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Finding Analog in the Digital With Yo La Tengo
by Bren Davies, photo by Brian T. Silak

PHOTOGRAPHER BRIAN T. SILAK AND I MET UP WITH INDIE ROCK LEGENDS YO LA TENGO at the SOHO Manhattan offices of Matador Records. We discussed the evolution of the band's songwriting and recording process throughout the course of their 30-plus year career, culminating in the lush soundscape of their 15th album, and newest release, *There's a Riot Going On*. It was an interesting conversation, and I may have gotten Ira Kaplan, Georgia Hubley, and James McNew [*Tape Op* #8] to open up about a few things.

Let's talk about your recording process, and how it has evolved over the years.

JM [to Ira and Georgia]: Where did you make that first single?

GH: Water Music [in Hoboken, NJ].

IK: With the first single ["The River of Water"], the first album [*Ride the Tiger*], and the second album [*New Wave Hot Dogs*], I think we just went to studios and recorded. We had never made a demo before, or anything like that. The first time we ever made demos, in any fashion, were the songs on *President Yo La Tengo* [third album]. Our pal, Tara [Key] from Antietam, came over with a state of the art Tascam 4-track cassette recorder and recorded us. Sadly, nobody can find that recording – I wish we had it. But things have really evolved, like so many things about our band, thanks to James. As you can tell by the Dump discography [James's own recordings, outside of his work with YLT], he's the most prolific recorder of the three of us. That kind of focus on rehearsal recordings; more and more of that happened [after James joined]. Then our friend, Fred Brockman, ended up sharing a Hoboken [New Jersey] rehearsal space with us. He put in an 8-track studio when we were there, and we split time. He recorded a bunch of demos for us – by far the most evolved demos we'd ever done, for *Painful* [6th album]. Some of them ended up on *Genius + Love*.

JM: "Nutricia" I think ended up on the [*From a*] *Motel* 6 single.

IK: Oh, Fred recorded that? I don't remember. Fred also did the first session with Jad Fair that became *Strange But True*. That session had a huge impact on our songwriting. We made up songs on the spot for Jad to sing along with. We enjoyed that so much that we just kept doing it, which put even more emphasis on documenting the things we were making up at practice; and also because things were happening only once.

JM: That's when we really started recording our practices, or at least being ready to record a rough version of practice, whether it was on a boombox or a recorder. As time went on we graduated from the boombox to a MiniDisc player. Here and there we found opportunities to put out some of those, like [a cover of The Ramones'] "Blitzkrieg Bop." That's just a rehearsal recording that we made.

IK: That was a 4-track cassette recording. Or 3-track! "Surfin' With The Shah," "Gooseneck Problem," were some of the other things from that day.

JM: Then later it was "Blue/Green Arrow," as well as the Earworm [Records] and Planet [Records] singles. Some of the Planet stuff is live.

Some things that you hadn't necessarily intended to release, but were just documenting for songwriting purposes, as well as to keep track of – later on you decided to release them on the *Genius + Love* collection?

IK: We did more of it as time went on. *Fade* [13th album] was the biggest change.

GH: Once we moved out of Jersey City, things were set up a little differently.

IK [to James]: You were already doing Dump on computer prior to doing our soundtrack?

JM: True.

IK: Had you recorded Yo La Tengo on a computer before we did film projects?

JM: I don't think so. We had done little project-y things here and there, but nothing official. There were little spec things that never came out. I started on Cool Edit Pro, kind of a Playskool version of Pro Tools. We gave up and started using Pro Tools in 2003 or 2004. We bought a Digi 002 and hauled it over to the practice space.

I want to talk about the collaborative group writing process that evolved out of your rehearsals – as opposed to one band member crafting some lyrics with a structure. How has this approach to group songwriting affected your recording process?

GH: It's been moving in that direction for a while. Certainly with *Fade*, James was doing a lot of recording of songs that we ended up augmenting and using when we made the record with John McEntire [*Tape Op* #23]. I think we also released at least one song that was just a straight-up version of one of James's recordings. We had done things like that before, but that album cemented that way of working for us. We did some movie soundtracks, and that would be another thing that helped us focus. At some point we started doing certain pieces on a grid almost – so that we could throw anything in there and it would be in time.

That's definitely a different approach to composition.

JM: Oh, yeah.

