TAPE OP

The Book About Creative Music Recording

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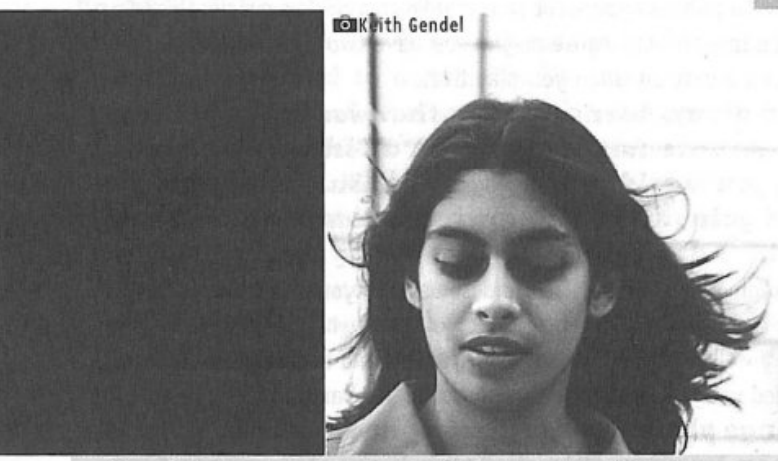
Papas Fritas and the Columnated Ruins

AN INTERVIEW WITH TONY GODDESS OF PAPAS FRITAS

by Leigh Marble



Keith Gendel

Papas Fritas are a young pop trio based out of Boston, Massachusetts. After putting a single out on Sunday Driver Records in 1994, they were discovered by Minty Fresh, who released 1994's eponymous *Papas Fritas* and, in 1997, *Helioself*. Both albums were recorded by the band in their homes on an 8-track machine with minimal outboard gear and maximum creative process. For mixing they have brought their tapes to Fort Apache in Boston, where they turn them over to the trusted hands of Paul Kolderie and Sean Slade. I ventured into the woods to visit Tony Goddess (his real name) in his Gloucester, MA hideaway (dubbed "The Columnated Ruins" ala the Beach Boys, because it's built on columns and a bit of a ruin on the outside). The inside of his place would make a great photo spread for a *Tape Op/Homes and Gardens* issue. You've got a cozy New England living room with a wood stove flanked by: guitars, a drum kit off to the side, a tack piano in the back bedroom, and a loft/control room with an Otari 8-track. Soon after I got there, Tony pulled out the master reels from Papas Fritas two albums and was showing me how they had built these gems from the bottom up.

In what order do you generally lay down tracks when you're recording?

Usually it's the drums first, with a scratch guitar and vocal track. On our first album [*Papas Fritas*], the drums were mostly done with a single PZM mic.

Really?

Yeah, we'd put it under the snare. On a few tracks we also used a [SM] 57 on top, and on "TV Movies" we used a 414 to pick up the brushes better. But mostly a PZM. On our second album [*Helioself*] we used four mics for the drums. We'd track them all to separate tracks, but we always bounce the drums down to mono as soon as we need the space. Vocals come next to make sure there's enough space to get them together. You know, enough room to bounce stuff

around, submix harmonies and doubled harmonies. The most important thing is to get the drums, get the track together, but then get the vocals and build around the vocals. I don't know enough about mixing; maybe guys can make room for the vocals at that stage no matter what. But that way, everything else gets built around the drums and vocals, so that the other parts are reacting to what are really the most important parts.

Yeah, there are guys who can mix and make space for vocals, but it might take a lot of EQ.

With vocals, getting the performance is the most important thing. I don't mess around that much with mic'ing techniques but more with which mic I'm using. You're singing the melody, and you just want to get that strong and in front. You're not going to create space with vocals, you're going to create it with other instruments. So after we do the vocals, usually bouncing them down to 2 or 3 tracks, we build around them. Guitar, piano, organ, other percussion come next. Sometimes these get bounced, if there's two parts in different frequency ranges and I need the space I will combine them on one track. Sometimes I'll mix two parts on a bounce, but one really quiet if it's a part that I don't really care if it gets lost. If it pops up in a couple spots, that's cool, it adds to the layering without really taking up room. Bass goes down last, on it's own track, to keep it punchy.

