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"WEIRD AL" YANKOVIC

Rubén Valtierra on a Quarter-Century with the Clown Prince of Parody

BY STEPHEN FORTNER

"I'M TELLING YOU, IT'S JUST CRAZY," says Rubén Valtierra, who for the past 25 years has held down the keyboard chair with the world's favorite comedic musician, "Weird Al" Yankovic. "We're playing to stadium-rock crowds, and sometimes they're screaming so loud they're almost screwing us up timing-wise. Even non-English-speaking audiences are going nuts. Parents and grandparents who were fans of Al's in the early days are showing up with their kids and grandkids who are fans now."

The tremendous response to Yankovic's latest album, *Mandatory Fun* is proof of his transformation from novelty artist to bona fide international rock star. There's a lot more going on here, however, than the ability to write hilarious alternate lyrics to current pop songs such as Pharrell's "Happy" ("Tacky") and Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" ("Word Crimes," which should warm any teacher's heart). It's about pinpoint musical accuracy, the ability to switch sounds on a dime, and maximizing your gear's multi-timbral functions. At a recent show in San Francisco, Valtierra told us how they pull it off night after night.

How did you first meet Weird Al and how did you get the gig?

I had moved to L.A. from Santa Cruz in 1990. I'd just started going out and making it my mission to meet everybody I could. Soon after I arrived, I met popular session keyboardist Mark Mathieson. He was a very sweet guy and said, "Hey, you're new in town? You need gigs?" I'm like, "Yeah!" He was from one of the old musical families in L.A. so he started turning me on to people from all sorts of different circles—R&B, jazz, salsa, this and that—and every Wednesday to Sunday I had gigs because this guy just kept turning me on to stuff.

One of the things was a Motown group with a

lot of famous players that I won't namedrop. The sax player was contracted to do a TV special in 1991 for the 20th anniversary of the *Dr. Demento* radio show. The show had about a 16-piece orchestra. We were backing up all the people whose records he used to play on the show: Bobby Boris Pickett, the guy that did "Purple People Eater," all those kinds of people, and the special guest was Weird Al.

I'm sitting with the orchestra during rehearsal and I started talking to the rhythm section. And they go, "We're Al's rhythm section." I'm like, "Oh really? Wow." Al is like my first big celebrity exposure down in L.A. So the rhythm section, of course, is the band we have to this day. [Jim West on guitar, Steve Jay on bass, and Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz on drums. —Ed.] I ask, "Where's your keyboardist?" Jim says, "Al doesn't have one right now."

Then Al himself comes up and says to me, "I'm going to do this bit where you play some lounge music behind me. I'm going to talk, you're going to get too loud, I'm going to give you dirty looks, you're going to get too loud again, and I'm eventually going to come up and poke you in the eye."

This bit is still a part of the live act . . .

Yes, and at that time, little did Al know that I was a big ham. So we do the sketch, he's trying to make me stop playing and I won't, and eventually

he slams me in the head with the eye-poke. I'm simply supposed to go "Ouch!" but instead I go flying off a six-foot riser, dragging the curtains and things with me, and the audience goes nuts. The director was Al's manager. He yells "Cut!" and everyone rushes over because they think it was a real accident and that I'm bleeding or whatever. Instead, they find me laying on a big pile of pillows. I'd grabbed them beforehand because I really wanted this gig, and intended to just take the whole stunt over the top. Then Al comes out with the *Off the Deep End* album and "Smells Like Nirvana," and goes on tour in 1992. His people phone me up and say, "Hey, Al really liked what you did on the *Dr. Demento* special. Want to come out on tour?" That was the beginning.

In terms of instrumentation and arrangement, Weird Al's parodies are virtually indistinguishable from the original songs. How important is this to them being effective and funny?

