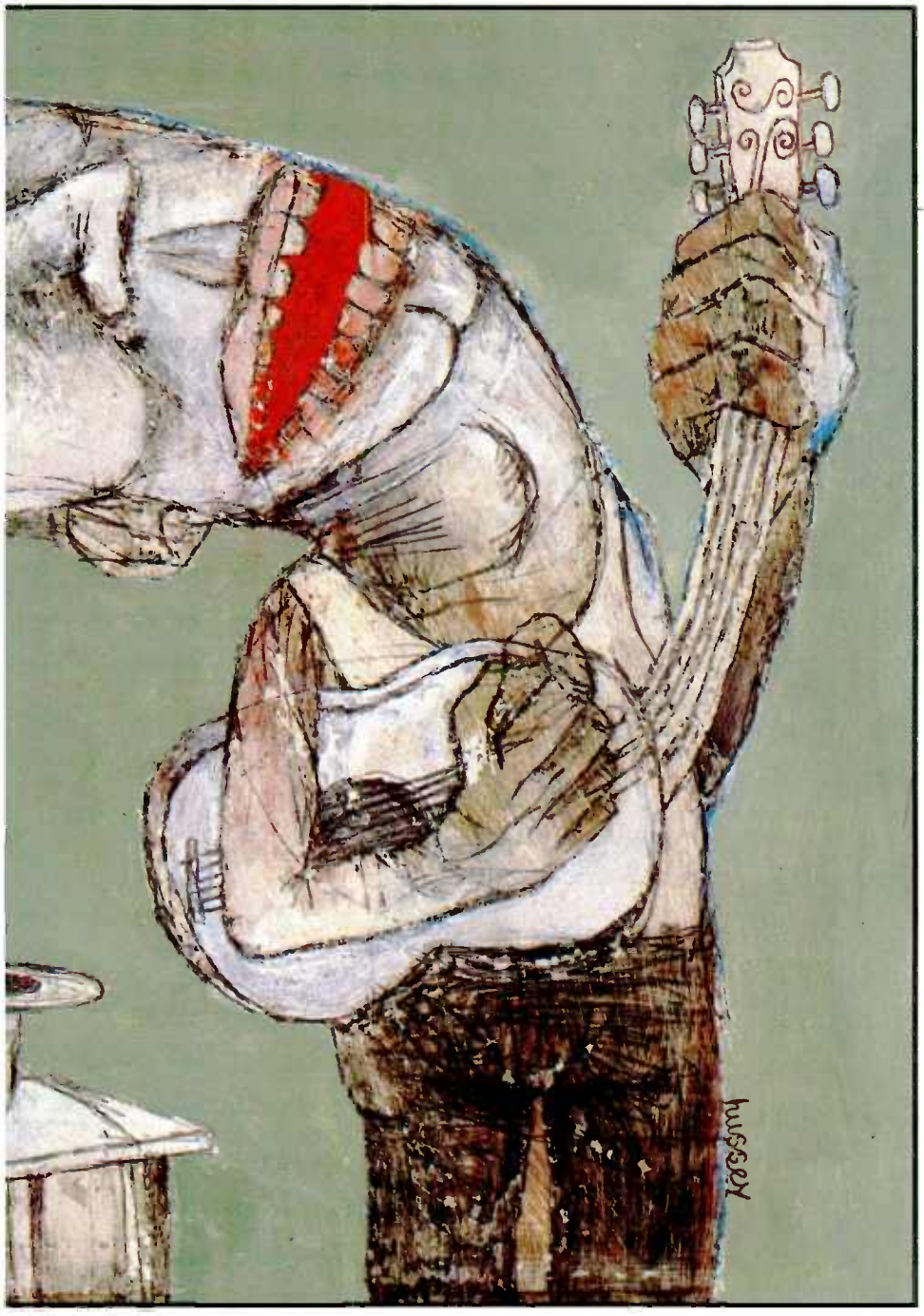

BY TED DROZDOWSKI

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM HUSSEY

those little clubs that musicians really grow up in," says Rishell. "Playing three or four sets a night, you improve fast."

Those gigs typically play $200 to $500 a band. If you've got eight pieces, the math's discouraging. But for a duo like Paul and harp sidekick Annie Raines, that's good bread.

To take three-set gigs, you need tunes. To that end, Teo Leyasmeyer, who played keyboards behind Freddie King, Johnny Copeland, Buddy Guy and Junior Wells, Luther Allison, and John Lee Hooker before becoming the booker for Cambridge's very blues-centric House of Blues room, says it's essential to "know the basic one hundred songs that are the backbone of the repertoire. Everyone expects you to know the basics. If you're onstage playing 'Messin' With the Kid'"—he sings the descending intro—"you don't want some musician to lean over and ask, 'What's that figure?' That enables you to do fill-ins and to sit in with people traveling through town, which could lead to good things later."

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Leyasmeyer, who won a Handy Award (the blues equivalent of a Grammy) for Best Club Booking Agent of '96, also passes along advice from the great blues pianist Sammy Price. "He told me, 'Learn 25 standards, convincingly, in every key, and people will think you know everything. You'll be able to get all kinds of work.' For Sammy that meant tunes like 'Darktown Strutters Ball' and 'Ain't She Sweet.' For our generation, that might mean 'Misty' or 'Who Knows?' Doing that takes maybe a year, and it's a real investment in your career."

Following Price's tip has yielded all manner of solo gigs for Leyasmeyer, from weddings and parties to playing hospitals and convalescent homes for the state of New York.

Calling from Tel Aviv, where he's been flown—all expenses paid—to play a bat mitzvah at the Israeli Museum, San Francisco boogie-woogie piano wizard Mitch Woods agrees. "The quandary of the working musician is whether you become a cover band or play what you want. If you want to earn your money as a musician—and I've never had a day job—then you do what it takes. But the important thing is to develop your own style, because that's what will set you apart from the crowd and make people want to pay to see you in clubs. So if you're gonna do a standard, do it your way."

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higher rates. "The rule of thumb is, ask for three times what you'd get for a club gig when you're doing a party or festival," advises Maury "Hooter" Saslaff, bassist for Delta singer/guitarist Big Jack Johnson. "You'll get at least double."

What's that mean in cash? Regional acts playing multiple club sets can expect to make $200 to $750. For mid-level national acts, $600 to $1500. And for high-profile national club acts—think "big labels"—$1500 to $10,000. But, as Saslaff points out, "I'd rather take an on-the-way gig for $300 than pay for a night of hotel rooms out of pocket without no income."

Saslaff is one of the busiest bluesmen around, playing 275 to 300 dates annually with Johnson, plus booking Big Jack and a handful of other mid-level nationals. A rocker who switched to blues in the Seventies, Saslaff created his niche after years of wheel-spinning in Philly-area bands. He promoted a few shows in the early Nineties, making contacts within the blues-biz community. Through those contacts, he struck ... well, if not gold, at least silverplate. When an Atlantic City club owner told Saslaff he was afraid Johnson would cancel a date because the Mississippian had just lost two weeks of surrounding gigs, Saslaff was able to set up five new dates for Johnson with his own band as backup. Johnson was impressed, and their partnership now includes 1996's *We Got to Stop This Killin'* (MC Records).

Having a well-distributed CD opens doors to clubs around the country. But the Susan Tedeschi Band tours purely on their live reputation, buoyed by Tedeschi's stage charm and Bonnie Raitt-like pipes. Like most working bluesters, she handles her own business, from maintaining a 2000-fan mailing list to booking and road managing.

"Traveling by van, you've got to be prepared," the Bostonian relates. "I have AAA-Plus and a car phone. I get an oil change and check the tires before a big trip. Research where you're going, how much it will cost, how long it takes. If you're driving to Memphis, know the mileage so you can figure out gas costs, know the roads, get prices on hotels, know how much you'll get paid. Get contracts, so you're guaranteed that money. I know what it feels like to travel to Florida and find your gig's canceled."

For tips on pit stops, club bookers, asking prices, or just about anything, turn to fellow musicians. "It's like the *Titanic*," deadpans Rishell. "Everyone wants to pull somebody else into a lifeboat."

What's the cost of traveling? Road warrior Saslaff estimates his phone bill at $1000 a month—then there's postage, photocopying, and CDs bought at cost from the label. "We average 1500 to 2000 miles every week. We always try to get our hotel provided by the club. But there's food and the occasional rooms for the night. Maintaining your vehicle is essential. When we played Nebraska the wind chill was seventy below. If you break down, it's life-threatening. All together, our on-road cost is $1000 to $1500 a month.

"To make a living at this, you have to be absolutely determined," advises Saslaff. "It's very exhausting just to make a decent income. Despite what they say about musicians' reputations, it's a very lonely life. You have to really commit to it."

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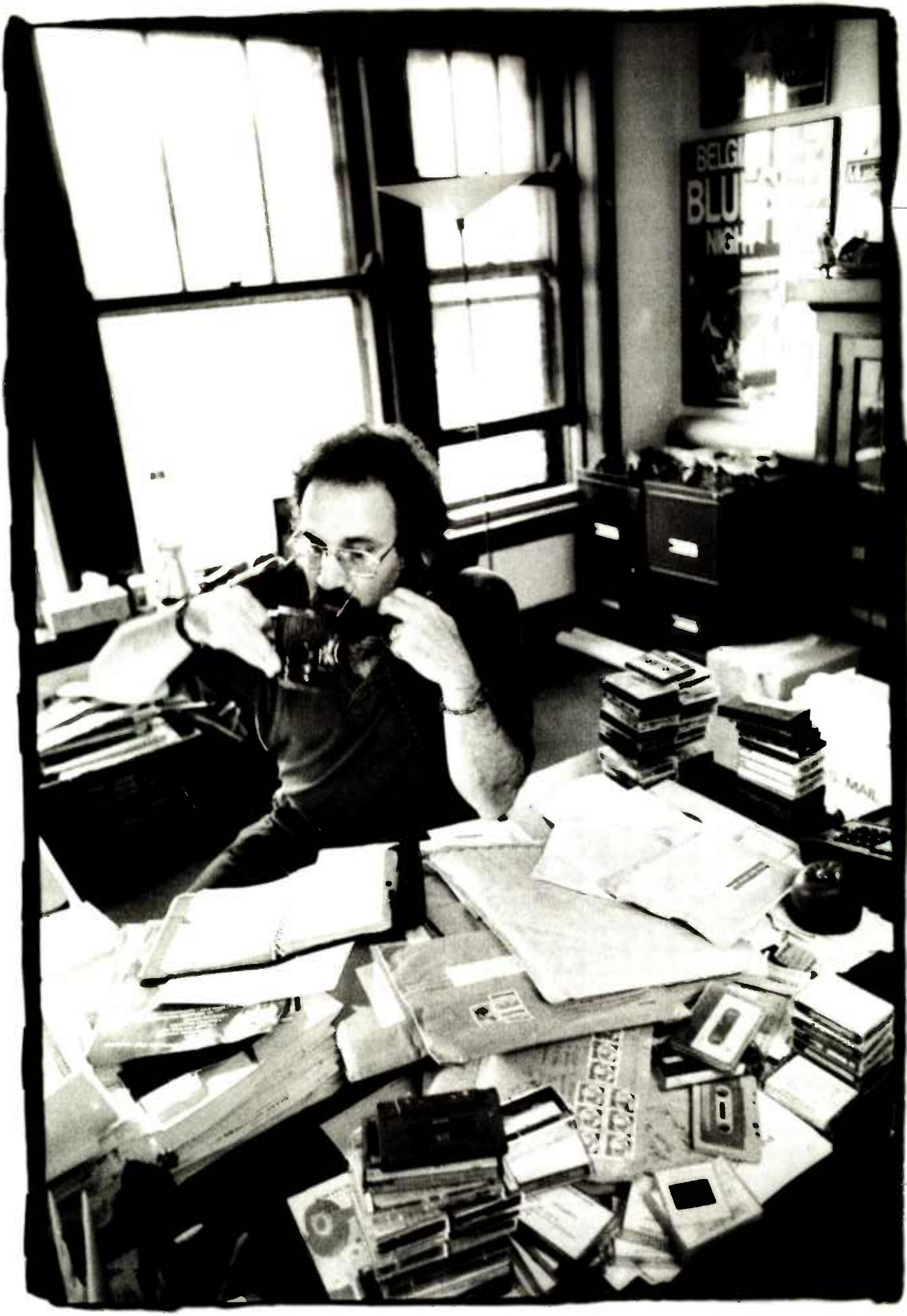

IN

SIDE THE BLUES

ALLIGATOR RECORDS PRESIDENT BRUCE IGLAUER ON WHAT IT TAKES TO LAND A BLUES LABEL DEAL

Five Post Office bins overflowing with manila envelopes sit on the floor in a corner of Bruce Iglauer's Alligator Records office on the north side of Chicago. The envelopes contain demo tapes from aspiring blues artists. Some of the postmarks are well over six months old. Iglauer will eventually listen to every one of them in hopes of finding the next great blues player. "How can I delegate listening to this stuff?" he asks, glancing at the bins. "I'm the A&R man as well as the president of this label. It's my ears that have to pick out the songs." • He's been doing this since he started Alligator in 1971 to record a little-known Chicago slide player named Theodore Roosevelt "Hound Dog" Taylor. Iglauer was 23 years old at the time. ***Hound Dog Taylor and the House Rockers*** *was recorded in two nights with no overdubs. Iglauer then drove across the country, distributing copies to radio stations from the trunk of his Chevy. It sold ten thousand copies in its first year, enabling Iglauer to quit his full-time job at Delmark Records. • At the time, Alligator was a one-man label, run out of Iglauer's tiny apartment and financed by his $2500 inheritance. Twenty-six years and nearly two hundred albums later, Alligator is the world's largest independent contemporary blues label, with gross revenues between $3.5 million and $5 million per year. Thirty of the label's albums have been nominated for Grammys; two have won. Gator artists have garnered 65 of the Blues*

BY TOM CALLAHAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRAD MILLER

BIZ

Foundation's W. C. Handy Awards, with Luther Allison, Floyd Dixon, and the late William Clarke picking up seven in 1997. At the May '97 Handy ceremony in Memphis, Koko Taylor, who has been with the label for 22 years, received a Blues Hall of Fame Award. So did Iglauer.

