

Rhythm COVER STORY

Record
producer
hits
the
fast
lane

Butch Vig

BY TOM ALESIA

Butch Vig apologizes, although it's not necessary. He arrives only 15 minutes behind schedule for a late-morning interview at Smart Studios on Madison's near east side.

"I'm a little groggy," he admits, sipping coffee from a Steep & Brew cup. "I was out late last night."

About 1 1/2 hours later, deep into the interview, Vig, 39, explains what happened the night before, treading the subject lightly as if afraid that he might be seen as name-dropping.

Vig — who spearheaded hit albums for Nirvana and Smashing Pumpkins — likely will produce Soul Asylum's next release, the follow-up to the band's enormously successful "Grave Dancers Union."

As a result, Soul Asylum's David Pirner and Dan Murphy came to town last week to play tapes of new tunes and persuade the Madison-based Vig to accept the job.

The trio then went bar-hopping at Crystal Corner, Cafe Montmartre and, finally, The Chamber. Shortly before 2 a.m., a drunken Pirner and

Murphy went onstage at The Chamber and, with Vig on drums, played a sloppy, impromptu set — including an endless cover of "Wild Thing" — before about 20 surprised patrons.

Vig smiles, "It was fun."

Long before Newsweek wondered whether Vig made Nirvana famous; before he consoled a crying Billy Corgan of Smashing Pumpkins during a grueling six-month recording process; before people started giving him tapes while he ate at restaurants; before Vig was big ...

He was pretty much like he is now.

Easy-going and hard-working.

So say Vig's co-owners of Smart Studios, Steve Marker and Brian Anderson, who describe him as unchanged by his recent wealth and popularity. (And Marker recalls Smart's infancy with Vig a decade ago "when we ate a lot of rice.")

Vig's fortunes — and, to a degree, Smart's — exploded in 1991 because of Nirvana.

Having worked with Killdozer and Nirvana's

When a band
gets Smart,
amazing
things happen

BY NATASHA KASSULKE

It may be one of the only things Lollaploozza grunge rockers L7 and local folksters The Common Faces have in common.

Both groups got Smart.

Smart Studios, that is.

Madison's Smart Studios is famous for its impeccable service and superior sound quality.

It has the technical and intellectual capability to do everything from serious government drunk driving campaigns to raucous rock music.

And it's recognized around the world for the company it keeps and the magic it makes.

From the outside, the building is a red brick eyesore at 1254 East Washington Ave.

But on the inside, where insulated walls separate the trucks rumbling on the street from the recording stars of the future, the studio screams Los Angeles or New York City.

From a plush tan leather couch on the second floor, owners Brian Anderson, Steve Marker, and Butch Vig can watch the lunch crowd come and go from Jan's Friendly Bennetts tavern and Ken's Barber Shop.

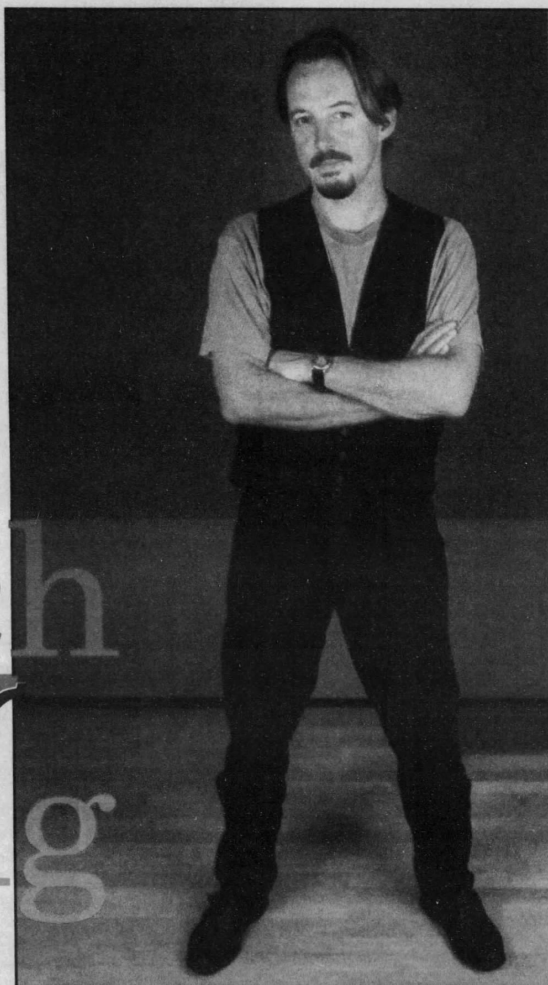
These three low-key and articulate men are the smarts (and spenders) behind Smart Studios.