Extremely so. When Nirvana hit his radar, they were playing *Saturday Night Live* and he was friends with [then cast member] Victoria Jackson because she'd been in his movie *UHF*. He calls backstage and says, "Hey, Vickie, can you bring Kurt Cobain to the phone?" Kurt picks up and Al asks, "Would you mind if we did a take on 'Teen Spirit'?" Kurt goes, "Yeah. Is it gonna be about food?" Al says, "No, it's going to be about how nobody can understand your



LAURA CHRISTIE

lyrics because they're garbled." Kurt says, "Sure!"

Point being, MTV used to play "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and then Al's version a bit later. People would think it was [a repeat] and then they were like, "Wait, the cheerleaders have hairy armpits. This isn't Nirvana ... ohmygod, it's Weird Al!" They reason they tripped on it so much is that the music sounded so perfectly alike. Contrast that with those "morning zoo" radio show guys, who'll put some wacky lyrics over a pop song. The production is often cheesy, like a bad karaoke track, so right away you don't take it seriously. When you hear something that's so close that it fools you, that makes all the difference. It has to be just like the original—that's just how Al is.

Can you relate a case where Al was especially exacting about this?

Sure. When we recorded "The Saga Begins," the *Star Wars* take on "American Pie," there's a lot of rubato in that song—a lot of pushing and pulling the time on the piano part. We get into the studio and there's no click track. So I start playing and I think what I'm playing sounds nice. I'd play a certain phrase and Al might go, "No, that's too soon." Coming from my "muso" mentality, I'd say, "But the original sounds kind of goofy. This sounds better." Al would say, "I understand, but I need it to be so close that if you were to play along with the record, it would sound like a chorus effect." So I woodshedded that record for what felt like an eternity. But the thing is, I also have to play it live. You could hear Don McLean play [the original] live and it's never the same way twice. Not so here.

It sounds like Al's ears and musical intuition are almost superhuman.

They are, but he's very specific about what he wants to hear. Sometimes he'll let things go that I wouldn't, sometimes he'll be all over something that I wouldn't even hear if he hadn't brought it up. But it's not just about his musicianship, per se. It's about the focus he has to have to entertain the audience. This guy remembers like, a billion lyrics, many of the more recent ones rap-based—every dance move and every word of a nonstop two-hour show. He does it all without teleprompters or cheat sheets of any kind, and I've never heard him miss a lyric. So if you play something that might sound nice, but it's not what he's expecting to hear, it might jar him out of his zone. You don't want to do that in front of 30,000 people. Back in the day, at

WEIRD AL ON SONGWRITING AND TOURING

The keyboard instrument you're most associated with is the accordion. When did you first pick it up, and what inspired you?

I started taking lessons when I was around seven years old. I'm pretty sure my parents made that life-altering decision for me—I guess they just figured I'd be the life of any party if I knew how to play the accordion!

Onstage for segments such as the polka medleys, do you use an acoustic accordion or a MIDI sound source such as the Roland V-Accordion?

We used a MIDI accordion a bit on the last tour. My front-of-house guy loved it because it output such a clean signal and there were never any feedback issues. But for this current tour we're back to using the vintage acoustic accordions—sometimes it's just nice to rock it old-school.

Parody is largely considered protected speech under the First Amendment. Nonetheless, is there a process you go through to get the original artists' blessings?

Yes, I always get permission from the original songwriters. Usually my manager will hammer out the details with their manager. Even though I can most likely "get away with" not asking, I've never gone down that road. I don't want any drama or ill will with other artists. I value my relationships with other people in the industry, and I always want them to feel like they're in on the joke.

Are your song selections strictly about numbers and popularity, or does a tune also have to speak to you musically in some way?

The only two critical things are, is it a

popular song, and can I come up with something really clever or funny to do with it? It's a plus if I personally like the song, and I don't think I've ever parodied a song that I've actively *disliked*, but the only real criteria are popularity and concept.

You've also written original songs in the style of an artist. Do you sit at the keyboard or with a guitar and write? Is it a solo process or more of a collaboration with the band?