With more then twenty artists signed, Alligator releases about twelve albums a year. Since it is Iglauer's label, he's been known to carry artists he believes in for several albums, even if they don't immediately make money. "I feel that at least part of the future of blues recording is in my hands," he says. "So my signings of younger artists become terribly important because, as with every other form of music, there are any number of good artists who will never get signed by anyone. I'm a lifer and I want my artists to be lifers too."

What advice can you offer young blues musicians?

First I'd say that having talent is never enough. If you're going to be a blues artist, you have to recognize that the chances are very good that you're only going to play the music for love and never make a living. If anything else happens, that's the luck. You have to be willing to work long hours for short money under crappy conditions. And the hardest part is, you've got to be able to make your own statement.

What do you mean by that?

Blues artists try to make statements that are rooted in the tradition. The fine line to walk is between getting so far from the tradition that you're no longer a blues artist and staying so close to it that you don't have anything of your own to say. If you play clubs in Chicago, people are going to shout for "Sweet Home Chicago," "Got My Mojo Workin'," and five or ten other familiar tunes. Nobody ever hollers, "Play an original song." You have to force your vision of your music on the audience. That's tough to do; very few young blues artists manage to pull it off.

Why is the idea of "paying your dues" on the club circuit so integral to blues performance?

Because you can't learn to be a great blues artist on your own. People create rock records in their bedrooms; they sit down with drum machines and synthesizers and make records that are sometimes huge hits. But blues is a community art form. It's created by the interaction between an artist and the audience. That communication is the essence of it. Everything else is secondary.

What should blues players look for in a record deal?

Obviously, is the label credible? Does it have decent distribution? Does it have decent promotion? Does it have a track record with other artists? Is the label committed to the music that you're committed to? Of course, that's true for any signing, but because there are so few companies that record blues, you've got to be pretty careful. You need to talk with other artists on the label and see what they think and how well served they feel.

How do deals with indie blues labels differ from those artists might have with a major?

First of all, most of the major labels don't spend years of commitment on an artist. If a record doesn't sell, artists are often dropped very quickly. We tend to grow with our artists and develop their audience. We don't have the budget to send people out on tour at our expense, so for the most part our artists have to be financially self-sufficient on the road.

On the other hand, I don't think many of the artists who record for a major label can reach the president of the company at any hour of the day or night. All of my artists have an 800 number that rings the phone next to my bed. We do press and radio support not just when the record is new but throughout the artist's career. But we don't expect that our artists will make

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most of their income from the record deal. Blues records don't sell that well. Most of their income is going to come from live performance. We don't have the money to make these huge gambles that the majors make, but we do a different type of gamble: We bet that over five, ten, or fifteen years, our artists will build a big enough following for it to make sense financially to put their records out. The majors tend not to understand that in the blues business you make small piles of money over a long period of time. Their mentality is to make a big pile of money real fast, or you lose your job.

You said you've been through two albums with Michael Hill that have made no money and it doesn't bother you.

Well, I wouldn't say it doesn't bother me. It doesn't deter me. Sure it bothers me. I would love to make a mint.

But then does Alligator have to expect less in terms of making money to get something pure in the music?

I guess the answer is I feel we are making records that don't consciously pander to this year's popular flavor.

Have you ever considered selling or merging the label with a bigger company?

Yes. About eight to ten years ago I was approached by A&M. There were some very nice people, very music-centered people, there. I had a long meeting with them, and I did consider the idea very seriously. But I realized that their vision for my label was not as big as my vision for my label, so I didn't make the deal. Within a year after that, A&M was sold, and every single person I was dealing with at that time was gone. That was my big lesson. I realized that because the majors are corporations, and because their executive pool turns, you're only as strong as the individual who made the commitment to you within that corporation. That's why I don't believe that the majors are going to make a long-term, artist-centered commitment to this music. I realized pretty quickly when I was talking with A&M that they hoped I was going to find them another Stevie Ray Vaughan.

What's wrong with that?

We're not knocking Stevie, but starting with Eric Clapton and British blues and peaking with the popularity of Stevie Ray Vaughan is the perception among younger musicians that the blues is a form of guitar-driven, solo-crazy rock & roll, that it isn't about stories or emotion, that it's about showing off guitar chops.

But British blues and Stevie Ray helped bring the blues to a wider audience.

Absolutely, and a lot of that music was real good. The problem is that no matter how good a picker you are, there's always somebody who can slice and dice you. But if you can play or sing a note that reaches inside people and moves them, then you've got a talent. And it won't go away.

Contributors: Tom Callahan is a freelance writer. His articles on the blues and other subjects appear frequently in Parade *and* The New York Times.

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1 Matchless Lightning Reverb

So what to put in Fast Forward for a special blues issue? How about a little amp that can sting ya? That's the word on the latest models in Matchless's Lightning line, now featuring—hold your applause till the end of the sentence—real spring reverb. This welcome development, of course, is just an addition to the usual specs: all-tube, interactive bass and treble controls, master volume, and customized Celestion drivers in a tuned cabinet. Though the Lightning Reverb's rated at 15 watts, the folks at Matchless claim it can still crank. Available in 1x12 ($1999), 2x10 ($1999), and 2x12 ($2199) versions. ▶ ***Matchless, 9830 Alburtis Ave., Santa Fe Springs, CA 90670; voice (562) 801-4840, fax (562) 801-4828.***

2 Danelectro Daddy O.

This pedal looks so cool that it would have to sound unbelievably abysmal for us not to include it in Fast Forward. Thankfully, it's a fine little unit, providing a vintage tube amp overdrive sound in that cute but nonetheless heavy-duty Fifties-style box. Whereas most distortion pedals have at most two tone controls, the Daddy O. has three, allowing you to dial in some extra-tweaked settings, like that hollow midrange sound we know you've been dreaming of. In short, a worthy member of the spiffy new Dano pedal line, and at $79, an easy add to your stompbox collection. ▶ ***Danelectro, P.O. Box 2769, Laguna Hills, CA 92654-2769; voice (714) 583-2419, fax (714) 369-8500.***

3 Ampeg AEB-2

Continuing the vintage look of this month's gear assortment is Ampeg's AEB-2 Horizontal Bass reissue ($1900-$2100, depending on finish and hardware options). Though the new model closely resembles the Sixties original, it's been subtly improved in several areas. For example, the ultra-hip scroll headstock is solid maple, not plastic like the earlier model; the nut is brass rather than aluminum; and the 35-inch scale length is an inch longer than the previous version. Yet the rock factor remains the same. Other features include Western ash body, ebony fingerboard, Schaller tuners, brass bridge, and chrome or gold hardware. ▶ ***Ampeg, c/o St. Louis Music, 1400 Ferguson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63133; voice (314) 727-4512, fax (314) 727-8929.***

7ard

4 Ibanez Blazer BL1025

And the revivals keep on coming—sort of. Yes, the Blazer name is a familiar one from Ibanez, but the BL1025 ($999) is not the same as the Eighties Blazers. The main difference is in the pickups—JL/Daisensei humbuckers that do double-duty as single coils—combined with a unique switching system that lets you have all the standard pickup configurations of both single-coil and humbucker-equipped guitars, plus configurations not available with either. Add on a Wilkinson VSV tremolo bridge and Sperzel locking tuners with individually calibrated string heights, and you'll be mixing and matching like never before. ▶ ***Ibanez, 1726 Winchester Rd., P.O. Box 886, Bensalem, PA 19020; voice (215) 638-8670, fax (215) 245-8583.***

5 Audio-Technica ATM89R

If you're singing the blues and you want the people to hear you, go with Audio-Technica's ATM89R handheld condenser microphone ($325). The ATM89R is engineered to offer studio-quality vocal reproduction in a live setting. Though it's supplied as a hypercardioid, the mic's interchangeable element design lets you choose a number of other polar patterns, including cardioid, subcardioid, and omnidirectional. High sensitivity and SPL capability mean distortion-free output, while internal shock mounting cuts down noise. And if you're touring, this rugged mic can take the extra miles. ▶ ***Audio-Technica, 1221 Commerce Dr., Stow, OH 44224; voice (330) 686-2600, fax (330) 688-3752.***

6 Korg N364 Workstation

Okay, so a workstation isn't very bluesy. But who says you can't lay down a 12-bar on one? Of course, you can do a lot more than that with Korg's 61-key N364 ($1900; a 76-key version, the N264, is $2400). Eight MB of PCM waveform memory, 64-voice polyphony, and a 16-track, 32,000-event sequencer supporting the Standard MIDI file format are quite helpful in the quest for sophistication. Also adding to the fun are two independent, fully programmable stereo digital multi-effects processors and a four-octave arpeggiator. ▶ ***Korg USA, 316 So. Service Rd., Melvile, NY 11747; voice (516) 333-9100, fax (516) 333-9108.***

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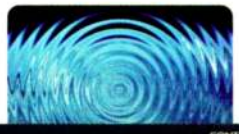

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editor's pick

The complete Pro Tools Project system

Pro Audio Tools For The Rest Of Us

Digidesign's latest addition to Pro Tools is affordability.

by howard massey

If you want to play the blues, you've got to know something about the I-IV-V chord progression. And if you want to get into serious hard disk recording or editing, you've got to know something about Digidesign's Pro Tools. This composite Mac-based hardware/software system rules the roost in post-production facilities, and it's also a staple in thousands of project studios. It's powerful, lightning-fast, and virtually bug-free, but the cost of a full-fledged Pro Tools III system ($7995, not including the computer, hard disk, or interface box) has made it something of a holy grail for the average musician.

Until now, that is. Digidesign has recently reconfigured its product line, introducing a family of Pro Tools systems for the rest of us. These allow musicians on a budget to work with the same software the big boys use, albeit with more limited hardware capabilities.

Digidesign's most comprehensive entry-level system, Pro Tools Project, allows up to eight tracks to be recorded and played back. The base cost for the "core" Pro Tools Project system is $2495, to which you'll have to add a rack-mounted input/output "breakout" box from Digi, either their 882 I/O ($995) or 888 I/O ($2995). The main difference between these is that the 888 has higher-quality A/D and D/A converters, uses balanced XLR connectors for its analog ins and outs, and provides eight channels of digital I/O (in the "pro" AES/EBU format). In contrast, the 882 uses balanced TRS connectors for analog I/O and provides two channels of digital I/O (in the "consumer" S/PDIF format). For most home studio purposes, the 882 will suffice: It provides CD-quality audio, with fidelity about the same as a tape-based digital recorder like the Alesis ADAT. The total cost of a base-level Pro Tools Project system with the 882 box comes to $3490, not including the Power Mac itself (models start at about $2000) and a dedicated AV-rated hard drive. (These days, you can buy a perfectly suitable gigabyte drive for about $500. All Pro Tools systems require a minimum of 32 MB RAM.) So for around six grand you can have the same kind of recording and editing system used in pro studios all around the world—not too shabby.

There are, to be sure, significant features in Pro Tools III that aren't present in Pro Tools Project; the most important is a plug-in architecture called "TDM" for real-time audio processing. But if you start with one of the entry-level Pro Tools packages and decide to move up to a full-blown Pro Tools III system later, Digi has a hip upgrade policy: They'll credit you with the full

price of your lower-end system. That's kind of like learning the blues on an Epiphone Les Paul and then trading up to a Gibson goldtop when you're ready to go on tour, with the full cost of the Eppy refunded to you. (Try proposing that to your local music dealer!) Perhaps the most important thing about this upgrade path is that you'll already know the software, so there will be almost no learning curve.

And after all is said and done, it is the Pro Tools software (version 4.0 is the latest and greatest) that's the key to this product's success. In a nutshell, it provides every conceivable means for recording and editing multiple tracks of digital audio. For example, you can quickly and easily record multiple passes, thanks to handy loop recording/playback functions that enable instant auditioning to create composite "best-of" tracks on the fly. Zoom and scrubbing options allow you to rapidly locate precise points in the audio data, and up to 200 Memory location points can be stored and instantly recalled. A QuickPunch feature lets you punch in and out just as you would on a tape recorder, and you can quickly create numerous "playlists," each of which provides a different arrangement of audio "regions" within the track. There's full SMPTE synchronization capability, and even QuickTime support so that you can view and score video on your desktop.

In addition to all this audio power, Pro Tools software lets you create MIDI tracks into which you can record data (played in from a keyboard or other controller) or import prerecorded MIDI files. These "virtual" tracks play along with the audio in perfect sync and can be sliced, diced, and rearranged just like audio tracks. There are even a few basic MIDI editing capabilities, including rough quantization and key transposition. For more sophisticated editing, the Pro Tools hardware is also supported by most MIDI sequencer/digital audio programs.

There's provision for extensive digital audio editing too (almost all of which is non-destructive), using Pro Tools' included AudioSuite plug-ins. Unlike TDM plug-ins, these are file-based and not real-time, meaning that you have to wait while the computer processes and rewrites the data instead of simply hearing the effect as the signal is playing back. They're also not as comprehensive as the multitude of TDM plug-ins supported by the full-blown Pro Tools III system—but they are free, and they work even in the three entry-level versions of Pro Tools. As a bonus, all AudioSuite plug-ins support batch processing, so that they can work on multiple selected files or regions without having to be reset each time. Options here include Normalize and Gain change functions, plus the ever-popular Reverse, so that the audio plays sdrawkcab. Also included are Time Compression/Expansion and Pitch Change modules; the former changes playback time without changing pitch, while the latter changes pitch with or without playback time being affected. Both of these modules have a Preview button that allows you to hear how the processing affects a short segment of the audio as you tweak various parameters.

As if that weren't enough, a Mix window gives you a full onscreen digital mixer so you can adjust track levels, pans, mutes, inserts (one or two bands of EQ can be applied to each track), and Aux send levels. (Pro Tools Project provides two Aux sends, using outputs 7 and 8 of the breakout box to route data to external signal processors, with the signal returning to special Aux Input tracks; from there, the signal can be recorded to hard disk.) All of these controls can be adjusted with the mouse, or you can use a MIDI control surface. The Mix window also provides full automation of both audio and MIDI tracks, with features that are more like those you'd encounter in a high-end mixing console than what you'd typically expect to find in a Mac program. And the graphic display in the Edit window allows you to edit your automation moves after the fact in ways that few mixers allow. When you've got your mix the way you want it, simply use the Bounce feature to write it to hard disk in any of a number of standard formats; the resulting file can then be transferred in the digital domain to DAT, or you can use Digidesign's MasterList CD software (our March '96 Editor's Pick) to burn it directly to a CD.