Let's talk about history a little. Were you doing 4-track stuff before you got together with Keith and Shivika?

No, that's really how the band started. I had gotten a 4-track and was just starting to mess around with that stuff a bit. I was in the big band at school and in a smaller jazz ensemble and then a free improvisation ensemble. I got a 4-track to start recording that stuff. And then I was getting into the idea of, instead of just recording spontaneous improvisation, getting into layering. I was listening to bands like Sebadoh, Tall Dwarves, and stuff like that. Stuff where you knew they were 4-tracking. Shivika inherited a drum kit from her cousin, I knew her because we're both from Delaware, we went to high school together, and she wanted a place to keep it, and I wanted to start writing songs to record; and it just kind of grew out of that. Keith was around too. We kind of formed to play at a friend's party but it started on 4-track, just messing around with that, but we got pretty into it. We didn't have much for gear, had a standard grey Tascam 424. I had a 57. I used a headphone for the bass drum microphone... Have you ever done that, plug the headphone out into the input jack?

Did you think that one out, like, "Oh, that'll be like a large diaphragm mic, good for bass?"

Oh, no [laughs]. It was just there. And I have a silver Electrovoice mic from the '50s that I inherited from my grandfather. The kind you might see on old Byrds records.

A condenser?

No, dynamic, kind of what was a 57 back then. A live mic for bashing. And we were recording and playing some parties. We had done some songs and a friend of mine said, "Do you want to put that out as a single?" We were just mixing down to cassette at that point. So we went into a 16-track studio in Boston, a place called Birdog Studios, and started recording some stuff there. We tried "Lame to Be," which is on our first album. They had a 16-track 1", and a pretty big room. I was starting to have some idea of how I wanted it to sound, but I really didn't have a very clear idea. I was like, "Make the guitars sound like tin foil." And the guy was like, "What are you talking about?" He just wanted to set up the mics, record what we do live, and make it sound professional. He didn't really want to produce... His idea of producing was setting up mics and recording. But we had no idea what we wanted to do either. So that just didn't work out. My big trip with it is that, when you're playing live, people can see you, there's more than one sense being engaged. And when you're recording, you can't just record what you do and put some reverb on it, unless you're such an amazing performer. You've got to make a listening experience. They've already looked at your CD booklet a couple times, there's not more visuals than that, so you've got to make the listening experience more visual. You've got to create a sound environment that the listener can enter into, or hear textures develop and shift, you know what I mean? You're creating a picture. With the latest album we took that even further. With that song, "Say Goodbye," that's about turning into an angel. So we wanted to have lots of soft and airy sounds, like the organ with the high bells. And there's that song, "Live By the Water," which is about moving out into the country. You're going to use acoustic instruments; you're not going to use electric guitars to write a song about living in the country. And there's "Rolling In the Sand," which is about when we played at a bar where a fight broke out, so we used an old saloon-style piano with thumbtacks. Just trying to create a picture with sound. The downside of that is that sometimes people thought the music was too theatrical, too much like a show tune. Minty Fresh contacted us, and we hadn't had a good experience in the studio, so we decided to get our own stuff. I got the 8-track [a 1/2" Otari] and a Mackie 1604, we bought a [AKG] 414, and a couple PZMs. Minty Fresh is in Chicago, so they got me in touch with Brad Wood, who said, "Oh, Radio Shack has these PZMs, you should check them out." I think he had only done the first Liz Phair album by then, he wasn't quite so well known. So I got that stuff, and I just concentrated on drums a lot. I knew I didn't want big, loud drums. Just figuring out, "Oh, I'll mic it from there, or put towels over them," which is anathema to most drummers. "How dare you duct tape tissues to my drums?" But it's just a question of what works. We just started recording the album in our basement. We realized we had all these songs from when we started playing, but how were we going to make a band out of this? We had recorded them as we went along, and it sounded like too many different styles. How to unify it, through different arranging techniques? Like the muted guitars and drum sounds, that was trying to make it more unified. Reading interviews with Lindsey Buckingham, he said, "My greatest contribution to Fleetwood Mac wasn't as a guitar player or a singer or a songwriter, but being able to take these three songwriters and create an identity for the band." Realizing that it's not just recording a drum kit, or getting a cool guitar sound, it's creating a whole sound for the band. There's a quote from Brian Wilson, talking about Phil Spector, where he says, "I wasn't really into production until I realized it's not just the song, it's like you're creating a two-minute experience for the listener, not just a two-minute song. A great record should be like an experience they've had, that they can go back to whenever they put on that record." I have pretty grandiose role models [laughs].

