In alternative rock circles, Steve Albini is revered, hated and feared in equal measure. Held in high esteem as a producer by the Grunge Cognoscenti, his talents as a guitarist are still often

overlooked. In a rare interview he talks to Tim Slater about his work, his equipment and his new band, Shellac

## EITY OF D Steve Albini



teve Albini may currently stand as one of the most hip record producers on the planet, but despite numbering Nirvana, the late lamented Pixies and West Country indie chanteuse PJ Harvey as three of his biggest clients to date, he still remains something of an enigma

It was the early '80s which saw the emergence of Albini as lead vocalist and co-guitarist in Big Black - the first band to successfully meld the uncompromising sneer of punk and the austere thunder of modern electronics into a ferocious, drum machine driven clatter which heavily influenced the later industrial hammerings of bands such as Ministry and As a guitarist, Albini makes liberal use of feedback,

influenced players for its extraordinary clarity and confident espousal of virtually all the typical rock guitarists' traditional influences. A vehement distrust of the mainstream rock industry and a fiercely independent stance have enabled Albini to maintain a healthy distance from corporate rock's velvet-lined leash and, if you believe the many rumours which surround him, the picture appears of a terrifying figure: rude

unmercilessly scathing of the music industry and

certainly not afraid to give his opinions on any subject. But, in the flesh, Albini is anything but the monstrous caricature depicted by the trendy music press. He is certainly direct and to the point but he also exudes a warmth, a self-deprecating streak of humour bordering on gentleness, which genuinely surprises given the unbridled ferocity of the man's music Image-wise, is Albini worried about living up to

expectations from the press over his new band? "No, not really. More than anything else it's just me satisfying my personal need to make music. I wanted to be in a band but I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, I just wanted the band to be excellent. If people outside the band ended up appreciating it and wanting to buy the records and come and see us play, that's fine and flattering, but that's not the reason I want to do it. I wanted to stick a stake in the ground and say, All right, we're going to attract an audience based on our merits. We are not going to try and fool anybody into liking us. So far I have been quite content with the way it's turned out. There's always a certain number of curiosity seekers that come to see a band play, especially if the band's got a membership reputation – that's unavoidable. We don't expect people to pretend that they have never heard of me, I don't expect people to pretend that they don't have expectations, but we're not in the position of having to live up

to them because we're in this on our own." So you're not going to trade on any past glories at all?

"This band exists separate and distinct from the other bands ightharpoonup145

➤ that we've all been in. Rather than try to attract an audience based on history, we're just going to present ourselves in a neutral way and if people come to appreciate it, then great. If they don't, then that doesn't

bother us either." How long did it take you to reach the line-up with Shellac that you were happy with? Did you think about experimenting with instruments that you are not normally associated with,

such as keyboards? "No, I knew I would only be happy in a small band. For the first year or so it was just Todd Trainer - the drummer - and myself. We even contemplated keeping it that way, but then we played with a bass player for a while and it made a big difference

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\$3,000,000 complexes. But you are more likely to get a good record out of a good band – that is the determining factor

to the songs, so we decided we would have a bass player as well. Bob Weston was an old friend and he seemed excited about the prospects of getting in a band again. He was in a hand called The Volcano Suns and when they broke up, I asked him if he wanted to move to Chicago and work with me in the studio as an engineer and be in my band. He said, Sure, and that stabilised the line-up - we've been operating that way for over a year now.'

It must be five years since you last played over here. "Or more. The last time I played here was with Rapeman, and that would have been about '87/'88."

How did you feel about the kind of protests that followed Rapeman around? "It meant nothing to me. Those people were complaining about something that had nothing to do with

me. They were taking offence at what they thought was a sexist band, but nothing could have been further from the truth and so I didn't feel obliged to take their complaint seriously. It was really only ever an 146

issue in England, nowhere else in the world did anybody take it seriously. So that wasn't the reason why the

band didn't last? "No. When we decided to break up I told our English record label that the press really should say that we were breaking up because our name proved unpopular, but it was entirely

in jest!' Why did you decide to break the band up in the end?