It's rare when a name accurately represents a product's capabilities, but Pro Tools really does provide you with every professional tool you need for digital audio recording and editing. It's wonderful to have such a powerhouse available at such an affordable price, and doubly so when you consider that the upgrade path to a full-blown system includes full reimbursement for your initial investment. So you can learn to play the blues on a Sears Silvertone—but let's be thankful for Epiphones too!

Special thanks to Jennifer Barrier, Mary Stevens, and Mike Cuddy.

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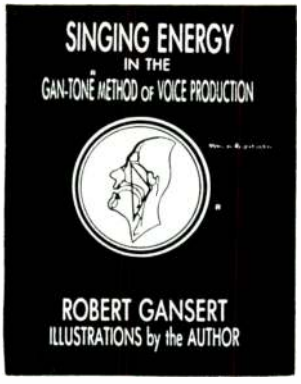

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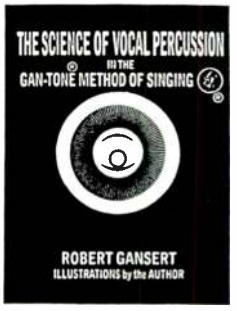

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home studio

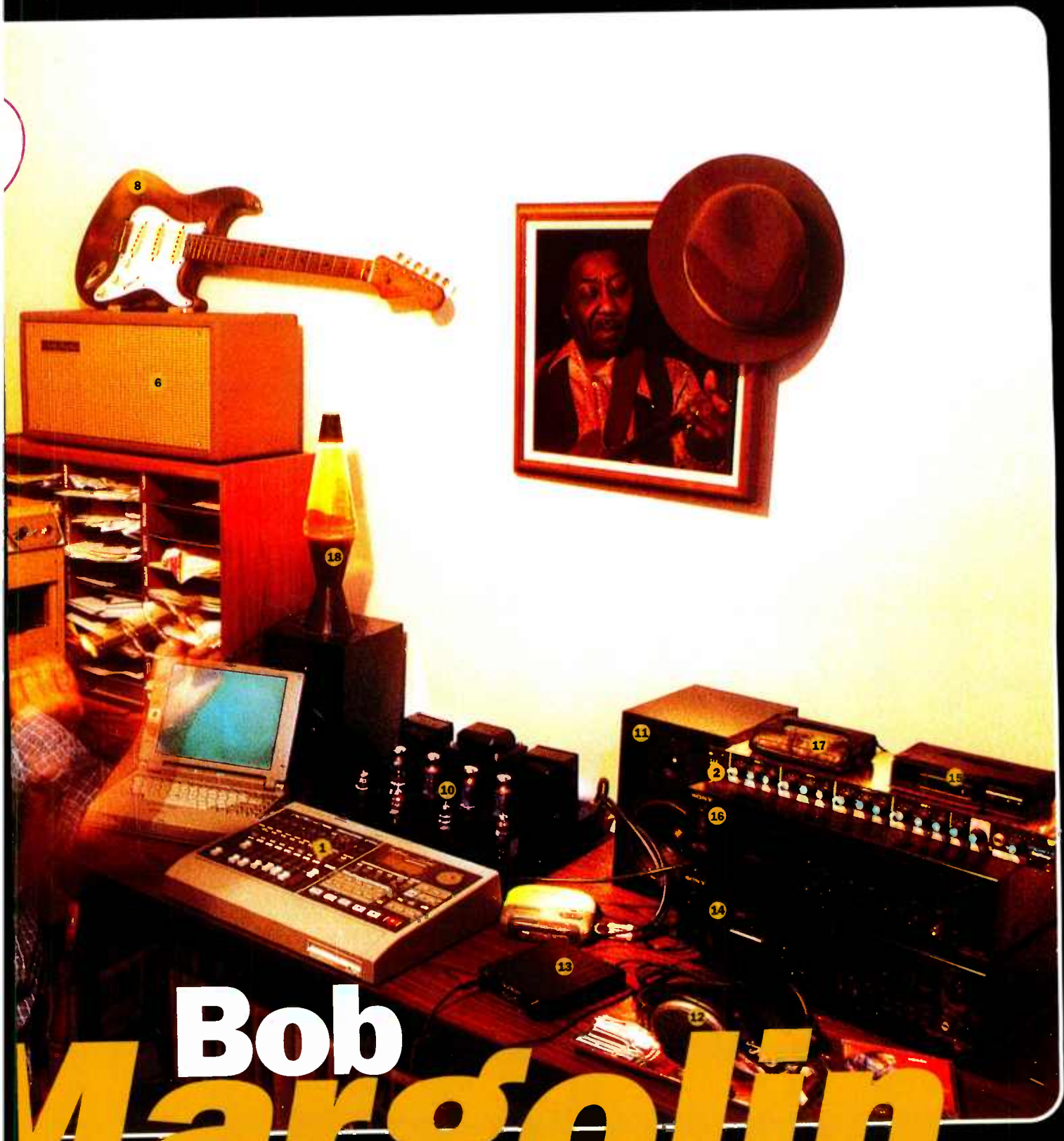
by michael gelfand

Can you imagine a blues guitarist from Muddy Waters' band owning a hard disk-based home studio? Sounds like an odd fit, right? Well, as Steady Rollin' Bob Margolin explains it, the tiny studio in his Greensboro, North Carolina, home offers the best of old and new worlds. "The combination of old guitars and amps mixed together with this new recording stuff combines my interests in traditional blues, audiophile stereo gear, and modern recording technology," says Margolin. "But remember, the soul that's in the music is more important than the quality of the equipment you're using.

"I spent most of the Seventies playing with Muddy, and I asked him how they got those beautiful room sounds on his older Chess recordings," recalls Margolin. "They used three-channel recorders back then, so proximity was the effect of choice. They put one mic near the vocalist, another close to the bass and piano, and the guitar and drums were picked up from farther away in the room. This was all mixed down to *mono* in the end."

Although Margolin's demos rely on overdubs, he's made a conscious decision to use the same classic ambient miking techniques, as opposed to outboard effects. "Instead of putting some room sound on my vocals, I'll record my vocals from three feet away. I do that with the guitars, too, which gets a really rich, natural room sound. Each instrument is recorded separately, and since it's just me in there, there's no problem with leakage. It's a case where modern overdubbing helps me get the old sounds in a better way—and that's not usually the way things work."

photograph by david loeb



Bob Margolin

Even while out on the road in support of *Up & In*, his newest of three albums on Alligator Records, Margolin longs to spend his time working up new songs in his studio. "I get in there whenever I can," he says, "but like a lot of people who work hard, I'm a little time-challenged." Tour dates and recording sessions aside, Margolin views the studio as a vital portion of his musical growth. "I've found that if I'm going to play, expand upon, or progress beyond just playing Chicago blues in bars—where some people had already done that quite perfectly by 1952—I've got to make my own songs personal, really develop my songwriting."

Margolin's desktop studio is built around a **Roland VS-880 Digital Studio Workstation** that sits on his worktable. ("Its ability to allow for instantaneous punch-ins keeps the creative process moving instead of getting slowed down.") A **Furman MM-8A** powered mixing board provides a low-impedance mic input and phantom power for a **Shure SM81** condenser mic. A Fifties **Gibson Skylark** amp is used primarily for recording, while a much larger **Victoria Amplifiers 45410-T** 50-watt combo is used for gigging.

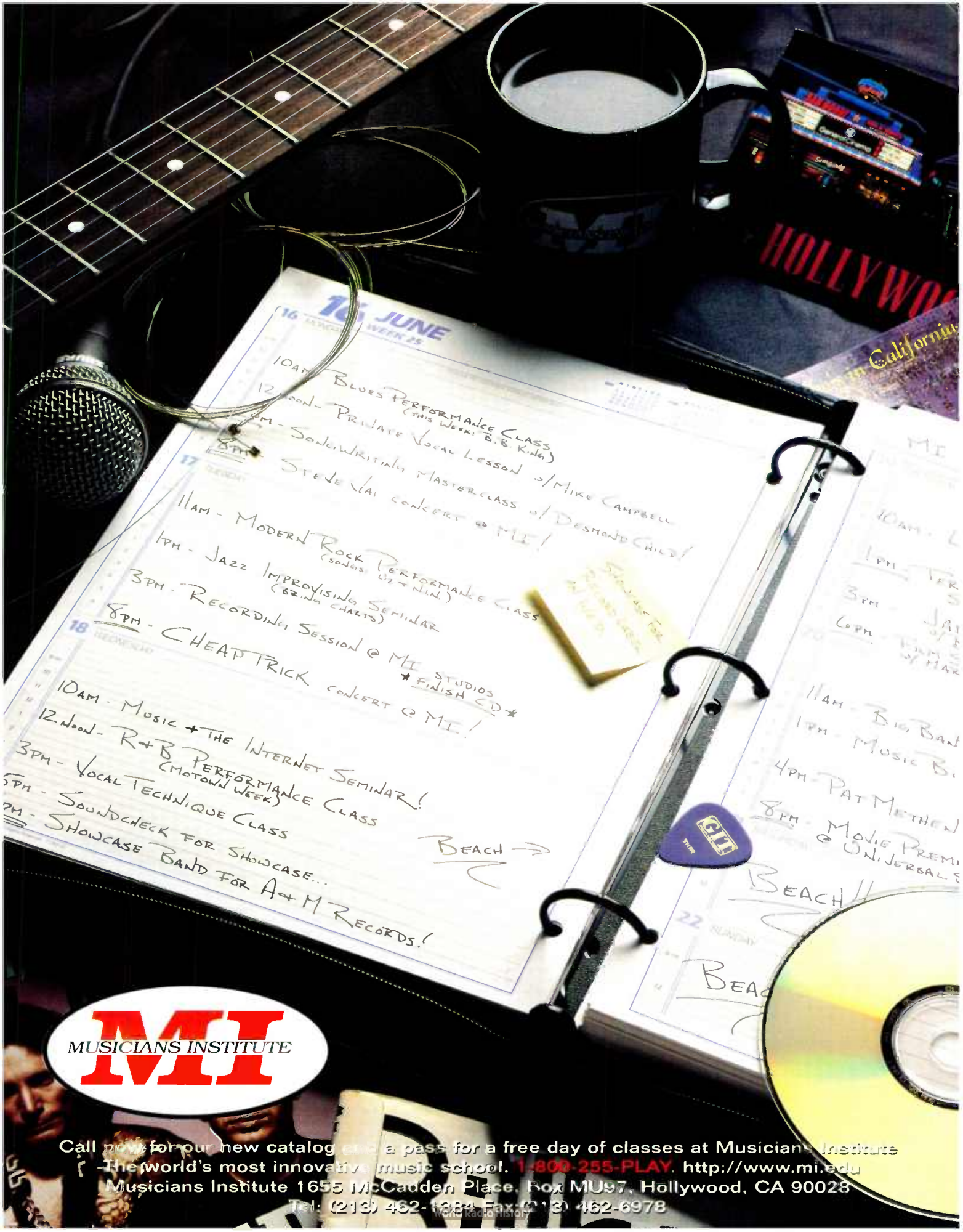
Margolin swears by his **Victoria Reverberato** tremolo/reverb unit. ("If I get on stage with it and play one note, I'm inspired to play all night long.") He doesn't have a drum kit, but when beats are called for, he'll either use brushes on a cardboard box or opt for an old trick copped from The King. "If the brushes make it sound too jazzy, I'll do what Elvis did on 'Don't Be Cruel,'" he says, "which is turn my Thirties **Gibson L-100** acoustic guitar over and hit the back of it really hard on the backbeat."

As you'd expect, Margolin has an arsenal of guitars at his disposal, including the **Gibson ES-150** Margolin played with Muddy Waters in *The Last Waltz* and a '56 **Fender Stratocaster** ("my main guitar with Muddy"). An early-Sixties **Supro Pocket Bass** with a piezo pick-up built into its wooden bridge helps Margolin get an upright sound.

A self-professed audiophile, Margolin admits that his **SG Jolida SJ-302A** integrated tube amplifier is "an indulgence," but he prefers the added dimensionality of the Jolida's tubes during playback. A pair of **NHT SuperOnes** serve as monitors; cables and interconnects by **Tara** and **Monster Cable** keep the signals flowing. **Sennheiser** HD 580 headphones and a portable **Headroom Supreme** headphone amplifier provide late-night monitoring.

For mixes, Margolin uses a variety of components: A **Cardas** digital cable connects a **Sony DTC-700** DAT player to the VS-880; a **Sony TCD-D7** portable DAT player sits by idly for use when Margolin is out on the road. A **Sony TC-K620** cassette tape recorder and **Sony WM-D6C** portable cassette recorder are used for making dupes, while a **lava lamp** provides atmosphere and assists with "spiritual centering."

