

Self-proclaimed "audio wizard" Scott Colburn stands in his Ballard home/recording studio, where the in-demand producer and engineer records bands from around the world

SOUND EFFECTS

A local audio engineer and music producer's stripped-back approach is making waves in the indie music scene and beyond **BY ROSS SIMONINI**

WALKING INTO Scott Colburn's Gravel-voice recording studio, a renovated 1908 church in Ballard, you can't help but feel that good, soulful things happen here. With its high, arched ceilings, old couches and stacks of records lying around, the studio (also Colburn's home) is the antithesis of most modern recording venues, which tend to have about as much soul as a doctor's office. "I try to make my space feel as comfortable as possible," says the 42-year-old audio engineer and music producer, who, thanks to a keen ear and a handful of recent high-profile recording jobs, has become one of the most prolific and in-demand engineer/producers in the Northwest, with groups such as garage punk legends Mudhoney and the country-ringed Transmission Six.

As one of the few punk rockers in his childhood home of Columbus, Indiana, Colburn had a rebellious nature that turned him into a devoted fan of noise

rock and obscure experimental artists such as Seattle-based psychedelic gypsy rockers Sun City Girls (SCG). After honing his skills in sound-engineering classes at Indiana University and Columbia College in Chicago, Colburn approached Sun City Girls about working as their engineer. Thanks to similar musical and philosophical tastes, the young engineer and the nascent underground band hit it off and Colburn moved to Seattle in 1993. Armed with a simple four-track recorder, Colburn and SCG began a 15-year, 30-record collaboration that—thanks to SCG's challenging and eclectic sound and Colburn's stripped-back production—influenced an

entire generation of new experimental bands, such as the New York City-based Animal Collective.

During this period, Colburn, who still looks and often acts like a newcomer ready to take on the world (he jokingly attributes his youthful nature to his "girlish figure"), developed his signature live-sound recording style. "My forte is capturing a band's live essence and energy and putting that on a record," Colburn says of his recording approach, which mirrors his lifelong love of raw, stripped-down music and defies the now-standard squeaky-clean pop production that's heard on the radio. >>>

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Colburn's live-sound recording technique came in handy in 2001 when he became an engineer at KEXP, where he recorded the renowned local radio station's popular on-air radio performances by influential groups such as Air, Blonde Redhead and local hip-hoppers Blue Scholars. Through KEXP, Colburn connected with a massive network of local bands, many of which were impressed by his work ethic and iconoclastic recording approach. One such band is Transmissionary Six, who recently finished recording a full-length album at Gravelvoice. Transmissionary Six front man Paul Austin describes working with Colburn as "really liberating, because [Colburn] operates outside the world of what's currently the 'now' thing in indie rock...he's a contrarian by nature."

Colburn's national profile got a boost when he recorded and produced Animal Collective's 2005 album, *Feels*, a dreamy, layered affair that stands as one of the milestone psychedelic records of the new millennium. His efforts on *Feels* led to more national work, most notably with indie superstars Arcade Fire, who flew Colburn to their native Montreal in 2006 to engineer their wildly anticipated sophomore release, *Neon Bible* (released last March). Later this year, Colburn heads to France to engineer and produce French pop star Cali's next album. Entering the pop world is an unlikely departure for Colburn, but his open-minded, try-anything attitude should make for an interesting pairing.

"I'm always traveling as quick as I can," says Colburn regarding his work pace. "The world doesn't move fast enough for me, so when I meet somebody it's like, 'Hey, you want to come along with me?' And you've got to make a decision that quick, because I'm on my way." **S**

NOTABLE PROJECTS SCOTT COLBURN HAS WORKED ON OVER THE YEARS:

- >> **Animal Collective**, *Feels* (Fat Cat, 2005), sound engineer and producer
- >> **Arcade Fire**, *Neon Bible* (Merge, 2007), sound engineer
- >> **Climax Golden Twins**, 1995 to 2005, member and engineer
- >> **Mudhoney**, *Since We've Become Translucent* (Sub Pop, 2002), sound engineer
- >> **Radio mixes for KEXP**, 2001 to present
- >> **Sun City Girls**, 30 records between 1993 and 2007, sound engineer and producer



DOWNLOAD A PODCAST OF SELECT SCOTT COLBURN RECORDINGS AT SEATTLEMAG.COM