

## Sigur Rós:

**LC: So you guys have a studio, and it was formerly a swimming pool? Like an indoor swimming pool?**

We're in the oldest swimming pool in Iceland. From '33 or something.

**LC: How did you pick that as a space for the studio?**

We were looking for a place to conduct rehearsal space and studio - this was the first place that we went. It's actually the place where I grew up - out in the countryside. A friend of ours kind of knew this was going but it wasn't open yet, so we just kind of stumbled into it. So designed for us - so brilliant.

**LC: What's the layout of the building like?**

There's five-meter high ceilings and there's a swimming pool and there's a walk going all around. So you can walk all around. The second floor is where the control room is. So you can watch down from the control room down to the swimming pool.

**LC: And you set up in the swimming pool to play music?**



Yeah. We have lots of booths too. When we record the drum track we can record in the three booths.

**LC: Like isolation booths.**

Yeah.

**LC: What's the studio's name? Does it have a name?**

We just call it the swimming pool. [I've seen it listed as *Sundlaugin* -LC] It's a really nice place and it's in the countryside and it's really quiet. It's nice to be outside the city. Because all of your friends are dropping by and you can't do much, but if you live outside, they are too lazy to drop by.

**JL: It's just an old public swimming pool?**

It's a really old kind of wool factory area. Manufacturing sweaters and things like that.

But it's been a really long time since that shut down that it's mainly just artists, sculptors and painters - so it's really nice energy. Really peaceful and quiet.

**LC: Except for you guys. [everyone laughs]**

**JL: The rest of the building though, what is still in there?**

Just apartments and artists.