And what would Margolin's mentor think of this whole setup? "Muddy never even thought about things like this," says Margolin with a laugh. "He'd think it could be cool to make high-quality recordings in your house, but I doubt he'd have been too interested in the tech side of things."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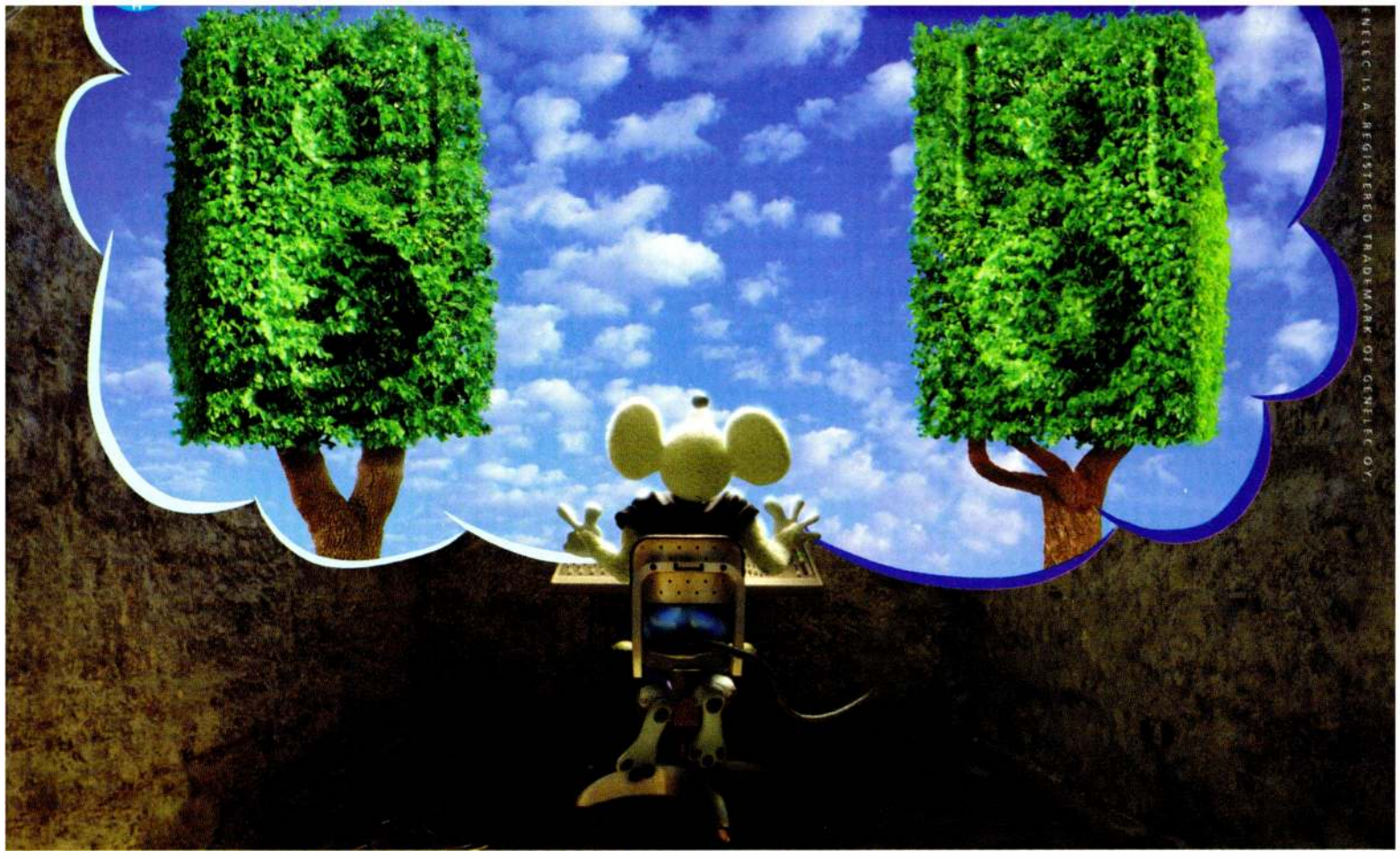

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Switched-On Blues

Even propeller heads can get low-down.

by robert raines

Who do I think I am, setting out to make a CD of classic blues standards with a computer and a bank of synthesizers? Well, who did Muddy Waters think he was when he plugged in and cranked up? Besides, even though I have my own hard-disk-based studio and a CD of electronic music on my résumé, I've put in my time in New York blues bars. And as "great" as it is to pore through manuals and trouble-shoot esoteric gear, my biggest thrill as a musician is still the night B.B. King sat with me, a fifteen-year-old beginner, in his dressing room for half an hour before his performance, showing me how to string and tune my new guitar, bend notes, and shake my hand for a mean vibrato. I left, star-struck, with an autograph on my Telecaster and a lesson I've never forgotten: Always keep an open mind about musical styles.

That, in a nutshell, is why I decided to take a music I love—the blues—and interpret it with electronic instruments. The resulting CD, *Home Cooking* (set for release in August), was recorded and mixed in my studio. The equipment included a Macintosh Quadra 650, a Digidesign sound card, Yamaha and Mackie mixers, an Audio-Technica microphone, Emagic's Logic Audio software, and a variety of sound modules, including a Roland D-50 and JV-880, and a Korg MR-1.

The fundamental challenge was to juxtapose acoustic and electronic sounds to create a set of idiomatic textures. A common criticism of digital recording is that it sounds sterile (read: unbluesy). But I see the pristine digital sound as just one color at my disposal; I like to mix it with gritty, rough-hewn washes of acoustic recording for contrast. One way I do this is to record some parts on my analog tape deck, pushing them into the red a bit. I then take this saturated signal and dump it to my hard disk, where I can easily edit it. This approach to mixing avoids a monochromatic approach: Red may be your favorite color, but you need some contrasts to highlight it on the canvas.

Since most of my sounds were synthesized, I tried to keep my acoustic tracks—mainly vocals and guitar—as natural-sounding as possible. Heard against the synthesized

Karen Caldicott

and processed sounds, these colors add warmth and variety. Rather than process the acoustic tracks excessively, I aimed for cleanliness. I also avoided layered guitars and thick background vocals, preserving the immediacy of the acoustic sounds and setting them apart from the synthesized tracks.

The Groove. One of the first things I did after selecting my material was to find the right grooves and tempos for each cut. My first decision was to not quantize. To achieve the appropriate organic, human feel, with the natural fluctuations and variations of a live performance, I let the tempo vary slightly in certain parts of each song. All the little touches that make a rhythm track come alive were added after the main elements had been recorded; this way the percussion could react to the music in a natural way as I nudged the beat around.

It can be a painstaking process to alter a stiff rhythm track, speeding it up slightly on choruses and crescendos, slowing it down on moody or quiet passages. But these nuances made a big difference. Blues tempo can ebb and flow like liquid as the players react to each other, so taking the time to build a fluid rhythm track goes a long way toward capturing this essential element of the music. On some cuts I used drum grooves sampled from a CD. In these cases I brought the sound file into the Emagic "factory" and created several versions of each groove, altering the tempo each time. (Emagic's Factory function lets you alter tempo without affecting pitch, or pitch without affecting tempo.) I was then able to draw on this tempo library as needed while piecing together my tracks. This saved me from the clock-like beats heard in a lot of electronic music.

Sounds. For individual sounds, I searched for alternatives to the standard blues instruments—Hammond organ, harmonica, and so on. One technique I used was to first play my parts using "traditional" sounds, and then experiment with swapping unexpected timbres for conventional ones. I didn't just replace a Fender bass sound with some other bass guitar sound. Instead, I looked for unexpected colors that would complement the song and execute all of the parameters well, including pitch, expressiveness, and response to fast passages. Most sequencing software makes it a simple matter to jump between widely varied sounds while playing back the track. I kept an open mind and was rewarded with some surprising timbral combinations.

The main thing I tried to keep in mind when selecting a "substitute" voice was the function of the original sound. For instance, the sassy horns on a B.B. King cut play a specific role, punctuating high points and building swells, but the sound I select for their role doesn't have to have a horn-like timbre, as long as it can fulfill its function. It's got to be able to execute the part in a believable way and not interfere with the song by being too outside the rest of the sounds in the arrangement. Using combinations of modules to play a single part can exponentially expand the sonic possibilities. Try combining sounds that have very different qualities from each other. You may want to add processing—reverb, compression, etc.—to help them blend effectively. That's how I found an unusual alternative to a standard horn patch: By putting a flute sound and a percussion sound together, I found the attack I was looking for, along with a subtle vocal-like quality and a potential for enhancing a bluesy feel.

Tech chops are important, but soul is what it's all about.

Form. Hard-disk recording provides a great way to experiment with blues form. Cutting and pasting verses and choruses in your software stimulates improvisation and on-the-fly arranging ideas. I usually start out recording a version of the song over a basic beat. It's important that this groove captures the feel you want; it's the foundation of the house. Keeping it simple, I improvised a vocal and rhythm instrument, sometimes playing for twenty to thirty minutes straight and recording it all. That's the fun part, the right-side-of-the-brain stuff. Next comes the left side, the intellectual part of the process. I shifted gears and edited the material down to what I felt was the best stuff I'd come up with. This might involve cutting and pasting one section, repeating it several times in the same song if it felt like a real anchor idea. I tried to look for less obvious ways of approaching the music: Should that solo bit be used as the intro? Should I try a modulation here?

As a result of this exploratory approach, I found lots of twists and turns in the old I-IV-V progression. Although my initial instinct was to follow the tried-and-true twelve-bar path, I began to reconsider while listening to some of the songs John Lennon wrote for the Beatles. Lennon often inserted 2/4 and 3/4 bars in a standard 4/4 setting and also added unexpected chord changes, which helped breathe spontaneity into the structure of his songs. There's a precedent for this: Time signatures and chord changes often fluctuate wildly throughout older recordings of rural blues. I tried to capture some of that freshness by manipulating the arrangement in my sequencer. Though there's a danger of overusing this approach, it can personalize your music if done judiciously.

Problems. Whenever my creativity hit a brick wall, I found it useful to step back and check out the techniques of the masters. On one cut I wanted my bass part to jump out and bite me, but it just wasn't happening. Plugging in another synth patch wasn't enough to do the trick. These was some fundamental essence missing, and I couldn't put my finger on it. So I dug out some of my favorite records and listened carefully to the bass playing of Willie Dixon, Jack Bruce, and other blues masters. Then, while their work was still ringing in my ears, I cut a series of new bass tracks. I didn't listen to my original, unsatisfactory track, or allow myself to stop when I flubbed a part. I played the results back, looking for inspired moments, which I finally pieced together for a much-improved bottom line. Hard-disk recording is a perfect medium for this method of making the blues come alive.

Man Versus Machine. It's extremely important to have your technology chops together. Know thy recording and synth gear. But remember, soul is what it's all about. Fact is, *any* instrument can play the blues if the right musician is playing it. The key is to experiment—how else would someone have come up with the idea of using a broken-off bottleneck on a guitar?

Contributors: *Robert Raines is an Internet designer and composer.* Home Cooking *can be ordered at robert@rrcreative.com or from IUMA at www.iuma.com.*

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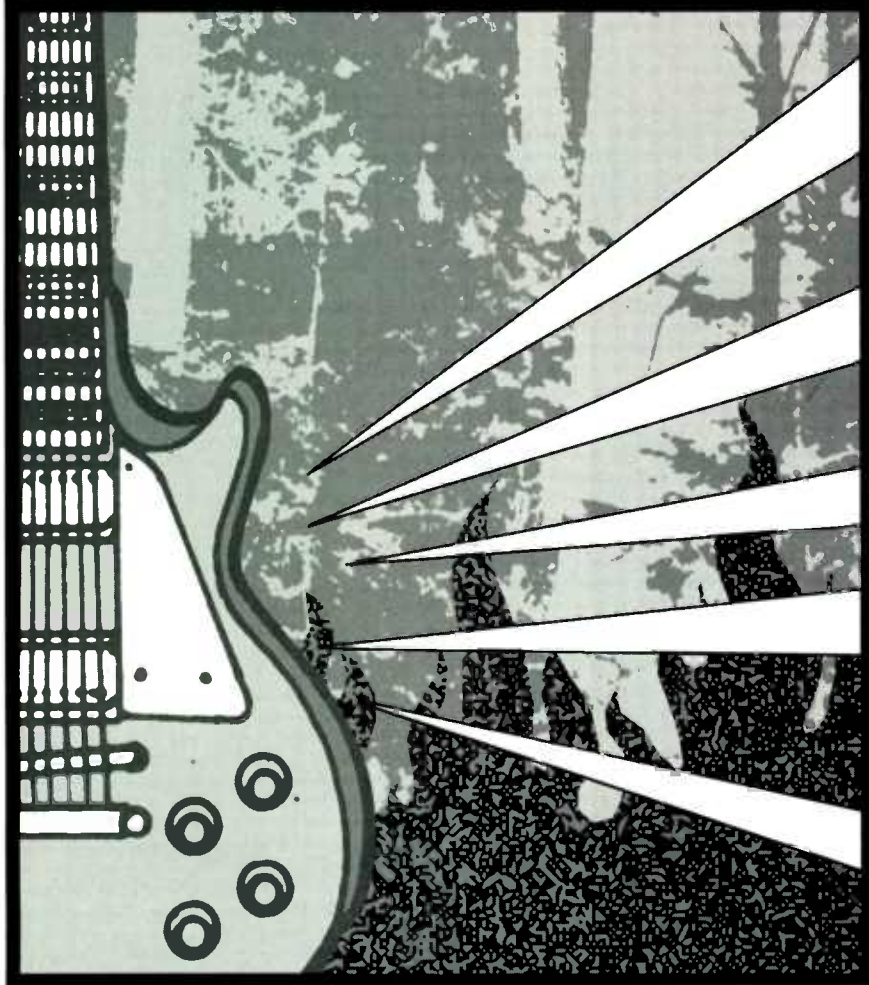

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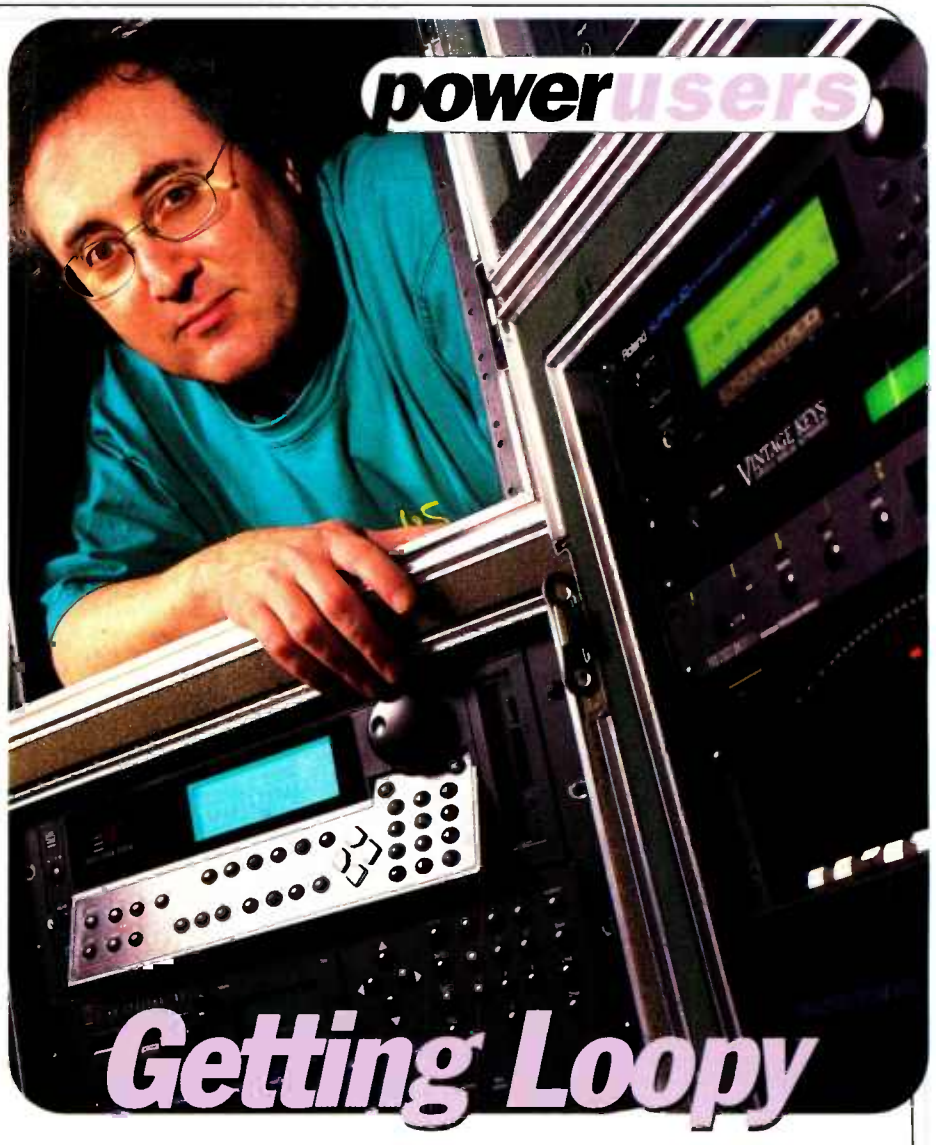

Getting Loopy With Jason Miles

by greg sandow

Jason Miles does a perfect Miles Davis imitation. Not that we're at his upstate New York studio for entertainment. No, our mission is musical, for our host programmed keyboards for Davis' album *Tutu*, and did the same work for Luther Vandross and Michael Jackson. Now he's on his own as a composer and producer, and wants to show us how he uses E-mu's flagship sampler, the E-4 Emulator.

