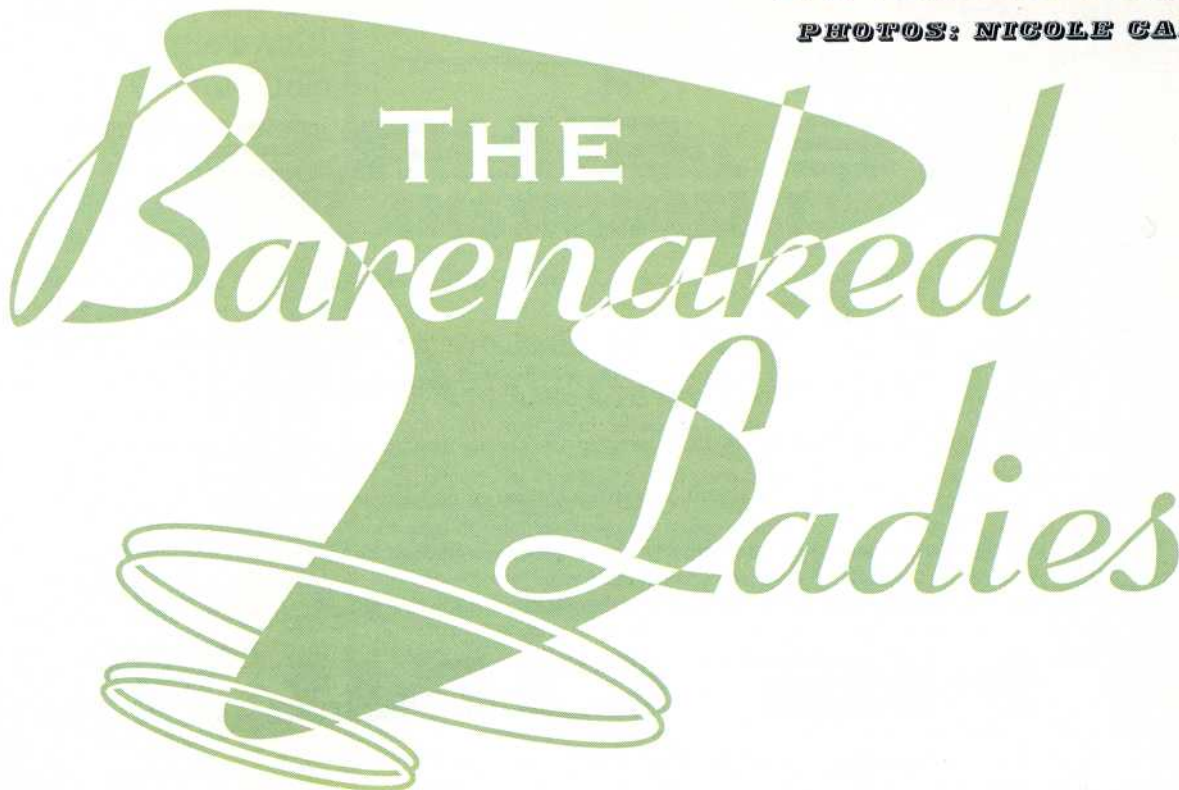


BY CRAIG JONES

PHOTOS: NICOLE GALOW



# THE Barenaked Ladies

## *Maybe You Should Drive ...*

The sound is constant from behind the door of Studio B at Vancouver's Greenhouse Studios where the Barenaked Ladies are in the second day of laying the beds for their sophomore release, *Maybe You Should Drive*. Jason Mauza, assistant engineer, emerges from the console room shaking his head. "These guys," he says, "are so tight it's insane."

It's true. Behind the hype and middle-class Bohemian hipness, one thing demands attention — the Barenaked Ladies can play. Gone are the pop-culture pokes and P.C.-weary wit that helped make the debut album *Gordon* an enormous Gen-X success. The catchy tunes remain, but the lyrical content and overall mood has matured.

*Canadian Musician* spent several days in the studio with BNL, trying to find out what made them tick musically, and what made this second album both a departure and a natural progression from their multi-platinum past.

"I don't think it's forced," says singer/guitarist Steven Page, referring to the new material. "Nobody sat down and said 'let's make our serious record now', we just started writing. I'd had a bit of a dry spell, only writing two or three songs be-

tween *Gordon* and last fall."

Page overcame this writer's block with the aid of co-writer Stephen Duffy. "He was my hero growing up," recounts Page. "He called himself Tintin for awhile and was in a band called The Lilac Time, and I was always a huge fan." Duffy co-wrote four songs on the new album and broke Page's losing streak. "I think I learned a lot about discipline from him and I wrote two or three more songs. He's a very disciplined writer — I'm really scattershot."

