DAVID ATLAS

Left to right: Bob Casale, Gerald Casale, Mark Mothersbaugh, and Bob Mothersbaugh.

DEVO

The Masters of Subversive Synth Rock Return

by Stephen Fortner

The first thing you need to know about Devo is that their creative collaboration was forged in the aftermath of the 1970 shooting of unarmed students by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University, where principals Mark Mothersbaugh and Gerald Casale were studying art and music. Rather than waving a middle finger directly at the establishment as the hippies of the day (and punk rockers of just a few years later) did, they crafted their artistic rebellion around a more longitudinal and thus more effectively subversive statement: Human evolution had not only stopped, but was beginning to go backwards. This message has since been the cornerstone of their multimedia mayhem.

What makes Devo *sound* rebellious has always been their unlikely juxtaposition of surf-punk guitar hooks with mechanized beats and plenty of buzzing analog synths. On *Something For Everybody*, that blend reaches new heights of refinement, making their first new studio album in over 20 years quite possibly their best ever. You can giddily thrash around your room to these songs, or listen to the social commentary of the no-apologies lyrics. If you're doing both, their plan is working.

Mark Mothersbaugh, Gerald Casale, and Bob Casale hosted us at Mutato Muzika, the radioactive green, carousel-shaped lair where they've also done scores for everything from Nickelodeon's *Rugrats* to Wes Anderson's celebrated comedic dramas. Is de-evolution real? Probably, but the fact that the band is in such top form proves that some life forms are immune.

It's not about record companies; it's about finding other avenues to market your music." –Mark Mothersbaugh

Stephen Fortner: The first question on many readers' minds might be: Why now, and what was the impetus?

Mark Mothersbaugh: There were a number of things. I mean, we've been playing live for a bunch of years. But I think a lot of it had to do with the decomposition of the record industry as we knew it. We finally got to the point where we couldn't take it anymore, but it also seemed like all sorts of new possibilities were opening up.

One day, an ad agency called Mother wanted to license one of our songs for a Dell computer commercial. We said, "How about a *new* song?" They said, "Is there such a thing?" and we said, "There could be!" We had some stuff we'd been fooling around with at sound checks, and it gave us reason to put together the song "Watch Us Work It." It was a pleasant experience.

Gerald Casale: It made us remember that it *is* possible to make money from music . . . sometimes.

MM: What got us interested in doing a whole *album* was talking to [Swedish alt-rockers] the Teddybears about remixes. They were saying something like, "You know, we just put one out last year and we've sold 35,000 records." We're thinking, "We did that out of a bedroom in Akron, Ohio, when we had Booji Boy Records—why would we go back to that?" Then they said, "But we've already licensed the music for over five million bucks." So there's your business model. It's not about record companies; it's about finding other avenues to market your music. You know, when we first started, we had all these big ideas about a Devo TV network and about doing films. As a matter of fact, we thought we were going to be making product for Laserdiscs.

SF: Those platter-sized optical videodiscs?

Bob Casale: Yeah. When we were starting, they were "the future," but supposedly in the next year or two, and it took another ten years or so before home video would take off.

MM: I still have a Laserdisc player and a collection! [*Laughs.*] Because there was no MTV back then and we made all these films with our songs, we really thought that was what we wanted to do.

SF: The "Jocko Homo" film clip was one of the first "music videos" I ever saw. It blew my mind. . . .

MM: People have always made films to music. Duke Ellington did it. The Beatles did it. It was just that we were already thinking of it as . . .

GC: . . . as the only way it would be presented.

SF: The album's marketing campaign, with the words "Devo, Inc." and this CEO guy who has a head shot on your website—it struck me as wonderfully ironic that you're mimicking corporate means of generating a fan base and "brand identity." Surveys, focus groups. . . .

MM: We're making fun of them but at the same time, utilizing them. We're actually curious. Admittedly, 40 years ago, you'd talk to people about de-evolution and they'd think you were crazy or just had a bad attitude. Now, we're a question on game shows. "Devo" is part of the vernacular. At one time, we were very insular and protective. Now that people have an idea of what *they* think de-evolution is, it's more interesting to invite them to have an opinion about what we're doing. People think about things in ways that we wouldn't; they hear things in the music that we don't.