**JL: So it's a shared space?**

# Sigur Rós

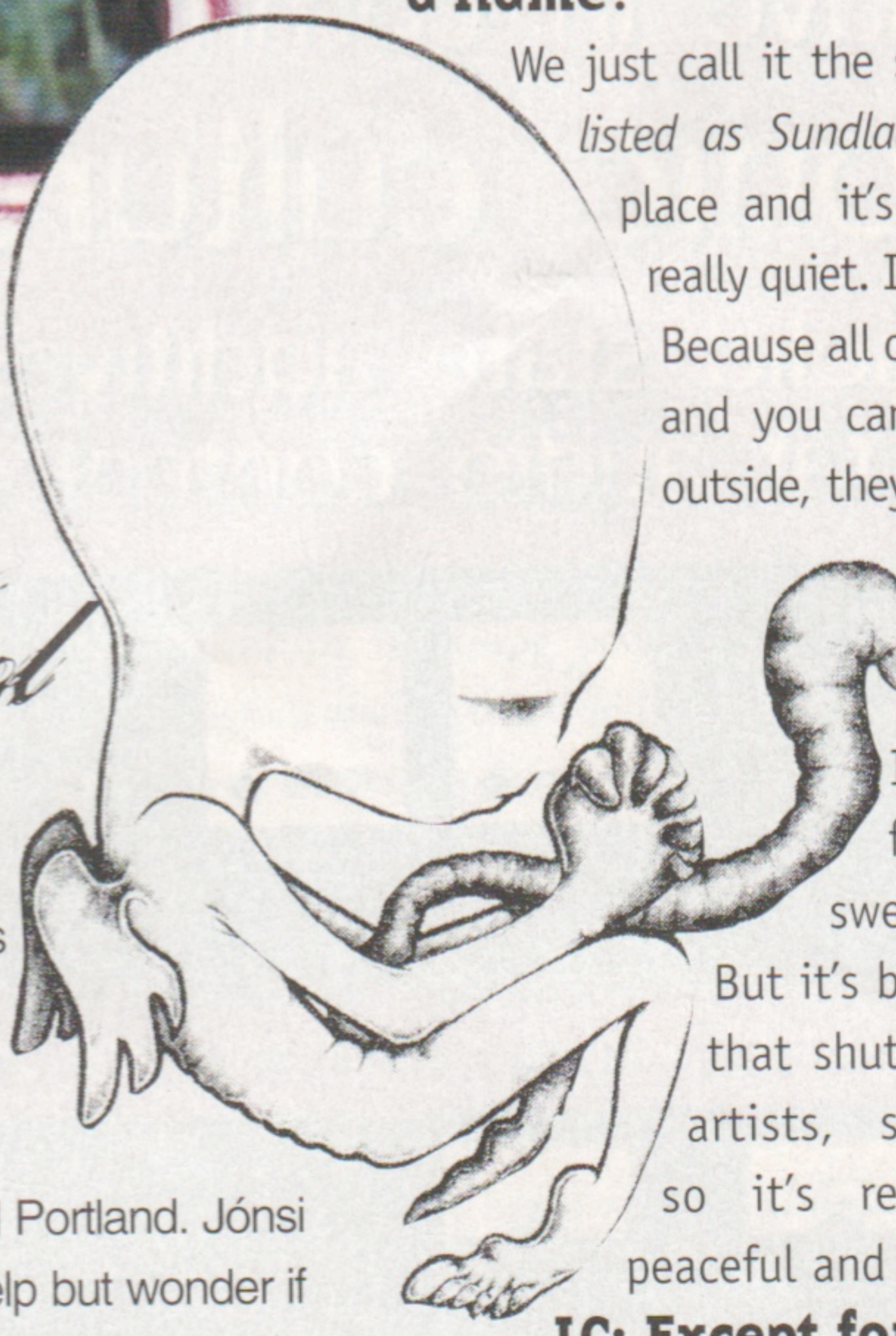
## How to Record in a Swimming Pool

by Larry Crane with Jimmy LaValle

The Icelandic combo known as Sigur Rós create some of the most haunting otherworldly sounds and songs. Their third album, known only as *( )*, clocks in at 70 minutes with eight tracks and no liner notes! Plus it was recorded in the band's own studio, a converted swimming pool in the Icelandic countryside.

We interviewed guitarist/vocalist Jón (Jónsi) Birgisson on the band's tour bus when they played Portland. Jónsi had been a musician and full-time studio engineer before starting Sigur Rós in 1994. One can't help but wonder if his knowledge of the recording process and boredom with traditional "rock band" sounds had a huge influence on his band. Jónsi's use of large reverb sounds on his guitar, a cello bow-guitar technique and ethereal choir boy vocals in Icelandic or Hopelandic (i.e., not a real language) combined with the band's sense of space and compositional development sounds like nobody else.

The other members of the band are Kjartan (Kjarri) Sveinsson on keyboards, Orri Páll D'Rason on drums and Georg (Goggi) Holm on bass. The Portland show was transcendent, with a sold out crowd sitting in rapt attention as the band, accompanied by the Amina String Quartet, created the same magic vibe live that they pull off on record.



# How to Record in a Swimming Pool. *by Larry Crane with Jimmy LaValle*

It's actually kind of strange building. There is a river that runs just beside of our building, there's another building there, it's an apartment, there's a bridge over the river, so it's really nice and we have a pond. It's really, really nice.

**JL: You were living in there, weren't you?**

Yeah, we were living in the basement. There are other people who live there. It's funny. It's a really small apartment - on the bridge. Really, really terrible.

**LC: On the bridge?**

**JL: Was a troll supposed to live there? [everyone laughs]**

They live under, but we used to live in the basement, kind of. At the corner is a pub but it shut down actually now. It was really nice.

I think it's actually quite nice because you never listen to music in that place. If you think of it you just listen to music in your home, I think it's actually quite nice.

**JL: For your vocal tracking what did you do? Were you in an isolation booth?**

No. Just did it in the control room in front of the mixer.

Just had mics and turned the speakers on. Had headphones on the other ear. When I sing with headphones on it's usually hard for me to find the pitch. So when I listen to the speakers it's much more natural for me somehow. On the last album I just turned everything really loud.

**JL: Do you do scratch vocal tracks as you're recording?**

Yeah. When we record we always play all together.

**LC: What kind of recording equipment do you have?**

We bought a really nice Neve desk - I think it was a fifty-five series or fifty-one series. We bought that from a French television station that was getting all digital mixers, so we got it really cheap. Digital is more convenient and smaller.