The song 'Great Provider' stands out as one of the first collaborative efforts between Page and Ed Robertson, whose teaming up in 1988 marked the beginning of BNL. "It must be five years old," says Page, "but we totally changed the whole vibe and the sound of it; it's a really funky thing now." That funk is provided by Page, Robertson, drummer Tyler

Stewart and the classically-trained sibling team of bassist Jim Creeggan and percussionist/pianist Andy Creeggan.

Few Canadian pop bands can boast the collective formal training of the Barenaked Ladies. Steven Page endured ten years of piano ("I still can't play," he claims), a minor in theory and choral studies at York University and a stint in the Toronto Mendelssohn Youth Choir before Barenaked fame called him away. Drummer Tyler Stewart cut his teeth in a military drum and bugle corps, as well as high school band. Then there's the Creeggans, veterans of the Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra, college and years of private lessons. Ed Robertson is the only completely self-taught musician in the group.

Talking to the Barenaked Ladies is a little like surfing on a sea of puns, double entendres and non-sequiturs. They are rarely perfectly serious, apparently seeing 'perfect' and 'serious' as mutually exclusive terms. This humour is a mainstay of their music, perhaps because of their varied and revealing musical influences.

"I grew up being a huge Beatles fan," says Steve, contrasting his tastes with those of Ed, who was raised in a country music household before discovering Rush and Max Webster. "That was probably my biggest influence in my formative years. For this album, I was listening to a lot of Randy Newman. He's a great writer."

"And a snappy dresser, too," opines Ed.

"I like Randy Newman and Elvis Costello," notes Page, "because they both temper their mean-spiritedness with humour and temper their humour with . . . I don't know, with mean-spiritedness maybe (laughs). It's a different humour on this record, not as referential, not as pop

culture-saturated, not the Jerry Seinfeldisms on every song, which the last record had a lot of. There's probably a little more sincerity on this record than on *Gordon*; it's a little more introspective. There's still humour, but it's different."

Another departure from *Gordon* was the selection of producer Ben Mink, renowned as k.d. lang's right-hand man and the producer of her Grammy-award winner, *Ingenué*. The selection process, like much of the Ladies' existence, was comfortably informal.

"We told him 'we love the stuff you did with k.d., but we don't want it to sound anything like that'," recalls Andy, "and he said, 'Why would I want to do that?'"

Mink has a reputation as a relentless perfectionist, preferring a much more layered sound than Michael Phillip Wojewoda, the producer who helped give *Gordon* its infectious live feel. According to the band members, Mink's meticulousness both complemented and clashed with their own looser style — with positive results.

Steve Page elaborates: "Ben is really the captain of the ship, steering it around. We're still the band, everything

we play is ours, the parts are ours, but I feel like he's at the helm. Working with Michael was a more collaborative effort, not to say that this isn't collaborative. On a second album, it's the first time you can open your eyes and go 'Oh, these are the other things in the world', because we've only been used to one thing. It was a first for us, you know, flying background vocals all over the place and compiling tracks from eight or ten takes, but I know this is going to sound great."

Two months after the first tracking sessions, Tyler interrupts the deadly serious business of watching the Stanley Cup semifinals in the studio lounge (you just know the Toronto-Vancouver series is mandatory viewing around here) by popping in a cassette of the first complete mixed song, 'A'. Steve and Jim leap to their feet and do a jig — actually a fair imitation of seaweed square dancing! The song is, well, infectious, propelling Steve into his best Steve Martin/King Tut routine. The Barenaked Ladies, it seems, are not *that* serious.