Their business was born about 15 years ago as a tiny four-track studio in a basement when Marker and Vig were film students at UW-Madison.

"We would go to the studio late at night and make really strange songs and just have a great time," Marker remembers. "We had so much fun that we thought it would be neat if we would make it into a business."

About 11 years ago they took those thoughts seriously and moved into a nearby warehouse.

"We invested in an 8-track recorder and tape deck and soon every little punk band from the Midwest seemed to come by,"



Cover, Page 3 photos/MEG THENO

Turn to Page 4

Turn to Page 5

Butch Vig profile

From Page 3

label mates on Sub Pop, Vig met the Seattle trio bent on making as much noise as possible.

They recorded together at Smart Studios in August 1990, and those songs landed Nirvana a major label deal. Fearful that hiring a "name" producer would indicate that the rebellious Nirvana was selling out, they opted for Vig and began recording in Los Angeles.

Before working with Nirvana, Vig says he was mixed about the band's obscure debut album, "Bleach."

"It was a cool punk record," he says. "The song I liked was 'About A Girl.' It was a great, poppy Beatle-esque song. That's one of the first things I told Kurt (Cobain), 'You have an amazing pop sensibility and I don't think you should ignore it.'"

Cobain scoffed.

Vig continues: "He'd pick up the guitar and play something. I'd ask, 'What's that?' It would be this gorgeous new thing he was writing. He said, 'It's just some pop (expletive),' and he'd put the guitar down."

"They came from such a punk background. He felt he had to scream. But he liked to sing quietly. When he played acoustic, it was so understated that it was haunting and beautiful. That dichotomy in him was what made their music special — the quiet beauty, the angst and the rage all rolled into one."

Nirvana's "Nevermind" was released in fall 1991. Stellar reviews preceded an avalanche of popularity. Nirvana and Vig had triumphantly struck a chord between wild abandon in the music and delicious hooks.

It sold more than 10 million copies and altered the music business by giving it a punch in the stomach.

"There was this great buzz when the record came out," Vig says.

"I went to the Metro (club) in Chicago shortly after 'Nevermind' was released. Nirvana walked out, and the audience was insane for them. I had goosebumps. It was like Beatlemania. The crowd was screaming, girls were crying. Everyone knew all the lyrics. That's when I knew that this was something that was way beyond my wildest dreams."

When "Nevermind" hit No. 1 weeks later, Vig and his wife, Patricia Lew, were living in a tiny apartment on Morrison Street,

paying about \$400 a month rent.

"We'd been living there for eight years. I remember going home and saying, 'Nirvana's No. 1.' We just sat there. It was so weird. I had a No. 1 record over Michael Jackson and U2."

Later, Vig says, "Nevermind" just accelerated everything beyond reality. The phone didn't stop ringing. Everybody and their mom wanted me to produce their next record. It was very heady, but it was almost scary, too. You felt things going out of control here."

Last April, Cobain shot himself to death.

"From the first time I met him," Vig says, "he was struggling with his personal demons. Very manic depressant. He'd be upbeat, charming and witty then, a half hour later, he'd be morose, sullen and uncommunicative."

"It's a shame he's not here anymore. Having all that success made me realize you could have everything in the world and still not be happy."