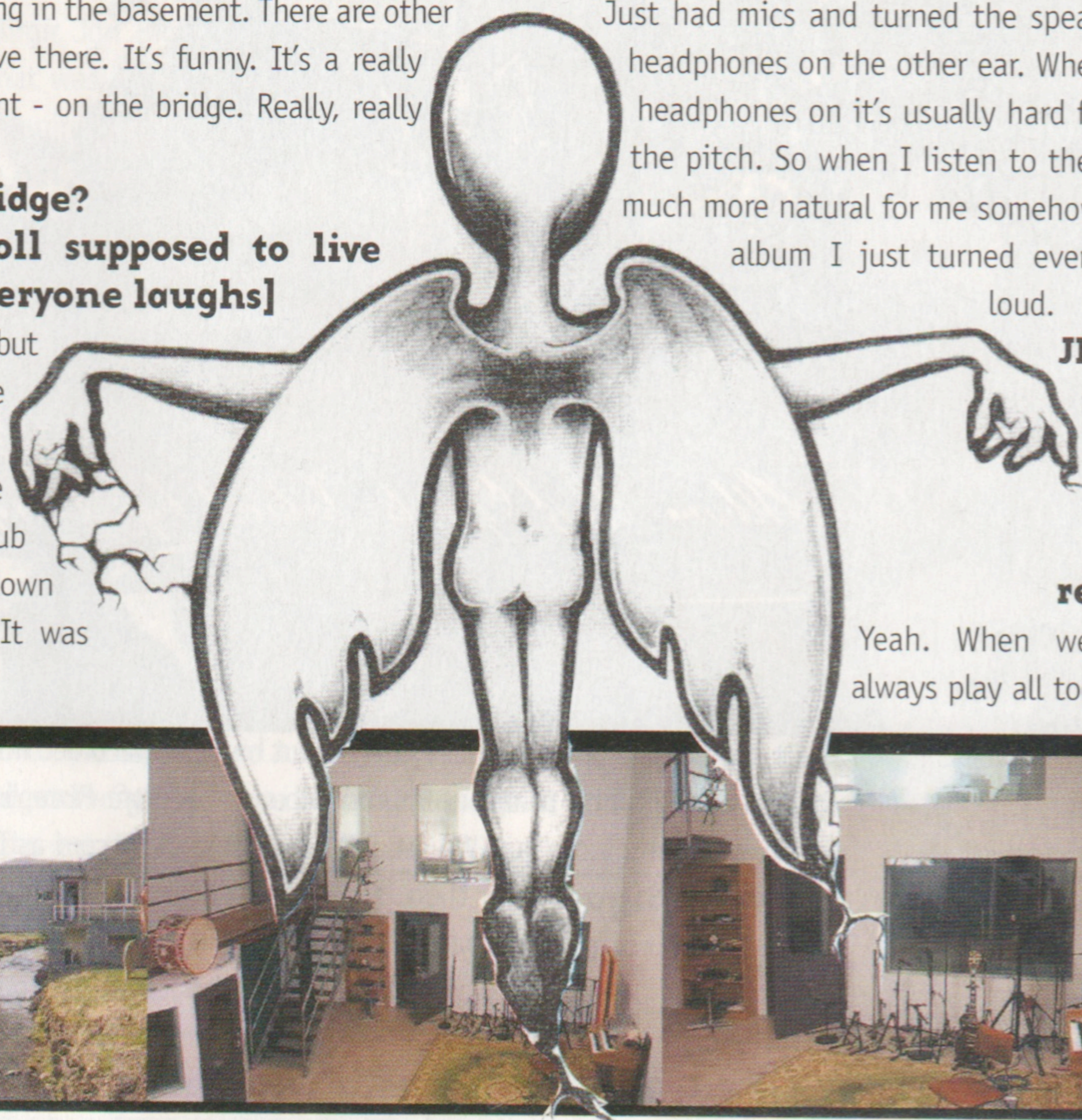
**LC: For TV it certainly is easier.**

And it was quite well maintained. It was on a TV station so it had to be well maintained. We recorded everything to a Soundscape system [a Belgian DAW <www.sydec.be>]. We have a tape machine, but we didn't have it when we recorded the album. Next time we are definitely going to record it onto tape.

**LC: Did you get a 24-track? What kind?**

An Otari machine. I don't know the number, but it's really nice. But we got it from our publishing company and - they have a Pro Tools system and everything like that so we got it really, really cheap.