## Jim Creeggan's STANDUP ROUTINE

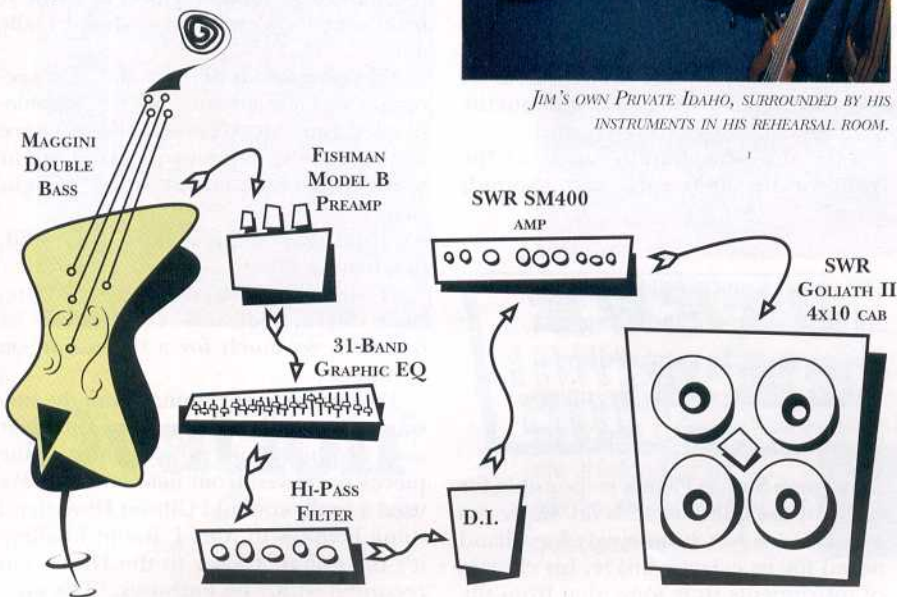


JIM'S OWN PRIVATE IDAHO, SURROUNDED BY HIS INSTRUMENTS IN HIS REHEARSAL ROOM.

Jim Creeggan is tall and articulate, a classically-trained musician wholly dedicated to his craft. Like everyone in the band, he is something of a multi-instrumentalist, but the BNL's lanky, carrot-topped bottom-end man is most closely identified with the enormous double bass that he plays bowed or 'pizz' (short for pizzicato) in the band's frenetic videos. This particular instrument has an interesting story, which Jim recounts:

"It's made by a guy from Montreal named Jacques Gagnon. Apparently, he used to work in the Montreal Symphony and he'd go to cruise ships and give the guys in the ships' bands a thousand bucks for their bass, some old amazing bass. Then he'd fix it up and sell it. Eventually, he designed a bass around a (c.1625) design by (Giovanni Paolo) Maggini, and he has these amazing master woodworkers in the Philippines making them from the plans. They'd probably never even seen a bass before." Creeggan's 1988 Gagnon/Maggini is strung with Pirastro Flexicor strings on the A, D and G, with a Thomastik Red End E-string "for a good growl". The bass is fitted with a Wilson WW pickup system in the bridge, con-

### JIM CREEGGAN'S SIGNAL CHAIN (LIVE)



# THE Barenaked Ladies

ment of the massive Gagnon/Maggini? "I don't know, we'll see. I'll probably be using both onstage."

Also in Jim's prized collection is a blond Ken Smith 5-string and an early '70s Fender Jazz Bass. He's also been playing a lot lately with effects, particularly an old Electro-

Harmonix Doctor Q Envelope Follower, an effect similar to an auto-wah that Jim wants to incorporate into his live show.

All of Jim's basses are played through his amp of choice, an SWR SM400 with Goliath II 4 x 10" cabinet, occasionally augmented by a pair of Eden 1 x 15" cabs. He always runs the amp in bridged (mono) mode and employs a graphic EQ in his signal chain for feedback reduction, particularly with the acoustic double bass. His studio sound is a combination of mic'd acoustic, mic'd amp and DI. Live, he runs his bass into the EQ and a

mainstream.

His favourite electrics are a 1993 Fender Jazzmaster Reissue and an early 1980s Gibson Sonex ("It's like Gibson's own Squier-type, a cheapo-deapo. I think it cost \$120 at Long & McQuade and the pickups are falling out, but it sounds great").

Talking to Steve about his amps, you quickly realize that the guy isn't troubled by too much deep technical thought. Getting him to open up about his gear is akin to interviewing Stephen Hawking about his choice of footwear — it just doesn't seem that important. "For an amp, I have a Musicman (HD1) head that I bought in a music shop in Fredericton," he allows. "I put a couple of Celestion 30s in a Doyle cabinet — sounds great. I've also been using the (Reissue Vox) AC-30 a lot too in the studio."

Page's current favourite for acoustics is a small-bodied Taylor. "It's a little thin-sounding with the pickup," he laments, "but at least it sounds like a guitar. I like

ned to a Fishman Model B preamp, a combination that is less than perfect for some of Jim's bowing techniques.

"Playing live with the double bass, the pickup just wasn't catching the bowed solos. The double bass is like a big 'sound sail'; with all the vibrations going through it, it caused complications when bowed.