IK: I can't remember the last time we used a format other than the computer for recording. We used the MiniDisc for quick recordings, "Okay, that sounds good. Let's throw it on the MiniDisc." But, at a certain point, James got nimble enough that he'd throw up two microphones and make a stereo recording. Not every computer recording that we have is multitrack. We ended up having this stockpile of all sorts of different types of things on the computer. I think that the more we had on the computer, the more we got used to working with it. There would be days every couple of months when we'd try to remind ourselves what all of these files were. I think that became a whole way of thinking and working, as well as seeing what we could do with those recordings, rather than it being "the song" coming out of us playing together. On [*There's a Riot Going On*] maybe 14 of the 15 songs came out of listening to a recording and figuring out how we could work with it to build a song.

So it evolved over time, from a writing approach to a recording approach.

IK: The songs were definitely recorded before they were written.

How much of the sonic cohesiveness over the course of any one of your albums is a reflection of this process that we've been discussing?

GH: It probably has a lot to do with personality and taste. It's also how we play, which has evolved over time as well. I don't know that there's a straight-up answer to that, because you're talking about a pretty long period of time. Certainly, and this is kind of to the side of what you brought up, but I think that [choosing the order of the songs] has always been a key part of making a record. I love doing it.

Is that something you've personally taken a strong role in?

GH: I have on a bunch of our records. I've never done all of it by myself, but I know that on past records I would come up with an idea and then people would have an opinion. Then it would change. This time, I think it was more [of a group decision], but I know there were specific [choices that I made]. But we'd work on it together and get it to where we think it works as a piece.

IK: I don't think we're aware that what we're working on is, or is not, cohesive or has a mood that runs through what we're doing. We're not listening to individual songs with that in mind. I think that we're just confident that when we're done mixing, we'll find a sequence in which some or all of the songs will hold together in a way that is meaningful to us. The fact that the records have individual and distinct personalities is not surprising, but I don't think it's been the plan.

It just happened as a result of three musicians getting together and creating something at a certain moment in time?

IK: Yeah. There are things that we can be really enthusiastic about and then at a certain point completely lose interest in, or feel like we have to go back to the beginning. Then there are other ones where we just completely forgot about something. Especially with this record, when we could pick the smallest element of a recording and repurpose it. In that sense, it wasn't like, "This would make a great song." It was more like, "This will make the basis of something we'd like to work on for the next week."

JM: It was super fun to take time to make mistakes and have accidental discoveries; when we were going for one thing and missing it but finding something else. Then one day we'd be thinking, "You know that one guitar part? Let's just start a new session, mute everything else, and hear that guitar part." Or taking a backing vocal track and building something out of just that – eliminating the middleman of finding a remixer, and instead doing it ourselves.

When I was listening to your discography, I was struck by some very specific production decisions that were made along the way. Certain

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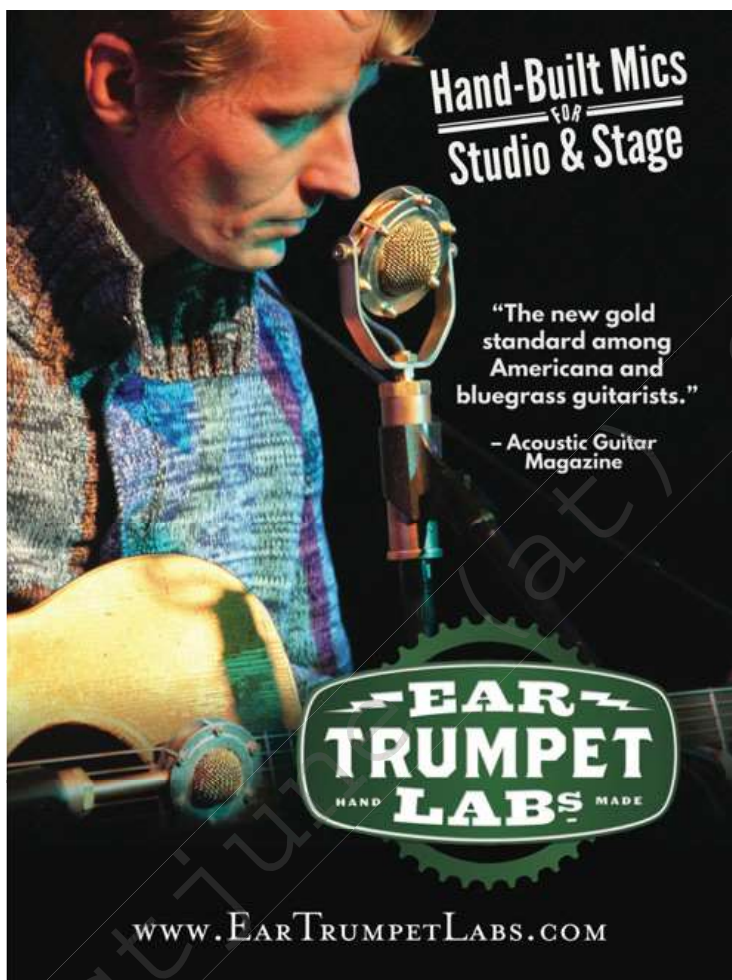


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songs evoked late '50s, early '60s, and other time periods and styles. How many of those "vintage" flavors were thought out in advance? The Ace Tone organ, for example, has a certain "retro" sound.