SF: How did that play out on the level of songwriting and production?

MM: For starters, with the people who've been working with us on remixes. [Producer] Greg Kurstin took a lot of the drum tracks we'd recorded and reused them as triggers, for instance, as opposed to using the drums we originally recorded.

GC: That's something we never did before—just hand off our stuff to somebody and say, "Show us what you'd do." It's been really interesting to get stuff back.

MM: Even back when we worked with people like Brian Eno, we were really protective of our stuff. I remember being over at the studio and we'd all be sitting there listening to a mix. Brian would push a couple of faders up—things he'd recorded on his synths or extra singing. We'd

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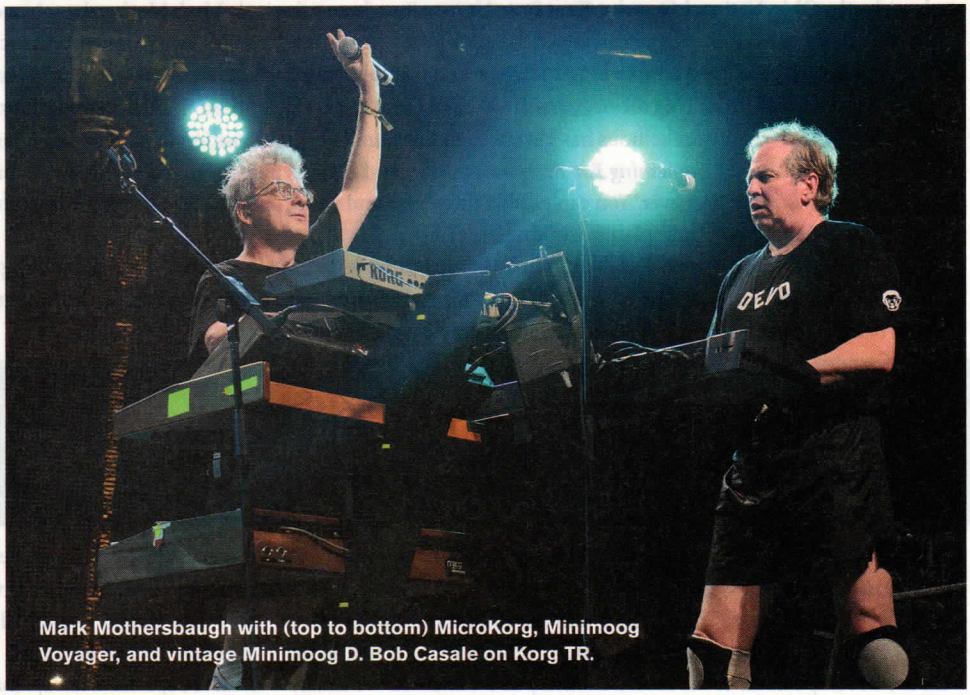

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Mark Mothersbaugh with (top to bottom) MicroKorg, Minimoog Voyager, and vintage Minimoog D. Bob Casale on Korg TR.

stand there and everybody would be looking forward like everybody does when they're listening to a mix, you know. Then, one of us would sort of reach over and pull the Eno faders back, and he'd look over and noticed that we'd just . . .

GC: Removed him.

MM: And nobody would talk about it directly! [*Everyone laughs.*] Eno had a lot of stuff there at Konrad Plank's studio. They had a lot of modular things but he had his Synthi AKS—that suitcase synth—and he did a lot with tape delays, as not long before, he'd done *Music For Airports*. I remember once we were all holding pieces of tape that were 20 feet long and going around the spindle of some echo machine.

SF: Did such a contribution ever surprise you in a good way?

MM: Eno did something on "Jocko Homo" with monkey chants. I don't know where he recorded them, but it sounded really good, and he *timed* it. That wasn't easy then. You didn't have digital gear, but he timed the monkey chants to play in sync with the song, so we kept that. That was great.