**LC: You said you were looking for rehearsal space, but as far as the**



**LC: Maybe you should open up a pub there. You could make some money on the side with the pub. Help support the studio. Did you purchase the building?**

We purchased it. We used all kinds of publishing money to buy it.

**LC: That's better than buying sports cars and drugs.**

It's a really good investment. When we get older, we can sell it.

**LC: Or you could keep making records.**

Yeah, maybe.

**JL: Since the ceilings are so high do you have any special room mics just kind of permanently placed? In the corners or anything like that.**

Yeah, we mic the corners. We bought quite old mics from Russia, Oktava mics, they're really nice. We put those in the corners, and then we have on the balconies just close mics to use to control.

**JL: It looks like Orri's drums were just in the bottom of the pool? Do you use some of that, those mics, to get the natural reverb?**

On the drums? Yeah. In the studio, we did nothing like to make, like sound traps, or bass traps, or anything so it's all really kind of homey, you know. We did nothing for acoustics.

**LC: Right. You didn't cover it in red foam.**

**JL: How deep is the pool?**

Deep.

**JL: Does it go shallow to deep?**

No. It's the same.

**JL: So like an Olympic kind of pool or something?**

It's an Olympic pool?

**JL: Olympic pools are just like the lap pools - they just go back and forth.**

We should call it Olympic Studios.

**LC: That's been done.**

They probably had the pool too.

**JL: So how deep is it?**

From bottom to ceiling, probably five meters.

**LC: That gives you a lot of space.**

So when you walk in the pool it's like two meters, you know, and there's a balcony all around and the control room is on the same floor that you walk in on, and the pool is down, so you can watch over the pool.

**LC: That really helps out having the space above. Sounds open up.**

Yeah, but we need to get this tape machine in.

It'd be really nice to have this 1" to mix to. It'd be brilliant. Real World had a really nice Studer and had a Studer 24-track too. Quite cool. You can play forward and backwards on that machine.

**LC: The Otari MX-80 will do that too.**

Really?

**LC: recording space were you unhappy with working in studios that you'd worked at or...?**

We just wanted kind of conduct more, you know, free time. Time to experiment and kind of create our own atmosphere.

**LC: Do you write music while you're recording or do songs get worked out before you start recording?**

This album [()] I think mostly we had written nearly everything before we had recorded.

