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Tape Op

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

DAVE FRIDMANN

Producing the Flaming Lips and more

MERCURY REV

Talk about Dave Fridmann

WHARTON TIERS

Recording Sonic Youth and more

ROBYN HITCHCOCK

Songs, not sounds

WEEN

Recording vocals in car trunks

ILLYAH KURYAKIN

Apartment life and new sounds

OLIVIA TREMOR CONTROL

Genius deconstruction

PHILL BROWN

Traffic sessions, 1968

RECORDING RECIPES

RECORDING DRUMS



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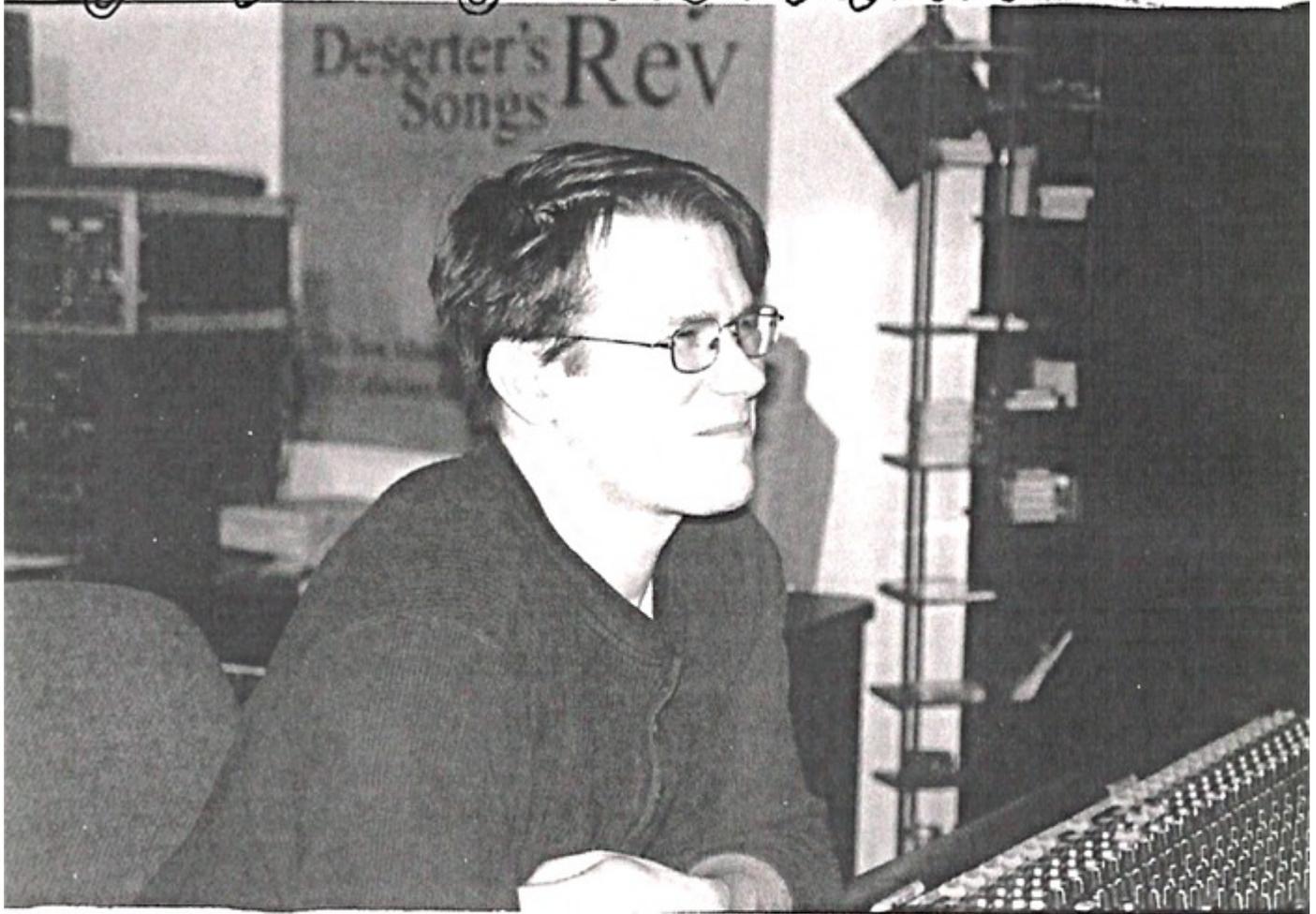
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TUBES
OF

Dave Fridmann



**Eureka! or: An Account
Of A Person Who's Ear Is
In Constant Contact
With Innovative Sounds
In A Rural Setting Away
From Things Like Very
Tall Skyscrapers And Out
Of Tune Ear Drums
Wearing Suits.**

*by Roman Sokal
photos by
Mary Fridmann*

Quaintly nestled in the western region of upstate New York, USA, between Buffalo and Erie, Pennsylvania, lies a small blink-and-you'll-miss-it town named Cassadaga; a place where maybe the most exciting thing going on might be someone filling up their vehicle with gasoline. While existence in any small community may lend itself to being very quiet and seemingly uneventful, Cassadaga in particular, just so happens to be summoning some of the world's most creative and acclaimed musical recording artists. The source responsible for this phenomenon points

towards nearby Fredonia resident Dave Fridmann: producer, recording engineer, musician and an overall friendly collaborator. His prerogative is different and simple - to fill up tracks.