"That band broke up for the same stupid reasons that so many good bands break up – because people within the band could not get along with each other. I was absolutely heart-broken when it happened because I was so happy and content to be in that band." How do you plan to fit your

producing and engineering job in around Shellac? "The same way I used to fit in my

job as a switch assembler around my rock band! As a recording engineer I have to work to earn enough money to keep my band afloat. But that doesn't mean that I won't have any time to keep the band going, it just means that the time that I have has to be scheduled." How did your fascination with

recording develop - is it something that you've always been into? "Oh, yeah. Ever since I was a

teenager I've enjoyed messing around with tape recorders and stuff. But only in the last three or four years have I developed an understanding of acoustics and electronics to an extent where I feel comfortable admitting to being a recording engineer. Up until now it's always been a matter of me feeling like I was something of an outsider in the studio. I was a naive but enthusiastic guy who made records with what knowledge I had. But now I feel like I've done the apprenticeship and now I have the right to call myself an engineer."

Was Big Black your first hands-on job as an engineer?

"The whole time I was in Big Black I was helping other Chicago bands in the studio, but I wasn't thinking of it as in terms of a career, it was just another facet of my appreciation for music."

When an artist approaches you to engineer a record for them, do you lay down any kind of criteria for the type of equipment that you prefer to work with or are you happy to accept any environment?

You have to understand that the vast majority of bands that I work with are in no position to be selective - they are incredibly poor. I really wouldn't be comfortable dictating

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anything to a band in that position; I wouldn't say, Oh, you have to use more expensive studios than this. I have a studio in my house which I make available to bands on that level, because I know first off that it's an outstanding studio and secondly that it's the cheapest studio that they can hope to find. If a band wants to do something another way in another studio, I'm perfectly comfortable doing that. I've made records in the dingiest conditions and they have been of equal quality."

Do you enjoy the challenge?

"I don't consider it a challenge, it's just a different arrangement of equipment. Great records can be made on \$100 tape recorders or they can be made in \$3,000,000 complexes. But you are more likely to get a good record out of a good band - that is the determining factor. Certainly there are things that are nice about working in a high quality studio - excellent acoustics for example - but by the same token when you're working rough and ready everyone is much more casual about everything and there's much less of a 'time is money' concept.'

What do you think of the retro scene which has evolved over the past few years with the demand for old valve mixing consoles, etc?

"Certain pieces of archaic studio equipment are now Guitarist May 1994

incredibly valuable on the collectors' market, and that is both a good and a bad thing. It's a good thing in that it will bankrupt those studios that are silly enough to follow the trend and it's a bad thing in that some of these pieces of equipment are actually worthwhile. In the beginning, all audio had to be handled by vacuum tubes, then transistors were used to replace them. Some transistor circuits have outstanding sound quality and some don't; they all have less noise and lower power requirements and are smaller than "The next stage of development was integrated circuits where transistors, resistors and other components could be etched into a piece of silicon and then formed into a package, but now that same item can be made into a chip that's like a quarter of an inch square! That development facilitated making more

complex equipment smaller and it has taken a long time for equipment of that complexity to reach the same sound quality as the discrete transistor, in the same way that it took a long time for some of the transistorised circuits to sound as good as the valves. It is flatly wrong to say that valve electronics sound better than transistors, or that discrete transistors sound better than integrated circuits There are some exquisite examples of valve electronics that are excellent sounding devices, particularly some of the valve microphones that are really outstanding and you simply can't get better reproduction – but there are some lousy pieces of valve equipment, too. Some of the valve compressors that neonle buy that are incredibly trendy and high priced, I wouldn't use because they colour the sound really dramatically There are some pieces of discrete transistor electronics, like the Neve consoles; Rupert Neve was so ahead of his time when he was designing the consoles

in the '60s and '70s that not appreciating them now is just stupid. The 80s series consoles have the most headroom - that is you can put a hotter signal through them without distorting - and they have the broadest frequency response. They will reproduce lower and higher frequencies flatter than any other boards that I have ever worked on and to dismiss their popularity as part of the retro boom I think would be a mistake. I think that there is contemporary equipment being made now that will stand the test of time and will in the future be considered as the classic equipment of this era. A good piece of circuit design will survive - excellent sound quality is something that is timeless."

