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FOO FIGHTERS

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TALE OF



THE TAPE

The Foo Fighters throw out the computers

and throw down the rock 'n' roll gauntlet

By Chris Neal



Since 2005 the members of Foo Fighters have enjoyed the luxury of making all their albums at Studio 606, frontman Dave Grohl's state-of-the-art recording and rehearsal facility in Northridge, Calif. Its walls lined with gold and platinum records from both his time with the Foo Fighters and Grohl's early days as drummer for iconic alt-rock band Nirvana (not to mention his work with other acts like Queens of the Stone Age and Tenacious D), Studio 606 has just about anything a musician could ask for in a recording studio. Grohl lives only minutes away, an effortless commute to find oneself in a first-class facility with all the accoutrements to which he, bass player Nate Mendel, drummer Taylor Hawkins and guitarists Chris Shiflett and Pat Smear have become accustomed as members of one of the most successful bands in rock. So naturally, when time came to make the Fooks' seventh and latest album, *Wasting Light*, Grohl elected to ... record in his garage.

"I wanted to be the band that sells out stadiums in Europe, but makes their albums in a garage," Grohl says with a chuckle. "There's some honor and nobility to that!" The fact that the Fooks do indeed fill stadiums around the world (two upcoming shows at England's 65,000-capacity Milton Keynes Bowl sold out within hours) and make albums that reliably move in the millions was a prime motivator for Grohl's decision to move his group and its recording sessions even closer to home. "Doing it this way defused a lot of that expectation or tension," he says. "I thought, 'Let's make it in a place we're entirely comfortable: my garage. Back the minivan out of the garage and put the drumset in there.' And it really is a garage: There are a couple of kid's bikes in there and a refrigerator full of beer, and that's about it. The project was to create an environment in which we would make a record that sounds like the Foo Fighters."

To further that goal, Grohl made two more important decisions. First, he drafted producer Butch Vig—producer of Nirvana's classic *Nevermind*—to handle the recording sessions. Second, he decided that the album

would be laid down entirely on old-fashioned analog tape, with no digital fixes. "I said, 'I don't want to see one computer in the studio. If I see a piece of computer equipment hooked up to anything that records an instrument, you are fired and kicked off of my property,'" he says, employing some characteristically tongue-in-cheek hyperbole. "That's

how it was." The result is the punchiest and hardest-hitting Foo Fighters album since ... well, maybe ever. Since the group's self-titled 1995 debut (for which Grohl played all the instruments himself), it has steadily expanded its sound with projects like the 2005 half-acoustic double album *In Your Honor* and poppier efforts like 1999's *There Is Nothing Left to Lose*. But *Wasting Light*, the Fooks' first full studio album in four years, is a focused recommitment to blistering hard rock. "At this point it's almost like you've stretched that rubber band as far as it will go," Grohl says. "If you let go, it just snaps back. That's what this record is."

Grohl says that these days he and his comrades get their experimental jollies with side projects like his work with the rock supergroup Them Crooked Vultures (featuring Queens of the Stone Age guitarist Josh Homme and Led Zeppelin bass player John Paul Jones); Hawkins' albums with his group, the cheekily named Coattail Riders; Shiflett's new country-tinged band Chris Shiflett & the Dead Peasants; and Mendel's recently reunited pre-Fooks alt-rock act Sunny Day Real Estate. "The idea was to make an album that's true to what the band sounds like," says Mendel. "Keep it simple, pure and true to how we actually sound as a band."

Wasting Light is a full-circle moment for Grohl in several ways. It features the return of guitarist Pat Smear, who met Grohl while serving as touring guitarist for Nirvana before joining the Foo Fighters. Smear left the group in 1997, returned as a touring member 10 years later and has since been reinstated as a full Foo. Then there is the presence of not just Vig but Nirvana's Krist Novoselic, who plays bass and accordion on "I Should Have Known"—only his second studio collaboration with Grohl since the 1994 suicide of frontman Kurt Cobain put an end to their former band. "When he plugged in and started playing, Butch and I just looked at each other and laughed," Grohl says. "Like, 'Oh my god, I haven't heard that in 20 years.'" The willingness to make that sound a part of the Foo Fighters marks a reconciliation of Grohl's past and present—and a newfound confidence in the strength of his current group's rock-solid legacy and continued promise. "The important thing for this band is that we want to be here," he

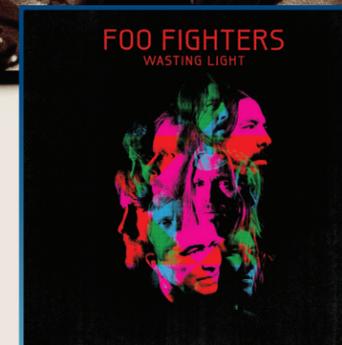
says. "I know some guys in bands who don't want to be there. I don't want to not want to be in this band. I have before, and I'm glad that I didn't quit." We spoke with Dave Grohl and Nate Mendel in California as they prepared for the group's current world tour, set to continue at least through late August.