Miles touches a key or two, and we hear a drum loop. We can also see it on the Emulator's screen. "Okay," he says. "I like that as a loop, but I want to do some shit with it." He presses more keys. Zooming in on the final sound, he smooths its graphic volume envelope, making it fade out instead of cutting sharply off. "If you don't have release time on a loop, you don't have that springboard to the next repeat."

"Look," he says, "we need to do some magic acts. The Emulator has these filters in it." These, he points out, are descendants of the fascinating morphing filters that E-mu introduced on the Morpheus and the UltraProteus. "I'll put the loop through the filters," Miles says. "I'll see which gives me what I want."

And here he teaches us a useful lesson. Though his programming credentials are solid, he works by trial and error, going through the filters one by one. "I'll listen and see what I can do." As he works, the sound gets muffled, sharper, hollow, wooden, edgy.

"Okay," Miles says, satisfied at last. "I'll use *this* filter." He plays with its parameters, coming up with something rougher, tighter, and a lot more bright. "And now I'll do something wacky," he goes on, "a different panning thing." He adjusts the pan, and then uses another E-mu convenience, its ability to assign a loop to any key on his Kurzweil. He puts the original on C, the copy on D, and fingers the notes, going back and forth so I can hear the plain loop on the left and the sharper filtered version on the right. Dynamite!

Anyone could do this, with all kinds of hardware and software. But I understand what makes the E-mu special. Miles trusts those filters *musically*. After years of work at the top of his profession he seems to have discovered that the Emulator gives him what he wants with hardly any fuss. True? He smiles in reply: "You've got it happening. Anything I want to do with a sample, I can do with this. I trust this box."

A master programmer samples perfection with his E-4 Emulator

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Trace Elliot's SMX Dual Compressor

Compression on the Cheap

by steve wishnia

A bassist's guide to affordable punch

For bass players, compression is often an essential part of recording. It saves the meters from obliteration by funksters popping and snapping, punk-rockers battering the E string, and blues players punching out stops. By holding down the extremes of volume, it allows you to record at a higher input level, thus bringing up the quietudes so that they don't disappear into a maelstrom of tape hiss. And ideally, it does this without destroying dynamics.

What compressors (and limiters) actually do is reduce the volume of any input signal louder than a certain level (the **threshold**). How much the compressor holds the excess volume down is measured as a **ratio** (sometimes called **slope**), which can be anywhere from 1:1 (no compression) to infinity:1. A 2:1 ratio cuts the volume increase by half, so that a signal 2 decibels over the threshold will only come out 1 dB louder; 4:1 holds a 4 dB excess down to a 1 dB increase, and so on. A ratio of 10:1 marks the border between the flexible roof of compressors and the brick wall of limiters. Other controls on compressors include **attack** (how long it takes to kick in) and **release** (how long it takes to let up as the note dies down).

All nine of the compressors we checked out retail for $250 or less, low enough to be accessible to club musicians and home studios. Of the three pedals specifically marketed as "bass compressors," **Boss**' LMB 3 Bass Limiter-Enhancer ($104.50) is the most discreet and unobtrusive. The LMB-3 has controls for ratio, level, threshold, and enhancement (added high end for extra presence). With the ratio set at about 3:1 or 4:1, this turquoise pedal offered sweet, creamy sustain on long legato passages. I had to push it to extreme settings—a low threshold and full limiting—before getting the "breathing" effects compressors can be prone to. Though it noticeably cuts the immediacy of roundwound strings, it's definitely adequate for four-track cassette recording, especially if you have a less trebly tone.

Ibanez's BP5 Bass Comp ($79.95) takes the opposite approach, sacrificing cleanliness for sustain. Extremely long sustain; longer than at least five other compressors we tested. However, it's the most prone to pumping and breathing, especially when set for long sustain and slow attack. I had to tweak it a bit to get smooth arpeggios without choking the tone.

DOD's FX82 Bass Compressor ($99.95) falls in between the other two on the cleanliness/sustain continuum. It has controls for level, release, and up to 40 dB of compression. It's a little bumpy with high compression and a quick release, but had the fattest, roundest bottom of the three.

Betwixt stompbox and full-rack units, we find several different approaches. **Alesis' NanoCompressor** ($119) crams almost every

Eli Hershkowitz

dbx's 262 compressor/limiter

conceivable professional feature into a one-third rack-space box. You get the four basic controls, plus stereo, a choice between "peak" and "RMS" compression and more.

The NanoCompressor offers both "hard-knee" and "soft-knee" compression, a choice also found on the dbx 262 (see below). With hard-knee compression, the effect comes in immediately and fully once the signal reaches the threshold level. Soft-knee compression (called "OverEasy" by dbx, which developed it) comes in less abruptly, beginning slightly below the threshold and not reaching full intensity till somewhere above it. In my experience, hard-knee preserves the attack and presence better, but soft-knee is smoother. The Nano-Compressor's sustain is long and majestic. Its tone could be more enticing, but it recorded reasonably well on my four-track. With its multitudinous features, I'd recommend it more as an economical all-purpose home-studio unit than specifically for recording bass.

ART's slightly bigger **LeVeLAr** ($159) is another story. It's got minimal features, merely a choice between 2.3:1 compression and 6:1 "soft limiting" and fast or "auto" (in which optical circuitry reacts to the note's envelope) operation. Instead, it tries to emulate the sound of Sixties tube compressors that many bass players and producers wax nostalgic about. This doesn't give you much flexibility, but sounds really good. On a P-Bass with half-round strings, the 12AX7 tube put out a juicy tone; when I did hammer-ons and pops on the roundwound G string of a Steinberger copy, it enhanced the presence and preserved the sproinginess.

Trace Elliot's SMX Dual Compressor ($195) is a double-size stompbox that runs off either two nine-volt batteries or an 18-volt adapter. It splits the signal into two parts and sends it to separate compressors, set for fast attack on the high end and slow on the low. The rationale for this is that the quick compression needed to catch high-end attack will distort bass notes, while the slower compression used on the low end would wipe out the note's attack. With five controls (input, output, low compression, high compression and EQ balance, plus a high-compression bypass switch), it strikes an elegant balance between simplicity and flexibility. With both compressors up all the way and EQ on full bass, it actually made the P-style pickup on my Gibson EB0 sound human.

The **dbx 262 Compressor/Limiter** ($199.95) was once the cheapest full-rack stereo compressor on the market; since its introduction last year, it's been beaten by the **Behringer Autocom MDX 1200** ($189.99, unavailable for review). The 262 is a simple, functional unit with controls for threshold, output level, and ratio on each of its two channels; it also has hard-knee and "OverEasy" compression, plus various meters and hookup options. With the threshold set very low (at -25 dB), the ratio about 3.5:1 and the output high, a hardcore punk bassline—normally tough to record well—made it onto my four-track quite cleanly.

Boss's LMB-3

Furman's C132 Limiter/Compressor ($199) has fewer features, running in mono with just four basic controls. The control called "threshold" on the prototype we had appeared to be either labeled backwards or an input-volume control, but it still sounded good. With the attack at 2 milliseconds, moderate compression and a relatively short release, roundwound strings and a Jazz-style bridge pickup came through in all their clangy glory.

Yet another approach comes from **PreSonus' Blue Max** ($249). This stereo half-rack unit appears primarily intended as an idiot-proof all-purpose compressor for home and small professional studios: It has 15 presets for vocals, drums, instruments and mixing. Its bass preset—a 2.6:1 ratio, 45.7 milliseconds of attack and 189 ms of release—gives a clear, sustained sound somewhat reminiscent of Seventies Pink Floyd: round, deep and punchy on a P-style pickup, offering a nice bite with somewhat dimmed sproinginess on roundwounds. (If you don't want this setting, you can control attack, ratio and release manually.)

Compression isn't a panacea. I have a distinctly physical fingerpicking style, and the best compressor in the world won't eliminate those noises without a little inhibition on my part. Some conflict is probably inevitable between the intensity of playing hard and fast and the technical demands of getting sound on tape. But any of these boxes can help lead the riffs of excess into the palace of clean sound.

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records

Pride and Joy

Stevie Ray Vaughan
Live From Carnegie Hall (Epic)

When Stevie Ray Vaughan led his band to Carnegie Hall thirteen years ago, he brought along a beat-up Strat and a sense of mission. His plan was to feature songs of the greats who first drew him to the blues but had never made it to the august room themselves. Thus much of the material on this album was written by folks like Guitar Slim, Albert King, and Albert Collins. Yet all of it is interpreted here with an authority that's rare even from the best players.

From first note to last, Stevie Ray is in command. Right after John Hammond completes his introduction, the guitarist pulverizes the knotty intro lick to "Scuttle Buttin'" and keeps up a blazing pace throughout the song. Here, in chord structures and tone, Vaughan echoes Hendrix before finding his own rawer voice after a few choruses. Stronger shades of Hendrix haunt the unaccompanied, introspective "Lenny"; if not for the gelatinous whammy-bar work and a few intentionally disruptive jolts, this cut might have snuck onto *Band of Gypsys* without anyone noticing the difference.

Aside from "Lenny," Vaughan's guitar is cranked to the max, often overwhelming his colleagues in Double Trouble. "Our volume was totally out of control," drummer Chris Layton, now with Storyville, tells *Musician*. "We completely overloaded the place. It's a good thing we had close mics for recording. I don't know how it sounded out in the room, but everyone said, 'God, it was *loud!*'"

The depth of his tone throughout the album reflects Vaughan's belief that subtlety and intensity could go hand-in-hand. According to engineer and co-producer Richard Mullen, the keys to his sound were a Fender Vibratone amp, which simulated the rotating speaker sound of the Leslie cabinets, and an amp built by Alexander Dumble in L.A. "It was like a big old Twin," Mullen recalls, "huge on the bottom end, with a lot of headroom. It had that big Fender sound without crapping out quite so early."

That sound applied itself perfectly to medium-tempo boogie grooves like "Honey Bee," with its churning beat and steely, ringing riffs, and the relentless slow shuffle "Cold Shot." His vocals were serviceable, so Vaughan riveted the spotlight onto his playing. Inevitably this pushed the band into the background: Layton, bassist Tommy Shannon, and assorted guests kept the clock ticking while Stevie (and, on one track, brother Jimmie Vaughan) flaunted their licks. None of it was exactly innovative. "Stevie was the first to say that if he was in a rut, he'd just start playing fast," says Layton. "Sometimes there'd be a sameness to it. But even when he was on automatic pilot, he played great stuff."

That's the key to at least this school of the blues: You don't mind hearing a familiar story again, if the storyteller has the right chops. So it was that night in Carnegie Hall, when the audience heard Stevie being Stevie one more time, and left wanting to hear it many times more than they would. ***—Robert L. Doerschuk***

Ebet Roberts

The Rolling Stones Chase The Voodoo Down

"My whole behavior with the Rolling Stones is governed by my first encounter with Keith," recalls Don Was. "He sent me a fax before we did *Voodoo Lounge*: 'Be in Dublin in three weeks.' I wrote back, 'What are the songs?' And by fax he says, 'That's for me to know and you to find out. Just remember, when you get to Dublin, improvise, adapt, and overcome. P. Fuckin' S.: Don't paint yourself into a corner.'"

Sound advice, recalls Was, who is between sessions with the Stones for their latest disc. We're at Hollywood's Ocean Way, one of several L.A. studios where the band has recorded regularly since the mid-Sixties. "Each guy has his own unique writing style," Was observes of the legendary Jagger/Richards tandem. "So there are evolving demos. Mick can sit down with a pad of paper and a guitar and deliver a song, but Keith needs to play with other musicians. He hammers out a song by playing it over repeated sittings, with at least Charlie sitting behind the drums. Then he improvises stream-of-consciousness lyrics over a period of time and culls from the best of those."

Hanging in Studio One, we're watching Mick and Keith discuss a new song, "Thief in the Night," which features a roots-rock groove and a descriptive Jagger vocal delivered via a Neumann SM 50—one of Ocean Way's huge collection of vintage tube mics—into a Neve 8078 board. "The rooms here hearken to an era when you wanted a room that sounded good because people were making real music in that room," Was points out. "The main thing is that the reflections are good; you get good bleed-through in the mics. Your walls have a major impact on that."