I write the original songs by myself, usually on a keyboard. After I make a demo for the pastiche, I'll send it to the bandmembers along with a dozen or so examples of the artist's work, so that they can add their own subtle touches and attempt to match the style as closely as possible.

What keyboard or synth gear, if any, do you have at home?

I have Kurzweil, Yamaha, and Casio keyboards in my home studio, and I use them with [MOTU] Digital Performer to make all my demos.

What do you like best about working with Rubén Valtierra?

He works cheap. He's also one of the best keyboard players in the world. But mostly, did I mention he works cheap?

Is there a musical "Serious Al" you'd like to share with audiences someday?

I think there are enough people in the world already that do "unfunny" music. I like my niche, and I like to think that over the years I've gotten pretty good at it. I'm certainly capable of writing



pieces that aren't inherently funny, and I wouldn't rule that out—but it's not some kind of burning desire.

The Mandatory World Tour has been one of your most ambitious ever in terms of its length and being densely packed with dates, and you seem to be putting out mega-joules of energy every night. How do you stay healthy and focused on the road? It's horrible to lose your voice in the middle of a tour, so I try not to exert my voice if I don't need to. I try not to even *talk* if I can help it—I spend a lot of time on the bus surfing the Internet and watching TV.

Also, I make a real effort to stay out of air conditioning and smoky rooms. When I was touring in my 20s, I'd go clubbing with the band almost every night, but in my 50s, I find that I need to lead a more monk-like existence. Of course, what works for me might not be ideal for anybody else, but personally I find it's best to be well-rested and save every ounce of my energy for the stage.

rehearsals I'd be adding chord extensions because I was coming from a hipster place. Al might stop and go, "Um, bar 246 on the 'and' of beat 3, was that a *ninth*? That's not on the record, is it?" [Laughs.]

This has even extended to working with the original artists in some cases. Ray Manzarek played on "Craig's List," for example.

Right. Because of Al's stature, we're lucky to be able to phone up some of the guys who did the original tracks. Sometimes it's straight rock or synth

pop and relatively easy, sometimes it's like with the Lady Gaga stuff where there's so many synths and so much layering going on. Sometimes artists will even send us the stems, and while we don't use them specifically, we treat them as a reference for the arrangement and for how all the synths were programmed. Also, a lot of people might not know that when Al called up Mark Knopfler to get permission for "Beverly Hillbillies" [based on Dire Straits' "Money for Nothing"], Knopfler insisted on playing guitar on the track himself! He was that hip to the

importance of the musical accuracy of the parody.

What are the technical challenges in translating this musical accuracy to a live concert with so many visual elements, video segments, and costume changes?

For much of the show, I'm more of a real-time producer and arranger than I am a keyboard player in the Yellowjackets or Steely Dan sense of that term. Sure, if I need to play a certain sound across the full range of the keyboard, such as piano on "The Saga



Tearing it up onstage, left to right: Jon "Bermuda" Schwartz, Jim West, Al Yankovic, Rubén Valtierra, and Steve Jay.

Begins," then I'll go in and make the best program I can on the Kurzweils for it. But we also play a lot of medleys as well as [parodies of] a lot of current tunes, and what these have in common is that there might be some little synth riff or stinger that lasts for about two seconds, so when you add all of those up, I need to have them mapped to places on the keyboard

where I can reach all of them easily. On my PC3K keyboards, there are a lot of multi-zone setups with these sorts of sounds mapped to the technically "incorrect" keys note-wise, because if I tried to reach for them on the keys that actually would correspond to those pitches, that part in the song would've zoomed by already. I would've missed it.

Can you give us an example of this sort of key-mapping?

Totally. Let's say I need a ninth—a C2 and a D3, for example. But I need a lot of other zones for a song like "Eat It" or "Fat," and I don't need this interval that I'm just going to use once getting in the way of those other zones. Well, I might put the C2 on key C1, then re-tune the D3 and put it on D \flat 1 so they're right next to each other. Again, for many of the songs and medleys, there are so many sounds going by so quickly that reaching from one keyboard to another, or even over too far a range on the same keyboard, is counter-productive. Sometimes I'll also sample a series of notes because I'm holding different things down with each hand and there's just no way I'm going to play that third part in real time, because I'm not George Duke! [Laughs.] Fortunately, Al doesn't care how it happens as long as it's in time and it sounds right.