Vig grew up in Viroqua, a small town 20 miles southwest of La Crosse. His dad was a family doctor; his mother was a music teacher.

An athlete at Viroqua High School where he graduated in 1973, Vig headed to the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a soon-extinguished plan to be a pre-med student.

He eventually studied film and communications and ventured into his first music studio work by writing soundtracks for his classmates' projects.

As a member of the Madison band Spooner and later Fire Town (which had two major label releases), he observed the production work closely.

"I'm fascinated with the process of recording," Vig says. "You're an editor; you're a sounding board for ideas; you're a well-paid psychotherapist — that's probably more than 50 percent of the job. You try to figure out what motivates a band to get the right kind of performance and persona."

His production credits keep rolling: two albums each by Smashing Pumpkins and Sonic Youth, L7 and — a dramatic shift from loud rock last spring — singer/songwriter Freedy Johnston.

Vig, however, has no intention of leaving Madison. He says he can only take New York and Los Angeles in spurts. Sure, he has to



Photo/MEG THENO

BUTCH VIG: Nirvana's 'Nevermind' release 'just accelerated everything beyond reality.'

go out-of-town to produce some major acts, but others (like Soul Asylum) are likely to opt for the deluxe Smart Studios.

Although Vig insists that he won't always be the "flavor of the month" among bands seeking a producer, his work on Smashing Pumpkins' "Siamese Dream" cemented his status in the industry.

"Siamese Dream" sold nearly 3 million copies and put Smashing Pumpkins as this summer's Lollapalooza tour headliner (replacing Nirvana, ironically).

Recorded in Atlanta, "Siamese Dream" put Vig through a grinder for six months straight, with only a rare day off during late '92 and into '93. The experience illustrates the need for Vig's calm through the studio storm.

"It was almost like going into a cave. All that mattered was making that record," he says. "Sometimes we would work all day and not get it right and the band would just explode at each other screaming and (drummer) Jimmy (Chamberlin) would disappear and wouldn't be seen for a day or two. He'd come and he'd be too (messed) up to play. ..."

"They felt a lot of pressure. Everybody kept saying to (Corgan), 'You're going to have a great record. It's going to be fabulous.' He hadn't even finished writing it yet. I felt pressure, too, (thinking), 'We have to make this great record.'"

What's next?

There's an abundance of proj-

ects in the works in addition to producing Soul Asylum. He's formed a production company run by his wife, a former pharmaceutical buyer for Meriter Hospital.

This week, Vig joins Steve Marker and former Spooner member Doug Erikson as part of a band called Garbage, which recruited Scottish singer Shirley Manson.

"It's really a studio band," says Vig, who adds that unannounced local live gigs may be part of the recording process. "We wanted to work with a female singer and write these dark, ambient pop songs which are kind of industrial and have a kind of low-fi trashiness to them."

A Garbage album likely will be released in January or February.

Vig also remains an in-demand producer for remixes — essentially taking a band's song, stripping it down to just vocals, then adding new bass, guitar and drum instrumentals. He's already re-worked cuts by U2 (which hasn't released them yet), Depeche Mode, Nine Inch Nails and the Cult.

Meanwhile, an assortment of acts — Billy Idol to Simple Minds to Ric Ocasek of the Cars — have inquired about his services to produce albums. He says he'd rather work with acts like the band Live and Chicago's Veruca Salt as well as a third go-round with Smashing Pumpkins.

And occasionally Vig savors his success, like a recent visit backstage to Lollapalooza in Mil-

waukee.

"Before the Pumpkins went on, (Corgan) went into the shower area with the lights off. He was crouched down, playing his guitar and warming up his vocal," Vig says.

"It's hard to believe when we were immersed in the studio, he was outraged because he couldn't focus on the music. Now what he poured into that record, those 20,000 people out there have taken to heart to some extent."

"I'm sorry, but it's very hard to put into perspective what that means."

No apology necessary.



KURT COBAIN of Nirvana was known as an intense, moody musician. He committed suicide earlier this year.