

MUSICIAN

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KATE BUSH

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Young Neal & the Vipers DeQuattro (41), Bigelow (34), Vitullo (28) & Brennan (37) are saving the \$150,000 Atlantic gave them to record, and living off their gigs.

YOU'VE GOT TO HAVE A GOOD REASON TO WAKE UP ATLANTIC RECORDS czar Ahmet Ertegun in the middle of the night. For A&R man Peter Koepke, the reason was Neal Vitullo, a 28-year-old blues guitar slinger from the little town of Warren, Rhode Island.

Koepke had gone to New York City's Lone Star Roadhouse to see Vitullo's band, Young Neal & the Vipers, on the recommendation of the guitarist's managers, Mark Krantz and Mort Cooperman. "I thought I'd just have a burger and relax, but Neal was terrific," Koepke says. He called Ertegun and asked if the band could play a third set after the club's clientele went home—which was no problem, since Krantz is the Lone Star's music director and Cooperman owns the place.

"We played a set for Ahmet and maybe 10 other people," says Vitullo. "I didn't even know who I was meeting at the time, but afterwards he came up to me and said, 'Young man, you've taken the pill, you've got soul. I want to work with you.'"

After four years of playing every bar-room between Boston and New York, things were happening fast. Vitullo had just signed his management deal with Krantz and Cooperman. Now negotiations with Atlantic began, and they yielded a contract that hit the desk of the band's lawyer in December 1988. It sat there for five long months.

The problem was that Vitullo was stuck between his buddies and a hard place. "You make friends, but it's a business," he says, sitting on a chair in the dressing room of the Clubhouse, a Bristol, Rhode Island rock joint. He and his band are circled by busted furniture, rubble and wires that dangle from the ceiling like eavesdropping pythons—the usual surroundings of working-class players.

"It's been a goal not to be a bar band," Vitullo continues, "and you've gotta do what you've gotta do to get to that level."

What Vitullo decided he had to do was replace drummer Bob Christina and singer Dave Howard. He wasn't alone. "Elektra had shown some interest in the band before Atlantic," says manager Krantz, "but they wanted to change the band. Atlantic wanted to change the band too, but they would initially take it as is. Elektra wouldn't. We had just signed Neal ourselves at the time, and my feeling is that you don't sign a band and then break it up. We told the people in the band that they got the first shot, but that we were going to have a very high standard musically, and that some people might not make it all the way to the end."

Christina, the brother of Fabulous Thunderbirds drummer Fran Christina, was cut first. His replacement was veteran blues sideman [cont'd on page 68]

STRIPPED

DOWN

AND

REBUILT

TO LAST

YOUNG NEAL & THE VIPERS

BY TED DROZDOWSKI

"BASICALLY, RECORD COMPANIES DON'T WANT A NEW ARTIST,"

Peter Koepke admits straightforwardly—and as assistant to the president of Atlantic Records, he should know. "A new artist means a new file, means you have to convince radio. So as an A&R person, if you sign an artist you better realize that you're going to go through meeting after meeting after meeting where you have to convince people that this person or band is great."

Initial enthusiasm among a record company's A&R (artists and repertoire) department is one of the common denominators between the signings of Young Neal & the Vipers, the Walkers, the Joneses and the Raindogs. The first two of these groups dealt with Peter Koepke. The Walkers came to his attention through A&R representative Sofia Ames-Leak. Just after she started at Atlantic, Ames-Leak remembers, a friend played her a Walkers demo tape. She was impressed, especially with the song "Fall from Grace": "It's an amazing song. After one hearing I could remember it." Koepke seconded her emotion about the tape, and suggested seeing the Walkers at CBGB.

"There were some A&R people there," Koepke says. "I talked to the band afterwards, and I thought we should go for it. The next week they played again, and there were A&R people wall to wall. I said, 'Look, Sofia, let's not fuck around.' If I'd waited another week, there would have been no chance in hell" of Atlantic signing the band.

The "band" consisted of singer Manny Verzosa and guitarist Patrick Newbery, the Walkers' creative force. Atlantic started negotiating with the two simultaneously with a couple of other major companies. "After three or four weeks of 'We want this,'" Koepke says, "we eventually got the deal." He credits Ames-Leak's determination in convincing the Walkers that Atlantic was the best label.