As with the making of many a Stones album, the process here is a mix of the familiar and the new. Besides the band (Mick, Keith, Charlie Watts, Ron Wood, Darryl Jones), there's a musician mafia of friends and collaborators on hand, including singer Bernard Fowler, drummer Jim Keltner, and guitarists Waddy Wachtel and Blondie Chaplin; Me'Shell Ndegéocello, Wayne Shorter, Lili Haydn, and producers Babyface and the Dust Brothers are among the new ringers. Less well-known, but pivotal to the process, is Pierre De Beauport—cryptically credited on *Voodoo Lounge* for "pre-production co-ordination & technical support."

"The first time Keith starts playing chords, Pierre is recording with a DAT," Was explains. "The moment that the notes drop from Keith's fingers, there's a certain feel that, over a period of time, might get passed over in favor of some new direction. But many times we'll find, as Allen Ginsberg said, 'First thought, best thought.' Keith will say, 'Do you have the time I played this in Barbados?' and Pierre will find it immediately. We often find ideas that occurred only in the first moments that are pivotal to the song."

In fact, the Stones are a rock band that records a lot like a jazz band to the extent that they rely on unscripted musical encounters—which heightens the responsibility of engineers Ed Cherney and Dan Bosworth. "It helps to have people who are alert and flexible," Was points out. "The minute anyone goes near an instrument, you'd better be running two-inch tape. There's a number of songs on the album that were recorded on the spur of the moment, where someone was smoking a cigarette, picked up a guitar, and the next thing you know, it's 'Flip the switch!' Someone may pick up an instrument they weren't even playing before, and that's your magical take. You can't *ever* stop paying attention."

Was himself takes a more physical role than most producers, playing keyboard or standup bass with the band instead of staying behind the board. "I just like to hear what they're hearing," he says. "It's a different reality than in the control room. If you're playing with a live drummer, you're getting hit with sound waves that you don't feel if you're overdubbing or sitting in the control room."

Lester Cohen

And with Charlie Watts behind the drums, those sound waves matter. In the summer of '97 the oldest Stone seems as enthusiastic as Michael Jordan, and his energy has a palpable effect on the band's current music. Was agrees: "Either I've learned how to listen to music better or something dramatic has happened to this guy!

"My feeling is that personality extends far beyond the boundaries of the skin," he goes on. "You don't have to spend much time in the studio to realize that Keith's personality is huge. And if you see Mick Jagger onstage, you understand how far this guy projects. What I've discovered on this album is that Charlie Watts has a personality that looms as large as those guys—he's just more soft-spoken about it."—***Harvey Kubernik***

Various Artists

Knights of the Blues Table (Viceroy/Lightyear)

We asked Manfred Mann alumnus and BBC radio host Paul Jones if there is such a thing as British blues—a style whose characteristics differed from those of the homebrew American variety. His answer was short and a little testy: "No!"

To be honest, we weren't too surprised; Jones, like many of his colleagues on this collection of new performances by some of the pillars of early-Sixties blues movement in the U.K., prides himself on his knowledge of the blues. But this scholarly approach is in fact one hallmark of the English school. Imitative and reverential in nature, tempered by influences never encountered in southside Chicago, Brit blues does have its own sound and feel.

With *Knights* we are left with a two-dimensional image, somehow broad and narrow at the same time. There's funky B-3 trio blues, provided by Georgie Fame and two of his sons. There's post-punk, attitudinal blues, with Nine Below Zero's Dennis Greaves snarling into an overdriven harmonica mic. There's Miller Anderson, whose impassioned yet folkish reading of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" stretches the definition of what qualifies as a blues. But there's a dozen more cuts that stick to the blues formula, with textbook guitar licks and meticulously flatted thirds.

Then there are the vocals. Maggie Bell delivers a hair-raising performance on "Blind Man," backed by Big Jim Sullivan; producer Pete Brown put the two together at Bell's request to work with "the best acoustic guitar player you can find," and Sullivan's work clearly meets her standards. On their respective tracks, Peter Green and Duffy Power sing with fewer histrionics yet deep feeling. And Fame again proves himself adept at jazz phrasing. But most of the other cuts display the British tendency toward tackling the blues with inappropriate vibrato and even melodrama: Jack Bruce, an excellent musician by any measure, defined the Brit blues vocal style with Cream, and he's still warbling it here.

The heavy representation of acoustic blues perhaps challenged Brown to look for and bring out nuances in each artist's sound. For example, to complement Green's swampy feel, he positioned a variety of ambient condenser mics around the guitar, which he close-miked with AKG C-414s; the vocal mic was a Neumann 87. But Tony McPhee, playing an Ovation guitar with a plastic back and thin strings, was given a Neumann FET 47 for close miking, with another one over the top of his shoulder and several Neumann KM 86s some fifteen feet away. (McPhee vigorously tapped his foot throughout the song. Rather than tell him to stop, engineer Tristan Powell hammered tacks into the singer/guitarist's shoes in hopes of adding punch to the beat. Alas, McPhee's stomping isn't audible on the album.)

Aside from a harmonica part on Chris Jagger's "Racketeer Blues," which brother Mick phoned in from Westside Studios, everything was recorded in The Church, a London studio owned by Dave Stewart. (Why? "Because it's around the corner from where I live," Brown says.) The setup was simple: an Amek 24-track board, a Tube Tech compressor, two old Tube Tech preamps, and two Urei 1176 compressors were used on the album. Built into a former church, the main room is huge, with a high ceiling. The spaciousness of the sound here is most evident on the drum hit that follows Jack Bruce's vocal intro on "Send For Me."

With the exceptions of Jagger's harp and Miller Anderson's electric guitar overdub, each song was cut live, with first takes generally winding up on the album. A pub band feel results, complete with rough edges and an exuberant sloppiness that many will find appealing. But a kind of sameness and, with certain exceptions, detachment is also evident. Though most of these folks have been at it for more than thirty years, they still seem to be playing *with* the blues. That in-the-gut quality one hears from Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins—and, yes, from the Vaughan brothers—doesn't quite translate. For all the migrations we've seen, maybe the blues remains fundamentally an American artifact even now.—***Robert L. Doerschuk***

Eric Matthews

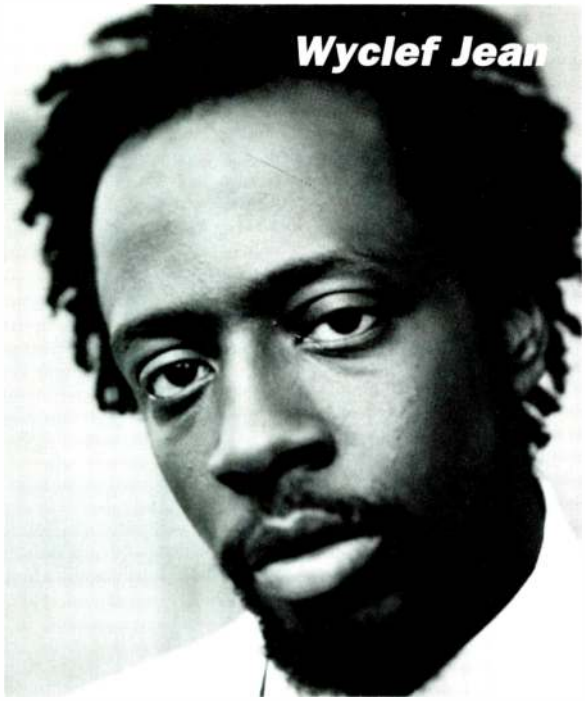
The Lateness of the Hour (Sub Pop)

For someone who fits so comfortably into the newly created "orch(estral) pop" ghetto, Eric Matthews sure can rock—in his own way. Check out "Everything So Real," the sixth track on this, his second solo album. Dig the driving, McCartney-esque bass part by guest artiste Spookey Ruben, the sudden calm-before-the-onslaught breaks in the central riff, and the luscious layers of overdriven open-tuned electric guitar. Note how the high, whispery vocals and the complex motion of the melody are offset by the ballsy band performance. Finally, arrive at the realization that your head can't stop bobbing to the music. Alright, it's not exactly AC/DC, but it still can get a body in motion.

Of course, "Everything So Real" is an exception to the rule. For most of *Lateness*, this conservatory-trained Oregonian is up to his usual tricks, making deliciously delicate, impossibly wonderful chamber-pop songs that don't quite kick ass but will likely activate your swoon gland. Take, for example, a moment toward the end of "Becomes Dark Blue," where Matthews' vocal, training off on the tonic, blends with a string quartet, which fades in emphasizing the major seventh. The subtle tension produced by combining two notes a half-step apart is finally dispelled by Andrew Shaw's high-flying soprano sax solo, which closes the tune. It's a small compositional miracle.

Not only did Matthews write and sing everything here, he also played guitar, trumpet, piano, harpsichord, and fluegelhorn, devised and charted the arrangements, conducted the players, and produced the whole thing. Among his assistants were multi-instrumental whiz Jason Falkner, younger brother Wes Matthews (who distinguishes himself with fiery lead guitar on "The Pleasant Kind"), and engineer/co-producer Tony Lash. The array of odd drum sounds that grace *Lateness* are mainly Lash's contribution; Matthews claims they were inspired by the work of Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake. You can hear that influence in the scrapyard percussion ambience of "Pair of Cherry," for which Lash detuned the snare drum so much that its ultra-loose snare flaps pitifully at every hit. He also added subtle harshness to that track's drum sound by placing a small crash cymbal on top of the bass drum. "For some reason, it didn't fall off," Matthews says.

An interesting note about the smooth, fluegel-



horn-graced leadoff single, "My Morning Parade": It was the last song added to the album, and because it was recorded so late in the game, an instrumental melody line that Matthews had intended to be played by a cello had to be given to brother Wes to play on guitar. Why? No money left; the recording budget had been stretched beyond its max. But considering that it paid for 35 days of studio time and 26 musicians, Matthews isn't complaining.

The result of all this effort is perhaps the most elegant, well-crafted and melodious pop record you'll hear this year. The Beatles, Beach Boys, Love, and Nick Drake references are fairly obvious. But the most striking affinity, especially on highly orchestrated numbers like "To Clear the Air" and "Gilded Cages," is to another album of moody compositions sung in a husky voice and enhanced by complex string and brass arrangements: David Sylvian's 1987 masterpiece *Secrets of the Beehive*. Which, not surprisingly, Matthews calls "one of my top five favorite albums of all time." Well done.—***Mac Randall***

Wyclef Jean

Presents The Carnival featuring Refugee Allstars (Ruffhouse/Columbia)

The Fugees bust-through record *The Score* was smart enough—and the group's reworking of Roberta Flack's hit "Killing Me Softly" was infectious enough—that member Wyclef Jean, on this first solo album outing, would be well within his rights to simply ride out the Fugees vibe (say, with his own deep-groove pass at another soulful Seventies chestnut). But Wyclef clearly isn't just looking to busy himself with a side project. On *Carnival* he's put together a worthy main attraction—a dizzying, invigorating midway of thick rhythms, canny arrangements, comic set-pieces, and a winning blend of song styles from all over the Western Hemisphere.

The singer has talked of using the record to celebrate the varied music he absorbed during his Haitian childhood, and nearly every track mixes some sounds of tradition with thoroughly modern hip-hop sonics. The inspired results include four tunes based on Haitian radio hits, which top off rich, easygoing dance beats with some fine French/Creole rapping. Latin songstress Celia Cruz helps pump the mariachi favorite "Guantanamera" into a powerful piece of cross-cultural hip-hop, and the Neville Brothers turn "Mona Lisa" into the sweetest of slow jams. When Wyclef does sample a bit of the Seventies, he turns somewhat improbably to the Bee Gees, and coaxes "Stayin' Alive" into the triumphant shout-out "We Trying to Stay Alive."

Wyclef has allowed himself a remarkably broad frame of musical reference here, and makes excellent—sometimes startling—use of it. "Gone 'Til November" achieves added drama via the Wyclef-conducted New York Philharmonic, and "Apocalypse" soars on the kind of baroque soprano scatting one usually hears only on *Emmanuelle* soundtracks. There's a bit of humorous high-concept to the presentation: Between tracks, Wyclef is being charged by the U.S. government with being a player and a "bad influence," and he pokes fun at a few rap conventions. But the real through-line here has *Carnival* unfolding as a kind of groove travelog. When so much of hip-hop still remains stubbornly focused on make-believe tales of the 'hood, Wyclef demonstrates that the music is better off when it gets out and sees the world.—***Chuck Crisafulli***

Photek

Modus Operandi (Astralwerks)

Luke Vibert

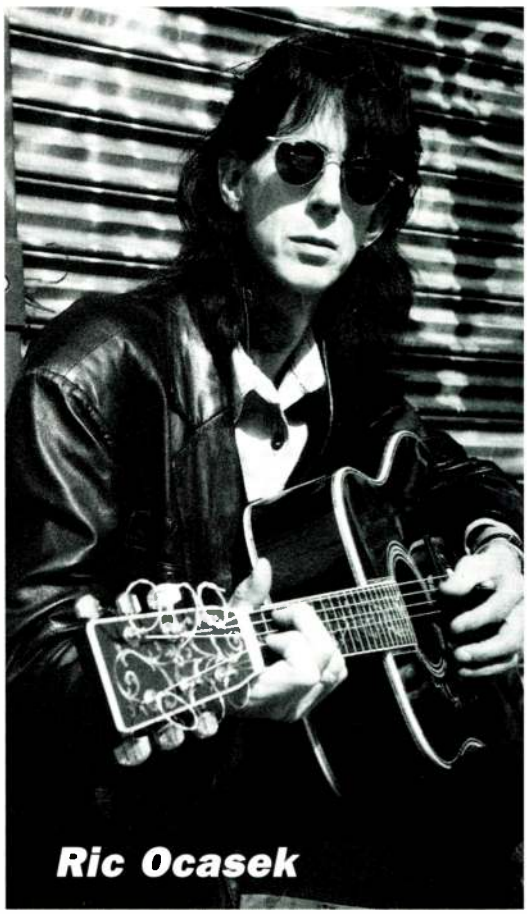
Big Soup (Mo Wax/ffrr)

If you regularly veg out to MTV's *AMP*, you may think the pulse-pounding sounds of electronica are the exclusive domain of the Chemical Brothers, Orbital, and Future Sound Of London. While these artists get the video action, they are simply the most popular players surging from a vibrant underground scene. But while Photek (Rupert Parkes) and Luke Vibert (a.k.a. Plug, Wagonchrist) make drum-and-bass music as distinctive as any of electro's heavy-hitters, these adventurous records will probably cement their reputations as shadowy figures making tracks in their bedrooms rather than visible DJ stars.

