

Blitzfully Yours

With their third studio full-length *It's Blitz!*, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs uncork a heady new brew of sonic delights with producers Nick Launay and Dave Sitek.

We've all heard how a shark has to keep constantly moving forward or it dies, and the same usually goes for a rock band that's banked its reputation on being edgy, engaging, and ahead-of-the-curve. For New York City's Yeah Yeah Yeahs, their "shark moment" came when the trio reconvened in early 2008 to begin work on their latest album. Collectively, they decided not just to leave behind the jagged art-punk sound of their 2006 breakthrough *Show Your Bones* (and the follow-up EP *Is Is*), but to deconstruct and retool it entirely.

The opening salvo originated with lead singer Karen O, who made the seemingly innocent suggestion to guitarist Nick Zinner that he might consider trying out some new instruments. For anyone even remotely familiar with the YYY sound, that's almost like asking Peter Max to give up his brush, but Zinner didn't flinch.

"There's already been some talk about this album, with people saying, 'He's putting down the guitar! There's no guitar on the record!'" he says, referring to a recent *Spin* cover story with a dismissive laugh. "The reality is there's still tons of guitar on here, but I'm constantly looking for new sounds anyway. Karen's idea just goes with our band ethos of not repeating ourselves, because we're always trying to evolve."

It's Blitz! [Interscope] marks an evolution on multiple levels. The band enlisted two topflight producers—British expat Nick Launay (known for his work on P!nk's legendary *Flowers of Romance*, and to YYY fans for *Is Is*, as well as recent albums by Nick Cave, Supergrass, and Silverchair) and longtime friend and confidante David Andrew Sitek from *TV on the Radio*, who has worked closely with YYY since their 2003 debut *Fever to Tell*. What's more, *It's Blitz!* embraces retro new-wave pop, but with a thick low end and deep-space atmospherics worthy of Björk, Massive Attack, or Goldfrapp—all of whom have felt the touch of the album's mix engineer Mark "Spike" Stent [see sidebar, "Jedi Master" on page 22].

Meanwhile, Karen O exudes a brighter, sunnier, and more confident mood throughout—a change that might have as much to do with her relocation to L.A. several years ago as it does her rise to maturity. Drummer Brian Chase sounds tighter and drier, giving the music plenty of room to stretch out and breathe. And Zinner flexes his burgeoning chops on an ARP Omni 2 synthesizer and a phalanx of other synths and effects pedals, proving his thirst for new sounds is only just getting started.

"It was really about going in without any plan," Launay says, recalling the first winter sessions he had with the band. "I think the important thing to know about this album is that they went in with maybe one or two tunes, but the majority of the material was written completely in the studio. That was more common back in the '80s when I started making records. It's a very unusual approach these days, and I think the reason they wanted to do that was specifically to come up with something new and fresh."

ENTHUSIASTIC PING-PONG

A total of five studios figured in the making of *It's Blitz!*, but the main venues for tracking were Long View Farm in Massachusetts and Sonic Ranch in Texas (with Launay), and Sitek's former Stay Gold Studio in Brooklyn. "We started in the winter at Long View and then we went to Sonic Ranch," Launay explains. "The last lot of overdubs were done at The Boat in Silverlake [L.A.], and there were little bits and pieces done at Seedy Underbelly in L.A., which is the studio that I usually work out of, just off Laurel Canyon."

Sitek spent about three weeks in July with the band at Stay Gold, while he and Launay would frequently trade Pro Tools sessions, building tracks and adding to each other's work as time went on. The scope of the project became huge: Each of the album's ten songs went through at least four or five different versions, consisting of sometimes more than 100 tracks per song, and eventually taking up more than a dozen 250GB hard drives.

You don't often hear of two major producers trading licks like this on one album—especially on this scale.