Koepke first heard of Young Neal through Mark Krantz of New York's Lone Star Roadhouse. Koepke was impressed with Young Neal—"a genuine talent, like somebody who can juggle 15 balls at a time"—but "I wasn't totally thrilled about the singer." He even considered "stealing" Neal for Paul Rodgers' band. Legendary Atlantic chairman Ahmet Ertegun went to a show—and practically signed Neal on the spot. Koepke says, "Ahmet is still very much the owner of this joint."

After signing to Atlantic, Young Neal & the Vipers recorded some tunes "just to see how they would feel," Koepke says. The results showed even more obviously than the live show the need for a more compatible singer. Koepke spoke to the band's management about retaining the singer, "an excellent harp player," while adding a new lead vocalist. The band itself

**Atlantic (Atco) Hears Musical Excitement There*

B Y S C O T T I S L E R

THE MEN FROM A.H.M.E.T.*

HOW THE
ATLANTIC
& ATCO A&R
STAFFS RAIDED
BOSTON

realized its vocal shortcomings, added former Push Push singer/songwriter Dennis Brennan and "liked him so much more as a musician that a rift was created," Koepke says, forcing the original singer to leave. "We never said, 'You've gotta take this guy,'" Koepke adds. "I don't think you can do it with people like that. You can do it with Milli Vanilli, but that's a different ballgame."

The point is that artists have to find out for themselves. "If I think you're a complete idiot," Koepke says, "and I have to tell you these things, why would I want to make a deal with you? If people are on the right track they're gonna come to the right solution. You've just gotta find a way of showing it to them."

By comparison, the Joneses signing seems like simplicity itself. Atlantic A&R representative

Aziz Goksel heard a "fantastic demo" of the band through a lawyer who was working for the group. "I kept hounding him about it," Goksel says, "and he sent me the tape. We played it at an A&R meeting and everyone fell over. It wasn't like pulling teeth."

Recording the Joneses was apparently as easy as signing them: "We get bands sometimes that are talented but not very seasoned," Goksel continues. "These guys had done all their woodshedding. They had their songs, they knew how to play... It wasn't a very difficult project. The whole thing was to sign them before other labels got wind of them."

"I wish every project that I did went as smoothly as this one has."

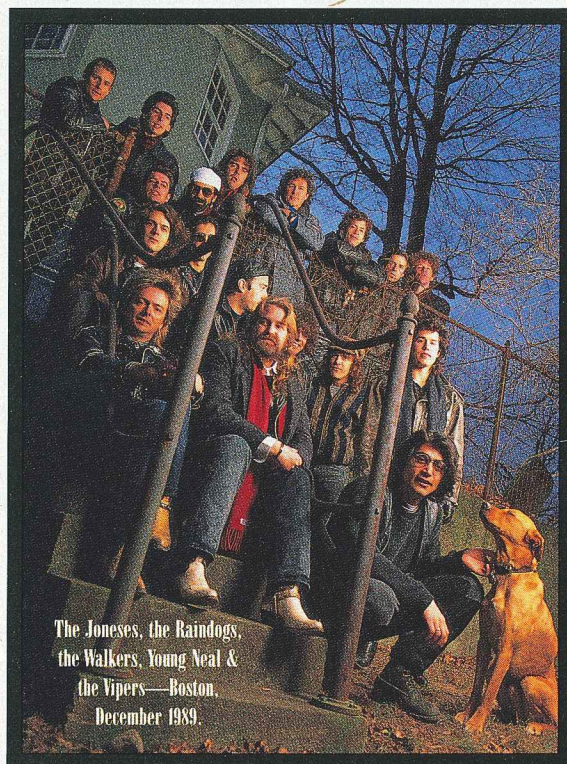
Koepke denies that Atlantic looks for musical types to fill specific categories. "It's very dangerous to see these slots before these guys have made records or before they have found their room. Would you have thought that AC [adult contemporary, or quasi-"easy listening"] radio is the first place that plays Tracy Chapman? You have to make a record with the best songs a group has at this time, that features the

best vocals you can get, that sounds like the real thing—and you make it a little bit *nicer* than what they are, in order for people to be able to digest it."