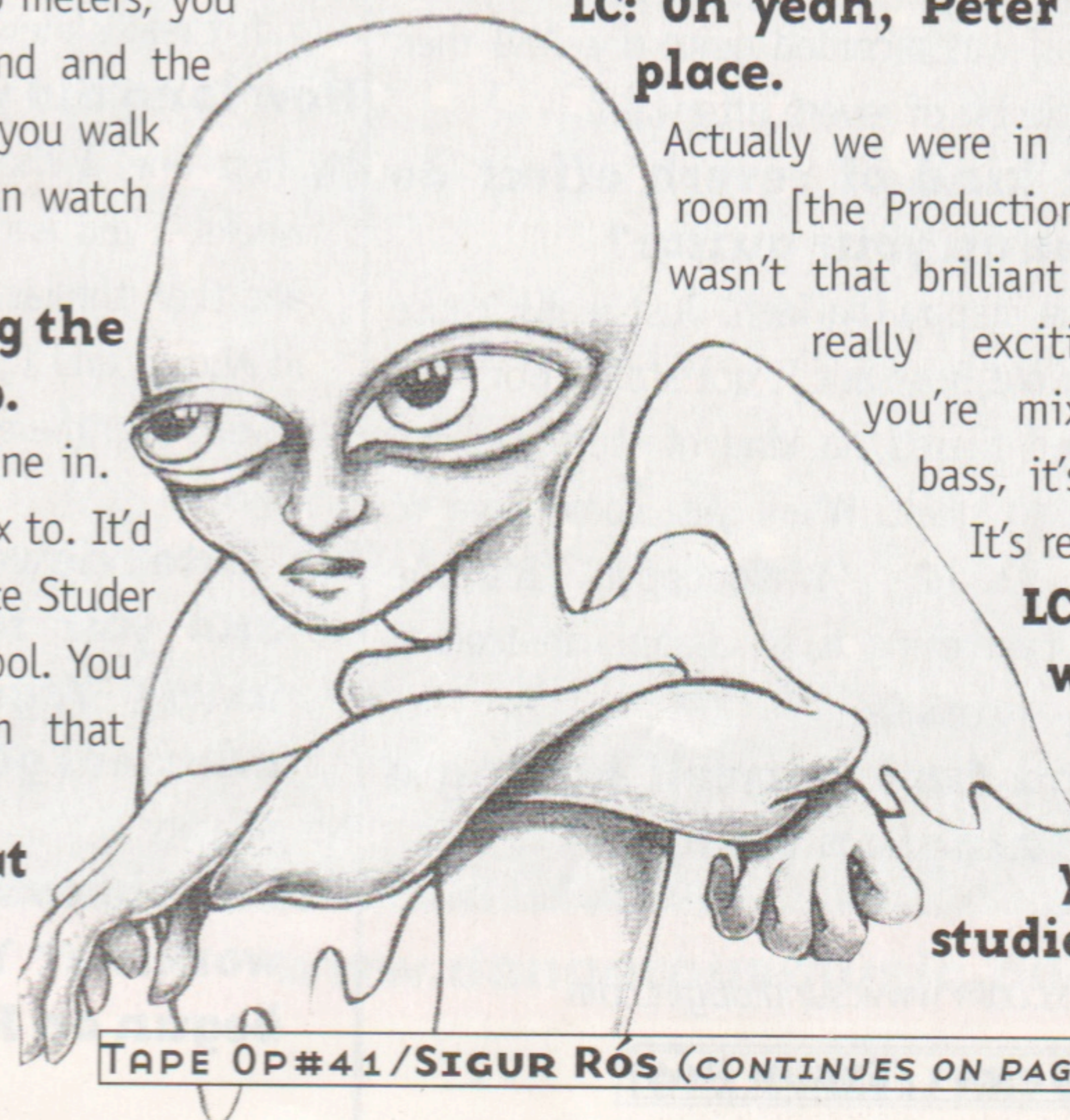
**LC: Did you mix your album at your own studio?**

No. We went to Real World Studios in England. [with Ken Thomas]

**LC: Oh yeah, Peter Gabriel's place.**

Actually we were in the smallest room [the Production Room] - it wasn't that brilliant but it was really exciting. When you're mixing - the bass, it's quite bad. It's really weird.

**LC: Do you want to try and mix in your own studio?**



The only reason we didn't is because we didn't have enough kinds of outboard gear, and we want to [mix] on a 1" tape machine, but we didn't have it in our studio. We wanted to change atmosphere too, because we had been in there for so long it would be nice to go. Change a little bit. I think we are trying to collect a little bit more stuff.

**LC: Is anybody in the band more oriented toward finding gear or deciding what to get for the studio?**

It's probably me and Kjarri. But we are all really interested in that stuff.

**LC: How do you learn about things? Just asking?**

Yeah, just experimenting and turning knobs and, you know, *might* read the manual. I have had my own studio since I was eighteen or something. Dropped out of school and bought into a really nice studio. So I had to learn everything - how everything worked to record all the bands. It's so important for a musician to know how everything works. How compressors work and how this works.

**LC: Your music has your own sound. Do you think that knowing how the recording process works has helped you to make the records? Your records have a lot of reverb and atmosphere on them.**

One reason that we bought the swimming pool also was because it has a little bit amount of echo.

**LC: Reverb.**

Yeah. A little bit kind of natural on the ambience.

**LC: Do you use that space? Do you sing in the swimming pool for the sound?**

I tried it but it didn't sound right. It wasn't the right kind of ambience we wanted.

**LC: What kind of artificial reverbs do you use?**

We don't record a lot with reverbs, but I record my guitar just as it is, and it has a lot of reverb.

**LC: Effects boxes?**

Just one reverb machine that is really floaty - really long. The drums have ambience, but the other stuff was recorded quite dry. And then add a little bit of reverb afterward.