Young Dave first hits 'Play' - the button with the arrow that points to the right.

The genesis for Fridmann's involvement in the recording arts originated from his days as a high school student in his native Buffalo, New York, suburb of Williamsville. And like many suburbanites

beaming with a jaded-less sense of unlimited hope for a stable and fulfilling future, he made up his mind on what he was going to do. "Like most recording engineers, I wanted to be a rock star," he muses. "I became aware of engineering during my junior high school year through my music teacher who was an alumnus of SUNY at Fredonia. He had heard that they started up a new sound recording program and thought that I might be interested in it." Upon graduating from the binds of high school, Fridmann enrolled in the program to continue his pursuit for rock star lumiance. "It seemed to

me, in a very viable and obvious way, that if I wanted to be a rock star, the best way to do that would be to meet other rock stars, and the easiest way would be to become a studio engineer because that is where rock stars were. That's one way to get in."

Fate or coincidence. Depending on whichever belief system the reader leans toward, it was certain that Fridmann would find himself in a situation that would surely propel his desires into reality - in the role as bass player for a band. "In a lot of ways very much exactly what I hoped would happen did happen," he states matter-of-

factly. With access to the college recording facility's Amek Angela console, Otari MTR-90 Mk II 24-track machine and a band called Mercury Rev, he would get a chance to exercise both his ears and his bass playing. "When early incarnations of Mercury Rev came into the studio to record they didn't have a bass player," he recalls. "I would record their songs and then we'd get to the point when we'd notice, *hmm... gee... we really should put some bass in there, which would be left to last and then I'd say, well, I could play it 'and they'd say, 'Okay, go ahead!' I ended up joining the band which worked out exactly as I'd hoped, which wasn't as it exactly turned out to be what I wanted, but that's what I thought I wanted at the time so it worked out great.*" The resultant product of their first collaboration was 1991's *Yerself Is Steam*, featuring the stratospheric "Frittering", which was primarily recorded at the college and mixed in Argyle, New York, at Sweetfish studio.

Two more collections of songs were transduced onto tape by Fridmann via the college and Sweetfish studios combo; *In A Priest Driven Ambulance* and *Hit To Death In The Future Head*, two albums by a band equally and colorfully known as The Flaming Lips. He recalls how he first became acquainted with the Oklahoma-based group. "Jonathan [Donahue] from Mercury Rev went to college in Buffalo and was a promoter there who became friends with The Flaming Lips and eventually became their tour manager. He'd be on tour with them and couldn't really do their live sound well and once they could afford a live sound person, he asked me to do it. By then I had been doing Mercury Rev stuff for a while. At the

end of their first tour I knew they were going into the studio and I built up enough courage to tell them they should do it with me. They fell for it, and we ended up doing it and we have been mostly ever since."

During this formative period Fridmann began to apply a certain polishing touch and character to Mercury Rev's final product via a now nearly deleted medium - magnetically striped 35mm film. "Back in the 1950s, 35mm magnetic film sounded better than what was normally available at the time in the world of music technology," he quips. "Some of the old Miles Davis and other jazz stuff were tracked onto that simply for the fidelity. It was a more durable medium as well. That was the inspiration to use it. I thought, *hey, that sounds pretty damn good.*" Ever since first applying that process to the mastering of *Yerself Is Steam*, 35mm magnetically striped film became a staple of every Mercury Rev album.

"Jonathan actually used to be in The Flaming Lips (under the alias 'Dingus') and we've demo'd songs for the Flaming Lips that ended up in the long run being Mercury Rev songs," he reveals. "It's a very incestuous relationship. There's been times when both me, [Mercury Rev guitarist] Grasshopper, Jonathan and The Flaming Lips have all been in the studio at the same time working in the same music." Not only does Fridmann write with both bands, he also aids with constructing

arrangements as well. "Everyone has a lot of common ideas as to what is good and what constitutes good sounds. It's no accident that there are a lot of similarities."

