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BUTCH VIG

The pioneering platinum producer continues to explore new sonic landscapes

By Michael Gallant

WHEN BUTCH VIG HELPED CREATE NIRVANA'S 1991 masterpiece *Nevermind*, little did he know the project would fundamentally transform the rock world. Though the Grammy-winning, multiplatinum producer had been toiling behind the glass for nearly a decade, that iconic album marked the beginning of a singular career.

Following *Nevermind*, Vig helmed groundbreaking albums like *Gish* and *Siamese Dream* for Smashing Pumpkins, *Dirty* for Sonic Youth, and *Bricks Are Heavy* for L7. His resume includes Green Day's *21st Century Breakdown* and Foo Fighters' *Wasting Light*, as well as production and remix credits with U2, Korn, Nine Inch Nails and many more.

In the mid-1990s, Vig formed Garbage, ushering in a now-ubiquitous paradigm of dark, electronic-flavored pop-rock by producing, writing and playing drums for the group's self-titled debut. The album sold more than 4 million copies and landed two Grammy nods. The follow-up, *Version 2.0*—powered by hits "Push It" and "I Think I'm Paranoid"—also sold 4 million and garnered another pair of Grammy nominations.

"When the first Garbage record came out, it surprised people," says Vig. "Everyone expected this alternative grunge record, but we ended up with something that was more experimental-sounding pop." As the band's popularity grew, so did the sonic clones. "It's totally cool," he says. "I'm more flattered than not when I hear bands that sound like Garbage or Smashing Pumpkins or Nirvana."

Most recently, Vig released the self-titled debut of his new band, the Emperors of Wyoming, a project that reunites him with three friends—Phil Davis and brothers Frank and Peter Anderson—from his days growing up in Wisconsin. The rootsy, haunting album is a departure for Vig. "This was the first file-sharing record I've ever done," he says. "It was put together by throwing out ideas via text and email, and then we recorded our parts in our home studios." Speaking from his L.A. home, Vig discussed the project and more.

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What was your goal for the record?
We wanted to make a country, Americana-inspired album, because that's a lot of what we grew up listening to–Neil Young, Johnny Cash, the Band, Creedence Clearwater Revival. Also, we made a record that's pretty simple. We defaulted to the simple ways we often choose to play.

Did you produce it?
It was a co-production between the four of us. I give lots of credit to Frank Anderson, who was the multi-instrumentalist in the band and the keeper of the files. We would post everything to an FTP site, and then he would put the songs into a workable mode. We worked with a mix engineer, Alex Smolinski, who was able to get everything sounding cohesive. This was done over nearly two years. The difference in the drum and guitar sounds may have varied quite a bit, but when


Green Day

he mixed it he was able to make it sound like we were all playing in a room together.

Do you have a home studio?
It's just a funky bedroom with nice big windows and a pretty view. I have a small drum kit, four or five guitars, a small upright piano, and no console–I record everything organically into a Pro Tools setup. With this album, I would send my daughter off to school in the morning, open my email, see an acoustic guitar and rough vocal, load that file into my laptop–and go play a drum track in my pajamas. Maybe 20 minutes, then I'd upload the drum tracks and I was done. That's how we did the whole record. There was no pressure and, at the time, no label. When we started writing, we didn't even know we would put an album out. It all came from being a labor of love.

Describe your process with Green Day.
Working with Green Day was a long process. From preproduction to rehearsals to mixing and mastering took more than


Foo Fighters

a year. We rehearsed in some funky little studio in Newport Beach where the band was hanging for the summer, just jamming to work on arrangements. We recorded at Ocean Way in Hollywood–one of the best-sounding spaces I've ever worked in. We saved the sonic part for going into a big room, but for writing and preproduction, I don't need to be in a state-of-the-art studio–it's more about getting the ideas formed.

How about the Foo Fighters?
With the Foos, we did the opposite. They have an amazing studio in L.A., Studio 606, and we did all our rehearsals there. Then we recorded *Wasting Light* in Dave's garage, very guerrilla style. We wanted to capture a raw, scrappier sound and vibe, and tracked everything to analog tape.

Do you use tape often?
I've been recording primarily to Pro Tools for the last 10 to 15 years, but I mix to half-inch analog tape. I cut my teeth doing edits and punch-ins, and I love the sound of tape, but most young bands don't want to use it because you have to work harder. You can't fix things like you can in Pro Tools, so your performance has to be spot-on. Recording to tape is all about capturing a performance, and it was fun to do that with the Foos. They wanted to challenge each other to really play their asses off.

