

get screwed

The analog revolt as lead by Metasonix

"Americans love to have their butts probed. Look at the freaks they vote into political power," claims Eric Barbour, owner and engineer behind Metasonix, the reigning kings of eccentric vacuum tube distortion. Never one to hide his true feelings on a subject, Barbour's approach to pro audio is a welcome addition to an industry where marketing execs think it's edgy to use the word "phat." (Not that Roland is as pedantic as Phillip Morris, but who else but Metasonix could get away with making a distortion unit called the TX-2 Buttprobe, complete with "ream" and "fist" settings?)

Speaking of "phat," Barbour's products really do have tubes in them, and they aren't just props for analog street cred.

► URB: Explain this fascination you have with vacuum tubes.

Barbour: I'm a contrarian. People don't like contrarians, which only feeds my antisocial nature. I'm also compulsively honest, another personality trait that fools seem to dislike. They love being lied to. Since the experts in the electronics industry have repeatedly declared vacuum tubes to be useless junk, it only increases my desire to use them productively.

► How do vacuum tubes and strange distortion units fit into an industry where everyone is supposedly switching to software?

I'm worried that people are making music production into a monoculture by using computer software almost exclusively. Software has its place, but it also gets heavily promoted and reviewed in music-industry publications. It's so excessive that one might be fooled into thinking that nothing else is going on, which isn't true.

Somebody wants this archaic stuff. And as it turns out, much of it is bought by major recording artists who are sick of the sterile, predictable sounds made by com-

mercial software synths. Instead of setting sound free, the makers of this stuff have opted to make endless rehashed imitations of vintage keyboards and synths from the 1970s. If this is a "digital revolution," then the rebels have already lost.

So, people who are serious about making music — people who make a living from it — are frequently snubbing software and deliberately looking for the most arcane or deviant electronic music hardware. Not only does it keep 14 modular synth makers in business, it also causes new companies to introduce new integrated analog synthesizers all the time. Moog, Macbeth, Cwejman, MAM, Vermona, Elektron, Dave Smith, the list goes on and on. In fact, there's more analog hardware available for sale today than there ever was at any single time in the past! This doesn't look like "dead technology" to me!

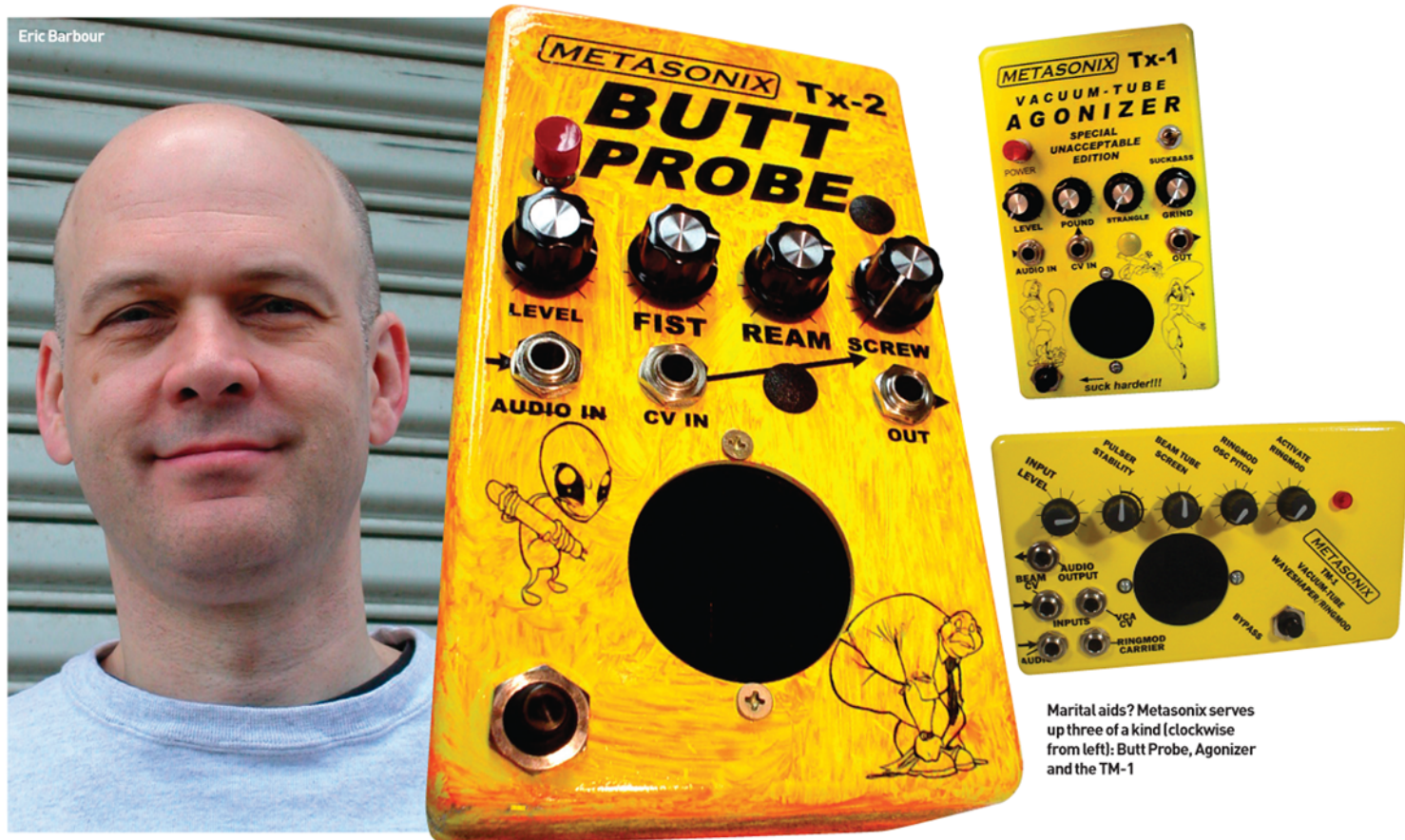
► What separates Metasonix from the other hardware out there, besides the marketing?

Even after doing this for six years, Metasonix is still the only company in the world making tube synth modules. Everybody else is using solid-state, mostly from designs that were perfected in the early 1970s. The irony is that some of those other guys are making gadgets using integrated-circuit chips that are very scarce and difficult to find. Meanwhile, I have no trouble buying all the obscure vacuum tubes I need.

► Who are the people you look up to in the engineering realm?

To me, people who really stand out are the ones who don't follow any industry-sanctioned rules about "the right way." Guys like Raymond Scott, Bob Moog or Don Buchla. They ended up changing the world, even though they were doing "the wrong thing" in the 1950s and 1960s. There is no "right way." There are many ways. Especially in art and music — it's almost like chaos out there. Great music is a mixture of chaos and order. ► **Brandon Ivers**

Eric Barbour



Marital aids? Metasonix serves up three of a kind (clockwise from left): Butt Probe, Agonizer and the TM-1