

GUITAR MAYHEM AND MADNESS

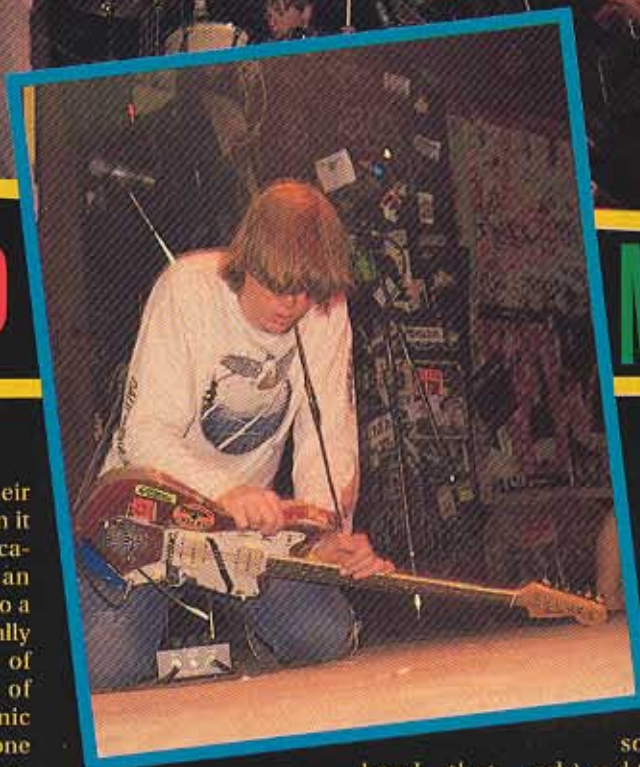


Kristin Callahan

by HP

Sonic Youth are not noted for their musical subtlety, especially when it comes to guitar playing. Yes, occasionally the band does sound like an overdriven 747 during a test run, set to a tight rhythm track. And yes, occasionally their guitars get more mileage out of feedback and distortion than out of chord changes. That's where the Sonic part of the Youth comes in. But anyone who's listened to songs like "Disappearance" and "Kool Thing" (from *Good*) and "Drunken Butterfly" and "Purr" (from *Dirty*) knows that the band also has crafted guitar hooks strong enough to catch barracudas.

Make no mistake, Sonic Youth is a



band that has guitar "noise" firmly rooted in their songwriting and production. While the group is credited with inspiring a lot of the current crop of guitar noisemasters, such use of guitar sound is not just part of alternative, college, or punk

Newquist

bands—it goes all the way back to Hendrix and the Yardbirds. Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo form the spinal cord of SY, overlapping each other's guitar sounds with just enough melody to build solid, drone-filled songs. Kim Gordon (bass, vocals) and Steve Shelley (drums) provide the rhythm section, which is oftentimes the only part of SY *not* flirting with sonic destruction. To call the band's guitar stylings a "wall of sound" would be an understatement; consider it to be more along the lines of a "berserk turbine of

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to make it sound interesting." As far as going to extremes to get certain guitar sounds, Moore suggests: "Just do it, and don't let anybody tell you you can't do it. That way you can free yourself up from an uptight music world."

So, with dual guitars pummeling away at chord structures and detuned songs that bury your senses under tons of sonic concrete, there is no doubt that pound for pound, Sonic Youth has more rock guitar grunge than Poison, Great White, or any pop metal band you'll ever hear. Sonic Youth doesn't just blow you away with their guitars—they hold your head viciously and continually beat on it with

things you'd never imagine could come from a six-string instrument. ☐



sound." Truth be told, the guitar work sometimes sounds like the noise you might have gotten out of your first distortion pedal with the amp cranked to overdrive—if you could have controlled it. And that's what makes SY's guitar work so damned good; the control that they bring to seemingly random guitar and amp sounds. Wild as these sonic explorations may be, they fuse together out of incredible chaos to create some very tight song arrangements. Feedback, string scratching, wildly ringing open discords, non-standard tunings and non-stop flailing and stabbing—the surprising result is songwriting that stands up to everything the alternative East Coast rock scene has kicked out in the last five years. But then, this is a band that's been ripping their Les Paul strings off the fretboard with screwdrivers and drumsticks for the better part of 10 years, and changes tunings so frequently that they tour with a dozen guitars apiece for Moore and Rinaldo—each one tuned to a different key.

Moore readily admits that the band stays away from traditional guitar tunings to get their signature sound. For the most part, they actually use experimental tunings that they come up with themselves, and then create chord structures in each tuning through trial-and-error. Some of those tunings are so dissonant as to not make any sense at first glance (such as F#, F#, G, G, A, A), while others involve the simplicity of tuning the guitar to octaves of only two notes. Though they ignore standard modes in search of specific "aural feelings," the band manages to patch together textures that have a lot more rock appeal than "connect-the-dot" scale shredders.

The band uses an extreme approach to recording and performing (with tube amps, wedged pieces of metal...) "because it's a gas, and sometimes it's the only way

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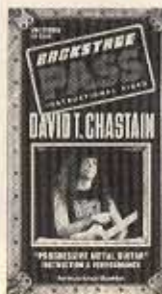
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- GUITAR WORLD August 1991

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