Do you ever get asked to work on acoustic sessions or vocal

"I basically only get asked to work on complete records. I'm not a hired gun; no one has ever said, Come on down and record the drums for this album. I've never worked that way and I don't think I would ever be comfortable working that way But virtually everything I do is a microphone picking up a sound acoustically, whether it be a drum kit, a guitar amp, someone singing or someone throwing a bucket of nails down the stairs! That is an acoustic event that is captured on a microphone, which is then turned into an electronic modulation on tape. I'm not a fiddler in the sense that I don't



record something and then screw it up and turn it into something else. The way I approach things is I record things in a way that they sound as they should and then the mixing process is just a matter of refining the balance between the sounds and the instruments - the weight of each instrument within the music. There's a significant and growing movement towards a more natural reproduction of sound, even within rock music.'

What about things like sampling - have you ever been tempted to experiment with that at all? "No, I think sampling is such an obvious dead end that it

doesn't appeal to me. If you buy a sampler you will spend the first week or so making clever messages for a telephone answering machine. Then you'll spend the next stealing sounds out of the air and stretching them. The range of possibilities of a sampler is so limited and so obvious, they get exhausted so quickly; music made with samplers to me is Do you see it as taking the easy way out?

"Well, it's definitely easier to take a sample of something than it is to play it! If you can record Steely Dan's rhythm section, loop it in your sampler and use that as the foundation for your music, that's obviously easier than assembling a crack band, writing your own music and recording it properly."

traditional rock background, despite the reputation you might "Not really. I wasn't really enthusiastic about music at all until I heard punk rock. I think I was about 15 or 16 years old

You're a fan of earthy, organic music. Have you got a

at that stage, and that's when you start buying records and

start becoming aware of music as an art form. I never played in bar bands and I've never played a guitar solo in my life. "I'm incapable of playing in a standard rock format. There's

a thing that most people learn on their first guitar lesson which is how to make the guitar go [plays plodding 12-bar blues rhythm] da da da, and I can't do that. To this day I can't do it; I would be useless in a rockabilly band, for example." Your sound is unique because you've got this immense rush that comes out of the speakers but at the same time it's really clean. Is that something that you have worked on deliberately?

"It's kind of an idiosyncratic sound, but I think it just comes from me appreciating things that other people don't appreciate.

How do you achieve this? "I'm quite comfortable playing the guitar in a way that allows for certain sounds without actually dictating them. If you have your amp set up to make that standard heavy metal ound, the range of possibilities of what you are going to play is pretty narrow. The amplifier that I used for years was a screechy transistor amplifier and in that way that amp dictated what I was going to play. But I found a way to play using the equipment to satisfy me, which would not necessarily satisfy anybody else. I don't know of any other guitar players who would enjoy playing guitar the way I do. Most guitar players like to show off in one way or another. For a guitar player to show off there are certain things that he has to do to clue in the other people that are listening; the blues reference is a big one. I've never played a note of the blues; if you put a gun to my head I don't think I could play a blues riff Possibly the distinct lack of soul in my guitar playing might Guitarist May 1994

be one aspect! Have you ever had a call to play on someone else's record? "I was asked to play little chicken noises on a song by Kath Carol, so I did!" Would you like to discuss your amp and guitar set-up?

"Sure. The whole time I was in Big Black and Rapeman I used an amp called an IVP made by a company called Tapco. It was a transistor preamp and I would run it into any old power amp and from there into a speaker. The IVP was intended to be a studio device but it was a big failure; no one ever bought the things because they sounded very strange.

"The distortion in the IVP is absolutely unique; there is an amp circuit that has a transformer within its feedback loop, and the transformer couples the output of the amp circuit to the input. So what you're doing when you increase the gain of the amp is you're saturating the core of the transformer – so that what is distorting is not the amp circuit but the transformer windings. It's an utterly bastard way to make distortion! It would be an essentially clean and very clear transistor sound until the really big transience came by and then

the core saturated. "So I've used this bastard IVP set-up for years in virtually every recording that I did. Sometimes I would just take a tap off the back of the preamp and plug it straight into the tape machine because I wasn't going for a particular ambient sound anyway. These days I use that same set-up with a '63 Fender Bassman that I use, and I run those simultaneously; although when I'm in another country I can't take that stuff with me, so I have a Marshall 100 watt. It's not so much fun to play on standard equipment, but I can

manage. I'm a big boy!' What about effects? 'On the Big Black records and some of the Rapeman stuff I had a very crude early digital delay called the MXR Delay System One. It's about as big as a Volkswagen. All I did basically was have ADT on it - a short delay – it was only ever in play on two or three songs but I liked the idea of having this big archaic device on stage at all times even though I was only going to use it

