

TAP INTO THIS

BY DANIEL DURCHHOLZ

They've come: Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Uriah Heep, Grand Funk. And they've gone: Led Zeppelin, Mountain, Steppenwolf, Cream. Only England's Spinal Tap remains of the bands that first brought us heavy metal's mighty wall of sludge. The Tap — guitarist/vocalist David St. Hubbins, guitarist Nigel Tufnel and bassist Derek Smalls — are currently prepping for a nationwide tour in support of their new album *Break Like the Wind* (MCA). Smalls recently spoke with the RFT about the band's recent re-formation, their checkered past and their unfortunate history of exploding drummers.

RFT: Derek, it's been eight years since your last tour of America and Japan and the film *This Is Spinal Tap*. What have you been up to?

Smalls: Well, it took me eight months to get out of Japan after the tour collapsed. We did the first gig and it was great — I mean, we really blew it out. But then jet lag caught up with us and we slept for about 22 hours. We missed the second gig and the sound check for the third. And I don't know if you know the Japanese people, but they take these things very personally. And so this little bullet-headed man stood in our suite and just screamed at the top of his lungs, "You've shamed a respected rock & roll promoter." And all I could think of was, what kind of country is it that respects rock & roll promoters?

So I just blew it out that night. I visited many hotels with women of many nations and lost my passport. I was reduced to busking on the street, playing my bass in Tokyo. And they don't like bass in Tokyo; it's not part of their culture. Their music is very high and twangy. So it was not a pleasure, though it did get me into my thing of collecting Orientalia.

Then I went back to Britain. The last few years I've been in a Christian rock band called Lamb's Blood. A mate of mine had been their bass player and he backslid, so they invited me to join. I toured with them for a couple of years. We did all the big tent shows and the Monsters of Jesus festivals.

What did you think of *This Is Spinal Tap*? I mean, some of the parts made the band look rather unprofessional.

Yeah, if you'd seen that movie, you'd walk out thinking, well, this isn't a smooth band, is it? We thought it was a hatchet job. We thought that Marty "the Butcher" DiBergi took advantage of us, exploited our willingness to believe that he was a fan of ours, and basically slanted the whole thing to fit some scheme he had. He showed us a different cut, where we looked good. And then we went, oh, this is nice, this is fine, and we invite our mums and dads and our lovers and all to the premiere, and we're sitting there with you-know-what on our faces.

I'll give you one example. In the film, you see us playing on various stages, don't you? Well, did it occur to you that we must have found those stages? As opposed to what he shows you, which is us not finding the stage. You see, he doesn't give you both sides. We didn't just plop down from heaven — we found the bloody stage, time and time again, but he doesn't show you that. For eight years, I've had people coming up to me saying, "Oh, Derek, you gonna get out of the pub tonight?"

What do you think of younger bands like Metallica and Guns N' Roses, who are selling millions and millions of records these days?

Well, let's just wait and see how many millions we sell, and then we'll say what we think. I mean, if we don't, we'll be a lot more pissed than if we do. But Metallica, all I can say is, great band, we love the lads. You know, great idea for a record cover, all black. I wonder where they got that from? And Nigel was wearing a kilt 15 years before Axl thought of it. But it's fine. They're just kids. It's monkey see, monkey do. And as

the senior monkeys, we just have to do something else. I mean, there's a euthanasia song on our new record. Let's just wait and see how long it is before everybody jumps on that bandwagon and starts writing songs about pulling the plug, OK?



Spinal Tap, from left: Derek Smalls, David St. Hubbins and Nigel Tufnel

You're known as "one of England's loudest bands." Are you worried about the effects of such loud music on your internal organs?

Oh, no. The bass, if played very loud, will make you eliminate and evacuate on sudden notice, but aside from that it can do no lasting damage. And actually, most people these days don't get enough fiber anyway, so loud bass really compensates. It sort of returns you to nature's balance. As far as the other instruments are concerned, all it's gonna do is whack off the top of your hearing range, which you don't really need in urban society anyway. You're gonna hear that car alarm a little less clearly, but that's probably a good thing.