Only seven floors separate Atlantic from its recently rejuvenated subsidiary label Atco. But employees at both companies stoutly maintain their autonomy. "It's competition, no doubt," Koepke says. "They're running an independent label up there. The only difference is Ahmet is the boss of both."

Up there, Atco president Derek Shulman agrees. Atlantic has "scooped me on a couple of things," Shulman says, "and I scooped them on a few things. Competition on signing bands—that's the easiest part. Breaking the bands is the hardest part."

The Raindogs emerged from a



The Joneses, the Raindogs,
the Walkers, Young Neal &
the Vipers—Boston,
December 1989.

pile of demo tapes Atco A&R director Steve Gett was going through. He gave the tape to Shulman, who was aware of the band; their manager had worked for Bon Jovi, a Shulman signing at PolyGram Records. Following a showcase performance last February the principals involved went out and shook hands on a deal. "The demos were unbelievably polished," Gett says. "We wanted to make sure they could deliver live. We were surprised no one else had signed this band."

By June the Raindogs were in New York's Power Station studio with Neil Dorfsman, chosen from a list of desirable producers. "There seemed like there was good chemistry to start off with," Gett says. "Unfortunately what seemed good in principle didn't work out in reality. They were coming from two different viewpoints." After a week at the Power Station the band canceled its remaining time. "We realized the Raindogs should be themselves," Gett says, "and they realized we were not prepared to just slap them in the studio and take what came out."

Gett remembered Peter Henderson as a "lowkey" producer, hooked him up with the band, and proceeded to check out Boston studios to resume recording. Then someone suggested using the Stoughton, Massachusetts studio where the Raindogs had cut their demos. "I was very hesitant about telling Derek this," Gett says, "cause I knew it was basically a run-down shack!" He also doubted the studio's owner would believe a major label was interested in using the place. Henderson, though, sensed the familiar surroundings would revive the band's spirit. Extensive rewiring and outboard equipment imported from New York temporarily turned Stoughton into an outpost of the recording industry.

Shulman, the leader of '70s band Gentle Giant, got involved after the recording was over. "It was mixed in a different way than I expected," he says. "I threw a shit fit and got them back to mix. It was way, way too dry. They were painting themselves into a total 'alternative' corner." The final remix has "more ambience to it." Did the band object? "A little bit."

These experiences show that A&R duties continue at every stage of a recording project. Shulman says the hardest part of his job is "to keep an objective viewpoint and not get immersed in the trenches. You can lose sight of what you did it for—certainly what I did it for—in the first place.

"I'd rather fall on my face and fuck it up entirely than not go for it. There's no point in just doing okay."

THE JONESES

[cont'd from page 62] says Finnerty. "With other bands we'd come close, but we were bogged down worrying about what was commercial. This time we decided to stay true to what we like, and we hoped that with a little luck its quality would sell it."

"After about two weeks in Billy's garage we hit a plateau where we had a real sound; a real heavy blues-rock thing came together," recounts Hallen. "It was different from the other bands I'd been in around here, because we were always off whoring around with other things to pay the bills. This time we decided to stay focused on one thing and really give this our best."

"The sound that we got is the sound I grew up with," Loosigian offers. "I was playing basic heavy blues in high school. I never really changed the way I played. It's just that the bands I've been in have been different. When we started this band, I'd seen groups like the Cult and thought, 'They're still learning. They haven't gotten it yet

because they haven't listened to the real blues.' I figured, 'Shit, if these younger guys are trying to sound like Free and Jeff Beck and Led Zeppelin, I can do it better, because I came up on it.'"

THE JONESES' JONESES

ON RECORD BILLY LOOSIGIAN uses a '59 Les Paul. Live it's a reissue run through a cranked Vox AC-30 top boosted with a Boss chorus and a Vox wah-wah. For big gigs, he'll roll out a Marshall 4x12 with a '68 plexiglass head. DAVID FINNERTY sings through a Shure SM58, plays a Les Paul Jr. and uses a little Ampeg amp that's due for replacement. BRAD HALLEN pounds a '68 Fender Precision, run direct through an old SVT. JOHN SANDS plays Yamaha drums with a blend of Zildjian and Sabian cymbals.