Did you kind of bash around in the dark awhile when you first got the 8-track? While you were trying to get this vision together?

Yeah, for a really long time. Our first single was "Passion Play," with a string section. I thought that would be cool, but I didn't really know what I was going for, I just thought it sounded kind of retro. And "Lame To Be," our first version was what we did live, distorted guitars, but on the album, I knew I wanted it to sound different but I didn't know what it was. When we play it live, it's like this, [plays descending bar chords]. But I realized I wanted it to be like this [plays descending bass line with suspended harmony]. It's not just sound that makes a recording, it's how you decide to harmonize.

There's that piano part on there too, that ascends at the end of each line.

Yeah, to break all the parts up, [plays parts on piano]. That's when I started to learn to play piano a bit too. And realizing what a lame instrument the guitar is because you're just playing chords [laughs]. In that song "For No One" by the Beatles, he just plays a C chord the entire time. Same with "Penny Lane", he just plays a C chord the whole time and moves the bass down with his left hand. But with guitar, you see the natural relationships...

The three and the five always following the root.

Yeah, exactly. So I was just getting into that - there was a lot of bashing around.

Did you reach a point where you said, "Okay, I've got it now, we're going to start with the first song and do it right"?

Kind of. I started getting some things together. It was kind of like when you're bashing around on a paper for school and it takes you forever to figure out how you want the paper to be but once you do you're like, "Fuck, now I gotta write the thing." So, yeah, I got the drum sound in place, and the whole muted guitar thing came from thinking of how to make the rhythm more harmonic. Putting polyrhythms in there that aren't just percussion, that are harmonic or melodic too. Like guitar parts that hit the chords on the two and the four with the snare. It was kind of a drag because I'd play it for my friends and they'd be like, what is this? This doesn't sound like you guys. We sound like one thing live, but this is what we sound like in the studio. I always like that, when you see a band live and it's different from the record and you've learned something more about them, as opposed to just hearing them play the record. So yeah, we were bashing around, the record company was like, "Just record it!"

Had they seen you live at that point?

They hadn't seen us live before. Anyhow, from playing jazz in the big band, the guitar players in those bands are never just strumming chords, you know, they're filling in holes and hitting spots. So I've never been the kind of guitar player that just strums chords, I've always wanted the parts to be smaller.

So once you have the drums and vocals down, do the other parts develop out of improvisation, or do you know what everything is going to be before you roll tape at all?

I think generally, in songs like "Explain," or "TV Movies," the ballads, you've got the rhythm but the rhythm has so much space in it. There's so much space between every beat. A song like "My Revolution", the rhythm is quick enough that you don't want too much stuff messing around between the beats. But a ballad that is slower, you gotta think, "How am I going to float chords in there without having these sharp edges. How are you going to get harmony in there?" We didn't have an organ for the first album, but organ is so unobtrusive, you just kind of float it. But for other things, how am I going to float the harmony in there without getting attacks. And that's using the volume swells or some slight lead guitar playing. But like in jazz, even when you're playing "My Funny Valentine" for the hundredth time, you're expected to come up with a new piece of music. When we're playing around with arrangements, I'm playing Rhodes or piano or guitar and Shiv is playing drums or just maracas and tambourine, it's not improvising, but it's creating new pieces of music with the same harmonic material. So that's what I mean, when you're casting around for a direction for a production. It's the satisfaction of trying out different ways to play a song. You feel like you're using your musical vocabulary, almost improvisational, and you keep pushing it around until you hit on something and then you fine-tune it. And on the last album too, we spent a lot of time around the piano working on vocal harmonies. And also saying, who should sing this song, or on "Hey Hey You Say," getting into trading off the vocals.