Your stage rig is exclusively Kurzweil: 88- and 61-key PC3K workstations—which are pretty retro by today's standards of soft synths, the real analog renaissance, modeling, and platforms like MainStage and the Receptor. Why this choice?

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Valtierra's all-Kurzweil live rig with Weird Al, clockwise from foreground: Artis 7 (currently used as a controller only), PC3K8 (facing audience), and PC3K6.

about pulling off the part, not about aesthetics. Interview some pit musicians, and you'll find that Broadway and musical theater in general make heavy use of Kurzweils as well. For me, there's nothing more flexible or intuitive when it comes to doing all the splits, all the zoning, all the modulation sources, the ability

to bring things in and out with faders or velocity and even do inverse volume control—everything like that. There's also the matter of the individual outputs. Al and the bandmembers want to hear different elements of everything I might be doing at any given moment, and the front-of-house engineers want as

much control over that mix as possible, too. But they told me, "We don't want you to bring in ten different machines. We want you to be able to do it all on one or two keyboards." That's Kurzweil.

You also have a more recent Kurzweil Artis 7 stage piano in your rig, but not their new flagship, the Forte, which I know you own.

Yeah. Right now I'm using the Artis just as a MIDI controller for the PC3K piano sound—even though the Artis' piano is more recent and has more layers, I know—because that makes it simple to take downstage for the "unplugged" portion of the show where we're all sitting together at stage left. I plan to incorporate its piano sound in the future. As for the Forte, it only does four zones onboard. The PC3Ks do eight. They also can load older samples I've created.

Is there a technology you'd like to see for doing your gig?

Companies like iZotope and Melodyne take really good care of me, and they have programs where they can lasso a bit of noise and remove it from the audio. I've been asking them if there's a way you can go in and isolate a certain part within the mix. Let's say there's some five-second sound bite we need for a tune. I'd like to be able to go into a mix of the original song, target that sound, grab the whole thing, filter



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out everything that's *not* it, and throw the whole thing into my sampler. Again, we're talking about something that goes by very quickly in the context of an arrangement or medley, so that'd be more efficient than having to reconstruct an entire Kurzweil patch based on how I know the bit is supposed to sound, only to map it to one or two keys.

When you're not using touring-grade in-ear monitors, what's your preferred keyboard amplification?

QSC is lovely stuff. When I'm not on the road with Al, when I'm doing my own gigs, I don't want to lug a lot of stuff. I started out trying their K8 powered speakers, but for massive B-3 organ solos where I'm pulling stops and adding distortion, they just weren't kicking my ass. So I went to the K10s. I've tried the K12s, but the K10s really seem to be the sweet spot for a balance of volume, bass, and portability.

What has made this gig most worth keeping over the years?

Here's God's truth: When's the last time you had a boss that in 25 years you've *never* heard



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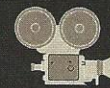
raise his voice? That's Al Yankovic. He knows what he wants and always gets it because he's surrounded by great people. They're pros, they know their job. If something isn't working, he'll wonder why and we'll fix it. But he's never like, "How dare you do that?" or "I

don't know what I need but make it so!" He never raises his voice and yet gets everything he needs. So how blessed am I?

Any advice for someone who aspires to a studio and touring career like yours?

Obviously, you've got to stay on top of the technological music scene. You've got to realize what part of the keyboard plays in the overall production. It's essential that you have great piano and organ sounds, but also synths—whether software or hardware—that let you get whatever sounds are *current*.

I'd also say, my case proves that you never know when an opportunity will turn into a lifetime career. So take every opportunity seriously, but don't take *yourself* too seriously. 🎵



Rubén Valtierra gives us a personal tour of his keyboard rig.