When time came for Mercury Rev to tour and promote themselves worldwide, Fridmann chose to bow out of touring duties. Unlike musical artists of the past such as Syd Barrett and Brian Wilson, both being brilliant yet too detrimentally preoccupied with mental 'crutches' to take on touring, Fridmann was far from being a semi-dysfunctional person. Instead, he opted to stay in the US and work with an array of groups including Syracuse's The Wallmen, Jennyranykind, St. Johnny, Grand Mal and Weezer.

The filament burns bright.

In a blessed 'right time at the right place' situation during the summer of 1997, Fridmann found himself temporarily exchanging his natural habitat for a big learning lesson in the madness that is known as Los Angeles, California. His task was monumental - to co-produce a new track entitled "So What!" for *Kettle Whistle*, a compilation disc by Jane's Addiction, a band that is infinitely distant from 'normality'. "No one wanted a normal sounding set up, so Kevin Haskins from Love and Rockets (a friend of Jane's Addiction's Stephen Perkins) brought in his home studio gear that included samplers and I also borrowed a series of guitar pedals called Love Tones from Joe Barresi." Barresi, an engineer/producer in his own right, first met Fridmann in 1996 during the Weezer Pinkerton sessions, remaining great friends ever since. Fridmann considers Barresi to be the best engineer he knows, someone from whom he has



learned a lot from. Fridmann continues, "I ran the drum loops through the pedals. It was the first time I ever experimented like that especially with something that was so loop-based."

Fridmann also had another concern, a large sized one. "I was very worried about how I was going to get Dave Navarro's sound [Jane's Addiction's guitar player]. I always thought he used some special big rack of gear to get his sound, but instead he shows up to the studio with only a Marshall half-stack and a few pedals. I sent the assistant to mic his amp with an SM57 and didn't even see where he put it and all of a sudden blaring over the speakers was 'DAVE NAVARRO'. And [singer] Perry Farrell became Perry Farrell screaming through an SM58." This was actually first experienced during the sessions for the second Mercury Rev album when John Ashton of The Psychedelic Furs [guitarist] was invited to play on the album. "He came straight from England to Buffalo with absolutely nothing and played only through our gear and he still sounded like The Psychedelic Furs." Fridmann excitedly expands on what he calls a major "revelation" on the Jane's Addiction incident. "What was even weirder was when Flea [from the Red Hot Chili Peppers] played bass. At one point I wasn't looking and Flea handed over his bass to Navarro who started to play it. I wondered to myself why all of a sudden the bass sounded like crap. Then I found out why. Navarro handed the bass back to Flea and all of a sudden it sounded great again. I really didn't have to do anything. The sound literally came out of his fingers!!! The sound was him."

Badminton anyone?

Once Fridmann's personal world expanded into a family unit, the idea of having one conveniently fixed studio close to home where a project can be realized from start to finish became yet another logical idea. Hence in the summer 1997, he, his wife Mary and additional partners Greg Snow and Andrea Wasiura erected what is quickly becoming a mecca for many recording artists - Tarbox Road Studios. Inspired by Sweetfish studios, Tarbox Road is located in Cassadaga a capillary town of Fredonia. The isolated cul-de-sac studio-in-a-house is far from its deceptively rustic shell as it boasts not only creative autonomy, but also allows a client to

practice their badminton skills for recreation purposes if they see fit. It is a place to work that is situated in Dave's preferred rural setting, serving as a place to nurture focus on the work at hand, far, far away from any intrusive big concrete city music 'industry' types. "What I shoot for most of the time is to get clients comfortable just as if they're at home working on their 4-track at 3 AM at their own pace. I may go home at midnight, but I'll leave 2 mics and a DI set-up and tell them what tracks they can record on. It doesn't take a genius to hit play and record. It's a great environment. People just work. They come down [from the studio's bedrooms] the next day in their pajamas and keep working, just like home." The location also tends to make sure that a project maintains 'freshness' to avoid 'studio burn out', or worse, an age-old condition known as 'cabin fever'. "Most bands get sick of being in the sticks, bands tend to record here only in two week segments" he chuckles since that environment does not phase him due to residing in it for a majority of his life. For a Japanese band like Number Girl who came straight from Tokyo to Fredonia, one can imagine the culture shock.



The first project to deflower the new facility was instigated by The Flaming Lips' Wayne Coyne. It was to be a 'modest' project, one that would only involve the creation of four separate compact discs that were meant to play through four exclusive sound systems at once, and whose purpose was to shatter linear storytelling by taking the listener into a new dimension of time and space. It was called *Zaireeka* (the combination of the words *Zaire*, an idealism inspired by the country's state of disarray and chaos; and *Eureka*, the word Coyne used to describe a sudden discovery of an idea that moves forward the creation process. "We weren't sure what would work... we set up Tarbox with *Zaireeka* in mind," Fridmann recalls. "Greg [Snow], who does the tech work here, set up four sets of speakers and four DAT machines. We bought an [80 input] Otari Concept Elite console, which has flexible routing features and is massively automated. We chose it because it would work for *Zaireeka* the way it is... so it would be possible to do all four live simultaneously. He made this really cool box with 4 stereo faders connected together to control the playback level. It looked like an airplane thruster." An example of what goes on with the psychotropic *Zaireeka* is

Wayne Coyne of the Flaming Lips

by Larry Crane

How did you first hook up with Dave?