Launay: That's why I think the album works so well, because Dave and I pretty much played what I like to call enthusiastic ping-pong. I would capture the band when they were writing and put all the best elements together with a lot of editing; maybe I'd grab something and put it in backwards, or switch out a chorus for a verse—things like that. Then it would go to Dave, and he might scrap this or that, try something new, and send it back to me and I'd go, "Holy shit! What happened to all those ideas? This is really good!" There was never any competition—in fact I found it all quite amusing.

Sitek: It was all pretty open. A lot of it was the band being like, "Okay let's take it to Nick's world," and then, "Now let's take it to Dave's world."

Launay: We actually had one conversation. I rang Dave to ask him a question about a song. I'd heard that he's a very strong-willed character, but he was totally graceful and nice about it. He even told me, "Man, I'm so glad that you're okay with what I'm doing, because if someone came along and f**ked up my stuff the way I've been f**king up yours, I wouldn't be

too happy.” [Laughs.]

SYNTHESIZE ME

From Nick Zinner’s perspective, his approach to getting guitar and synth sounds was equally wide open. Aside from the ARP Omni 2 he picked up on eBay (and which provides the bulk of sounds for the oddly mystical ballad “Skeletons”), he also availed himself of Sitek’s huge array of synths, including the Yamaha CS-15—a staple on almost everything Sitek has ever recorded. It helps drive the arpeggiated bass lines, along with a Roland Juno-106, of the uptempo first single “Zero,” while an ARP Solina String Ensemble and a Crumar Trilogy provide the strings and pads oscillating in the song’s upper reaches.

Then there’s the mind-boggling sonic palette that Zinner is able to wrench from his main guitar—an ’80s Strat that he’s had since childhood— with the help of such exotic pedals as Line 6’s DL4 Delay Modeler and MM4 Modulation Modeler, Eventide’s Time- Factor and ModFactor, DigiTech’s Whammy and Hyper Phase, and a beat-up Roland RE-201 Space Echo, which he uses primarily for distortion filters. With so many choices at hand, Zinner can dial up guitar sounds that can easily be mistaken for synths; for a prime taste, check out the whistling—and Whammy-fied— melody that anchors the catchy “Soft Shock,” the only song on the album where Zinner played a vintage Fender Jaguar.

What were the basics of your guitar setup?

Zinner:I like to go through two amps at the same time—a Vox AC30 and a Fender [Hot Rod] DeVille, for example—and then mic those up differently, as well as going direct. We really wanted to get away from the classic big room sound, so I did blends of those different signals. I usually put the guitar into a [Pro Co] RAT first, then the Line 6 Mod, then the Whammy, then the Line 6 Delay, and into the amps.

Launay:We usually had five tracks of Nick’s guitar on every song. We’d have two mics on the Vox, which were usually a Beyer M 88 and an AKG 414, with the 414 very flat up against the grille and the 88 at an angle. The combination of them being slightly out of phase with each other is what gives it the basic sound, and then you can manipulate the balance.

On the DeVille, I’d have another 88 and a ribbon mic like a Royer or an old RCA 44. Very often I’d use a combination of any of the four mics— again, I might use two of them and put them out of phase with each other, or sometimes delay one of them, and then all of these would go through a combination of API and Neve preamps.

With the DI, sometimes that would be after all the pedals, so it would be very fuzzy if he was using a [fOXX] fuzz pedal, let’s say. And we would replug things constantly—it was like spaghetti junction in there. If we wanted to go back and recreate some of those sounds, it would be almost impossible. We just had to record everything.

On “Zero,” how did you “warm up” the signal path of the synths on the way into Pro Tools?

Sitek:For most of that I used the Wunder Audio 1073s and the Retro [Instruments] 176 [Limiting Amplifier]. I’m going direct, so older synths like the Yamaha CS-15 tend to need a little makeup gain on the output. What I like to do is take it to the absolute maximum that I can on the 1073s, and then draw it back in by turning the gain down a little bit in the compression stage. That keeps it really bright and frizzly—that’s the technical term. [Laughs.] By that I mean everything above 2k, where the air starts to distort.

