

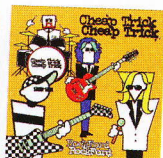
STEVE ALBINI

by Patrick Berkery

IT'S THE DRUMMER, NOT THE DRUMS. SO SAYS THE MAN RESPONSIBLE FOR SONICALLY CAPTURING NIRVANA, CHEAP TRICK, THE PIXIES, THE STOOGES, AND PAGE & PLANT.

Though he doesn't view his role in the studio as that of a producer and doesn't want credit for being one ("Recorded by..." will do), Steve Albini probably has as much or more to

then delaying those mics slightly to closely mimic the slap-back echo swirling in the room the drums are played in. It's that dark, room-y "thwack" that's been heard on Nirvana's *In*



do with how a band sounds on record than the typical producer who critiques demos, demands rewrites, suggests changes to a drummer's part, and so on.

Albini's methods, whether he's tracking rock royalty like Jimmy Page and Robert Plant or a scruffy indie band like the Ponys, are relatively simple: Mike things up, get sounds, put a performance on tape.

What ends up committed to tape is pretty identifiable—particularly the drum sound Albini gets by deploying ambient microphones and

Utero, the Pixies' *Surfer Rosa*, and countless other albums over the past twenty-odd years.

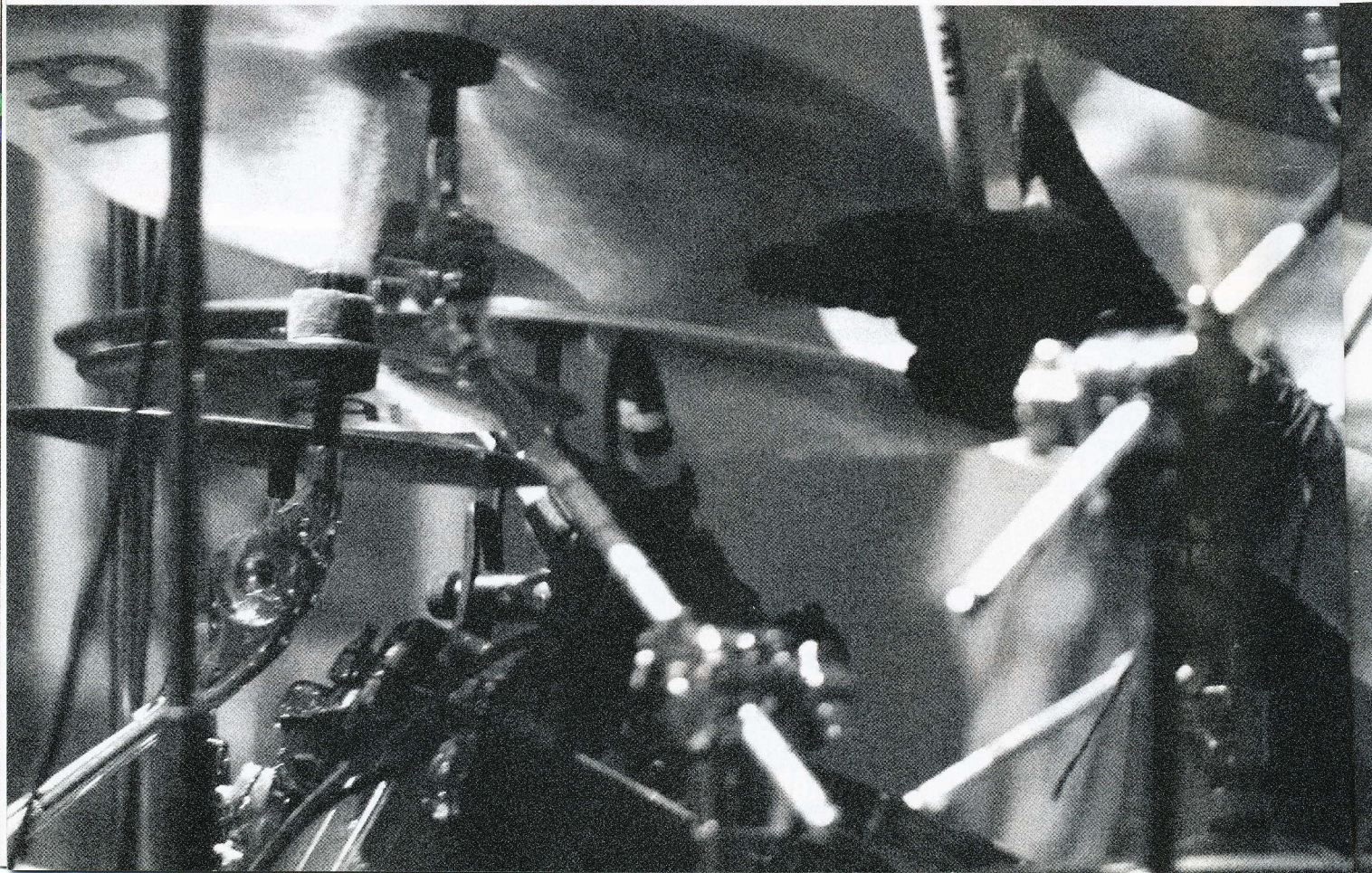
Albini does smaller drum sounds too, and quite well. For proof check out Nina Nastasia's 2006 album, *On Leaving*, which features the drumming of Jim White (the Dirty Three, Nick Cave, Cat Power) and Jay Bellerose (Robert Plant and Allison Krauss, Beck, T-Bone Burnett).