I think it was through Jonathan Donahue. He was going to Buffalo University with some of the members of Mercury Rev. They were all recording themselves with 4-tracks and they all had brief stints of recording in studios. I think they knew Dave Fridmann just as a friend and he was part of the recording program at Fredonia University. I think, somewhere along the way, those two connected and Dave started recording them. Jonathan, originally was sort of part of our entourage - he would go on tour with us and act like our soundman. Little by little, we progressed onward and Jonathan started playing guitar with us and at the same time it left the soundman position open. Jonathan had said that he knew a guy who was a great soundman. Dave Fridmann came out and he was our live soundman for the summer or so. As we got done with the tour, we went immediately into recording up at his studio where he was working and still doing his graduate degree or something.

What was the first recording you did with him?

It was the *In A Priest Driven Ambulance* record. The very first thing we recorded with him was song called "Unconsciously Screaming" that took us about three weeks. We recorded and did all these things to it and I think we ended up mixing it over 200 different times. After that we realized that, "This is our guy." He's so dedicated to what we do that we can't wear him down. He seemed to have this endless energy and enthusiasm. Right then we decide it was a good way to go. We thought he would eventually come to his senses and say, "These guys are too much work, I want to make money..." but he never did. It seemed like the more we threw at him, the stronger he got and the more he embraced the whole concept of exploration and all of that.

I noticed that there's such a difference in sound from your earlier records.

I think we had reached a point where we were equally frustrated, but equally in awe of the ways of recording. If we can't do it the way we want, we're not going to go back to the old way of trying to wear down some conservative engineer that we end up

working with. That's what we would end up doing - we would get these people who knew how to run the boards, but always laughed at all our ideas. We would eventually wear them down and by 10 o' clock at night they'd be willing to try anything we wanted just so they could go home. [laughter] With Dave, we went in there with the idea of doing what we wanted. By then, we didn't feel what we wanted to do had to be silly - we could try new ideas and not have people roll their eyes all the time. Meeting up with him at that point, with what we were doing and the kind of money that we were able to spend, it was a perfect combination. Recording is like that - you need to have artists, producers and engineers. All of that is important and people think that if you have a great song, the other parts of it don't matter, or if you have a great producer they can do anything. It really isn't that - it's a combination of everybody doing the best that they can. We see that now, with Dave, how important it is to have him being the expert at what he does. He embraces the way that we want to do the impossible. We say, "Dave, we've never done this before, but I think it would be great." You can see him sort of rise to the occasion.

What did he say when you talked about *Zaireeka*? Having the idea of 4 simultaneous CDs - what was his first reaction?

If a movie of that was ever made, I think people probably envision me in the back room looking like Jerry Lewis as the Nutty Professor where I'm concocting these ideas and then I'd walk out and go, "Here's what I'm going to do." In reality, it's just not like that, these ideas come slowly and it's because I know Dave and I could bounce these ideas off of him little by little. But we realized that we could do it, so by the time I said that we were going to do it, it wasn't like he had never heard it before. He assisted me in figuring out that we could do it. The equipment and the computers and all this stuff were coming together and I thought, "I'm not sure how we'll do it, but I think we could do it." Him, being enthusiastic and interested in it, propelled it to the next level. When you're talking about concepts like that, there needs to be this abundance of belief that we can do it and it'll actually be worth listening to once we do it. Art is like that, if everybody doesn't think it's going to work, it doesn't actually happen. You kind of have to think that it will work and it'll be good and then you have this



"Everything is going on all the time, no matter what."

perhaps best depicted in the track "Thirty-Five Thousand Feet Of Despair", which sonically tells the tale of a troubled airplane pilot who commits suicide in the middle of a transatlantic flight. Each disc contains a different perspective of the situation at hand. Disc 1 features a news reporter who awaits the landing at the airport, disc 2 has the pilot walking to the bathroom to meet his demise, disc 3 contains the downtrodden airport ambiance and disc 4 goes subjectively deep inside the mind of the angst-ridden pilot. As one might rapidly come to the conclusion, *Zaireeka*, now sadly out-of-print, is definitely not your everyday standard generic top 40 kitsch.