VOCALS WITH ATTITUDE

The lion’s share of Karen O’s vocals were tracked by Launay at Sonic Ranch using a Neumann M 49, which he also prefers specifically for the way it distorts. “When you get close to it, it cracks up in the same way that a Shure SM57 does,” he says. “To me, it’s one of the few tube mics that has the midrange of a dynamic mic, which I think is very important when you’re doing rock and roll. If you use a really nice mic on a singer who’s gonna give it some attitude, you’re not gonna capture that with a delicioussounding mic. You want something that sounds a little bit more earthy and urban.”

Karen O is at her strongest and most riveting on “Hysteric”—a dreamy, almost mournful performance that channels equal parts Chrissie Hynde and Karen’s own soulful emergence as a singer with real emotive power. Her sound gets an added boost from Spike Stent’s beautifully designed mix, which subtly guides her voice through varying movements of cool crispness, shimmering delay, and needle-clipping distortion.

Can you describe the room at Sonic Ranch where you tracked vocals?

Launay:It has a wooden floor with plaster walls, just like a normal living room, but the ceiling is very high. Karen was positioned in between a couple of slightly padded screens— with some amazingly colorful material, by the way, so there was a vibe there too—so if she sang loudly, then you would hear the room, but if she sang softly you wouldn’t. I would say compared to the way most people record vocals, it sounded quite live.

How do you use EQ and compression to preserve that attitude that Karen delivers?

Launay:Another thing I like about the M 49 mic is that it gives you this incredible low-mid boost when you get close to it, so when I run Karen’s vocal into a Neve 1081, I just leave the midrange alone. I’ll boost at about 300Hz to give the sound some

thickness, and then a similar amount at 100Hz. I usually boost at 15k, too—I find that the 1081s have the top-end control that's really good for fine-tuning at that frequency.

Then I go into a Tube-Tech CL 1A compressor, which I really like because the attack and release are both very fast. They're very similar to an 1176 in the way they're set up, but they sound a lot warmer and better suited to sibilance than an 1176. Generally, the combination of the M 49 and the Tube-Tech is fantastic. I'll set it at the fastest possible attack and fastest possible release for Karen's voice, and compress so that it's pinning—so the needle is hitting the end stop on the left-hand side when she's at her loudest. It comes very close to sounding like analog tape distortion.

Did you treat her voice with any other effects before the final mixing phase?

Launay:One thing I used on all the monitor mixes that we were doing, and in Karen's headphones generally, was a Roland CE-301 Chorus Echo. I used that as the slapback and reverb because there's a cheap built-in reverb in there that works really well with Karen's vocal. I know that made it onto a few of the songs, and I'm pretty sure Spike may have used it because I told him I thought it sounded great.

Sitek:

DRUMS FOR DAYS

There aren't many rock drummers who will actually tune their drums to the key of a song—in fact, you'd be hardpressed to find any besides Brian Chase, whose conservatory training at Oberlin College made him somewhat of an anomaly among Brooklyn kit bangers when the Yeah Yeah Yeahs were first coming up. Chase has a number of tuneful moments on It's Blitz!, but his tom arrangement on the reverberating album closer "Little Shadow" is probably one of his best.

"The room gives the drums a natural reflective sound on that," he says, "but that's also Nick Launay's touch after the fact. I remember with the kick-drum sound in particular, he would dupe a track and then run it through a SansAmp setting to give it a little fuzz." In fact, aside from the album's two "live" tracks with the full band—"Dull Life" and "Shame and Fortune"—sonic manipulation was the order of the day for capturing and cataloguing new drum sounds.

Dave Sitek has mentioned that he recorded different parts of the drum kit separately for the last TV on the Radio album. Is that how you guys worked together, too?

Chase:Yeah. In general for this album, we were essentially going for a very muted kick and snare sound, so a lot of the drums were recorded pieces at a time. We would record a kick and snare track first; because there were no cymbals or toms, it gave us a lot of flexibility to mold the character of those sounds. Then we would layer the tracks from there—usually multiple hi-hat tracks, and then cymbals on top of that.

