

This historical palaver is all very well but Sonic Youth are certainly not an act to rest on their laurels. They've got this great new record to follow up *Goo* and it's called *Dirty* and it was produced by Butch Vig and Andy Wallace. Because of this, they're currently out here on the west coast shooting a new video and, fortunately for us, doing a little promotional chatting. Thus, Kim Gordon and I are lounging in a rather elegant record company office discussing all the sort of things you discuss with a punk rock star. Like how come Butch and Andy, who together worked on Nirvana and independently have done everyone from Killdozer to Slayer, were used by Sonic Youth who normally avoid 'name' producers?

"I was always a fan of those Slayer records, I like them out of all those speed metal bands. I love the way they sounded and I recommended Andy to other people, so when the chance to work with him ourselves came up, we thought 'why not?' I mean, it would have been stupid not to use him. Butch we've known for a while, he's done all these hardcore records through the eighties, and we'd never worked with a producer before so we decided it was time for a change. It's a lot easier, mixing by democracy is not the best way."

There's no way to deny that these two guys can get a great rock sound and *Dirty* is no exception.

"The guitars sound good, the vocals sound good and Andy gets a great bass sound. Actually, they both can work a great sound on bass which is why I wanted to work with them. I think the record sounds closest to our live sound. I think you have the power and aside from just playing live in a studio, we'd given up trying to get that sound. We were like 'well, this is how it sounds coming out of the amp' and we try to recreate that in the control room."

That's a real thing with indie bands, it seems the albums are never quite up to how they sound live.

"Yeah, that's true and that was the impressive thing with Nirvana, they showed it could be done. They had actually pretty much recorded that album a year ago at Butch's studio before the deal was worked out and we have a tape of that. It's better in a performance sense, but *Nevermind* is so big and so cool sounding for an indie band album."

The first single from *Dirty* is a near pop tune called '100%' and the Youth are in town to shoot a video for this. What's the deal?

"Well, it's being shot by this woman called Tamara Davis who has done videos for us before, 'Kool Thing' and 'Dirty Boots'. We like her a lot, and this kid called Spike Jonze has shot some of the footage too..."

Spike Jonze as in *Dirt* magazine and skateboarding fame?

"Yeah, *Dirt*. Do you like it? I think it's a brilliant magazine. Actually, about a year ago Mark Gonzales sent us a video of the blind skaters that Spike shot some of and we used to watch this video on tour constantly. Anyway, the video is about this friend of ours who was shot and it's kind of a celebration of him so we decided we would have a house party. One time when we were out here we went to a party in Hermosa Beach and Black Flag were playing in the living room and Henry was just singing in people's faces, going up to girls and totally freaking people out, jumping around the house and stuff, and that has always stuck with us. So we decided to do a video where we were the band playing this house and Spike plays the lead where he's this kid sitting looking out of the window thinking about his friend who something's happened to but you don't know what. The instrumental part is going to be the blind guys skating, Guy and Rudy and people. Spike shot all that just the other day. Mark Gonzales doesn't skate anymore, he's an artist now. He did come by the shoot and give us a drawing though."

In the pantheon of alternative music, Sonic Youth are most definitely major deities. They've plotted their own wacked course through modern music over the last decade, not worrying whether they play live with Iggy Pop or tour with Neil Young and for the last couple of years, they've been a part of that proverbial corporate entity without too much fuss and with a couple of fine albums to keep things rolling.



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Above: Lee Renaldo, Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore and Steve Selley

It's really cool the way a 'serious' band like Sonic Youth has got involved in the whole cultural deal, hanging out with people like Spike Jonze and Mark and getting in on things like *Sassy* magazine.

"When I first discovered *Sassy* I was like 'oh this magazine is so cool!' It wasn't such a big deal back then. I actually think *Dirt* is a better magazine, *Sassy* has got kind of obnoxious, they still don't know that much about music but as they learn more they get more obnoxious. Still, they're cooler than most."

You guys still have a good line on that whole teen deal, which is much cooler than being a lame intellectual, especially as the cultural thing is a package deal — the magazines and music and pastimes like skating have all developed together.

"Skating especially is just going to get bigger and bigger and bigger as a cultural thing, like skaters are going to become huge heroes like models are now. It'll be like skateboarders and models are who kids look up to. That's cool though, they're so radical, the pro skaters. They have this great lifestyle, it's a lot like playing music in a lot of ways. Surfing too, it's neat. I loved that movie *Puberty Blues* from Australia, it was so cool."

