Different Strokes

by Steve Harvey

BERLIN, GERMANY—In 2001, a year in which Staind, Incubus and Nickelback dominated the modern rock charts, the release of Is This It by the Strokes sparked a revolution, especially in the U.K., heralding a new era of lo-fi, guitar-based garage bands. Critically acclaimed at the time, the band's debut full-length record, produced by Gordon Raphael, was recently voted into the top spot in British music journal NME and placed #2 in Rolling Stone magazine in their respective end-of-the-decade retrospectives.

Looking back, Raphael, now residing in Berlin, Germany, says, “I like to think [the album] was the sound of the joy of young guys in a band, friends who have been growing up together, playing music at the same time in the same room. Let’s just play music and see if that can be enough of a joy for people to check it out.”

The album, 11 songs totaling 37 minutes, had quite an impact. “At the time it hit, it really affected a lot of people, especially young people, who had not grown up with that sound,” Raphael recalls. “They'd grown up with a much more manufactured, corporate sound. Suddenly there’s this liberating noise.”

Plenty has been written, both at the time and since, about the sessions, which took place in Raphael’s studio using less than a dozen tracks of Pro Tools, a few API mic pres and an Avalon 737. One of the most striking aspects of the album was the rough-edged vocal sound, singer and principal songwriter Julian Casablancas liked to sing through a guitar practice amp, which Raphael faithfully captured using a Neumann TLM 103 mic. According to Raphael in an interview at the time of the album’s release, Casablancas knew the sound he wanted, telling the producer, “We want to sound like a band from the past that took a time-trip into the future to make their record.”

With the sonic signature of the band almost diametrically opposed to the majority of the songs on the radio at the time, it’s not surprising that a representative for the band’s U.S. label, RCA, was taken aback when he first heard a completed track. “When I played the freshly recorded version of ‘New York City Cops,’ James Endicott, the man from Rough Trade [the label that signed the Strokes in the U.K.], threw his hat into the air. The man from RCA heard the same song and had an emergency meeting with the band,” reports Raphael. “He said, ‘We’ve got to get a different producer. Nobody will relate to this sound.’” (That track was left off the U.S. album version, released in October, due to the events of September 11.)

Raphael continues, “He gave the same speech when we mastered the first single, ‘Hard To Explain.’ He stood up, with the owner of the mastering lab by his side, and said, ‘Guys, this is such an unprofessional sound, this is going to do nothing for you. You’ve got to reconsider!’ I was hurt. It surprised me that this little thing I made in my basement on 11 inputs of Pro Tools sounded good at Sterling Sound. It sounded exactly like we wanted it to. So it was a shock.”

Raphael and the band worked together on a second album, Room On Fire, before the producer, who is originally from Seattle, relocated from New York to London. “I brought all my synthesizers and guitars to England. I started buying gear at Funky Monkey, a lot of things like guitars, and they all sound like a record after one minute of knob turning. When they hear that sound, they all sing better, too,” he observes.

“The other secret is a few API preamps for things like guitars, and an Avalon 737, which is a magnificent, multi-purpose machine. I have a couple of Universal Audio pieces, and some Telefunkeners, and things like that.”

After four years in London Raphael again moved eastward, this time to Berlin, where he has been for the past five years. “I have a carbon copy of that studio here in Berlin, and I’m doing a lot of work here. Almost 99 percent of my jobs come from people finding me on my Gordon Raphael Myspace page. If they say they like my work and they want to work with me, nine times out of 10, I like their music.”

Gordon Raphael

www.myspace.com/gordonraphael

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