Dave Grohl on stage at London's Wembley Stadium, June 6, 2008



Dave Grohl, Nate Mendel and Taylor Hawkins at Studio 606, Northridge, Calif.



Why record in the garage?

GROHL: I didn't think we should take the conventional route of hiring the best studio in Hollywood, using all the newest, coolest gear and making a CD that would sound like everybody else's. So I figured we'd wheel the tape machines out of the closet, dust them off, put them in my garage and make the record there. Using digital recording technology, there are just too many options to manipulate. A lot of producers have a problem with digital technology—it's almost like Frodo and that damn ring. (laughs) It's like, "One ring to rule them all!" All they want to do is put it on, and the band is saying, "No, no, don't put it on!" So I wanted to eliminate that option. The idea was to capture all of that on tape, and we did.

MENDEL: I was skeptical about doing that at first, honestly. We've got a nice studio, we've done a couple of records there and it worked well. I wasn't sure about the idea to go and camp out at Dave's house, infringe on his family's private space and be in a cramped space in an untried studio. But it ended up being the most fun, casual, relaxed album that we've ever made—and it sounds great. So I was basically wrong. (laughs)

How did you set up the studio?

GROHL: First we did a test. We rolled in the tape machine, recorded a couple of demos and it sounded great. We thought, "All right, now let's commit and start to get the control room ready." So we had to buy a couple of things. I said to the engineer, "OK, make a wish list of things you'd need to make a great record in a garage." He sent me the list and it was \$700,000 worth of stuff! I laughed. I was like "Dude, I'm not building Abbey Road, I just want to be able to make a record that sounds cool!" But there was a little preparation that we had to put into this.

What is Butch's studio manner like?

GROHL: It seems like he's just hanging out, having a good time, when really he's taking your song and making it better. He finds a song and simplifies it to the point of maximum potential. He'll find the reason for

the song, cut everything else away and then turn that up to 11.

MENDEL: It's like working with a friend. He's good at the technical aspects of putting a record together, but he doesn't get in your face and second-guess your decision-making. The songs were pretty well structured by the time we went into pre-production with him. He's got an opinion, and he's not afraid to tell you if something's not sounding right, but his strong suit is figuring out how to have it make sonic sense so that the end result is strong.

How did Pat return to the band?

MENDEL: I don't think Pat was super happy with his decision to leave all those years ago, and he remained friends with everybody after the initial shock and disappointment of his leaving had a chance to dissipate. There were only two albums that Pat didn't have anything to do with [*There Is Nothing Left to Lose* and 2002's *One* by

One]. Everything from *In Your Honor* on, he at least took part in the touring. It was working well with him, he felt like a member of the band, and we decided we should just have him come back.

Was it hard integrating a third guitarist?

GROHL: It was an exciting challenge, because we found ourselves thinking a lot more about individual composition. Also, when you're recording to 24-track tape, it's not like everyone could pile six tracks on top of each other. You had a track and you had to make it count. I thought of it like each one of us was a gear. If this is my riff and it's going tick, tick, tick, then you're the smaller gear and you're going

'I wanted to be the band that sells out stadiums, but makes their albums in a garage.'

— Dave Grohl



Dave Grohl, Pat Smear, Chris Shiflett, Nate Mendel, Taylor Hawkins

tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. Then the next guitar player is doing the chorus riff that's going tick-tick-tick-tick-tick. Throw those three gears together and you wind up with a percussive composition of guitar riffs.

MENDEL: A lot of the time he'll play baritone guitar, in the range halfway between a bass and a guitar, so sometimes he's playing my lines, sometimes he'll be playing something independent of Chris and Dave and sometimes he'll be playing one of Chris' or Dave's parts.

How did Krist come to play on the record?

GROHL: We go way back. We've always been close, always kept in touch and see each other often. I love Krist, and we're still very much connected by everything that happened—the good things and the bad. He's come down and sung backup on a Foo Fighters record before [on 2002's "Walking a Line"], and he's always been a part of our world. I thought it was a good opportunity for Krist, Butch and me to have a personal reunion. Honestly, the song was kind of secondary. To sit in a

room with Krist and Butch for the first time in 20 years, together in front of a pair of speakers, was heavy. It was something deeply personal, and something very necessary. It didn't get too far gone, like men

crying in men's arms or anything, but it definitely had some weight to it that's a little different than just hanging out with your buddies in a control room. And then the song turned out great. You forget that

Krist has a real signature sound when he plays bass.