It's clear a lot of work and refining went into that song.

Sometimes I put so much time and effort into a song, I think it's going to translate into a really heavy listening experience. But to most listeners it's just notes coming out of a speaker. They don't hear the hours of work. Sometimes I think I need to focus on it being a more immediate experience.

Oh, it's quite immediate. But for people who think about how it was recorded, it's also clear that it was a lot of work.

People think our music is so light. But it's hard to make music that feels good. I think of it as, not sober music, but serious and emotional music to me, but many people think it's just "la dee da," that it just comes out all peppy. But I worked my ass off on that! [laughs] Great music, great creation in general, doesn't say, "Hey look at me, I'm a great creation." It just, you never question it, it just sounds right. But the reason a tambourine is there is because I put it there, it didn't happen on accident. That handclap or that harmony, it doesn't just come out when you open your mouth. Nothing exists naturally in music, you are making conscious decisions about each sound, more or less. That is my biggest problem with music made electronically. All music is made of the ability to make a sound and the ability to organize it. I think electronic music is only organization. To play guitar, it's a combination of your body's ability to play the guitar and your brain wanting to play the notes in that sequence and with that tone. And with a lot of electronic music, at least what I've heard, I'm not aware of any physical component. You know, I might want to sing like Aretha Franklin, but my physical body can't. And when you eliminate the physicality of the human body making the sounds I think it leaves something to be desired. Maybe I just like working with limitations. When you EQ and sample drum kits, you have all these variables, you can make it sound however you want. But you need to say, that's wood there that's making the sound of the drum, or I may want to play guitar like Jimi Hendrix,

and I may have all the fuzz pedals, but it's not going to come out like Jimi Hendrix, it's going to come out like a different human being. So sometimes with electronic music, I get scared that it's all made by the brain, it's not made by the body.

So is struggle part of what you want to hear?

Yeah, and I think it comes from jazz too, hearing a guy improvise, hearing him push himself. That's what I like about the guitarist in Pavement, or J Mascis, they're improvising, you can hear them learning about their instrument. I do like some electronic music. But I look at music as having four components: rhythm, melody, harmony, and tone. And to me, the rhythm is the engine. Rhythm is time, and music doesn't exist if time doesn't exist; and melody and harmony are like the steering wheel on the engine. It's what gives it direction. I think that more and more people now, they don't want to agree on, they don't want to be a part of larger things. I don't think rhythm inherently has emotion. I think it's melody and harmony that gives music human resonance, outside of the physical resonance. People more and more right now don't want the emotion, they want engines and they want energy and they want physicality. When I listen to electronic music, rhythmically and tonally it's pretty advanced, but harmonically and melodically it doesn't satisfy a lot of my needs. I like the Chemical Brothers, it's fun to improvise to, it gives you a beat and you're just jamming. But it never changes key. A friend of mine has this theory that people's belief systems go through cycles every couple hundred or thousand years, that people's belief systems are based outside their bodies, like in Christianity, and then Pagan beliefs are of course all concerned with the body and earth. And he thinks that electronic music, it has no melody or harmony to give it this "larger than the body" feeling, it's all rhythm, it's Pagan music, rhythm-body music. That's generally what I listen to it for, I don't sit down and listen, but it helps me do the chores.

Do you want to talk about your songwriting process?

Yeah, we just had a band meeting, and I think what I've realized is the different roles you play when you're in a band producing yourself. There are three roles you have: moment capturer, sound designer, and public relations specialist. One, you capture moments; that's the songwriting process. You sit at the piano and you get some chords and a rhythm together until all of a sudden, this is kind of cheesy, but a crack in time opens up, so you can go back and play that and all of a sudden you're back in that moment. And after the first album I got so much into the sound design that I forgot where the raw material came from. I'd start playing and automatically I'd start thinking, "Oh I'm going to have the bass guitar hitting on this beat and the piano doing this," and I just got real hung up on that stuff. I was writing songs with just the production instead of the moment. Sometimes that's cool if you just want to do a groove song, but usually you want to capture a moment. So that's the first role; and then sound design, that's where you further define this moment that you've created. You flesh it out with whatever instruments you use. All the production decisions about how you choose to make that moment sound. You want to make it as true to the moment as possible and also as creatively rewarding as possible, but you also want to make it, if you're concerned about this, and we definitely are, commercial. You can make a moment pretty esoteric, but we want to make it stick. That's where public relations comes in. Public relations and sound design are pretty intermingled. You know, say, that people react to a certain rhythm, or you refine the lyrics, to make them a little more accessible to people. So that's pretty much our songwriting process. I write whatever I want and then we'll play it and put it through those filters, as opposed to always worrying while I'm writing, "Is this going to work? Will this fit with our image?"