"We've gotten a lot of flack around Boston," Finnerty continues. "We hear retro this and retro that, 'Bad Company.' But to me there's a big difference between copying stuff and coming from the same place."

Now the Joneses need to find out where they're going—and when. It's just before Thanksgiving: Gathered 'round a table in an Irish alehouse in Boston's Allston section, Loosigian, Finnerty and Hallen mention they're unsure if their band's LP, which was finished in late September, will be released in January, February or March. So they don't know when they'll be going on tour, or if they'll be paired with a bigger band when they do. And their advance money's running out.

Atlantic's Goksel has a clearer picture of their future: "The record's tentatively scheduled for release in February, but we want to do it right. I want to make sure the Joneses' record won't come out in a month when there's a lot of releases in the same format, which would be worked by the same promotion people. I want to avoid any in-house competition.

"I consider myself very lucky to have signed the Joneses," he continues. "As soon as I got their tape, I played it for the powers that be, and I didn't have to persuade anybody. They all agreed that we had to sign this band very fast.

"The Joneses are playing a type of music that many other musicians are attempting, but don't have the musical maturity to pull off. I felt that I could leave them alone in the studio for weeks at a time and have every bit of confidence that everything was going fine. They're the kind of band that can take care of itself; well-seasoned, cool, professional. They're not like a very young band; their hearts aren't going pitter-pat now that they're signed.

"They're a unique band with a very identifiable sound. First, the heavy-rock aficionados will pick up on it, then the general public. But I think they have great potential."

So, apparently, does Atlantic chief Ahmet Ertegun, who met all of manager Sonenberg's bargaining points at the time the Joneses' contract—good for three two-album options—was negotiated. "When David went in, Ahmet just seemed determined to have the Joneses on his label, so David played it up a little," Finnerty explains. "He said, 'PolyGram's really hot on the band.' And they had expressed some interest. But Ahmet said, 'David, the Joneses belong on Atlantic.' He was really buying it. So David said, 'You know, I don't know if they're right for Atlantic. These guys aren't spring chickens.' And Ahmet said, 'I don't care if they look like shit, the music's great. . . . They don't look like shit, do they?'"

Meanwhile, the Joneses are working out their arena chops on the

stages of Boston clubs, squeezing into velvet pants they haven't worn since the '70s, learning the value of broad gestures like holding feedbacked guitars aloft and raising fists to emphasize a lyric. But Finnerty still can't help grinning self-consciously when he spins his mike stand over his head. "We're really just feeling that kind of thing out," he says, "because getting this record deal has made us think along the lines of playing in front of larger audiences. We're trying to get better at the things that are part of doing that. You should have seen the first few gigs. I was grinning a lot back then." **M**

YOUNG NEAL & THE VIPERS

[cont'd from page 64] Tom DeQuattro, who started full time on January 1, 1989, but had already been subbing on Tuesdays while Christina took night classes in architecture. "You've just got to be one or the other," says Vitullo. "You can't be a drummer and an architect. Without a steady timekeeper, when it comes down to making records, you're in the shit. I couldn't picture working with a click track."

Replacing Howard was a harder call. He and Vitullo had started the band together; they were songwriting partners. A two-album contract was finally signed in May, but "the vocals were holding things up," says Vitullo. Demos just weren't yielding the kind of results Atlantic wanted. "They didn't feel we had someone strong enough to make the transition from being a bar band to radio or arena style. Instead of making a record that would go straight into the cutout bins, we had to make the change."

Howard was offered a spot as harp player and second guitarist, but decided to return to his job with the Warwick, Rhode Island sanitation department, where he'd accumulated well over a decade's worth of

