

## **Shareef Does Like It** (Even If It's Not Kosher)

*By Keith Walsh*

Driving north on the 5 freeway past Disneyland, you can almost smell the money. Not too far off, Howard Hughes headquartered an aerospace empire, Walt Disney created a fantasy land, and glistening office towers scrape the sky, their inhabitants generating billions upon billions of dollars in revenue annually. More than just the First World, Orange County, California represents the upper crust of the First World -- where else would you expect to find the "Happiest Place on Earth?"

In 1982, when the crush of traffic chewed up much less precious time, it was a twenty-minute drive from Disneyland to the Casbah recording studio in Fullerton, California. And while Walt's creative offspring were entertaining the world, artists at the Casbah were producing their own exports -- popular music for the masses. Berlin, Stacey Q, and Social Distortion, -- all Billboard top 100 artists at one time -- recorded early works there, most notable perhaps being Berlin's *Pleasure Victim* EP (1982) featuring the hit "Sex," and the "Q" EP (also 1982) featuring a pre-"Two of Hearts" Stacey Swain.

Purchased by St. James in 1977 with money borrowed from his parents (his father spent his productive years driving a big rig), the early Casbah boasted a mere 8-channel Teac reel-to-reel machine using half-inch tape, though eventually Jon upgraded to a 16 track Teac with 1-inch tape. His initial ventures included a full length album of electronic music, and a series of sound-alike jingles for the now-defunct Los Angeles rock and roll station KMET 94.7 FM. The multi-instrumental St. James played virtually all of the instruments and sang on these as well. Examples included a reworking of the Beatles "I Saw Her Standing There" (*How can I dance to another, since I heard K-M-E-T?*) and a dead-on snippet of Bowies' *Suffragette City* (*Hey Man, You know it's K-M-E-T*).

### **Low Cost -- High Fidelity**

When, in late 2004, I asked producer and engineer Michael Hutchinson how the Casbah fared in comparison to other studios, he told me: "Considering it wasn't a five star studio...you could consider it a three star. They had the basics. I mean, they had some sort of a plate or spring reverb unit, some delays and a couple of chorus boxes, and things like that. Most of that stuff was done on a really tight budget. You have to give kudos to the guy who did the Berlin record, because it sounds like it was done on much more expensive gear." Hutchinson, whose credits include Billy Idol, Chicago, Warrant, Poison, Manhattan Transfer, and Berlin, was referring the groundbreaking *Pleasure Victim* EP, which was released in 1982 and went platinum in 1993.

Early on, St. James brought a partner in; that was Chaz Ramirez, guitarist for Eddie and the Subtitles, a punk group whose leader lived literally just down the street and around the corner from the studio. "Most punk bands wanted to go there and record," Hutchinson told me. "Mostly, I think because of the vibe, and because of Chaz. Chaz always cared that everybody got what they wanted and had a good time." The first thing that caught one's eye upon entering the waiting area from the parking lot was the bald, female

department store mannequin known as Babs, whose attire was frequently revised. "I do remember the mannequin," Hutchinson told me. "That was frightening the first time I showed up there."

### **Heady Days**

"It was such a blur sometimes; you're not always aware if you're working on something that might end up on a specific band's record," said Hutchinson. Despite the Casbah's reputation as a place of wild fun, a line should be drawn between the more casual gatherings sponsored by Ramirez, and the more commercial ventures of St. James. Part of the excitement seemed to come from the two distinct cultures; one typified by Chaz and his cronies' slacker ethos, the other by St. James and his keen awareness of musical trends. Of the pair, Hutchinson says: "I don't think they shared musical tastes; I don't know how excited Chaz was about Berlin – he was more excited about punk stuff." Nevertheless, Hutchinson credits Chaz with being an "unsung hero" for his work on *Pleasure Victim*. Ramirez and St. James are listed as assistant engineers on the disc, with Dan Van Patten headlining the affair as producer and engineer.

"Those were heady days; if we were sober, it was an event," Hutchinson recalled of time spent at the studio. "There was a hell of a lot of beer, and everybody was smoking." No doubt there were clashes; St. James had laid down a strict "no smoking" rule in the equipment room, a rule not always honored. He expressed irritation to me on one occasion over the lack of concern for conventional etiquette exhibited by Chaz and his punk cronies, upon entering the control room and noticing the distinct smell of partying that had gone on the previous night.

Often at the apartment shared by Chaz and Eddie Egan (aka Eddie Subtitle), grizzled veterans of the music scene, as well as relative newcomer Stacey Swain (soon to be known as Stacey Q) sat around trading war stories. Their Christmas tree one December in the early 1980's was festooned with dozens of Marlboro boxes; these guys weren't afraid of thumbing their noses up at the spirit of Christmas itself. (Sadly, Chaz died in the late 90's in a bizarre accident, in which he fell from the rafters of a warehouse while picking through electronic odds and ends.)

