



WHAT'S THAT SOUND?

NEIL YOUNG

Neil Young has an immediately identifiable guitar style, especially when he plays electric guitar. Not many guitarists could get away with the one-note solo on 'Cinnamon Girl' from 1969's *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, for instance. And Young has been widely credited with inventing grunge, or at the very least laying the groundwork for it. That song was written in 'Double Drop D,' which entails tuning both of the E strings down to D while keeping everything else in standard tuning.

The guitar most identified with Young is Ol' Black, a repainted 1953 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop with a Bigsby vibrato unit. Ol' Black has a P-90 single coil pickup in the neck position and a Firebird mini hum bucker at the bridge. The Firebird pickup looks like the mini 'buckers used on models such as the Les Paul Deluxe apart from its solid cover (whereas the Deluxe's covers feature adjustable pole pieces). Internally it's very different to the mini: whereas the mini is built like a regular PAF-style hum bucker but with a narrower bar magnet placed between the two coils and coming into contact with the pole pieces, the Firebird pickup has two Alnico bar magnets, each positioned within the coils in a dual blade type design. This aids in the Firebird pickup's bright treble response, and it helps Young to achieve feedback. It's also slightly microphonic, which means you get more pick attack and more string noise. All together it adds up to a very lively-sounding pickup. The Bigsby on Ol' Black also has an impact on the tone: it contributes a slightly hollow, honky overtone to most guitars.

These days it's common - nay, standard - for guitarists to use hi-tech switching systems to go from one channel to another, or to flip to a patch with slightly more of this frequency and less of that one. In 1978 Neil Young started using a device

called the Whizzer, originally made by his amp tech Sal Trentino and later by Rick Davis. A 1992 *Guitar Player* article explains that the Whizzer sits on top of the amp and physically turns the control knobs of his 1959 Tweed Fender Deluxe, and the Davis version had four presets to control the three knobs on the top of the amp. The amp has a tone control and two volumes, and Young discovered that with the tone and main volume on 12 and the second volume on 9.9, something magical happens, which you can hear on 'Cortez The Killer'. Anything past 9.9 and the sound goes away. "The volume on the channel you're not using will affect the volume of the channel you are using, even when you're not plugged into it, because of the drain on the power amp," Young explained. "Having the ability to bring up the channel I'm not even using—so the overload thing comes on—or to change the treble here and there—those are the things I couldn't have done without this technology."

The *Guitar Player* article says a red box on the floor controls the Whizzer via four preset switches, with an additional one to toggle the reverb on and off. The box also has seven buttons to activate various effects devices hidden inside it, including an MXR analog delay, a Mutron octave divider, a Boss flanger, an Alesis Microverb and an Echoplex delay unit.

Young often uses various vintage Fender Tweed Deluxe amps in conjunction with a Magnatone 280, a late-50s amp similar to models used by Lonnie Mack and Buddy Holly. The external speaker jack from the Deluxe sends the sound through a volume pot and into the input of the Magnatone, kind of a unique way of using the Deluxe as a preamp.

For acoustics, Young tends to favour Martins, including his main D-45, a D-28 previously owned by Hank Williams, and a D-18 which he used throughout his coffeehouse days in Canada and on early Buffalo Springfield albums before Stephen Stills bought him the D-45. Young has also been known to use a Taylor 855 12-string.

BY PETER HODGSON

Neil Young and Crazy Horse tour Australia in March 2013.

- March 2 - Perth Arena, WA
- March 5 - Adelaide Entertainment Centre, SA
- March 7 - Brisbane Entertainment Centre, QLD
- March 9 - A Day On The Green, Bimbagan Winery, Hunter Valley, NSW
- March 10 - Sydney Entertainment Centre, NSW
- March 15 - Rod Laver Arena, Melbourne, VIC
- March 16 - The Hill Winery, Geelong, VIC

New album *Psychadelic Pill* out now through Warner



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PONDERING PRESETS

I was having a discussion just last week about the validity of preset sounds that come built into most modern synthesizers. The argument that was put forward was that using sounds that come as factory presets within a keyboard was the safe way to get a very commercial sounding track, but if you really want to push the boundaries, you need to start with a blank canvas and build your sounds from scratch. This seemed to be agreed as being the only way to do it, but that doesn't mean preset sounds are no good, they just seem to get overused and don't really give your track any originality.

This all came about really when we were tinkering with the new analogue synthesizer from Arturia, the MiniBrute. Some of you may have seen this unit and a few of you may even be lucky enough to own one. They have come in very short supply since their release with only 80 units landing in Australia so far and many of us keen for a second shipment to land. If only Arturia could build them fast enough to meet worldwide demand we would be laughing, but at the extremely low price they are coming in at for an all analogue synth, the demand is going to be hard to meet. Where the MiniBrute stands apart from most other modern keyboards is, that it doesn't come with a memory system or any preset sounds. Once you turn it on, it does whatever the controls tell it to do. So, with every knob and fader set to the minimum value out of the box, and the gate source set to an auxiliary input, you will get nothing out of it by pressing a key. You need to start from scratch and build each and every sound yourself. This may worry some people, as many of us have become so used to getting a wealth of sounds from our keyboards at the press of a button. That was the easy way. The MiniBrute takes us back to the old way of doing things. The manual way. The good way. What you get from building your sounds from scratch is a truly unique tone every time you use this synth. It is possible to get similar sounds to other users, but you will find that with all the controls available, there will always be some very slight differences and so, some very unique timbres in your music. The exciting part of working like this is finding new sounds that don't really seem very conventional. Building the sound within your



mix allows you to find tones that, whilst heard on their own may sound terrible, somehow fit with the existing audio pallet that your track is offering. This gets us into the realm of real experimentation in sound design and stops us from falling in to the trap of just reaching for the same old preset patches, inevitably ending up with tracks that all sound the same. Building your own tones is going to give your music a standout sound and a real point of difference. It will, without doubt, end

up having your listeners asking, "What's that sound?"

BY ROB GEE

For more information on the Arturia range of products contact CMI Music & Audio on (03) 9315 2244 or visit www.cmi.com.au