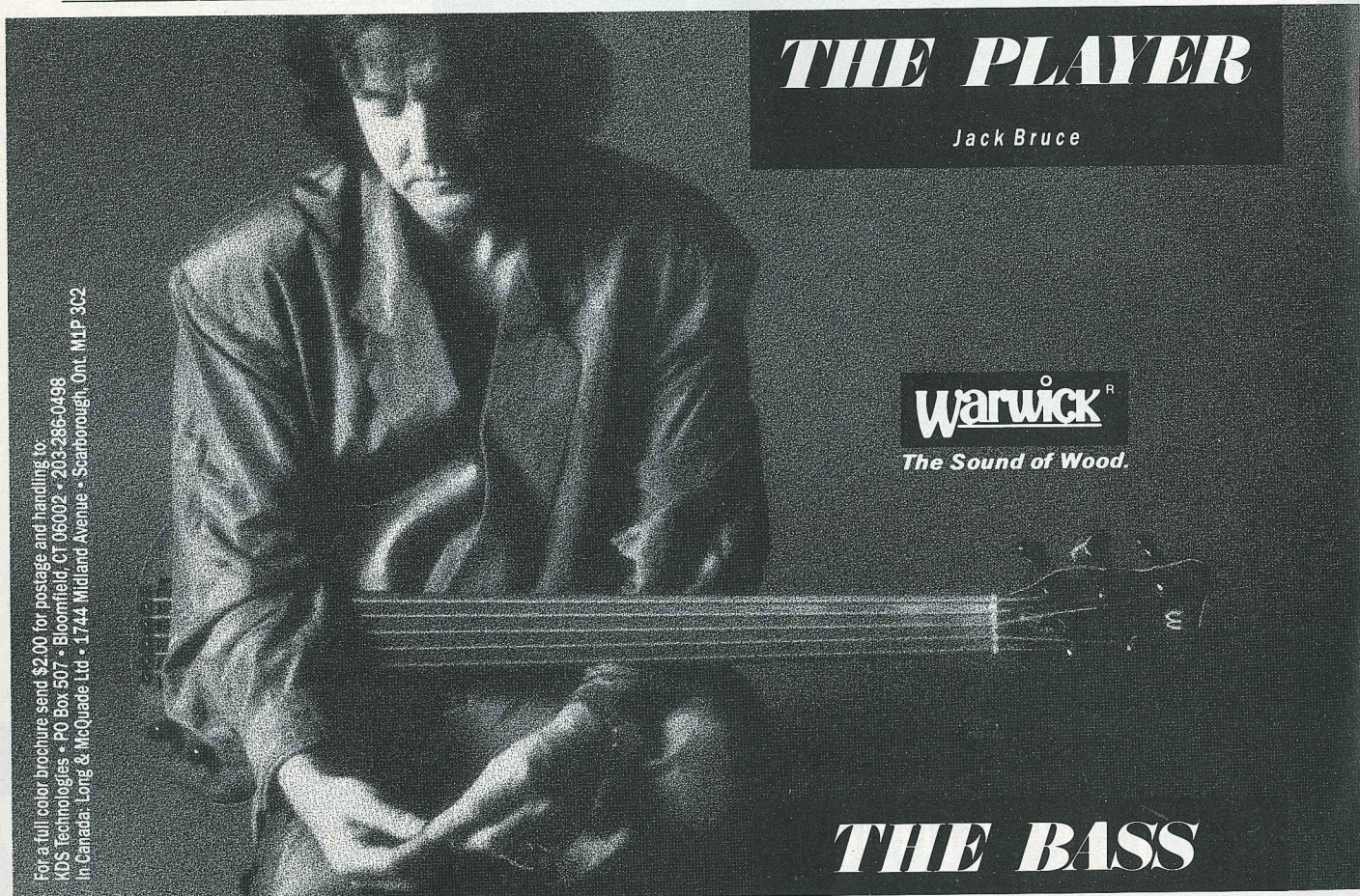
benefits. He's also got points on the album, is still writing with Vitullo, and has started a new group that plays on weekends.

Veteran Boston musician Dennis Brennan was brought in to replace Howard in late October. His power-pop outfit Push Push had broken up early in '89 when guitarist Adam Steinberg left to join the Walkers, another recent Atlantic signing. Brennan was about to move to Nashville to hang out his songwriter's shingle when he was recommended for an audition with Young Neal & the Vipers.