GH: The Ace Tone was maybe the first organ we had. I think it almost became part of the band, because you heard it on so many of the records.

JM: We devised ways to play it while playing another instrument at the same time, so it was kind of a non-human member of the band. We could duct tape a few keys down, and then turn it on and off when we felt like it.

GH: When we've been in studios and had access to gear we don't own, we definitely made the most of it. "Hey, we should use that thing that weighs two million pounds."

IK: Definitely. The vibes at Alex the Great [Studios, Nashville], for example.

GH: The [Hammond] B3.

IK: As far as evoking certain genres or styles, that depends on the song. There are times when we have specifically tried to do it, and other times when it's accidental, or we [even] tried *not* to.

Your music strikes me as lush and spacious. Who are some of your musical influences?

GH: That's tough. I think it probably goes without saying that all three of us love a lot of different kinds of music. Over time you'll discover something that may have been around for 50 or 60 years, but you only heard it recently.

IK: I think the "influence question"...well, I've run away from it before. I feel like everything influences. The way that it's generally used is to ask, "What are your favorite things?" But you can be just as inspired to *not* do something by something that you encounter. Maybe it doesn't ring true to you. It's not necessarily bad. Of course, I feel like there are influences that are inspiring.

Fans and critics alike have taken a lot of time to surmise about your influences.

GH: I'll do that when I see bands. Like, "Oh, this little thing reminds me of this band, and this little thing reminds me of that."

IK: On the current record, the shoo-wops on "Forever" are unmistakably us imitating "I Only Have Eyes For You." I love that song, but I don't think The Flamingos loom particularly large in any of our lives. But there was just something in that moment where this collective memory... Rather than do something *like* it, we did something...

That was it.

IK: Yeah. It just felt right, in the moment, but I don't think it was a reflection of the influence doo-wop has had on the band.

I've heard Ira discuss that when you're recording an album, you give everything of yourself creatively, and when you're done there's this moment when you wonder whether it's possible to make another album again. But then time passes, and once again there's some sort of pull to create a new record.

JM: I feel like we do, unconsciously, have some kind of internal clock where it just feels like, "Yeah." It's a cycle of write, record, and tour – and then I guess it's time to write some songs again. We don't really stockpile stuff, like write a hundred songs and keep culling them. We empty it out each cycle, for the most part.

GH: And it's of a time. Even if pieces are old, we still feel like this is what we did during this particular period of time. Who knows what the next one will be like?

How did not having an outside producer manifest itself in the music on *There's a Riot Going On*?

IK: I would say that a difference between Roger [Moutenot, *Tape Op* #20] and John McEntire, who produced *Fade*, is that Roger was interested in expressing his opinion, while John was very reluctant to do so. A lot of the dynamic with Roger was that if there was disagreement within the band, Roger was very interested in saying where either he thought one person's opinion was right, or what combination worked, and how we should go about resolving a conflict. John was more like, "Let me know when you guys have decided." I think working with him definitely led to us doing this record ourselves. We got much more adept at establishing consensus, rather than staying heightened where it's like, "I want to try it this way," "I want to try it that way" or, "Maybe we'll do it both ways." Instead, we just worked. I think we've always worked together pretty well.

GH: I think things became more efficient in our communication with each other, and with what we collectively wanted to do. I think it was sort of obvious. We enjoyed doing it ourselves, and James has continued learning more and more about recording.

IK: It also wasn't the plan. I think everyone enjoys having the input. Mixing [*There's a Riot Going On*] with John was fantastic. It wasn't like we thought, "Okay, we're ready to do this ourselves." It was more a function of we were working [that way] for a long time without even realizing. I think, at a point, we still thought we were going to go – whether it was John or someone else – to someone's studio with what we'd been working on and make a record. Somewhere along the line we figured out that not only could we do it ourselves, but we were already a third of the way done.