Okay, back to the video. Do you think it will get played on MTV? That's like the major outlet for videos yet you've never had much acceptance from them.

"I don't know really, there's no reason why not. They loved 'Kool Thing' but they hardly showed it, maybe because I was touching the stomach of a black man or something. 'Dirty Boots' too, it was such a positive video, I thought how can they not show it? Those kids were so angelic. They're just so conservative at MTV."

But I would think that post-Nirvana they might be a bit more open as they can't be sure what's going to be next.

"Maybe, but they're still so worried about their sponsors. I was wearing this t-shirt in the video with the Rolling Stones logo and 'Eat Me' written across the top. Geffen didn't want me to wear it, they were like 'we'll pull the plug on the video because if she wears

that no-one will show it and it'll be a waste of time'. It was weird, it wasn't worn in a sexual way yet it wasn't allowed. Whereas the reality is if I wore pasties and a G-string it would be OK."

That's weird as the guy from Nirvana appeared on the front cover of *Rolling Stone* in a shirt that said 'Corporate magazines still suck'.

"Yeah, that's all down to sales though. It's cool and punk rock of Kurt to wear that, but his band is still going to sell a heap of copies of the magazine for them."

It's strange seeing these bands like Nirvana in *Rolling Stone* and on major labels, especially as you guys were sort of the forerunners of that whole scene, you were one of the first bands to sign to a major and put out what was a very independent album.

"We've been around since 1981 so I guess it's not such a surprise. I don't really view us as the first though, there were the Replacements and Husker Du and the Pixies all on major labels for a while and now bands like Nirvana and Mudhoney and Helmet get signed which is no surprise, the surprise is how quickly they got big. It makes you wonder where A&R people are looking. They seem to make the job really hard for themselves."

All the same, Husker Du and the Replacements were making what was really just accessible alternative pop whereas Sonic Youth were doing things like 'Death Valley 69' which is pretty out there.

"Yeah, that's true I suppose. That stuff would no doubt totally freak the record company. We're actually going to re-release it all over the next year as we get the rights back for it."

On the subject of freaking people out, what was touring with Neil Young like? I just can't imagine the average middle American Neil Young fan getting off on Sonic Youth.

"It was really interesting working with someone like that. I mean, integrity is such a broad word but as far as maintaining his sound, Neil still plays out of a little tube amp. It's all bolstered up through a stack but it's still pretty eccentric, which is what you

have to be to keep going against the grain like that. What was really weird was his crew were totally traditional rock and roll sexist type of guys and we've always been sort of insulated from that sort of thing. They'd sit around talking about strippers and whores and things, it was like 'wow, this is the real world'. All of a sudden we're playing to arenas full of rednecks. Some nights we'd be playing and there would be this booing/yaying war going on and it was kind of fun, it was like playing for the first time again, very rejuvenating. Especially as we knew we were making Neil work harder every night."

You're starting the new tour with a big show in Central Park on July 4th aren't you?

"Yeah, it's a big free show featuring us and Sun Ra."

That's cool. I wasn't sure if Sun Ra was still playing, let alone doing Central Park.

"Yeah, Sun's amazing. He plays back east all the time and puts out all these white label albums that he sells at the shows. It must drive collectors nuts."

Well, it's the final important million dollar question now. Are you going to play down in New Zealand some time soon?

"Oh yeah, definitely. The last time we tried to tour we had to cancel because of the Neil Young tour. We'll be down there in January or February. Who should we get to play with us?"

I'm sure there'll be no shortage of offers for that one.

A footnote for you fans. Aside from making albums, Sonic Youth have kept very busy with assorted side projects. Lee Renaldo has done some solo work, Thurston Moore and Steve Shelley have recorded with Don Fleming and Richard Hell as the Dim Stars as well as one off things with the likes of Jad Fair and John Zorn, while Kim Gordon has been producing Hole and reviewing Mariah Carey records!

If you want to keep track of all this, get in touch with the people at *Sonic Death* magazine, the official organ of the SY fan club. If you join, you receive the mag which is cool in a cheesy photo copied zine sort of way and has all sorts of neat info (I bet you never knew Keanu Reeves was going to be in a Sonic Youth video) as well as funny correspondence. Write to *Sonic Death*, PO Box 1588, Bloomfield, NJ 07003, USA. As a bonus you get some goodies and a live CD from Austin in 1976 which is pretty damn fine. By the time you read this you should be able to get a hold of issue one.

KIRK GEE