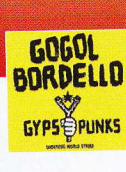
Sure, Albini is pretty particular about which microphones he records drums with: Neumanns, mostly, for room and ambience; Josephson E22 top and bottom pairs on toms; and an assortment



of tube condenser mics on the snare. But if a drummer wants to track using, say, a piccolo snare with a welshed head, a 26" kick, and toy cymbals, Albini's fine with it.

"Whatever somebody wants to do, the choice a drummer makes for a drumkit, I think I'm open to any of it," he says. "And I don't even particularly care if it sounds bad. If it sounds bad





and that's an emblem of his style, then it doesn't sound bad, actually."

MD: You rarely get involved in the composition of a drummer's kit, correct?

Steve: It's none of my business what a drummer wants to play with. I'm not going to tell him what hi-hats to use. He should do what he wants. I've had some people use 16" crash cymbals for hi-hats, and I've had people use little saucer-size cymbals for hi-hats. Whatever works, you know?

I did a record with the Stooges, and Scott [Asheton] had been using a sort of toy drumkit during rehearsals. It had little tiny cymbals. He had stacked a few of them up to get a trashier sound. So the cymbals he used for the album were conventional ones, but with little tiny cymbals stacked on top of them. And he made a believer out of me. It sounded kind of odd and piercing at times, but it also had a very distinctive sound, like a half-open hi-hat. He owned it.

MD: Then you probably wouldn't insist a drummer track with a fresh snare head that's been cranked up overnight and dropped back down to midrange tuning in the morning.

Steve: No. People are idiots about a lot of stuff. It doesn't make that much difference. The main thing is that whoever's playing the drums should be able to do the job effectively, right? The less crap I put in his way, the better.

MD: Are there certain characteristics that you typ-

ically look for in a drummer?

Steve: When I think of a great drummer, I don't think of dudes who can play super-flashy stuff. I think of guys that, without drawing attention to themselves, are probably the most important element of the band. And there are very few drummers that can be put into any circumstance and still maintain that level of importance. Glenn Kotche from Wilco is one. He is a phenomenal percussionist. He has a really complex setup, but he doesn't use it more than he needs to.

Jim White, he's a percussionist more than strictly a drummer. He plays in a very expressive, improvisational, fluid style, but I've never heard him sound bad—any lineup, any setting. And Jay Bellerose is a phenomenal drummer. He's one of those guys that's a shadow figure, and he's a super-sweet guy to work with. Really takes the music to heart, knows what matters and what doesn't matter, doesn't get hung up on getting credit for stuff. He just wants it to be awesome.

MD: On records like *In Utero*, you've achieved a cavernous room sound, and it seems like the microphones and the room have as much to do with that sound as the intensity with which the drummer is playing.

Steve: Right. Some drummers play quite softly, and they still manage to maintain the impression of power. They do that by varying their dynamics. Bun E. Carlos comes to mind. He has a fairly light touch, but the drums always sound great. He has

a way of milking the sound out of the drums without having to pound them.