In the midst of this chaotic mixture of talent and excess, St. James steadily pursued his dreams. Jon cultivated his public image carefully, seemingly knowing what success lay ahead. He drove a turquoise Karmann Ghia, though his heart was set on a Porsche (he later achieved that goal.) He dressed like he owned shares in The Gap, and was a perfectionist in all areas of his life, but particularly in regards to music, with a penchant for experimenting with new devices.

### **Techno-Obsessions**

In 1982, new musical technology was rampant. Programmable polyphonic synths -- a vast improvement over the inflexible machines and mellotrons of the past decade -- were coming onto the market. The first of them was the Sequential Circuits Prophet 5, followed by Roland's Jupiter 8, and the first affordable sampler, the Emulator. Electronic drum machines with digitally generated sounds began to appear as well -- among them

Roland's simple Dr. Rhythm, followed by the Compu Rhythm, and the Legendary TR-808. These machines used synthesized sounds, not real ones; the TR-808 is all over Depeche Mode's *Speak and Spell* and Berlin's *Pleasure Victim EP*. In 1980, Roger Linn came out with the LM-1, one of the first drum machines that played actual digital drum samples -- changing music across every genre (frequently for the worse)-- but this machine cost close to \$5,000 at the time, making the TR-808 the rhythm box of choice. Like most of us, St. James had an interest in all of these instruments.

As far as I know, St. James has always been a gifted engineer, songwriter, and guitar player. After graduating from high school he went to France to busk with his guitar, presumably to see the world and polish his musicianship. He also fell in love, with a French woman Martine. Incidentally, when John Crawford, Dan Van Patten and Terri Nunn were in the studio recording "*The Metro*," the first single for the new incarnation of Berlin and a precursor to "*Pleasure Victim* ", it was St. James who came up with the line "*I remember the night we walked along the Seine.*"

He was the first person I knew who owned a personal computer – it was a Mac 512k, the model with a tiny monochrome monitor. Just for context: the processor ran at 8Mhz, compared to today's 3Ghz processors. People convert them into little fish tanks now, but one day in 1984, Jon was playing a video game on his, launching pixilated paratroopers from planes and guiding them to safety.

### **Big Electronic Beat**

All of us were swept up in the spirit of the new technology and the music that was happening -- Jon was a big fan of synth bands like Kraftwerk and M; when he met Stacey Swain in 1981, he knew right away that this impossibly stylish former Ringling Bros. elephant girl and veteran of the Disneyland Main Street parade possessed star qualities perfectly compatible with electronic music, a genre Stacey also adored. She was enamored with the obscure Japanese band the Plastics and the B-52's, and simply could not get over David Bowie. As a student of style, Swain could literally turn rags into a fashion statement. On one occasion she went to the renaissance fair in Agoura dressed simply in two large pieces of soft leather she bought from a shop in Anaheim.

It wasn't long before Berlin and Fahrenheit drummer/synthesist/producer Dan Van Patten, St. James, Swain and John Van Tongeren were working on the four-song "Q" EP -- a brilliant exercise in minimalism, featuring a heavily effected Dr. Rhythm (on *Sushi*) along with Van Patten's Roland TR-808 and CSQ-800 sequencer nearly everywhere else. Swain's waifish vocals were the icing on the cake, highlighted by St. James' elegant guitar playing. Van Tongeren weighed in with his masterful playing of a Sequential Circuits Prophet 5, while Van Patten's Vocoder, another Roland device, showed up on a track or two as well. (To get a peek at some of these machines and others, check out [www.synthmuseum.com](http://www.synthmuseum.com).) I put down merely one keyboard track on the EP (using the Prophet 5 at the end of the haunting "Music's Gone,") though the Moog Prodigy I lent them showed up on a couple of other tracks as well.

## **Playback**

The resulting EP, printed on transparent red vinyl by M.A.O. Records (owned by Fahrenheit and Berlin manager Perry Watts Russell) did okay on college radio, and generated considerable buzz, providing the impetus for Jon and Stacey to move on with another project. The “Q” name had to be dropped for legal reasons. I seem to remember that Quincy Jones’ lawyer may have initiated a “cease and desist” order, due to Jones’s established use of the “Q” moniker. Thus, the new-wave band SSQ was created, with Stacey at the helm, Jon Van Tongeren on keyboards, Skip Hahn on guitar and keyboards, Karl Moet (aka Karl T. Moe) on electronic drums, and St. James on guitar. The resulting album had my name listed as “synth programmer”, probably because I did give St. James a cassette put out by Roland with hundreds of Jupiter 8 patches on it. The album’s first single, *Syntheticide* got some airplay on KROQ, then a Los Angeles area leader in new wave music. But world stardom was still an album away for Stacey Q.

When SSQ performed *Syntheticide* on KTTV in the mid 80s, it was apparent that Stacey’s star was rising, though no one knew exactly how high it would go until *Two of Hearts* became a monstrous hit in 1986, reaching #3 on two separate Billboard Charts in 1987.

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