Nate, was that awkward for the bass player?

MENDEL: It's strange to have another bass player on the album, but it's almost like he's doing a lead—he could just as well be playing guitar. It's like he's playing lead bass on this one section of one song. It was cool to have him come in and do that.

What is your songwriting process like?

GROHL: The foundation is usually Taylor and me. I'll come up with some vague structure of a song, with a melodic idea and a vocal melody, and Taylor and I will sit down and do demos together just to find a tempo and dynamic. The two of us go into the initial demo process with so many ideas you wouldn't even want to waste everybody else's time on them. We'll come in and do 30 song ideas in five days, then walk away enjoying about five of them—then we'll do the same thing a couple of months later. Once I feel like a song is going somewhere, I'll elaborate and work on it myself, and if it seems like it's worth showing the other guys in the band I'll do that. Then everybody starts coming up with parts and it becomes a song.

MENDEL: Dave's the songwriter in the band. He will bring a song in, and it can be anywhere from a nearly finished demo that he's played everything on to something as simple as a verse and a chorus that he'll play for us on

'The idea with this band from the start has been that it's going to be friends making music.' – Nate Mendel

FOOS ON FILM

A new movie by Oscar-winning director James Moll, *Back and Forth*, documents not just the making of the Foo Fighters' latest album, *Wasting Light*, but the sometimes tumultuous journey of the group up until this point. "Having been a band for 16 years, it was time to take a look at the past and document it now before there's too much history to put into a movie," says bass player Nate Mendel. "It seemed like a cool way to tie the past and future." Mendel

acknowledges that the presence of Moll's cameras during the sessions was initially distracting, but the group soon became accustomed to it. "You have to make your peace with the idea of being filmed," he says. "You can't worry about whether you're going to say or do something that you're going to regret later. I'd just pretend they weren't there and try to be myself, figuring that if there's something I wasn't 100 percent comfortable with, at least it was honest."

acoustic guitar. Then we'll go in and alter the song from there.

How has the personal dynamic in the band changed over the years?

MENDEL: The idea with this band from the start has been that it's going to be friends making music, and it's not going to be a business enterprise. That's still the way it is. We were just in the U.K. on a promo tour and had three vans to travel in—and we all ended up piling into one cramped van, with two empty vans following us around. We just wanted to hang out. There's no shortage of opportunities to get tense with your bandmates in a situation like this. It can be a contentious experience. But we found a way to work through that element of being in a band and still remain friends.

Do you feel an obligation to sound like the Foo Fighters?

GROHL: Absolutely. It's funny, for a long time I tried to make that definition as broad and as vague as possible: Here's a mandolin, and it's a bossa nova tempo! OK, this one has the vocals distorted and it's 270 bpm! It was always important not to paint ourselves into a corner stylistically. Even on the first record, I remember writing "Big Me" and thinking, "Wait a minute, this doesn't sound like 'Wattershed.' This is way too bubblegum pop." On the next record [*The Colour and the Shape*, 1997] we did the same thing with songs like "See You," "February Stars" or "Walking After You"—feeling like we had to broaden the dynamic in order to ensure some sort of longevity. The last two albums were exaggerated examples of that. "Let's make a double record and do one CD rock and the other CD acoustic, then let's go on acoustic tours!" It was necessary for us to go there musically. But now I feel like I can go out and be a musical schizophrenic in other places, but here at the Foo Fighters headquarters, we do what we do.

Do you have a goal for the band?

GROHL: After this long it becomes something more than just music and instruments and tours and buses. It's like a family. We're fathers with children. I mean, we're *men*. As Nate likes to say, we're adults in a rock band. How about that? Our families are all family, and we've lived and worked with each other for so long that I can't imagine it going away. **M**



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Dave Grohl and Nate Mendel discuss the instruments they used to record *Wasting Light*.

GROHL: "On this record I played mostly Gibson Trini Lopez guitars. I have a few from the mid- to late-'60s, a couple of Pelham blue and a few red ones, and they're all great. I used my Gibson DG-335 [Grohl's signature model] on a few songs, but those vintage Trini Lopez guitars have this percussive element that lends itself to everything we do. When I play guitar, I kind of play it like a drum set. When I'm playing riffs I'm using the low E, A and D strings like they're kicks and snares, then I let

the high strings ring out like cymbals over the choruses. With the Trini, you've got all that string between the bridge and the tailpiece, so the chime you get out of each chord is pretty spectacular."

MENDEL: "A lot of times people will try to find a different sound on every song, or something that's more suited to the nature of one song over another. But on this one I just used a Lakland bass and an Ashdown amp—we got a good sound and just stuck with it. We tried another bass on one song and the sound wasn't as good, so we stuck with the production-line Lakland/Ashdown combination."