**LC: What kind of reverb effect do you use on your guitar?**

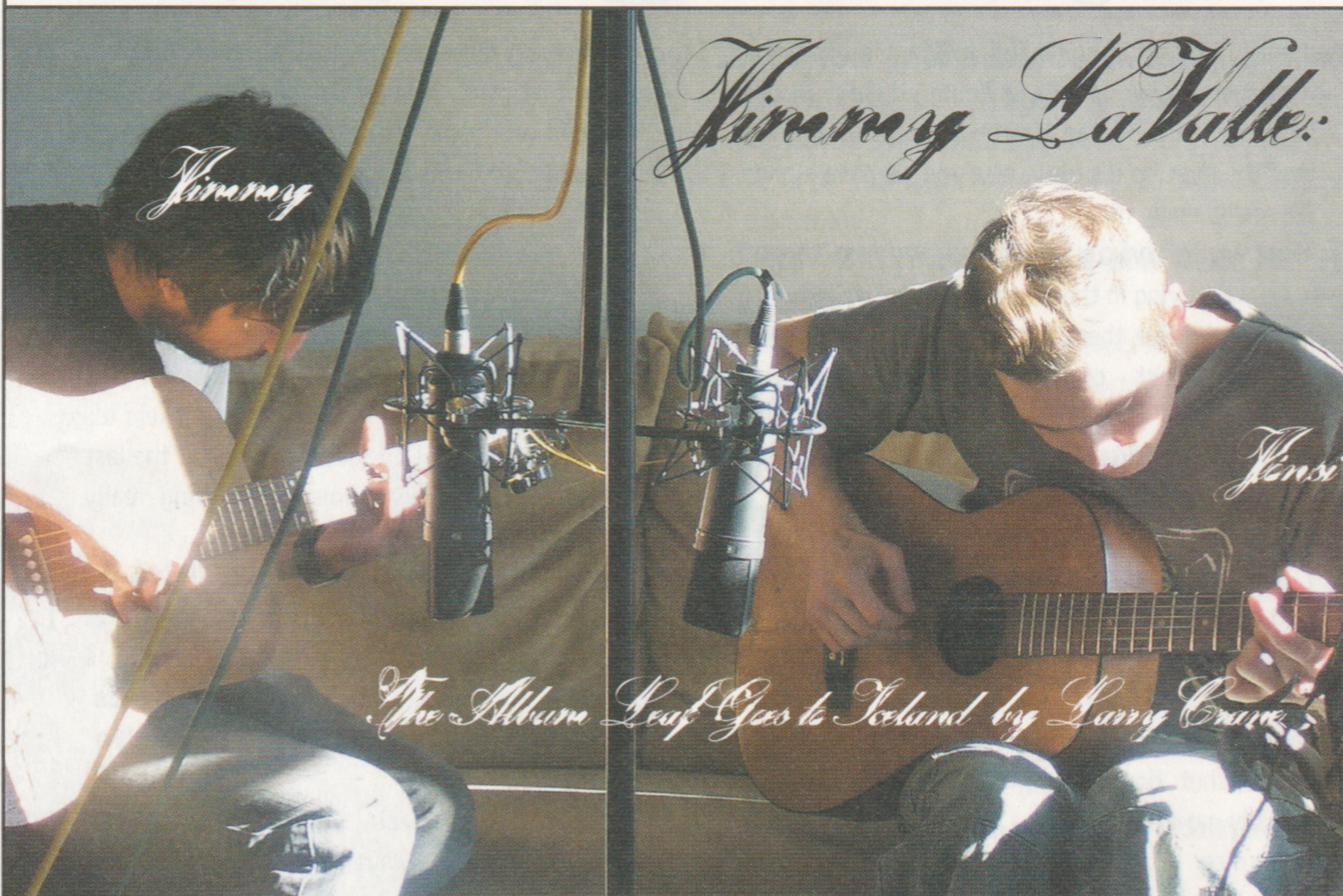
It's just some crappy DigiTech. Just really 'cause I had an old Boss but it got stolen from me. In Iceland there's no kind of stuff you can buy, it's so small. When you come here to America it's like, "Whoooooow!" It's like heaven. Everything is so cheap - in Iceland it's really expensive.