Their method of taming a behemoth of a project was approached with a need to maintain sanity somehow. *"In general we mixed each CD one at a time so as to have more randomness so things wouldn't sound too perfect. The final product [the CDs] were easy to synchronize but DATs aren't. Most of the time we were listening to it very poly-rhythmically. It was a strange event. It plays more normal for the people who listen to it now than it was for us. We thought it was weirder, which of course, we thought was cool."* In an attempt to sync the aural information so as to have things not be led too astray, Fridmann included a time cue in front of the tracks, similar to a slate used in filmmaking. *"We did the mastering at the studio just to make sure there wasn't any confusion down the line."* In the end, the experiment was deemed a success, and is now a staple for many who enjoy being taken on a ride to previously uncharted

territories of perception. It also makes for great entertainment at parties and by no doubt is highly suitable accompaniment to those who enjoy ingesting substances.

On any given session, be it Mogwai, Home, Delgados, Citizen King, Creeper Lagoon or Toronto's Bodega, Fridmann assesses that the top 3 microphones responsible for picking up the soundwaves from instruments are the tube-based Neumann U47, the RCA 44 ribbon mic and the common day workhorse known as the Shure SM57. Before the gracing signal paths with the warm and omnipotent U47, a pair of Neumann TLM 170s were constantly employed around the clock. *"When I finally got the chance to use a U47, I was shocked and appalled over the superiority it had over the 170s,"* he excitedly reports. When he occasionally ventures to another studio to work, he is sure to pay attention and always keep on the lookout for new mics to induct into the Tarbox tour of duty. Among the ones desired are the Earthworks Omni OC1 and the Coles 4038s, of which he professes would accumulate quite a bit of sonic mileage at his studio.

Dave can see more things that should be heard.

Fridmann also believes in ghosts. Well, sort of. When a client records at Tarbox, their project is subjected to every morsel the facility has to offer. The sounds emanating from a guitar amp for instance, can interestingly transmogrify into a haunting sound in one of the far corners of a

room. And just in case something does go there, a mic will be present to capture the stray sound. Nothing is nothing, not "nothing is everything" as someone once preached. "I always have both of my 24-track MTR-90 II and RADAR Otari's running at the same time. There is no reason not to use them. I have everything going all the time due to the nature of the bands I work with. Most of the projects I work on are 'studio projects'. We're not sure what it is going to be until it's done. We put things down one by one then sometimes do it all over again because minds tend to change so much. Or, you get to the point where you realize what you should have done and you start over and keep going and going. Even the

Dusman, a big mentor of mine from the college, mixed it down to a Genex 24-bit 8000 Series along with Lucid Tech 24-bit converters. He recorded the monitor mix while we were tracking and we would quietly listen back to the Genex recording... and it was absolutely AMAZING. I've been amazed by my RADAR about how quiet it is but when we did the Genex playback, the difference was night and day. The RADAR was noisy and grainy in comparison. Digital is pretty damn good nowadays." When confronted to differentiate between the digital Genex and his analog Otari MTR-90 II, Fridmann meekly assures, "The Genex is remarkably similar, except it doesn't have any noise." After numerous trial

big period where it's in the abyss of, "Well, we'll see what happens." I think, by the time I approached him about actually doing it, none of it seemed impossible. We both knew it would be a lot of work and we didn't know exactly how we would do it, but we were determined to make it work. We knew, to a certain extent, that elements of it would work. I think that's what is so great about those sort of things, you just go about them. There's no blueprint or anything to fall back on and say, "This is how these people did it." I think he really likes that, I know I like that. I think we found out a lot about each other, going into Zaireeka.



"The sound literally came out of his fingers!! The sound was him."

simplest things I do now tend to be 48 track. Number Girl are very straightforward and play together, which is uncommon for what normally goes on with projects I work on. They're adamant about recording live at the same time and that will be the final take. If it's not good, we'll keep doing it until it is. And even with them I am into the second 24-track. I set up a million mics, arm all the tracks and fill 'em up. I may end up using two mics in the long run, but I always like to have options. You never know what might happen." In what is beginning to sound like his motto, he cannot help but ultra-emphasize his strict recording regiment in which "everything is going on all the time, no matter what."

ADD - Analog vs. Dave vs. Digital.

"When [Digidesign] Sound Designer and ProTools first came out I wasn't leery of them at all," Fridmann reassures, keeping in tune with his ever-accommodating persona. "I wanted to embrace them but they sounded like crap. In general, I prefer analog, although 24-bit [digital] is pretty amazing now. We did a jazz band [the Steve Copeland 5] entirely on the studio's digital 16-bit Otari RADAR simply for financial reasons because it costs only \$15.00 to back the data onto a tape. While we were tracking, Dave

runs, Fridmann found what he considers are the best tape stocks to load his multi-tracks and magnetically charge their oxides with. "These days I stick with the revamped Quantegy GP9 formulation because it's reminiscent of the old silky 3M 996 formulations. It has more of an in-your-face rock sound whereas 499 was a little rougher like 456. I still use both depending on what the project calls for. I still don't like BASF. I can't figure out why people do."