Inspired by martial arts and ominous surveillance techniques, *Modus Operandi* is an exhilarating ride through strange territory. Like the nerve-wracking menace of the original *Alien*, Photek's eerie expanses imply claustrophobia and technology gone mad. Constructing loops from drum machines and samples (*e.g.* Elvin Jones, Mark Mondesir), Photek's rhythms jerk spasmodically, while fragmented echoes and gripping noises zoom overhead like an invading army. Photek's vision is clear and cold, and would make George Orwell proud.

Where Photek plays sinister futurist, Vibert is all laughs. As Plug, he wrapped his trippy d'n'b beats in orchestral strings and Sixties sci-fi samples, as if NASA had lost control of a moon mission to stoned slackers in band class. At the beginning of *Big Soup*, a silly robotic voice announces, "Good evenings citizens of earth," preparing us for a record of dopey beats and squirming, sonic mayhem. Vibert seems fascinated by the sound of one hand twiddling a knob, as if goofy noises and freaky atmospheres alone make listenable music. While Vibert does conjure some gorgeous moods, like De La Soul jamming with Nelson Riddle, too many tunes float away in a smoky cloud.

Electronica's vast subgenres are rife with the discovery of newfound land. These two records hint at the deluge to come.—***Ken Micallef***



chuck's cuts

by charles m. young

The Blues Brothers

Live From Chicago's House of Blues (House of Blues)

If you're being entertained by a simulacrum, are you having fun or a simulated, idealized imitation of fun that isn't really fun? Whichever, I retain a certain affection (virtual affection?) for the Blues Brothers on the grounds that their exuberance does capture something essential about the soul revues of the Sixties from which they draw their inspiration. And if you're listening to musicians who actually played in the great soul revues of the Sixties, are you listening to an authentic simulacrum? Whatever, the Blues Brothers have purchased a credibility in their backup band that Sha Na Na lacked. And the authentic musicians—Steve Cropper, Duck Dunn, Lonnie Brooks, Charlie Musselwhite, Syl Johnson, Sam Moore, among others—respond with authentic enthusiasm. Chops and enthusiasm: What else matters? All rock & roll artists under the age of 35 could learn something important from Dan Aykroyd's emceeing. Wish they had let "Green Onions" go on for ten minutes. Hope the movie isn't stupid.

Joe Louis Walker

Great Guitars (Verve/Gitanes)

Like the Blues Brothers, he's enthusiastic. Unlike the Blues Brothers, he can sing as well as shout. He can also play electric blues solos within the form and without the clichés, which is really ear-grabbing. The concept of the album—uniting Walker with other ace guitarists like Scotty Moore, Ike Turner, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Bonnie Raitt, Otis Rush, Buddy Guy—is itself sort of a cliché, but in this case it works as they all derive genuine inspiration from each other. I found myself thinking several times per song: "Wow, where did that note come from?"

Tony Furtado

Roll My Blues Away (Rounder)

A cross between acoustic blues and new age, which you shouldn't dismiss unless you've heard it. The new age gives the blues some fresh moves and forces the mysticism up front. The blues gives the new age direction and energy. No vocals to distract your imagination. Blues banjo is especially evocative. "The Ghost of Blind Willie Johnson" actually sounds like the ghost of Blind Willie Johnson. I pronounce this something new under the sun.

Early American Women Blues Singers

I Can't Be Satisfied: Vol. 1—Country Vol. 2—Town (Yazoo/Shanachie)

Maybe all contemporary blues is a simulacrum. Can new men sing the blues? Listening to these ancient women, I have exactly seven thoughts: (1) digital technology is amazing at eliminating surface noise; (2) these songs have a vitality in the lyrics, an urge to say something, that has disappeared almost completely in modern blues, where the emphasis has shifted so much to instrumental prowess; (3) Delta blues women enunciated more clearly than their male counterparts—why?; (4) men are dirt; (5) the overwhelming experience of falling in love with an idealized other who will solve all problems, which is the staple of contemporary pop, doesn't interest these women; (6) what they do sing about is love and betrayal, and they are thus closer to L7 than Vanessa Williams in attitude; (7) I can be satisfied with titles like "Papa's Got Your Bath Water On."

Lurrie Bell

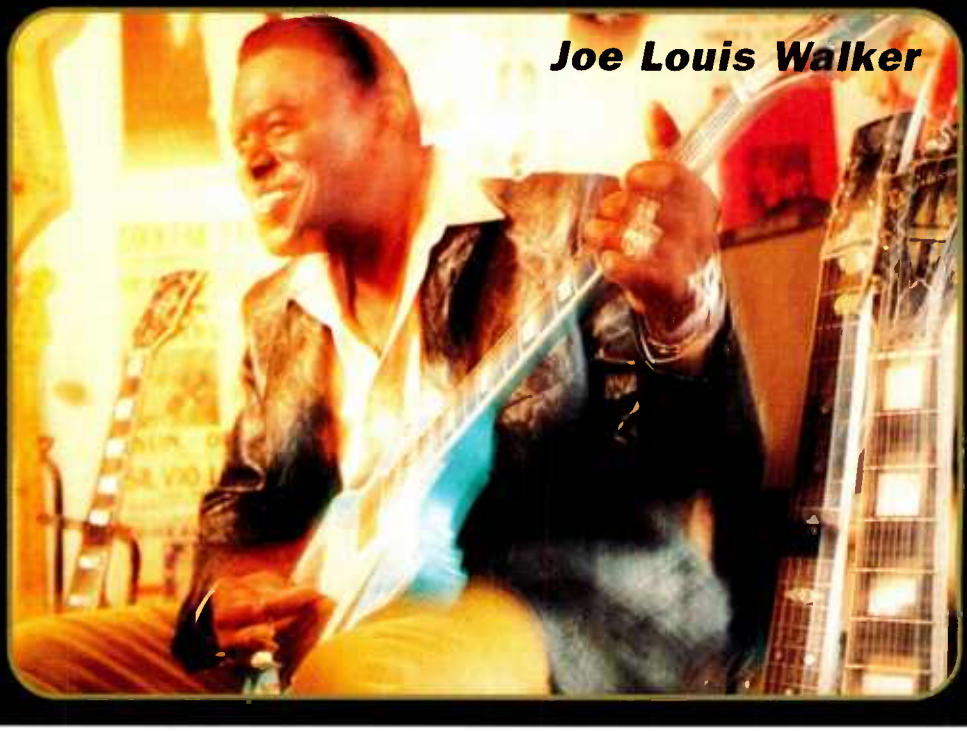
700 Blues (Delmark)

In the clean and distinct electric tradition of B. B. King. Especially convincing when exploring the realms of despair and paranoia. Which is not to say he doesn't convince when he just wants to swing on something like Jimmy Reed's "Found Love." Long solos justify themselves with imagination that's all in the neck, there being no distortion or special effects to hide behind. Is third-generation Chicago bluesman (son of Carey Bell, grandson of Lovie Lee), so he's born to it, but you can hear the dues he's paid playing in the Sons of Blues and supporting Koko Taylor. So it's not nature vs. nurture, it's nature and nurture.

Paul Geremia

Live From Uncle Sam's Backyard (Red House)

In the absence of Blind Willie McTell, the world needs more humans who can properly pluck a twelve-string acoustic. Geremia isn't the only human who can do so, but he is one of the elite few. Appropriately live from Minneapolis, which has provided a sympathetic home for acoustic blues (Koerner, Ray & Glover) since the early Sixties, Geremia is convincing when covering McTell, Robert Johnson, Skip James, and his own intelligent self. I like his irreverent leftie politics in the title song, and I like his analysis of the damn noise that now afflicts business establishments specializing in the sale of alcohol in "My Kinda Place." Bars are for music, and bars are for talking, and they aren't for video games and excruciatingly dull sporting events during the regular season. If you can't have community in a bar, where are you going to find it? Bars televising sporting events are a simulacrum of community.



Merri Cyr

Ric Ocasek

Troublizing (Columbia)

Timing is everything, and few records released so far this summer sound more cheap-thrill refreshing than *Troublizing*, the kitschy, unexpected comeback from ex-Cars leader Ric Ocasek. For that, credit the current plethora of cheesy, new wave-inspired artists coming of age, the retro-minded co-production and scrappy guitar work of longtime Cars enthusiast Billy Corgan, and the playful, tongue-in-cheek outlook of Ocasek himself, who's not afraid to camp up his skinny-tied past.

Ocasek works the synth-pop schtick with such lowbrow glee here, it borders on Vegas, even dinner theater. Cars fans will flip for all the corny synthesizer lines blipping over this project like errant UFOs; it's all dumb, corny fun, and unapologetically so. Helicopter-aloof, Ocasek whup-whups in that peculiar sucker-punched-librarian voice of his (so geeky it could give that buck-toothed *Simpsons* scientist a run for his nerdling money), and only tumbles to the ground a couple of times, notably on the heavy-handed, look-at-me-I'm-metaphysical title track. Conversely, the opening "The Next Right Moment" grabs you with an uppity riff that's pure Elliot Easton and a whee-hawed keyboard pattern that rivals Greg Hawkes', circa the underrated *Panorama*. A few minor adjustments in recording quality, and the track could peacefully coexist on *Candy-O* or *Shake It Up*.

Negative thinkers might dismiss Ocasek's fortuitous resurrection as carpetbagging, but hey, this is his patented sound—why shouldn't he return to reclaim it? "It's the right time for a change," he intones in the chorus to "Crashland Consequence." Luckily, that isn't always the case. Ocasek is doing just fine as he is, thanks. Now a new generation can discover his twisted genius.—***Tom Lanham***

Various Artists

The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers—A Tribute (Egyptian/Columbia)

The Inner Flame (Atlantic)

Amid the endless parade of bad tribute albums, here are two good ones, celebrating musicians' favorites who deserve more notice from the general public. Despite a few clinkers, both contain enough cool sounds to please folks with a yen for old-fashioned passion rather than groovy trends.

The Singing Brakeman, a.k.a. the Blue Yodeler, a.k.a. the Father of Country Music, Jimmie Rodgers might seem in scant need of attention, but his recordings have been neglected over the years by RCA (though Rounder issued the entire canon a while back). Anyway, his heirs are out in force for the first release on Bob Dylan's new label. While a few artists, including Willie Nelson and Mary Chapin Carpenter, are too smooth to have much impact, others echo the bristling emotions of Rodgers' own work. Steve Earle's "In the Jailhouse Now" is a rollicking garage delight, and Iris Dement's poignant version of "Hobo Bill's Last Ride" achieves a profound sadness. Hooray also for Dave Ball's gorgeous "Miss the Mississippi and You," John Mellencamp's nasty "Gambling Bar Room Blues," Bono's haunting "Dreaming with Tears in My Eyes," and Aaron Neville's weepy "Why Should I Be Lonely." (Not surprisingly, he's the best at mimicking that blue yodel.) Elsewhere, the limitations of a superstar assemblage emerge: Dylan's wheezy yet genial "My Blue Eyed Jane" and Van Morrison's funky "Mule Skinner Blues" are so stamped with the performer's identity that little of Rodgers survives.

The Inner Flame spotlights Czechoslovakian-born Rainer Ptacek—in other words, who? A cohort of Robert Plant, who spearheaded the project along with Giant Sand's Howe Gelb, Ptacek would merit acclaim solely for the stinging dobro licks he contributes to a handful of the album's fourteen tracks. He's also a canny writer of brooding, late-night tunes that ponder human fallibility with wry bemusement. Some of the players on this diverse roster, which ranges from Emmylou Harris to Jonathan Richman to Evan Dando, emit terminally mournful vibes, casting Ptacek as a one-note composer. Others, fortunately, take a livelier tack: "Where's That At" finds Vic and Tina Chesnutt on a delightfully loose ramble, and PJ Harvey flirts with chaos on the awesome "Losin' Ground." Besides featuring one of Plant's spookiest vocals ever, "Rude World" proves Jimmy Page can still create exciting noise when motivated, while Buffalo Tom's Bill Janovitz closes the show in a cacophonous blaze of glory with the ragged "Powder Keg." *The Inner Flame* offers tantalizing glimpses of Rainer Ptacek. Now it's time we get to hear the man himself.

—Jon Young

Pal Shazar

Woman Under the Influence (Shiffaroe)

Pal Shazar's thin, nasal voice is not a great instrument, but she possesses one virtue that makes her an exceptional vocalist, and that is her utter lack of pretense. It has become so common for popular singers to inflate and oversell their emotions that some might find it a bit unsettling to listen to a woman addressing her neuroses without seeming like she's having a nervous breakdown. But that's just what Shazar does on this delightful album.

It helps that Shazar is equally smart and honest as a writer: The well-crafted songs on *Under the Influence* are rife with simple profundity and gentle pathos. Lean, grainy textures and minimalist production values are tailored to Shazar's vocals, so that her wry wit and wisdom is neither bludgeoned nor buried. On the moody romance ballad "Requiem," she sounds at once playful, paranoid, and passive/aggressive—in other words, like a partner in a real-life relationship. The shimmering "Don't Leave Me" is a more earnest, uncomplicated plea for tenderness.

Like a lot of clever lyricists, Shazar occasionally veers toward the sentimental. "Flowers need soil/Without the sun, they'll surely spoil," she sings on the catchy, minor-chord-driven "Look at the Sky." It's a cliché, and a rather goofy one at that, but Shazar's unabashed, matter-of-fact delivery distills it to a kernel of undeniable truth. For all her verbal adroitness, Shazar rarely reduces life's foibles into fodder for kitsch.

—Elysa Gardner

Blake Morgan

Anger's Candy (N2K Encoded Music)

He used to be a classical piano prodigy, but you wouldn't know it from Blake Morgan's distinctly electric guitar-oriented (and loud) debut. Lenny Kravitz's guest appearance on one track gives you a hint of what to expect, but to be honest, Blake and Lenny aren't all that similar. They do share a love of and talent for classic pop-rock songwriting forms, but Morgan chooses not to adopt the self-consciously retro sonic approach that Kravitz has. Instead, he leans toward a more modern, crunchy, arena-friendly sound—a bit strident at times, but more often endearing. At its best, this music suggests a neo-Matthew Sweet, with a stronger voice and a harder edge. Worth investigating.