**LC: Do you find yourself buying a lot of things on tour?**

Always! ☺

[www.sigur-ros.com](http://www.sigur-ros.com) [www.sunndlaugin.com](http://www.sunndlaugin.com)

## Jimmy LaValle: The Album Leaf Goes to Iceland by Larry Crane



In issue #28 we interviewed Jimmy LaValle, the man behind The Album Leaf, about his home recorded instrumental albums that we really enjoyed. Now Jimmy has had the opportunity to record his new album, *In a Safe Place*, in Iceland at Sigur Rós' studio with input from the band themselves. What a lucky guy. We sat and listened to the record as I picked his brain.

**So how did this whole project with Sigur Rós come about?**

It was with Jónsi originally.

**How did you meet them?**

They bought my record, *One Day I'll be On Time*, in Iceland.

I ended up on the tour [as the opening act] and through the tour we became really close friends.



**So when did you decide to go over to Iceland and work in their studio?**

On that first tour they talked about how they had their own studio and on their second tour I was just traveling with them and they said, "You should come out and record with us." I did another tour with them and they actually started playing with me live because in Europe I was just solo over there. They would start sitting in, one by one every night and playing along. Them playing with me was really, really good. Then I arranged a time to come out. I didn't really know what to expect when I went over there.

**How long did you go initially?**

My first one, I thought I was gonna be done, was three weeks. I did another trip after that which was a week, and then the last trip I just did was two weeks. I started in August and I just finished in January. The second time I went over there I played a show and that took away two days.

**We interviewed you briefly once before, and you talked about how you were using Vegas and doing things with minimal gear all alone.**

No preamps!

**Did this become a whole different system of working? You said the first track was begun on Reason...**

And then there was some string overdubs. I wrote that in the bedroom I was sleeping at and that's why the song was called "Window" because I wrote it in front of the window. I went in with six songs. I tried to go in with half ideas so there'd be room for someone else to write a change and stuff like that. When I got there it turned out they didn't have much time to be part of the writing process of it so I would do all the writing and spend eight to ten hours a day in the studio by myself with the engineer. I'd just lay things down to click tracks and if I came up with something new I'd lay that down as well and burn rough mixes. I was staying with Kjarri who's the piano player for Sigur Rós so I'd bring back rough mixes and he and his wife, who plays violin on the record, would listen to stuff and have ideas. One night, right before we left, they came in and had a whole list. "I want to do this on this song..." It was cool. There are melodies there that I didn't do. Throughout the day members would just poke their heads in and randomly come out and do something. Sometimes I would just leave them alone with the song and they'd record all this stuff. When I was working on my previous records I'd sit in front of my computer for five or six hours tweaking. [In Iceland] I had to have everything ready to go. I didn't know how to edit on the software that I was being recorded on.

**Soundscape.**

Yeah. So I couldn't really mess around. Eventually I learned how to use the thing and I got into my own, normal way of working. I was so happy when I learned how to use Soundscape. It was a lot different. You know how the space bar is always the stop and play? On Soundscape it's the up arrow.

**Could you tell the engineer to edit things?**

Yeah, but he didn't understand it like I did. Trying to point at waveforms. That's where you as an artist make sense to yourself but you can't really convey it to somebody else.

**How was it working in their space?**

It was completely surreal. There's a pond right there and it's all green countryside. Horses right outside the window and a waterfall a minute's walk away. To get stumped or something and then just walk outside and take a stroll - you're just, "Ahhh..." I don't think a lot of things would've happened on this record if I were doing it in San Diego. I was somewhere only focusing on recording - no friends, no distractions.

**Before you were working by yourself. How did you like working with an engineer?**

It was nice. He [Birgir Jon Birgisson] engineered 90% of the record. It was someone else that was helping me and telling me if it didn't sound right. Especially with singing.

**Had you sung on records before?**

No. I'm mostly afraid of lyrics. Me and Pall [Jenkins/Blackheart Procession] wrote them together.

**How many songs have lyrics on the record?**

Three. Actually two because the other one's Jónsi's song where I was singing I don't know what! Just sounds.

**How did Pall end up in Iceland?**

I had just done a tour with Blackheart Procession [as the bassist] and I invited him to come to Iceland with me. He plays guitar and saw on it and sings. My roommate, Matt [Resovich], plays violin with me and I got him to record violins on this stuff at home on my stuff.

**Any plans for how you'd do your next record?**

I think I want to go to the same place actually. Signing with the labels I did I have a better budget and can do more of the things I want to do, like spend a solid two months out there. ☺

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