Point being, anybody we hired as a producer probably got very frustrated. Roy Thomas Baker just stopped showing up at the studio after about three weeks, so they were there in name but not always getting to do what they do best. So this time around we thought, why not see what happens if we let people who grew up with Devo have their way with this stuff? I mean, nobody has done anything as radical to our tunes as what we did to "Satisfaction" from the Rolling Stones. The closest was Polysics, who covered our "Secret Agent Man."

GC: They totally deconstructed it! [*Laughs.*]

MM: I listened to it again today—I love that mix.

SF: What I always really loved about your "Satisfaction" is that through most of it, I'm never really sure where the downbeat is. The rhythm has this Möbius strip quality.

MM: We actually had to play it for the Stones, and Mick Jagger danced around the room and said it was his favorite version he'd ever heard! This was back in the day before they had the parody laws all worked out. Now, there's a much wider interpretation of what you can do before you have to get permission.

SF: When you guys started the band in '73, synthesizers would have been exotic, large, and not that affordable.

BC: Exactly, and not that available. Mark got one of the first Minimoogs that ever became available.

SF: I was wondering when and where you first heard a synth and said to yourself, "I want that sound in what *I* do."

MM: When I was at school, Morton Subotnick visited Kent State, and that was when I really saw one being used and thought it was amazing. The first synth *solo* that ever really inspired me was Brian Eno on Roxy Music's "Editions of You." I think he used an EMS suitcase synth, one with no keyboard on it. You could tell, and it was the best synth solo I'd ever heard. Before that, there was Keith Emerson going *bow-rowr* and Rick Wakeman going *bong-deet-de-bong-bong*, and—not to take away from them as musicians—it all sounded a bit Doctor Seuss-ish to me. Eno found a new vocabulary. You couldn't play those sounds on a keyboard; the notes were sliding all over the place. That totally changed way I thought about the potential of pop music.

SF: Don Buchla famously saw the synthesizer as *freeing* us from the keyboard. The Minimoog and Prophet, on the other hand, were for putting on top of your Fender Rhodes and playing licks on.

MM: Don't forget EML. They were crazy keyboards, almost impossible to tune. I mean, they had a keyboard on them but we just ended up using ours for sound effects.

BC: But they also had a keyboard scaling function—you could slide it such that you weren't playing notes or intervals at all.

MM: You could warp it a tiny bit and it just make it really crazy.

SF: Once you established your own sound, who were the first artists you heard thereafter that reflected that new wave of music—not to call it "new wave," but in terms of new uses for synths?

MM: People like Suicide in New York, and the Screamers out here. Early Human League was different than the Human League that had hits in the '80s. They were half Heaven 17, and were doing much more adventurous music than either band did after they split up.

SF: How did de-evolution, um, evolve as the concept to wrap the band around?

GC: It was always floating around as we wrote songs, and it just gelled. We were interested in playing games with the culture, in being "aliens" who were just observing. That was always a go-to security blanket, and it also fit with what we were doing musically—stripping things down, looking for the antithesis of what was happening on the radio.

To find the musical language that would show people what we were talking about, we'd do things like taping one of [drummer] Alan Myers' hands behind his back and saying, "No cymbals, no fills!" Then we'd argue like a debate team: "If we're riffing in *E*, what's the reason to change to *A*? What's gonna happen? Is it just because you're supposed to go to *A* after eight bars? Let's not." It was like that.

MM: Which *isn't* to say that by looking for a new sound and a new

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language, we were trying to be obscure. We actually wanted to be commercial at the same time. To be likable.

GC: Well, we knew what we liked and we thought everybody should like it. [*Laughs.*]

SF: On the new record, did the vast plethora of options that both technology and your success now afford you present any challenges—in terms of just picking where to start?

BC: Less than you'd think. It ran the gamut from the way we did it in the beginning, with an old Minimoog, to all the software synths available now.