IN THE STUDIO ONE SPENDS A LOT OF TIME AWAITING CUES. HERE ED ROBERTSON AND STEVE PAGE MAKE DO WITH WHAT'S AT HAND.



ANDY CREEGAN IN THE STUDIO SURROUNDED BY A SAMPLING OF HIS INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS.



TYLER STEWART POSES WITH RAY AOYOTTE AT THE AOYOTTE FACTORY SHOWROOM IN VANCOUVER. TYLER HOLDS THE SNARE SHELL OF HIS CUSTOM KIT UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

The WW pickup is great for pizz passages — I can control the feedback, but it relies a lot on the bounceback of the top of the bass. So if I go to a solid-body bass to eliminate feedback, I need to look at a different pickup system."

Jim hopes that his most recent purchase, a Zeta bass, will cover all his requirements. The solid-body ZB244 is fitted with an extra magnetic pickup in addition to the stock piezos, providing a better sound for bowed passages. "It sounds so incredible. Ben loves it. We weren't going to use a solid-body on the album, but this one is so sweet we decided to go ahead and play some parts with it."

Jim is optimistic that the Zeta will provide a live bass that is immune to feedback and great for either bowed or plucked lines, which often follow each other too closely to allow switching instruments mid-song. Will this mean the retire-

high pass filter (for the Maggini, shelving subharmonic frequencies below 20 Hz to improve amp efficiency and eliminate unwanted undertones). From there, a DI takes the signal to the board and into the SWR as a monitor (See Diagram).

Like the little button taped to the front of his amp rack says, 'sounds great!'



Frontman Steven Page is responsible for many of the guitar sounds on *Maybe You Should Drive*. Not surprisingly for a band noted for its eclectic image, his choices of instruments stray somewhat from the

look of a smaller guitar because it makes me look even huger than I really am."

Ed Robertson is perhaps the most recognizable Lady, all quick wit and stubble-headed anti-chic. When Ed and Steve are in the same room, anyone else present tends to become an unwitting straight man.

"I use real catgut strings," offers Ed, deadpan.

"I use human skin strings instead!" retorts Steve, political correctness be damned. So much for a discussion on strings.

Ed is more forthcoming about the substantial collection of guitars and gear used on this album project, most of the pieces borrowed from near and far. "We used a really cool old Gibson Dove that I think belongs to Alex Lifeson; I believe it's the guitar 'Closer to the Heart' was recorded with," he enthuses. "The elec-

tric that I like most is a Casio MG that I played. It's a MIDI guitar, but we just used the straight sounds on it and it sounds amazing. Other acoustics I've used a lot is the Takamine Special that was built for k.d. lang and a couple of really old Washburns that Ben has. I tend to like the sound of older Gibsons, just that real warm body sound. That's why I've been using the old Gibson on this; that and the Washburns — they're tiny little guitars and they sound huge, just great."

Ben Mink elaborates: "There's a refurbished 1910 Washburn and another Washburn, about 1930. I actually think that the Takamine (k.d. lang's custom PT408) was modeled after the Wash-

burns. They're both mine. We used the Gibson Dove (mid-'70s) that belongs to the guys in Rush and a Martin guitar, a D18 from around 1960. We also used a Grit Laskin Mandola. It's from a builder in Toronto, it's like a mandolin with a longer neck, eight strings."

Mink, an accomplished musician in his own right, added multitracked violin and viola parts to Jim Creeggan's cello and bass to form the string section heard at the end of the song 'A'.

Ed Robertson also added pedal steel guitar parts, using a mid-'70s Sho-Bud twelve-string model with an extended E9 tuning. Ed professes to know little about amps and electronics, and is still shop-

ping around for electric gear for their forthcoming tour. His main amps for the project were the reissue Vox, a Fender Twin, a silverface Fender Bassman 10 4x10" combo that belongs to Colin James, and a Fender Deluxe Reverb 2x10".

Effects? Steve and Ed don't really use them. "I used to use a lot of chorus live, but not lately," says Ed, "we'll see."

"Chorus-y guitar is just a little too '80s now, though," offers Steve.

"You can never be too '80s," argues Ed. "True," Steve concedes, smiling.



Andy Creeggan fills many shoes in his role as the band's designated 'Research and Development Guy'. For his piano parts on the record, Andy used a pair of Yamaha C7 Grand Pianos, one at The Armoury Studios (Jim Vallance's studio, where the band did extensive overdubs) and one at Greenhouse. At home, he is the proud owner of a six foot Yamaha MIDI Grand piano, which he takes to gigs wherever possible. He uses a Mark I Rhodes Seventy-Three electric piano extensively and a Hammond B3 organ with Leslie cabinet may also be heard on the new album, along with a tiny reed organ of indeterminate origin. "I'm also really excited about the accordian," enthuses Andy, "you'll probably be hearing it more in the band."