It's a way to make space.

Yeah. A lot of times I'll just have a chorus, or some chords that'll work for a verse, and I bring it to the band, and we just kind of play it. We bounce it around, figure out the bigger picture like the intensity level of the song, who's going to sing it... All these different puzzle pieces that we work with until we say, "Oh, of course it's going to be that way."

You were saying that for the first album you wrote most of the material on your own. Was the second album written more as a group?

Yeah, a lot more group. I just didn't realize that we were going to have to tour for ten months and have an album coming off of it. I've never written on tour. It's hard to get a song together in the back of a van. You're never alone for ten minutes. For, like, "Say Goodbye" I had all the chords and the chorus but I didn't have how we were going to play it. When we played it live I was just doing the chords as an arpeggio thing. So then we decided Shiv was going to sing it. I had the chorus already, "Say goodbye to all your friends," whatever that might be, and she decided it was about becoming an angel. And that's when we decided, oh we'll use airy sounds. Or on "Hey Hey You Say", we just had that riff and we played it over and over, and I had the "man on the telephone" part. We just kind of scatted lyrics until we said, "Okay, everyone go home and write a verse and bring it in," and we just kept doing that. It was also we were kind of pressed for time. We had all these fragments, but then you've got to say, "Okay, these twelve are going to make an album." You can't just try to write twelve hit singles, but maybe you'll make an album that by the end is taking you someplace. One thing I want to say about recording it ourselves is that music is a very organic thing. When you wake up in the morning you put on some music to wash the dishes to, or when you're going out on a Friday night you put on different music. It's part of life; and the recording of it should relate to that. Some records are almost like a study of a place; you get such a sense of where it was recorded. My favorite groups, it's all part of the production, songwriting, image of the band. Like Cheap Trick. I like the production on their early records, I like the performance, the sound, the image. The Band's *Songs From Big Pink* is like that, there's a strong sense of the room that they wrote and performed the songs in. And on our first album, we recorded it in this completely dead 10 x 10-ft. room, the sound has that quality and if you listen to it enough you pick up on that.

Are there any technical things you'd like to add, about gear or mic choice mic or placement?

The gear thing, it's all so subjective. Our drum kit is a piece of crap that we inherited, we've had it for years. But sometimes you might want the snare to

sound like a cardboard box. It's all context. I guess you can make a thousand-dollar drum kit sound like a cardboard box, but you can't make a fifty-dollar drum kit sound like a thousand-dollar kit. You know, I paid $75 for that organ, and $150 for that piano. But it's not about that, it's about being aware of frequency ranges, stuff like that, and you'll get it okay. So many bands, I think, say, "Oh we'll go to a studio with a Neve and a bunch of really great mics." They think that's all of a sudden going to arrange their music, that because they recorded it on a Neve all of a sudden the bass guitar and the bass drum are going to lock up right. You've got to arrange that yourself, you know? You want a good mic for your vocal, that's what I'm learning more about. The first time all we had was a 414 and I don't like what that does to my voice. It's good for Shivika's voice, it gives her a nice light high end – it's airy, which is good for her. But I want my voice to be more of a tight, punchy sound. The [Sennheiser] 421 is better for my voice. I have a really rough voice and I don't usually sing out of my range. My voice is not a pure tone, so I want a mic that doesn't capture all the little resonances. I want a mic that makes all the edges and crooks of my voice sound like more of a pure tone. Whereas Shivika's voice is more of a pure tone, so we use a mic that captures as many edges as she can. On the first album I did more stuff like wrapping stuff in T-shirts, or putting the mic across the room. Then on the second album when Bryan [Hanna] came out to help us engineer he'd just do whatever, put a 57 on top of the snare drum. And he tuned drums, that's something I'm learning about. For electric guitars I mostly use the SansAmp, because I'm doing them myself up in the control room and I don't want to be running downstairs messing with a mic. When I started 4-tracking I'd try to get a cool guitar sound or just a crazy part [plays me some early stuff, one of which features the sound of a shower running in the background throughout] I didn't really hear the sounds as working towards the song.