It's always inevitable.

Fridmann and his collaborators will at one point be left to think what should be right for a mix that gets piped down the 2-track digital highway. "Before outboard converters I used to pick flavors of DAT machines like picking flavors of tape. I still hate Panasonics because they're too soft sounding. From memory, even Tascams were better, because they at least had a crunch and attack - you could really drive them." When it came time for Fridmann to go to the DAT machine 'toystore' for Tarbox he purchased two Sony PCM-R500 with SBM (Super Bit Mapping). "By default, I thought they sounded best on their own, especially with its D/A conversion. However, I haven't used built-in converters in a DAT machine in a long time." This is because

What are Dave's main strengths?

I think that his main strength is that he really knows the equipment. He knows all the ways around it. The biggest problem that most people have isn't imagining ideas. Look at something like going to the moon, it's not that hard to imagine. Cavemen probably looked up and wanted to go to the moon. The hard part is actually doing it. I think sometimes that my ideas are a lot like that. I'll tell him that I have this song that we've already recorded, but I want to insert a brand new song right into the middle of that. He knows, technically, that it's not as easy as I'm telling him. I'm the caveman that wants to go to the moon. [laughter] So, I come to him with these problems and he explains to me what we could do. Those things require creativity in it of themselves. The creativity isn't just the freak in the corner that says let's paint the room purple. It's every step along the way, you've got problems that you have to solve to move on to the next thing - sometimes they're technical, sometimes they're musical, lyrical, philosophical or just problems of objectivity. Is what you're doing any good? Any group of people that work in an intense way... everybody has a strength and at the end of the day, if we have a technical thing, that's where Dave does his

thing. He's great at music and he's great at arranging and recording. But eventually, at the end of the day, if there's one of these big technical questions, that's where he shines. It takes everybody, pushing to the limit of what they're good at. I think sometimes it shows up in the music, sometimes I'm surprised when I put on something that we've done and I say, "How did they do that?" and I go, "Oh, that was us." You get so immersed in it, there's so many things going on that it still is a little unknown to it's makers.

Do you like working out where he is... out in a rural type area?

Yeah. I think any artist, after awhile, ends up becoming isolated. Even if you're in a room with twenty people and you're starting to write, eventually the world disappears and you're there with your ideas. That isolation may seem like it's easier if your already physically isolated out in the middle of nowhere, the way his studio is. But it's not really true, you can surround yourself with your records and computers and cable TV. Even though you can be 100 miles from a real city, you can really be just as immersed in all that stuff as people who live in the city. Location doesn't really matter to me that much anymore. It matters that Dave is where all this equipment is and if that was here, I'm sure we would become isolated and we would find ourselves alone with our problems of doing something with the ideas that we have. Even though, because it's out in the country, it looks like we are purposely isolating ourselves. I think it would happen anywhere. The main thing is, is that Dave is there and all his equipment is there that he's the master of. The situations don't really have much to do with it, it's really our problem from there on.

Do you plan to work with him in the future?

Oh yeah, sure. We look at it like it's this progression that people get to. It's like old married couples... it's Thursday and we're going to have macaroni and cheese. You don't even have to speak about it after awhile. So much of what we do is intense work, it's not like being a doctor or an airline pilot. I don't think of it as serious in that way. We do take our work serious even though we realize it's just a bunch of silly music at the end of the day. But, you do get into intense situations where it's hard to communicate what it is that you want to do,

Fridmann massages his projects with his older model TC Electronic Finalizer for A/D conversion with no compression or normalizing. Since 16-bit is still the all-around standard for digital, he sticks to it. His Pro Tools is 16-bit as well, but soon plans to upgrade to 24-bit for archiving. He would love to see 24-bit become the standard. "Even a person who isn't obsessed with sound will be able to tell the difference. The sampling rate should be left at 44.1 kHz, because the 96 and 88.2 rates are kind of a hoax. Sampling rates don't matter as much and are not anywhere nearly as important as bit depth is. They should focus on that more." He also confides his view on 1:1 digital copies or 'clones'. "The difference is terrible. It's as plain as day."

And while a band might be discovering new heights of musicianship thanks to Fridmann's friendly work methods and Tarbox's comfy atmosphere, he himself can be found in a perpetual state of seeking technical enlightenment. His concerns these days are cleanliness of the sound kind. "I've been worrying a lot about noise lately. It's a private little fetish of mine. I've been testing out various sounds versus noise combinations. I'm trying to find a quiet dynamic mic so I can use my older Altec mic pres. Even with my RCA 44, it's hard to get an *a d e q u a t e* amount of gain without noise creeping up." Although he once temporarily discovered relief via the use of a Summit Neve Element 78, he feels there is a more universal way to go about it. The quest continues...