How do you get big guitar sounds?
There are a lot of things you can do in the studio using EQ, compression, and mic selection to get a particular guitar sound. A lot of times I'll use two or three microphones on a guitar cabinet to capture different frequencies and max out the tone. You have to be careful to make sure that the mics are all in phase so you don't get any weird anomalies.

How about drums?
A lot of it is getting the performances. It's one thing to tune a drum and choose the right microphone, but it's another to get the drummer to hit the drums the right way, or to pay attention to how he or she is playing. Whether a drummer is a light, medium or heavy hitter, you have to adjust input and compression levels. And as a producer and engineer, you have to understand how a band is playing overall and adapt to that in order to maximize their particular sound.

What about Dave Grohl's drums?
I haven't recorded Dave on drums since *Nevermind*, but he's a super rock-solid drummer in terms of timing and feel. Taylor Hawkins, the Foos' drummer, is an amazing player, and he hits just as hard as Dave. Taylor also has a lot of swing and can throw in lots of little grace notes. I'm working on a new Foo Fighters record, and one of the drummers we love is Ian Paice from Deep Purple. Ian would always play these crazy, fast buzz fills, and Taylor can play that way, too. I always try to sneak things like that into Foo Fighters songs when I can.

Anything about *Nevermind* that you haven't previously revealed?
The mics we used and all of the technical details are out there in books and online, but one thing I've been talking about recently is how simple the record actually is. Given


Nirvana

Jeff Fasano, Butch Vig, Steve Gullick, Foo Fighters; Paul Elledge, Smashing Pumpkins

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Smashing Pumpkins



Garbage

‘Looking back, people wanted to hear something different, and *Nevermind* started a spark. It changed music.’

the time and success of the record, Kurt had to kind of pooh-pooh it and say it was too slick–but the record is actually raw and simple. There were maybe eight mics on the drums, one or two electric guitars, bass and Kurt’s vocal, which was double-tracked here or there. That was it. We had 24 tracks but when we mixed we used 14 or 15. The record sounds big, but not like a Steely Dan project or *The Wall* by Pink Floyd. The songs were good, and it’s just a primal rock record, so I think that’s why it still stands up well. There wasn’t a lot of trickery going on in the recording or mixing process.

Have a clue that record would blow up?
No. I knew it was a great record when we finished it, but then people started calling and saying that it was incredible. I didn’t see that coming at all. At the time, radio was dominated by Madonna, Michael Jackson and C+C Music Factory. Looking back, people wanted to hear something different, and *Nevermind* started a spark. It changed music.

What’s it like working on remixes?
I’m lucky that I’ve been able to work as a producer and engineer, but I also have Garbage where I’m a musician and songwriter. They’re all different hats that I wear. When I’m producing a band, it’s my job to help them reach *their* vision and *their* songs. I have to be objective, and be a motivator, a facilitator, and sometimes a therapist to help get the best out of them. In Garbage and the Emperors of Wyoming, I’m a songwriter and musician, and let that live at the forefront of the experience. Remixing is quite different because it’s a combination of the two.

What do you look for in bands?
There needs to be something exciting in the music, but I also want there to be camaraderie, and I want to know we’re on the same page. I don’t want to go into the studio and have shouting matches every day trying to convince them to do something. Thankfully, I’ve only had to make a few records like that. I’m pretty picky–I meet with bands first and see if the vibe is right. I have to go through that process before I say yes to working with someone.

Advice for aspiring producers?
It’s important for a producer to understand where the artist is going and then help him or her reach that vision. Figure out the strengths of a band and pull them out. Hopefully, in that process, you’ll also pull something out that sounds cool and unique.

ESSENTIAL VIG

Here are just a few albums that showcase Butch Vig’s production prowess.

The Emperors of Wyoming, *The Emperors of Wyoming* (2012)
Foo Fighters, *Wasting Light* (2011)
Goo Goo Dolls, *Something for the Rest of Us* (2010)
Green Day, *21st Century Breakdown* (2009)
AFI, *Sing the Sorrow* (2003)
Garbage, *Garbage* (1995)
Smashing Pumpkins, *Siamese Dream* (1993)
Nirvana, *Nevermind* (1991)