It was like, "Yeah, showers!"

Yeah, "That would be cool if I record it in the shower. Next song I'll record it on the bottom of my swimming pool." But, yeah, as far as the technical stuff, it's just thinking about frequency ranges. In terms of thinking about parts, it's about leaving space, especially if you're a rock band. Technically, on the bass, we always compress the hell out of it, and use a lot of muting with our palms, to try and be consistent. I like a bass sound that has a lot of punch to it, a lot of attack and edge. Keith uses flatwound strings. Not on everything, but on a lot of stuff. On the guitars I use a lot of muting too, with the direct in with the SansAmp. I wish I could concentrate on getting different guitar sounds a little more. We don't have any delays or reverbs here, so that's not something we play with. We do play with compression a lot, not just as something to use to make sure it sits okay, but as an effect.

You were saying with the handclaps, you use a lot of compression on that to bring out the room sound?

On the drums too. Those Zeppelin records, recording in castles, they'd just stick a mic on the kick, mic on the snare, and then they had a couple of ambient mics just compressed to hell. Same with, you know the Flaming Lips, they were saying on the last song on, I think, the "She Don't Use Jelly" album, they got a huge Zeppelin drum sound. Compress the hell out of the overheads. And using compression on guitars alters the sounds, whether it's really clicky or punchy. On the handclaps, you affect the attack and release and get some cool effects out of that. You can get some cool effects out of just about any instrument that way.

When I was listening to your first album, I thought it was compression on the snare that gave it that sound.

It was recorded really tightly. You can have the most rickety snare drum in the world, when you put a towel over it it's gonna go "tink." We do a lot of speeding up and slowing down sometimes with vocals, if it's not a word part. You record it slower, so it's lower and easier to sing, then when you speed it up it brightens them. You want your background vocals to be bright. But also you're speeding up time so if you're singing out of tune it's, less time you're singing out of tune. It can brighten them and bring the background vocals together. Or if you want a loose draggy drum sound, record it faster then slow it down so the drums have a deeper tone. The whole sonic identity thing, that's why I like older records I think. So many of them have more sonic identity than records these days. I'm not talking about the way they play their instruments, but what comes out of the speakers. Right now, I feel I could put on a Nirvana record, a Pearl Jam record, and maybe even a rap record; they all use the same frequencies, and they have the same presence of sound. Before recording gear was mass-marketed, people had to customize gear more, so a record made in Detroit sounded different than a record made in Philadelphia. I don't think vintage rules, I don't have any vintage gear, but it's that attitude.

Music

$19.95

TAPE OP: The Book About Creative Music Recording opens up the door to the minds and techniques of the most interesting recording engineers, producers and artists. Creativity, ingenuity and using whatever facilities are available are the keys—from amazing albums recorded on 4-track cassette by the likes of Guided By Voices or Elliott Smith, to big studio productions with Mitchell Froom, Don Dixon or Steve Albini. Inside, there's a wealth of practical information for the home-recordist, musician, record producer, or the curious on how to get the most out of any recording scenario.

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"I just read your magazine and was really impressed. It seems like it's much more about making music as opposed to corporations trying to sell gear."
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"Tape Op rocks! I love stories about the battlefields of lo-fi, and making the best of what you've got in your arsenal."
—Tony Visconti, producer: David Bowie, T-Rex

Editor Larry Crane runs Jackpot! Recording in Portland, Oregon, and has engineered recordings for Sleater-Kinney, The Go-Betweens, Quasi, Elliott Smith and many others.

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