MM: And folding in circuit-bent instruments that we found. They kind of replaced Jim Mothersbaugh's input. Before there was a term for it, he was our circuit bender in residence.

SF: Were there any soft synths that you found yourself going back to repeatedly?

BC: GForce ImpOSCar. We like the ImpOSCar! Mark ran a real Minimoog through a bunch of effects pedals. . . .

MM: We also programmed a lot. We have a pretty good collection of software here.

BC: Mark was using Logic and I was using Digital Performer. If we used a soft synth that was exclusive to one program, we'd record an audio track and port it over to the other program.

MM: We were always interested in *Keyboard* magazine. We always read it to know what was new and what was happening. We've been using software for scoring so it seemed natural. It was just trying to figure out the balance between software and hardware that was integral to our writing process—like old step sequencers and drum machines. We could easily balance out a software-heavy song with just a couple of out-of-control tracks with circuit-bent gear on them. We kept recording all the time, and Bob would take, like, two minutes of crazy s*** and cut it down to an eight-bar solo.

BC: We really didn't get into soft synths until we got into Logic and Digital Performer at around version 5.

MM: Before that, it was Opcode Vision. We were using rack synths and MIDI for a long time, and we got into soft synths only when we finally gave up on that. We pleaded with [Opcode founder] David Oppenheim. I said, "What would it cost us for you to come rewrite all our stuff so it'd be compatible and updated?" He was like, "Eh . . . I don't even want to do it." So we went, "Oh s***, we have to learn another program!" We'd written so much stuff on Vision—there's probably a couple hundred hours of intellectual property just lost on some computers downstairs.

BC: Unfortunately, any of the audio you did in Vision doesn't translate to anything else because the program kept adding to one long file, then picked it apart for what tracks you needed.

SF: What synth was used for the signature seven-four-one notes in "Whip It"?

BC: It was a Prophet-5 with the oscillators set an octave or two apart. It had a filter and envelopes that did those chime-like things better than the other synths at the time. We had one in '79 and the voltage regulators would freak out about three or four times a tour, and we'd lose all the memory.

GC: "Whip It" was written over a period of August to October of '79. It came from about four different pieces of music, and that synth part was one of the last things to be put on it when we already had the song structure.

MM: Here's another good Prophet story. In 1979, I got hired to score an off-Broadway play with Dean Stockwell and Russ Tamblyn, and I went to Malcolm Cecil's studio in Santa Monica. I set my Prophet-5 on top of the keyboards for [Cecil's famous modular synth] TONTO. I'm looking at TONTO for the first time going, "Wow, that's crazy!" Malcolm comes over and asks me about the Prophet. I go, "Yeah, it has internal memory *and* polyphony!" He's like, *sigh.* It was so sad! He'd invented one of the first polyphonic synths, and his partner was so paranoid someone was going to steal the design that he filled the whole interior with epoxy so you couldn't see what was in there. In two days, it had dried and contracted, ripping all the circuitry apart. He showed it to me.

GC: That's a good lesson about paranoia.

MM: TONTO showed up here about 13 or 14 years ago. For a couple years it was working, and people would come over and find out what it was like to patch a giant modular synth and spend all day getting one bass sound. And they'd go, "Okay, I can understand why we're moving on from that technology." It was so cool to have it here, though.

SF: To finish, I have to ask about the new look of the band. How did the idea of the half-facemasks and the blue color scheme come together?

GC: Well, we needed some age-appropriate clothing. [*Laughs.*] It's a little bit orthodox Devo, a little bit Greek and Roman, and a little bit *Eyes Wide Shut.*

MM: There could be a kids' TV commercial in there somewhere. There's definitely some Hasbro influence.

GC: Yeah, and of course the very grown-up jackets and pants, made with a fabric Bea Åkerlund found. She's done a lot of costume design for Lady Gaga. Speaking of which, I have to hand it to them—her video for "Telephone" actually disturbed me. I thought nothing could disturb me anymore. When they poison everybody in the diner, they poison the dog, too. There's actually a shot of the dog dead. They should've let the dog live. That's how sentimental I've become. K