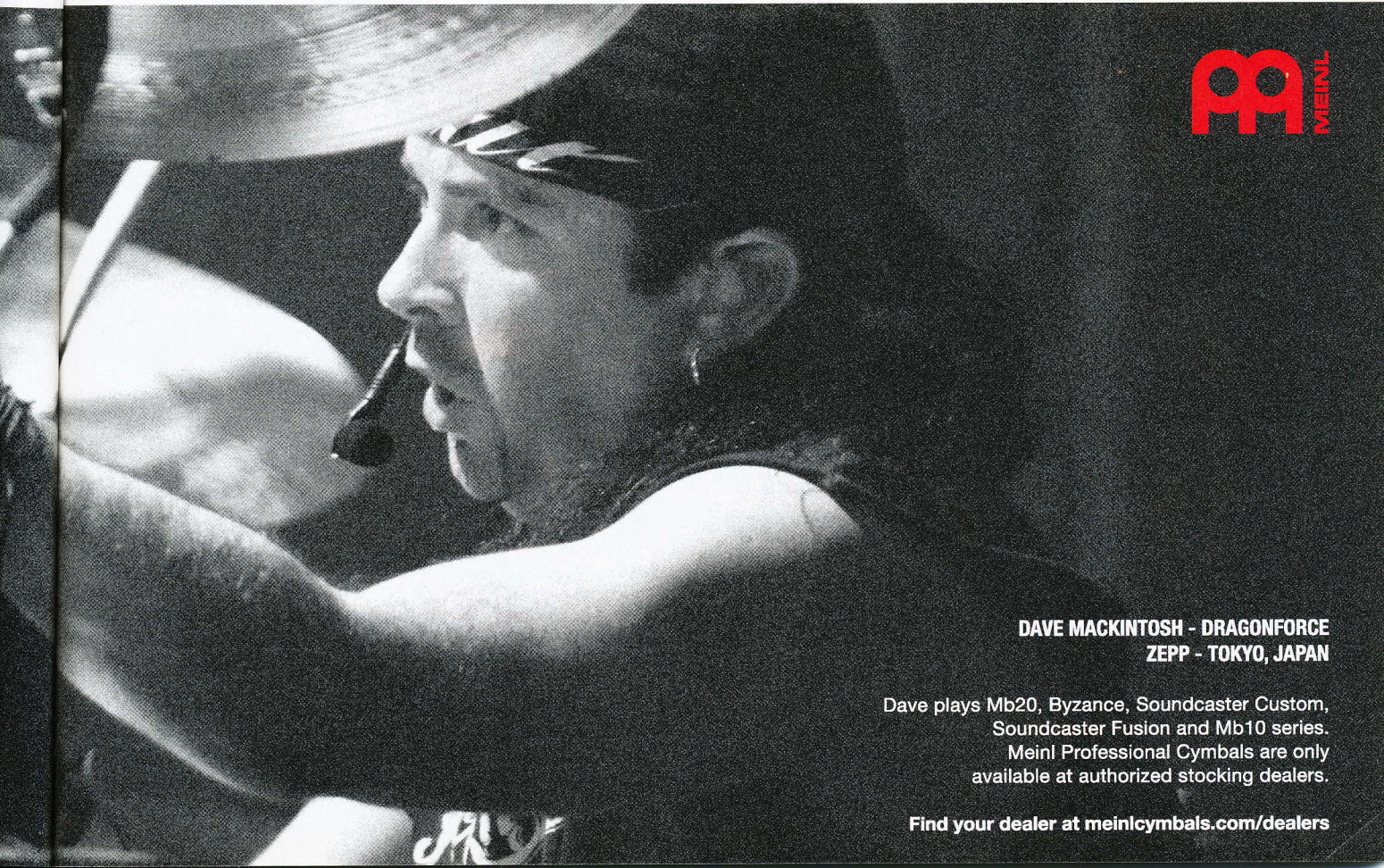
There are other drummers that hit super hard, and the drums sound great, like Rey Washam [Rapeman, Ministry, Scratch Acid]. His technique is as finely tuned as Bun E. Carlos's is. Dave Grohl beats the crap out of the drums, and they always sound great. He hit really hard, but his feel for the music was fantastic, and he was able to adjust his playing intensity on a subtle scale. As highly regarded as he is as a drummer, I think he's really underrated.

MD: That's well put. *In Utero* is one of the greatest drumming performances ever, and it's gotten a bit obscured because of the legacy of Nirvana and what he's gone on to do fronting Foo Fighters.

Steve: What I think is nice about it is he didn't do anything stock. His drumbeat seemed suited to each song. You notice distinctive flourishes in what he was doing, but you don't notice it instantly.

MD: Do you get a lot of requests from artists for that huge drum sound?

Steve: Twenty percent of the time the band wants a super-tight, super-dry sound; 20 percent of the time they want that super-boomy, deep, cavernous sound; 60 percent of the time they want something in between. I have no qualms about any part of that spectrum. It's just that with an awful lot of the records I've worked on, the drummer liked the ambient sound and wanted to feature it. I have no problem with that.



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