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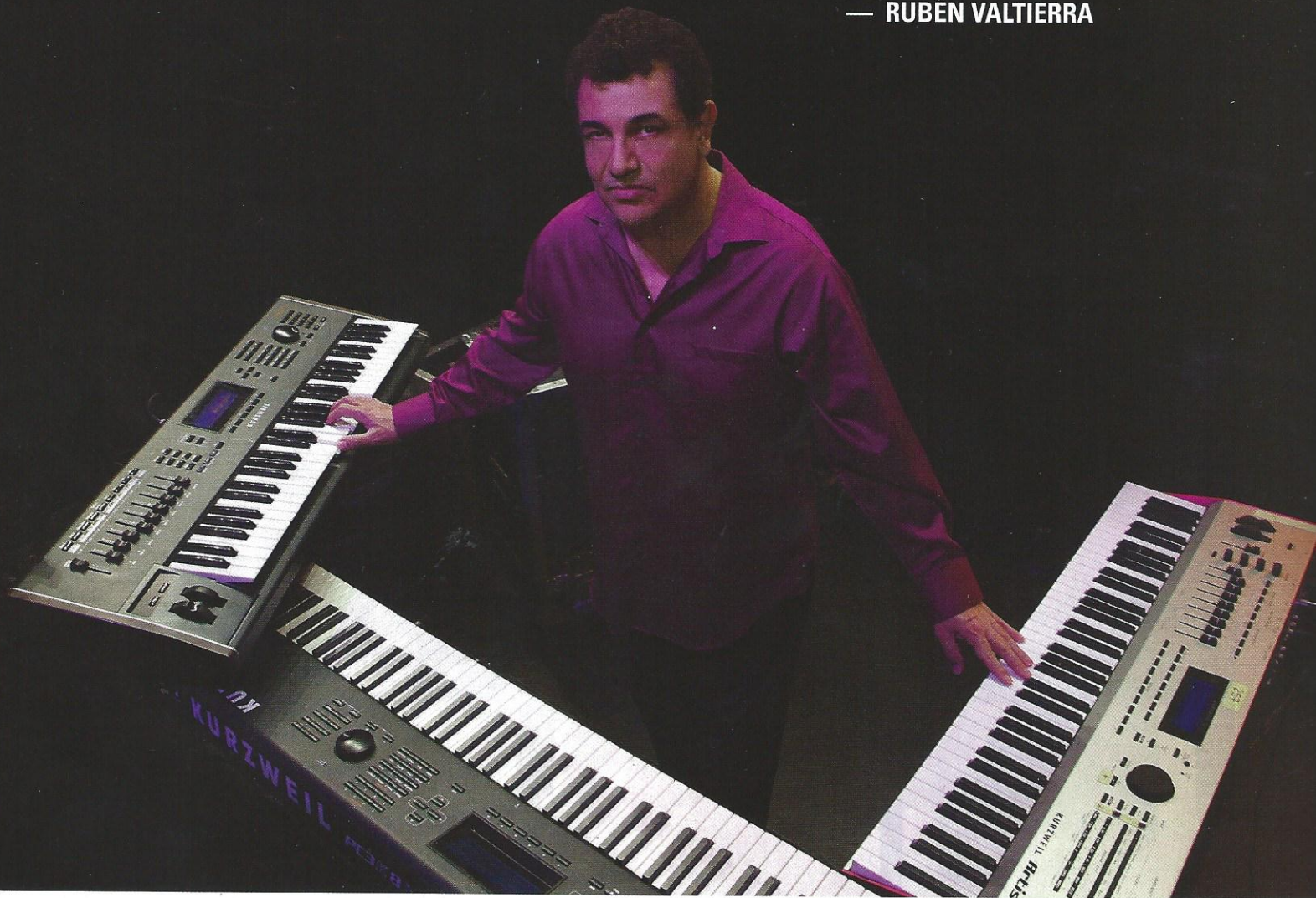
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