JM: It was a slow revelation. [It started with] "Are we playing music in front of people?" That's crazy! I never thought I could do that! [And then it was] "Are we writing songs?" That's unheard of! [And then] "Are we self-engineering a record?" That's impossible! That's crazy!

It was a logical step along the evolution of the band.

JM: It was a really awesome feeling. And now, 30-some years on...

IK: I don't think there's any feeling like, "We'll never work with someone else again. This is now what we do." It's just what we did.

You've made some very interesting production decisions over the years. I heard an interview where Ira talked about the use of heavily-processed toilet flushing and air conditioner banging in one of your songs, "Big Day Coming."

IK: Yes. That toilet, that was Roger's idea – I'm almost 100 percent sure.

JM: Oh, yeah. The toilet and the Eventide Harmonizer.

IK: We wanted to record singing in the bathroom.

Because of the tiles and natural reverberation?

IK: Yeah. But because the lyrics were written late, we needed lyric sheets. The fluorescent light in the bathroom was humming and creating a problem. Roger's solution was to take the hum and process it. Once that was done, we added the toilet.

GH: We recorded in the bathroom on *Fade* a couple of times. We did some vocals in there.

JM: That's true. Drums too.

Since you had so much freedom at your rehearsal space during the process of recording this new album, are there any similar creative production techniques that you used?

JM: The air conditioner was left on the cutting room floor this time, sorry to say.

IK: That'll be a bonus track, at some point. There was a guitar solo that we recorded on this record where we used multiple microphones. One of them was a microphone built by our guitar tech, who's also a really great solo and group musician on his own, Kevin Micka. He has a group called Animal Hospital. He built us a contact microphone inside a Twinings tea box; a little aluminum box with a quarter-inch jack. We actually took the box and duct taped it to an amplifier. It sounded like the end of the world. That was a lot of fun.

That made it onto one of the tracks on your album?

JM: Sure did.

Can you tell us which one, or do we have to figure it out?

JM: I think you can figure it out.

IK: One of the songs starts with a soundcheck. We were sitting on stage waiting to play, and Georgia started playing a drum beat. I was sitting at a keyboard and just starting playing along with her. James took out his iPhone and recorded 30 seconds. We ended up looping it, and built a whole song around it.

Were there any times when making a decision was more challenging, when there was an impasse compared to what might have happened on previous albums with an external producer?

GH: We hit some snags, but you get through.

JM: There was a lot of tech stuff that happened while we were recording. I had to make crazy gain structure decisions based on, "Okay, we need this now!" Trying to find solutions to problems. Then there were the very humbling moments of taking the sessions to John and having him redo some of my gain structures.

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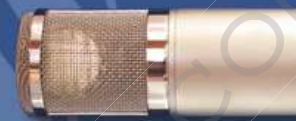
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1953 - 1963 ...

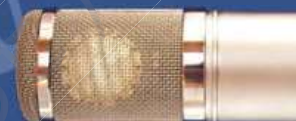
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IK: It's funny that you say humbling. My recollection of it is different. In one of those cases where John took something that we had done "wrong" and made it right, it didn't sound as good anymore. One of the reasons we avoided demos for so many years is the amount of time that you can spend chasing the rough mix or demo. It's like, "Why do I like our old version better?" He finally went back to the wrong gain structure, and I was like, "Yeah, that's what we like." That's what we ended up using. Digital recording, as far as I understand, is not supposed to work that way. That sounds like analog, when you oversaturate. Somehow we managed to find analog in the digital.

JM: We broke it! A lot of the songs that got recorded were really spontaneous. A lot of it was happening for the first time, unrehearsed, and just naturally being played. A lot of our technical decisions followed that emotionally, and we preserved the feeling of spontaneous discovery – on every level.

GH: Even with Roger, he was great. He went along with a lot that was not "done the right way." There's one instance where I was playing something and working it out the tape was running. I hadn't really figured out what I was going to do yet. We all liked it so much better. He hadn't mic'd things up the way he planned to, but we decided to go with it anyway.

IK: Well, Georgia tried to turn it into a part and make it better, but it just didn't...

GH: It didn't have the same feeling.

Given that this band has operated on the fringes of the music business and created a successful model over the years, how have recent changes in the music business affected Yo La Tengo?

JM [laughing]: Oh, I'm afraid we're out of time!

GH: The fringe still stays the same.

IK: We could rage against downloading. We could rage against streaming and all of those things. You're not going to change it, so you may as well just do what you do. I think the three of us have loved working together for a long time – in a lot of ways even more so now than we used to. A lot of that is just us trying our best to ignore what's going on around us. ☺

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