Dave reaches the final stage - with ease.

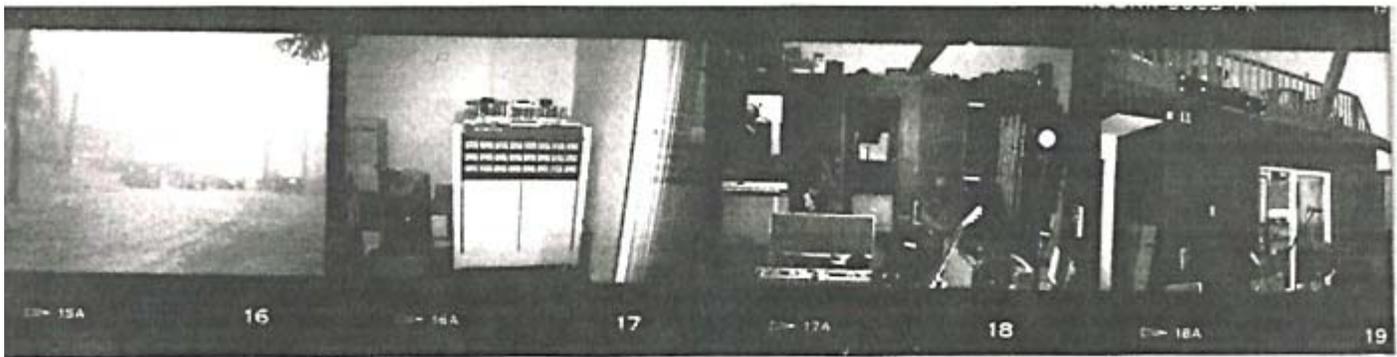
When possible, every stage of a Fridmann-related project is executed at his studio to be kept free of possible 'contaminants'. Keeping with the Fridmann tradition of logic, he puts his foot down. "Let's put it this way - a lot of what I do as a producer happens in the mix stage. When it says 'Mastered By Dave Fridmann' it means we didn't change anything. When we do a mix, it's done. It doesn't need anything else. At the end of any mix session I print a CD-R and it has to be as good as a finished CD. If it's not, then keep mixing, 'cause it's not done yet!" Eloquenty put.

When queried whether he is a producer that is noted on the outside for working on projects that are more suited for 'connoisseurs', Fridmann takes a moment of silence for introspection before replying. "Sure, there is a cinematic scope to most of the projects I work on," he admits, "I naturally gravitate towards those types and vice-versa." (He also admits to the hopes of taking on sound design duties for films in the future, taking his passion with 35mm film a step further). "All people seem to care about in the big picture is 'the beat'. The guy who fixes my car knows I do something with music and asks me whether I heard a certain song because it had a good beat. Once you get beyond record sales of 20,000 copies you start getting into the 'normal people' audience very quickly. All the work and intricacies that you've put into a recording just doesn't matter anymore. People don't care. They only want to wash dishes or party to music. That's fine, I don't have a bias towards that. A lot of stuff I've been working on recently certainly has been 'weird' in nature, but we're hoping that it can appeal to a wider audience. There is a concerted effort to do that." And with the success of The Flaming Lips' *The Soft Bulletin*, they are obviously on the right route.

Suddenly everything has changed.

When the calendar year rolled into the infamous digits that read '2000', numerous music-related publications world wide began to report that The Flaming Lips' *The Soft Bulletin* as the 1999 record of the year. Featuring such lush tracks as "Race for The Prize" and "Waitin' for a Superman", the on-again-off-again 2 year project was a labor of love of which everyone involved on the project will attest that it was an intense learning experience. Initially the album was planned to exist as two separate versions. One would be inspired by the positive results of *Zaireeka* format which allowed for them to potentially use all 80 tracks that were sometimes going on at once. The other mix would be what is currently available, a stripped-down stereo version. Fridmann warmly sums up his experience working on the critically acclaimed album. "To me, the best thing about *The Soft Bulletin* was when there was this time period where we weren't really sure what we were doing. About a year and a half into the project we were recording the track "Feeling Yourself Disintegrate" and did a rough mix of it, sat back and listened to it. We noticed something had changed. Everyone became aware of it simultaneously. It





was very strange." And of course, being susceptible to the 'Eureka!' complex, things were always changing. "Even at the very last session we totally changed a bunch of the songs that bore no resemblance to themselves." The end result - a meisterwerk. Hear for yourself.