At the Clubhouse gig, just six weeks after he joined the band, it's obvious that Brennan is everything Howard was not: stylishly dressed, comfortable with major keys and vocal melodies, a real presence onstage. He's a spirited foil for Vitullo, who's lost in his world of open-mouthed gyrations and stunt playing (over the shoulder,

VIPER PIPES

NEAL VITULLO plays Stratocasters—a '58 and a '57 reissue—and a '58 Gibson 125 for slide through a pre-CBS Fender Super Reverb and a 30-watt Marshall head with channel switching and reverb that drives two 4x10 cabs. His strings are D'Addario, gauges .011 to .052. DENNIS BRENNAN blows a Marine Band harp through a Statik mike and plays a Fernandes Strat and Takamine acoustic through a Fender Vibrolux amp. STEVE BIGELOW plays Fender basses—a '70s P-bass, a '57 reissue P, and a fretless Jazz—into a Fender B-300 head and Ampeg SVT cabinets. And TOM DEQUATTRO slaps a custom kit by Drew Drums of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. It's held by Tama hardware, dressed with Zildjian cymbals, and paddled with Zildjian sticks.



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behind the back, with his teeth) from the first chord. Meanwhile, DeQuattro and bassist Steve Bigelow keep the band's bottom in a hammerlock. It all bodes well for their recording sessions, which are scheduled to begin in January. Ertegun himself has offered to produce some tracks, and the band's kicking around names like ex-Blaster Dave Alvin.

Koepke also seems satisfied: "Neal is an animal on the guitar. He has no other way of expressing himself. Dennis will make sense of what the band does. A guitar player can't do that well alone. Look at Jeff Beck. But if you find a guitar player and a voice that work together, it's great. There's a history of successes going back to Page and Plant."

Though the record deal's already earned Vitullo a chance to jam with the likes of Paul Rodgers and Kenny Jones, and led the band to perform at the inaugural bash for the Delta Blues Museum, Young Neal & the Vipers are miles away from Easy Street. Christina has sued, rejecting an offer of a point on the record, and the group's still working the same circuit, six nights a week. "We haven't touched a penny of our advance money," Vitullo says, "so when we go into the studio we'll have money to live on. Meanwhile, we're real proud that we can make a living just from people coming to see us play." **M**

THE WALKERS

[cont'd from page 63] ist Adam Steinberg, the Walkers started to crawl. Gigs proved Verzosa to be a bubbly frontman with a voice that could soar.

The songs on the tape—which retain more than a hint of folksy preciousness—tout clarity, not clank. "There were definite ground rules," says Manny. "I told Tom, 'No synths.' And I wanted a standup bass—I'm a big fan of *Astral Weeks*; Richard Davis' bass planted those songs in a very emotional way. I didn't want anything bombastic."

They didn't get any. The Walkers' songs wear their heart on their

sleeve and bask in earnestness. ("New Age Folk," read one headline.) Ballads pick up speed and lilt into the clouds. No matter what's going on in the background—Steinberg's exacting filigree work or Rivard's swooping bass lines—it's Newbery's clean strumming and the grandeur of Verzosa's voice that make the songs what they are.

Given that Verzosa and Newbery spent plenty of nights onstage in Portland performing as a duo, it's not surprising that their sound harkens back to Batdorf & Rodney/Aztec Two-Step days. Though they are Meat Puppets fans who once played in a punk unit called Pulltoy, the Walkers are more interested in a lustrous, sometimes dark sound, fueled by simplicity.

"You really have to be judicious about where you orchestrate yourself," cautions Verzosa. "Songs should be to the point. Neil Young's got four chords, but he sure uses them well."

"Musically, it's much more fun when the song itself has something to it," says Newbery. "You can't stand on effects when you're playing

WALKING STICKS

WALKERS GUITARIST PATRICK NEWBERY strums Guild F-30 and Martin HD-28 guitars. His more electric comrade ADAM STEINBERG plays a Fender reissue Strat and 1967 Telecaster, and a Gibson Les Paul—"nothing old enough to be really cool." Strings are GHS, amp is a Fender Twin and extension cabinet with Celestion speakers. Steinberg uses a Chandler Tube Driver for distortion, not to mention "a bunch of delays and stuff." Bassist MICHAEL RIVARD plugs a Wal fretless or Ken Smith five-string into a Yamaha pre-amp, Ashly power amp and SWR cabinet. MANNY VERZOSA sings into AKG C-12 and Neumann U-67 and U-47 microphones, going into a Hardy pre-amp. He also uses a Blonder Tongue Audio Baton, "a colorful old German EQ device."

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