Andy balanced his classical piano education with a deep immersion into percussion, learning classical techniques during a five-year stint with the All-Scarborough Wind Symphony. Show-stopping timpani solos were, according to his brother Jim, Andy's trademark at Toronto Symphony Youth Orchestra concerts. This background, combined with his love of contemporary jazz a la Pat Metheny, led to an abiding interest in freer forms of music and his current ambition, "to combine the technique of classical with the attitude of jazz".

Perhaps most intriguing is Andy's obsession with percussion instruments of far-away lands. "I'm really into ethnic percussion," he says. "One of my favourite instruments right now is called the Udu. It might not show up on the Ladies' stuff, but I really love to play it. The design's from Nigeria, but this one's made in Freehold, NY by a guy named Frank Giorgini. I'm really excited about it."

Also on the album are Andy's trademark Latin Percussion Classic Congas, a hammered dulcimer and African durabake and dumbek hand drums. He's also keen on something from Brazil called a Pandeiro. "It's like a tambou-

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rine, but you play it like a conga. You can change the tone by pressing harder on the skin with your other hand."

Another Brazilian instrument previously heard on *Gordon* is called a Cuica. "It's like a drum, but the skin has a rattan stick attached to it and you rub the stick with a wet cloth or something get this whacky noise. You can recognize it at the beginning of 'Enid'," says Andy, imitating the instrument's almost elephant-tine whoop.

Although Andy is modest about the importance of his contribution to the 'BNL sound', dismissing his role as "mostly colour", the unusual addition of such diverse instrumentation into a pop format is arguably one of the band's most endearing trademarks.



Tyler Stewart somehow always looks coiled to spring, kind of a friendly, determined pitbull with mini-dreadlocks and a steel trap mind. A very nice guy, but something about him says don't piss him off. He learned to drum through "school bands, garage bands and the drum and bugle corps", eventually becoming attracted to the Barenaked Ladies by their "similar sense of humour".

He rattles off a gear list as though he's been cramming for an exam all night: "I use Sabian cymbals; I like smaller, thinner cymbals — they tend to be bright, aren't too loud and don't ring too much. I've got 15" Extra Thin and 16" Medium Thin crashes, 20" Rock Ride, 18" Hand-Hammered Chinese and two splash cymbals, 8" and 10" AAX Stage Crash. All the cymbals are HH Series, and I use 13" hi-hats. I like the small hi-hats for the crispy, little sound."

Tyler took advantage of recording in Vancouver to visit the local factory of Ayotte Drums, where he ordered a Custom Wood Hoop six-piece in deep forest green. The sizes of this kit, which will be his touring mainstay, are 6x14" 25-ply snare, 10x9" and 12x10" toms, 14 and 16" floor toms and 22x16" kick. Tyler's usual kit will likely omit the larger tom and floor tom.

"Ray (Ayotte) is building the kit right now; I didn't use it on the album because it's not ready. I used another Ayotte kit, mainly a 22" bass drum, 12" tom, 15 or occasionally 16" floor tom. For snare drums, I alternated between a wood-hoop Ayotte 14", a 14" wooden Tama piccolo, which I did most of the work with, and my old 1960s Gretsch white marine pearl snare."

Ray Ayotte adds that in addition to the kit, he is also building a 'cocktail drum' for Tyler. "It's for his busking," says Ayotte, referring to the band's penchant for impromptu outdoor concert-giving, "it's like a floor tom, only the bottom head is played with a kick drum pedal and the top head is played like a snare. It's a one-piece drumkit."

Tyler is pleased with the sounds he was able to capture on the new record. "The drum sounds are really great, most of them are just live off the floor. Marc Rammer is a great engineer for that. I'm really happy with the tracks. I worked with a click track this time — on *Gordon* I was terrified of it — but this time I seemed to

work with it naturally. We'd come up with patterns on the Roland R8 that were fun to play along to, and Ben or Marc would program in a funky click. The key to that is to program the click on the beats that you're not playing, something that doesn't get in the way of the part you are playing. It's trial and error, like everything else in life."

Tyler uses Pearl hardware, built around the DX-1 drum rack, Camco bass drum pedals and 5A sticks of no particular brand.

*Craig Jones is a freelance writer based in Vancouver, BC.*

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