Despite the similarities heard in the array of sounds present throughout any Fridmann-related project, he feels that people are usually misled thinking that there is a mystical "Trademark Dave Fridmann Sound". Fridmann himself wishes to set straight what a producer's role really is and what it *should* be. He feels that a good deal of his work is purely contextual in nature. "I don't adhere to a formula. Under the best of circumstances, when things are going right, what you hear more than anything, is what the band wants. It happens to certainly be that many of the groups I work with like and use the same types of sounds. It makes no difference to me. I can't qualify one sound as being better than the other. My job as an engineer and producer is to find out what those people want and do just that." He continues with a logic-laden dogma that once again recalls his 'revelation' story; "People call me and say they want a Flaming Lips drum sound. I reply usually with a 'you mean you want to hire Steven [Droz] to play on your record?' This is because it comes from him, not me. I just put up the mics. Sure I have an idea of how to capture a good sound but really, when a band is good, it's good. You're set. You have to stay out of the way." He dictates that the key to having a good result in the end product begins with the artist. "They have to have a strong idea about what they should sound like, and I've been lucky to work with people like that." After taking one quick breath, he continues his common sense-based attack, "Look, this Fall I've got a line-up that includes Low and Godspeed You Black Emperor! How far out of my way would I have to go to suddenly be a bad producer working with these bands? What would I do to make a Jonathan Richman record sound bad?"

Another important professional threshold of rationale he lives by surfaces in the conversation. "If it had to come down to it, I'd

rather work with a crappy band that are friendly anyday than a great band that are a bunch of assholes. This job involves working with people, so it matters. If I wanted to work with assholes, I'd have gotten a corporate job." Given the lengthy work days that both a musician and engineer share in close proximity, his point is very clear.

The year 2000 will definitely be a rewarding year for Tarbox Road and Fridmann, and always exciting. After the off-the-floor Japanese Number Girl sessions, his next client will be Sparklehorse. "There are only two of them [Mark Linkous and Scott Minor]," he explains, "so I'll go back to having to slowly build the songs; although it'll still be organic. After that, Dot Allison (a Scottish singer) is coming in and we're going to do a lot of computer-based work. What I love, and is fun about this job, is that it changes all the time." Fridmann is glad to be away from the cloud of the megalopolis music business and would rather just work. "I live in the sticks. I work 12 hours a day. There is no entertainment industry here. People around here don't care if something is #1 on the charts. They probably wouldn't care unless they saw something about it on [the TV show] Entertainment Tonight." Set aside the odd chance exposure to other's work from the outside world (he vehemently admires the production skills of Tchad Blake, Jon Brion, Nigel Godrich, Bryce Goggin, Jim O'Rourke and Brian Paulson), he is content on getting home to his family at the end of a long day and reverting to absorbing two therapeutic albums which have taken permanent residence upon his cerebral tastebuds - the eerie John McLaughlin guitar-threaded Miles Davis classic *In A Silent Way*, and The Cure's *Disintegration*.

By the way, Dave wishes to thank his mom and dad.

Sparklehorse. Low. Mogwai. Godspeed You Black Emperor! The Flaming Lips. All five are amongst the most talented and expressionate artists this planet currently has to offer. And

they will all be making the trip along the New York State Thruway this year with Cassadaga as their destination. And Dave Fridmann will await their arrival at his bunker of self-sufficiency. He'll lend them his helping ear, friendship and act a conduit to their resilience. And more will follow. Oh... and add in a band called Mercury Rev to the roster. He's a member, remember? He plays bass, and sometimes keyboards. You will be let in on a secret - they have already returned and have begun to record the follow up to 1998's critically acclaimed *Deserter's Songs*. And, in the same work ethic as the late great filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, they are taking their time, as usual. "Who knows when it'll be done," he says humbly, "when it's finished, it'll be finished." ☺

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because it's new to everybody in the room. That unspoken way of working sometimes, where you don't have to be polite, you don't have to do any of that stuff. You work with each other so much that you end up being like a bunch of cavemen, just grunting. There's a lot of unspoken things that happen when people work with each other all the time. Sometimes, you're just so comfortable with who they are that you don't have to worry about the niceties of being courteous to each other, even though we try to be. Some moments, everybody's focused on the same thing and there isn't anything left to speak about. You just simply have to go in and do what you have to do. In that sense, I want to always work with him. I'm sure that if we couldn't work with Dave, we would still be able to record. [laughter] He would be the first to say that. He wouldn't want to think that if we can't record with him we're powerless. It's just in the way that anybody works together, you acquire a certain way of working that hopefully progresses to making it easier and you can do bigger things without it being, necessarily, harder to do.

...keep progressing.

Yeah. I don't know if I'm progressing anymore, but certainly he has. ☺