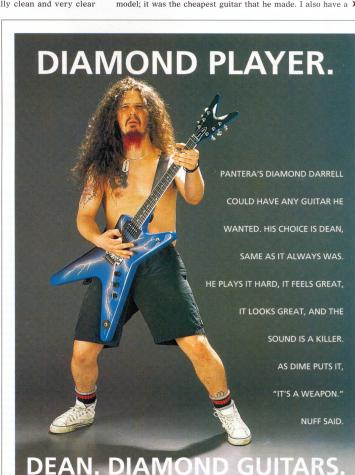
for 30 seconds in the set.' What about on Hated Chinee (From the Rapeman album 'Two Nuns And A Pack Mule') where

you summon up random chunks of feedback at will? "When I was in Raneman I found this distortion pedal called the Harmonic Percolator. It was a distortion pedal made by this nut in Milwaukee who had a company called Interfax and it was an extreme distortion pedal. The thing about the Percolator that I liked was exactly that effect that you were talking about; that is, I didn't actually have to play the guitar if I didn't want to, I could just take my hands off it and hit Guitarist May 1994

the percolator and it would play itself." What about your guitars?

"The Big Black records were made with two guitars. One had two Seymour Duncan pickups, one in the neck and one in the bridge, and I always had them both on and out of phase. I also had a guitar built that was in a Telecaster shape but it was a double cutaway as though a Telecaster was mimicking an SG or something and that had the same pickups. I smashed that guitar into little tiny pieces at the last Big Black show. Then I had another built for me and the guy found out that I had smashed the first one and charged me twice as much for the second one. Nowadays I have a Travis Bean that I really love. I have been into Travis Beans for a while and I turned a couple of my friends onto them - I'm Travis Bean's biggest

"The character of the notes played on Travis Beans is so much more ringy and resonant than on a wood neck guitar and the guitar that I like that he built was like his student model; it was the cheapest guitar that he made. I also have a >



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➤ guitar called a Veleno. It was a guitar made entirely out of cast aluminium the body is cast into two halves sort of a double cutaway Telecaster shape, and those are bolted together and then there's an aluminium neck that's bolted onto that. It's quite heavy and almost

Is it a good stage guitar or is it very

heavy?
"It's fine, I've played it on stage a couple of times and I quite like it. It sounds totally unlike any guitar I have ever heard. It has a very long sustain and very clear harmonics on all the notes. I had it fitted with Gibson P-90 pickups and they are considerably sharper than the humbuckers that were originally in it. One of the things I like about it is that when something breaks on it I don't take it to a guitar shop to get it fixed, I take it to a machine shop!" You've stayed loval to Chicago, you haven't felt tempted to move to New

York or LA, or one of the hip music towns? "No, I couldn't stand one of those places for a day. I absolutely detest New York, I think it's a third world city, couldn't live there. Los Angeles is like Disneyland! You really get the feeling that people are not paying attention in LA; the anguage that they speak sounds like English and they seem to be grasping what you are saying, but they don't understand

You've been a very successful person, how do you preserve that sense of integrity, keeping the bullshit of the music



MAX94 business at arm's length? "I don't consider myself to be in the music business, I consider myself to be an independent recording engineer. Occasionally I have to deal with people in the large scale music industry but very rarely, the rest of the time I am basically of the same generation and

mind as me. "It takes an active decision in order to become part of the bullshit, if you're doing things in an honourable way you have to decide to become a bastard at some point and I've never seen any advantage to being a bastard. I have seen so many people do so many sleazy and offensive things and things that were ultimately evil in an attempt to increase their profile in the music industry. I would rather have a modest income and work with a relatively low profile and deal only with people that I loved and trusted than make an

enormous amount of money and have to deal with scumbags every day. If I leave a legacy I would like it to be of well rded records, regardless of style, and be comfortable that I didn't bankrupt anybody - I did a good job for a reasonable fee. I think the records that I make as an engineer will survive on their merits, and if in 20 years people listen to records that I have made during this era and think that I did a good job with these bands, I will be satisfied. If they listen and think that the bands of this era were not very good I would have to agree; it doesn't really affect me."

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