



With the AW4416 are Vertical Horizon
(l-r): Matt Scannell, lead vocalist and songwriter,
Ed Toth, Drums, Keith Kane, Guitar
and Sean Hurley, Bass

Matt Scannell is an upbeat,
articulate guy who gives
the impression he could happily
discuss music late into the night.
But Vertical Horizons' 29-year-old
singer, songwriter, and guitarist
morphs into a man of few words
when asked to explain why his
group's RCA debut,
Everything You Want,
has generated hit after hit:
"Simple, sincere songs."

STUDENT OF SIMPLICITY: MATT SCANNELL OF





A DECADE HAS PASSED SINCE SCANNELL AND CO-guitarist Keith Kane met at Washington, D.C.'s Georgetown University and started gigging with only their voices and a pair of acoustic guitars. Eventually they went electric, recruited bassist Sean Hurley and drummer Ed Toth, and developed enough of a grassroots following to sell 70,000 self-pressed albums, mostly from a car trunk.

Scannell, speaking from his home in New York City, recently analyzed his band's not-so-sudden success.

Did your years as an acoustic duo help you learn how to focus on the songwriting essentials?

I think so. Being a duo forced us to be honest and true with our music. If you approach songwriting with simplicity and write lyrics and melodies that really mean something to you, people will recognize your conviction, even if it's not their kind of music. If we'd started out as a full band, we might have been focusing on more peripheral things like sonic treatments, tones, production. Those things are important, but it's even more important to start with basic questions such as "Is this a good song?" Like the old adage says, you can't polish a turd.

Do you subscribe to that other old adage: that the best songs can be communicated with only a voice and an acoustic guitar?

Absolutely. I love the immediacy of simply playing a sincere song on acoustic guitar and letting the listeners decide whether they love it or hate it. Writing in a band context with electric guitar can make you focus more on riffs than lyrics and melodies. Sometimes that's okay — Led Zeppelin made brilliant songs based on riffs, and some Beatles songs have killer vocal melodies and killer riffs. But for mere mortals like me, it's best to start with lyrics and melody.

That's quite a statement for a onetime shred guitar player. You had to teach yourself to be simple.

I admit it — the '80s were very important to me! [Laughs.] I love athletic guitar playing. It's fun and exciting. I spent years trying to learn solos by Eddie Van Halen, Steve Vai, George Lynch. But around 1990 I took a hard look at what I could bring to the table as a

musician, and I realized it wasn't Yngwie Malmsteen-style guitar. From that point on, I focused on singing and songwriting.

What was your biggest challenge in evolving from an acoustic duo to an electric quartet?

Not getting overwhelmed by the peripheral things. With all of today's unlimited technical options — sounds, numbers of tracks, sequencing, pitch-correction — there's a danger of toiling endlessly on a song instead of just finishing it. That's one of the hardest things about making records: knowing when you're done.

You're one of the first musicians to get your hands on the new Yamaha AW4416 Digital Audio Workstations.

Yes. I'd used a 4-track cassette recorder for all my demos for ten years. That's about as basic as you can get. At the same time I've had a chance to work in some of the greatest pro studios and become acquainted with the amazing possibilities that technology affords us these days. The exciting thing about the AW4416 is the way it marries those two worlds. It can be a simple, get-the-job-done machine when you need a quick, easy demo. But if you want to get sophisticated and focus on the art of production, you can use it for that as well. I am absolutely blown away by its flexibility and options. You have such control over everything, from tracking to editing to mixing to mastering. I don't throw my enthusiasm around lightly, but I've got to say that Yamaha really nailed it with this one.

Do you think AW4416 tracks are likely to make it onto your final recordings?

I'm sure that many of the guitars, vocals and samples that I track on the AW4416 will be used on the next Vertical Horizon record because the machine's sound quality is so strong. The preamps and compression are great. The EQ is incredibly transparent and musical. Another very cool feature is the sampling section. It has eight assignable sampling pads and a simple sequencer, so you can create drum loops, or sample one part of an arrangement to repeat in another. The instant editing capabilities are incredible, and they facilitate experimentation. Now that I have a wonderful-sounding studio here at my apartment in New York,

we will be able to bypass certain stages of working in a big studio. We might be tracking drums at a pro studio, but cutting background vocals or experimenting with alternate approaches here at my place. Having a home studio is great, but having a great-sounding home studio is the best.

So what's your next move?

We have a bunch of songs that are ready to go, but I want to write a lot more before we go into pre-production. I wrote all the Everything You Want songs in a four- or five-month period, as well as 10 or 15 good songs that didn't make the cut. But even though we have a nice well to dip into, I want to spend some time creating again. Sometimes writing songs is like being a runner. If you train, train, train, the process almost becomes second nature. Your muscles seem to be doing some of the work for you, and you don't collapse from exhaustion. If you write a lot and work consistently, the creative spark becomes more disciplined.

So you don't subscribe to the "lightning strikes" school?

I never discount lightning striking. Those are the greatest moments, when it almost seems like you had nothing to do with creating the song. I wrote the song "Everything You Want" in 20 minutes, and I swear, I had nothing to do with it! I was just a conduit for a song that wanted to get out, and I was lucky enough to be awake when it happened. But you do help that birthing process if your songwriting muscles are in shape. You know, you always hear people say they woke up in the middle of the night with the greatest song in their head, told themselves they'd remember it in the morning, and then went back to sleep. I guarantee you: There is no way you will remember it in the morning. You have to get up and capture it when it hits. On the other hand, you have to know when to let an idea rest. It's time to put the guitar down when you're back inside the box, playing the rote, dogmatic passages you've played a million times. At times like that, it's better to go for a walk, see a movie, visit friends. On the other hand, there are times when I'm visiting friends, an idea hits, and I say, "Sorry, guys — I love you, but I have to get to a guitar right now."



This Year's Modeling: Scannell on Yamaha's DG Stomp Guitar Modeling Preamp

"For an all-in-one modeling amp, it's incredibly flexible. I like the way it lets me be creative, and it's a wonderful tool if you want to get an idea down quickly. The pre-amp-section voices are expressive, and I'm impressed by how they capture some of that great chaos you get from tube amplifiers. The DG Stomp definitely sounds better than the other modeling preamps I've tried. The clean, crunch and in-between sounds are especially amp-like. I've got to say, as beautiful as a vintage amp on '10' is, it's not a feasible option for a New Yorker like me if I want to keep living where I'm living. On top of that, the DG Stomp weighs only a couple of pounds. You can carry it in a gym bag."

For more information on the DG Stomp Guitar Modeling Preamp see page 39.