There was some controversy over the cover of *Smell the Glove*. Did you anticipate any sort of problems this time out?

We never anticipate problems. We let them come to us.

A lot of people seem to have misconceptions about the music. For example, I imagine feminists will be upset over the song "Bitch School."

Well now, wait. Why would feminists be upset at "Bitch School"? It's a song about dogs and dog training and how, if the dog is going to be recalcitrant, you've got to send it back. Nigel happens to have a very cute little female corgi. We were talking about training her, and he said, "If she misbehaves one more time, I'm gonna send her back to bitch school." And that's all it's about. Feminists, you see, are so bloody oppressed that they choose to misinterpret things as their defense against oppression. And we're caught in the middle.

For example: I don't know if you've seen the video, but there's young attractive women in it. Our record

company said, "Boys, not just dogs in the video, all right? Let's have some people in it, let's have some scantily clad people jumping about." In the old days, we would have said, "Our way or no way." But now we're more mature. We said, all right, maybe the record company knows something we don't. Let's put young attractive people in a state of relative undress bumping about in the video. Now, what if we said at that point, "Spinal Tap video shooting tomorrow, 20 young people needed, good pay, good working conditions, no women need apply." What would the feminists say then? They can't have it both ways. But as you know, it's very hard to satisfy women. So we don't even try.

Now, your last tour was pretty disastrous. What are you doing this time to prevent a similar debacle?

Well, you're judging by the film again. There were nights it went all right. It was not our best tour, I'll admit that. It was not what we'd hoped. But this time we're taking all the precautions. For example, we've got this great new drummer, Rick Shrimpton. But just in case, 'cause we know there's a curse on us, in every territory we go into, we hold a drummer audition. And there's a winner, and he gets a beeper. And if God or Satan forbid, anything should happen to Rick, we just ring him up and say, "Right, your turn, bring your sticks."

What about the band's history of acrimony and infighting? Has that settled down at all?

We're much more mature now. After eight years to think about things, we really don't have any punch-ups anymore. Nigel will, on occasion, bite. But he really doesn't break the skin very often. We really know how to settle our disputes now. But you've got to have a certain amount of tension in the band. If you don't, you don't have a rock band, you've got the Carpenters. I mean, not even the band. Just the people who come in and work on wood.

A lot of bands out there are cleaning up and working out — no more sex and drugs with their rock & roll. Is that the case with the Tap as well?

What, no sex and drugs? Well, as far as David's concerned, you'd have to ask Janine. But Nigel and I, yeah, we're still a bit on the wild side. Although these days, you do know that you have to indulge in excess more carefully. We double bag it — paper and plastic. And it depends on our feelings for the person we're with whether the plastic or the paper goes first.

St. Hubbins and Tufnel are such charismatic frontmen. Do you have any problem with sort of living in their shadow?

The thing about living in someone's shadow is, the sun goes across the sky, doesn't it? And when it does, the shadow moves. So, unless you're moving with the sun, you're not in the shadow all the time. That's the philosophical answer. The real answer is, I'm less in the shadow now because I wrote two tunes on the new album and I sing lead on one of them. I'm growing into a new — I don't want to say more prominent — but less hidden role. I think the band is growing into a more multifaceted kind of stone in a way. It's like a diamond that you suddenly realize has eight more sides to it than you ever saw before. And those would be me.

What are your thoughts on returning to America?

America is so very different from England. I mean, they're both so-called free countries, you know, laff laff. But here, there's so much more a sense of possibility. Things are open 24 hours a day, the telly is on all night. I mean, if you value individual choice at all, the ability to go round to a shop and get butter or beer or a nice little packaged salad at any time of the day or night — you understand how people must have felt when they saw the Statue of Liberty and realized, "Oh, I can buy beer at 4 in the morning."