Was there a basic way you got that muted sound—for example, on "Dragon Queen?"

Chase:I think the kick on that was a 24-inch double-headed kick that was stuffed with blankets. The muting on the snare was just a wallet resting on top, which worked against me a few times because I would end up leaving the studio without it. [Laughs.]

The drums on that song almost sound like an old drum machine. How did you record them?

Sitek:Generally, I use the Microtech Gefell M 930 on the snare, but on that particular one I think we actually went way out on a limb and used an SM57. [Laughs.] I recorded the kick with a Neumann U 47. You've gotta be real careful in terms of wind with that, so I doubled up the kick shell with another empty shell in front of it, and then put the mic in that shell and carpet the whole thing. That gives it a little more space between the head and the microphone, but you don't really sacrifice distance because it's all in its own chamber.

You must have done something on the way into Pro Tools.

Sitek:Everyone asks me what I use on the drums, and I'm like, "Well, who's the drummer? Is he on acid?" [Laughs.] One thing I will say is that I'm big about low cuts. I cut the lows out of almost everything, so that when I finally do the bass, you can hear every aspect of it. The kick and the human voice are my priorities in every song that I work on.

Can you give us a hint, though?

Sitek:Well, I mod those Dolby A-Type [Model] 361s to compress just the high end and disregard the low end. Those are my favorite things on earth. I'll put Karen's vocal through those things, too. If you want the crispy tippy top to stand out and you don't want to deal with an EQ or a mix issue, the 361s are great for that.

JEDI MASTER

Dave Sitek refers to Spike Stent as the "Obi-Wan Kenobi of mixing." Welcome to his inner sanctum.

Studio G at L.A.'s Chalice Recording Studios is outfitted with an SSL 4080 G console, and for a while now it's been the main base of operations for Mark "Spike" Stent. More than just a mix engineer, Stent has built a sterling reputation over the years for truly shaping and crafting a mix, using filters and effects largely at his discretion once he gets creative input from an artist. The approach must be working; his client list includes everyone from U2 to Radiohead, and he has more on the horizon.

"I love the SSL Gs," Stent raves. "I don't particularly like mixing on any other console. I basically use a mixture of the console and plug-ins and automation on Pro Tools or Logic; for the Yeah Yeah Yeahs album, it was Pro Tools. I was brought up oldschool, so I like the analog sound because it has a certain toughness, and I find it a lot easier to get what I want quickly out of that."

From the layered guitar and synth atmospherics that coat the tail-out section of "Dragon Queen" to the subtle variations in texture of Karen O's vocal on "Hysteria," Stent folds himself seamlessly into some of the finishing aspects of It's Blitz! He favors a number of SoundToys effects plug-ins, including EchoBoy and FilterFreak, but uses them judiciously in conjunction with the console, accessing automation controls in the box as well as on the desk itself.

"Karen had tracked up 'Hysteria' quite a lot," Stent observes, "but where she sings the actual word in the background, I stuck it through EchoBoy. I also time-adjusted her vocals in places, so one side would go left and one would go right with a very short delay; that makes it sound wider, phase-y, and a bit more 3D. I also have a dual chain that I tend to use where I'll split the vocal up to two channels and EQ them differently. One goes through an LA-2A and the other goes through this bluestripe, black reissue special edition 1176, which I use on everything."

In the end, Stent had options galore; not only were the Pro Tools sessions delivered to him in all their multitracked (and color-coded) glory, but producers Launay and Sitek also included loads of extra "grayed-out" tracks that Stent could activate if he was looking for something different.

"Dave and Nick did amazing jobs," he says, "and the soundscapes that they created for me to work from were incredible. And nothing should be taken away from Nick Zinner. He's an incredible guitarist, and I feel he completely reinvented himself on this record. There are traditional fans who are gonna go, 'What's happened?' but I think it's important for bands to try new things, and not just do the same record all over again."

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