—Mac Randall

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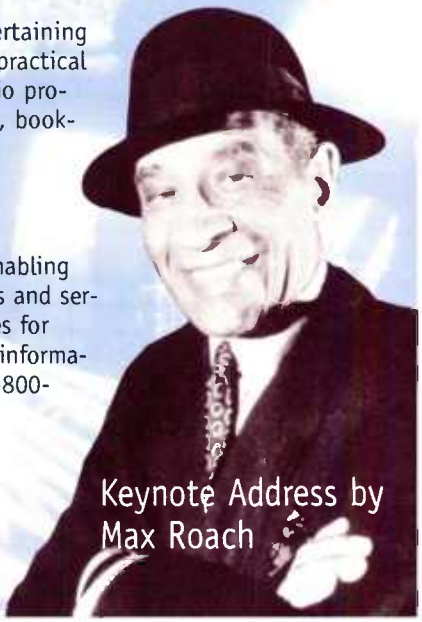

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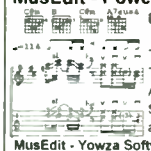
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AUDIO-TECHNICA 1221 Commerce Dr., Stow, OH 44224, (216) 686-2600: ATM89R, **64**; microphone, **75**

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HOHNER 10223 Sycamore Dr., Ashland, VA 23005, (804) 550-2700: harmonicas, **24**

HOSHINO/IBANEZ
1726 Winchester Rd., Bensalem, PA 19020-0086, (800) 669-8262: Tube Screamer, **48**; Blazer BL1025, **64**; BP5 Bass Compressor, **81**

KORG 316 S Service Rd., Melville, NY 11747-3201, (516) 333-9100: N364 Workstation, **64**; MR-1, **75**

KURZWEILL c/o YOUNG CHANG AMERICA
13336 Alondra Blvd., Cerritos, CA 90703-2245, (310) 926-3200

MACKIE DESIGNS 16220 Wood-Red Rd. NE, Woodinville, WA 98072, (800) 258-6883: mixer, **75**

MARK OF THE UNICORN
1280 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138, (617) 576-2760: Digital Performer, **68**

MESA ENGINEERING
1317 Ross St., Petaluma, CA 94954, (707) 778-6565: amplifier, **25**

NEUMANN USA
6 Vista Drive, Old Lyme, CT 06371, (203) 434-5220: SM 50, **86**

OPCODE 3950 Fabian Way, Palo Alto, CA 94303, (415) 856-3333: Studio Vision, **68**

PEAVEY ELECTRONICS
711 A St., Meridian, MS 39301, (601) 483-5365: Axcelerator guitar, Classic 50 amp, **48**

PRESONUS AUDIO ELECTRONICS
501 Government Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, (800)750-0323: Blue Max, **82**

ROLAND 7200 Dominion Circle, Los Angeles, CA 90040, (213) 685-5141: D-50, JV-880, **75**

SADOWSKY GUITARS 1600 Broadway, #1000, New York, NY 10019, (212) 586-3960: 5-string bass, **8**

SHURE BROTHERS
222 Hartrey Ave., Evanston, IL 60202, (800) 257-4873: Green Bullet mic, SM58, **25**

STEINBERG/JONES
17700 Raymer St., Ste. 1001, Northridge, CA 91325, (818) 993-4091: Cubase 3.0, **22 & 68**

TRACE ELLIOTT
P.O. Box 507, Bloomfield, CT 06002-0507, (800) 647-2244: SMX Dual Compressor, **82**

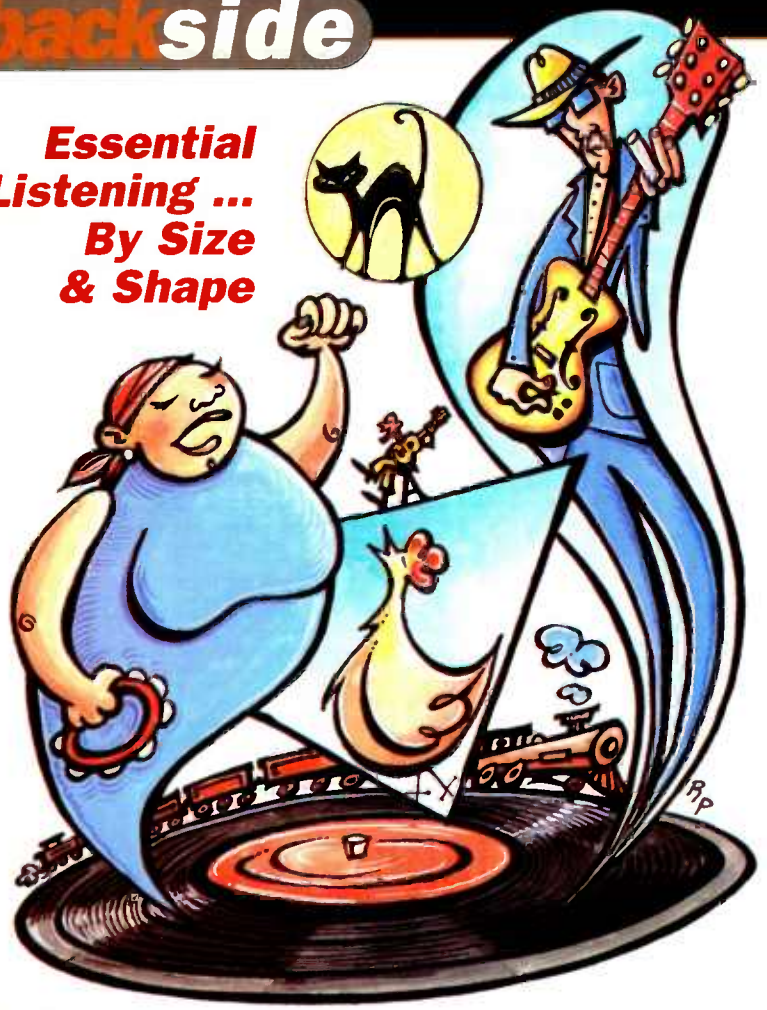
VICTORIA AMP CO.
1504 Newman Ct., Naperville, IL 60564-4132, (630) 369-3527: Double Deluxe amp, **63**

VOX
316 S. Service Rd., Melville, NY 11747-3201, (516)333-9100: Wah Wah pedal, **48**

YAMAHA
6600 Orangethrope Blvd., Buena Park, CA 90622, (714) 522-9011: mixer, **75**

ad index

Essential Listening ... By Size & Shape



Directory Assistance

Okay, now that you've read all about the blues in this issue, you're ready to expand (or begin) your blues record collection. Since the teenage clerk in the Marilyn Manson shirt at your local store probably won't be much help, I've put together a few of my own recommendations. There's just one catch: Rather than list them in the boring, predictable, old-fashioned way (regions, instruments, etc.), I give them to you now by ... nickname.

Anatomical Wonders

▶ ***Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown.*** A multitalented Texan, still burnin' up the road. Check out his early recordings, available now on *The Original Peacock Recordings* (Rounder).

▶ ***Professor Longhair.*** Dr. John, the Nevilles, Fats Domino: They all go back to 'Fess and his piano genius. Drop the bucks and get *'Fess: The Professor Longhair Anthology* (Rhino).

▶ ***Leadbelly.*** This superb blues and folk singer survived a couple of long stretches in prison, where he wrote "Midnite Special" and "Goodnight, Irene." The best place to start is *Leadbelly Sings Folk Songs* (Smithsonian).

Larger Than Life

▶ ***Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup.*** This guitarist and singer was a major influence on Elvis and countless others. His recording of "That's All Right, Mama" was the original. A good collection is *That's All Right Mama* (RCA).

▶ ***Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton.*** Another big influence on Elvis, she was also Janis Joplin's idol. A great singer and harp player, she sang the original version of "Hound Dog," wore men's clothes, and took no shit from nobody. Check out *Big Mama Thornton: Hound Dog* (MCA).

▶ ***Big Joe Turner.*** Blues shouter and R&B legend, with a career that spanned five decades. He sang almost everything in the key of C—and sang the hell out of it. Get *Big, Bad & Blue* (Rhino).

H.O. Scale

▶ ***Little Walter.*** The man who revolutionized blues harmonica. If you're a fan of John Popper, Charlie Musselwhite, or John Mayall, now's the time to meet Marion "Little Walter" Jacobs. One good collection is *His Best* (MCA).

▶ ***Little Willie John.*** One of the most intense singers ever recorded, he made most of his great blues and ballad records before the age of 25, including the original version of "Fever." Pick up on *Fever: The Best of Little Willie John* (Rhino).

Slimfest

▶ ***Guitar Slim.*** In the early Fifties Slim was playing a red guitar, wearing a red suit, driving a red ragtop Caddy, and was accompanied by female "valets" dressed in red. Can you say "Amen"? If you're a fan of Stevie Ray or Clapton, you *must* buy *Sufferin' Mind* (Specialty).

▶ ***Slim Harpo.*** The dean of Louisiana swamp blues, this Slim told the world that his itch needed scratchin'. A big influence on Mick Jagger. Listen to *Hip Shakin'* (Excello).

▶ ***Sunnyland Slim.*** The last of the great barrelhouse piano players. He could "holler loud, and draw a crowd." Look for *Sunnyland Train* (EVI).

Raining Champs

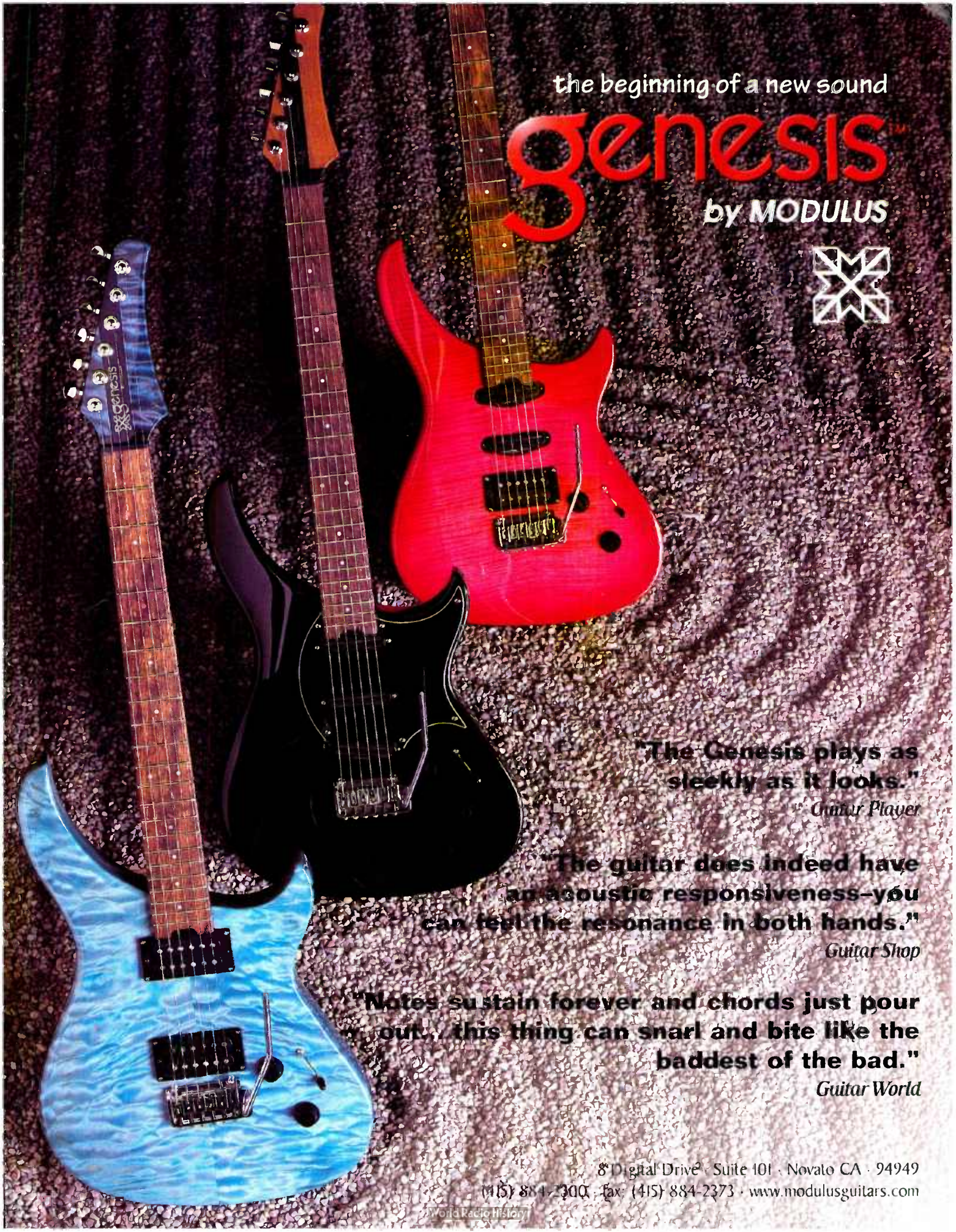
▶ ***Lightnin' Hopkins.*** A one-man virtual reality theater of pain and suffering, with a gift for brilliant lyrics and haunting melodies. He did it all with one guitar and three chords. Discover his mojo power on *Mojo Hand* (Rhino).

▶ ***Muddy Waters.*** It gets no better than this. Skip dinner and buy *His Best* (MCA). It's essential!

Each of these artists paid enormous dues, but at least they didn't have to worry about the "correctness" of their nicknames (as they might in today's socio-sensitive climate). I don't know about you, but I'm glad I don't have to ask that clerk for a copy of "Good Golly Ms. Molly" by Size-Challenged Richard.

—Rev. Billy C. Wirtz

Robert Piersanti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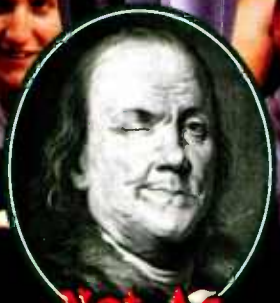

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