"We have a saying in my band whenever I put on a CD by someone like Leon Russell or the Miracles," chuckles Rami Jaffee of the Wallflowers. "Someone will always say, 'Rami, is this one pre-or post-Civil War?'"
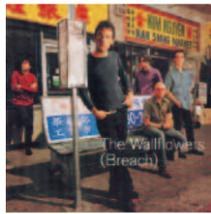
WHY IS SO MUCH of the 32-year-old keyboardist's favorite music older than he is? "There just seems to be more honesty in the sounds of those old records," he replies. In fact, Jaffee, who has played piano since age four, says he had retro tendencies even as a child. "I have an older brother and sister, so I was well seasoned in the Beatles, the Stones, and all the other great rock bands that teenagers loved while I was still in grammar school."

Rami scored his first electronic keyboard as a Bar Mitzvah gift, and by met (Wallflowers bandleader) Jakob Dylan, he was specifically looking for a Hammond B3 player. I was probably the only guy in Los Angeles at the time with that setup. Lucky me."

Jaffe says his attraction to vintage instruments is chiefly a matter of sonics. "Today's gear either sounds too bland or too lush," he complains. "But on those vintage instruments, even the buzzes and hums seem musical, and they can contribute to the vibe of a song. Obviously, to someone carting their own gear — as I was doing not so long ago — a versatile modern keyboard is important. But I'll always opt for an instrument with a few great sounds, especially now that I have that there was no doubt: the P200 is the one. The feel is one of the best, and the piano sounds are incredible, not to mention the great vibes sample. I also called all the keyboard techs in the country, and they all said they'd never seen Yamahas having trouble on the road. And now I've become so comfortable playing it on the road that when it comes time to record some new tunes, I'll set up the P200 just because I play better on it."

Since Jaffee works almost exclusively with vocalists (his non-Wallflowers credits include sessions with Garth Brooks, Edwin McCain, Melissa Etheridge, and Macy Gray), he's learned to take his musical cues

THE WALLFLOWER'S RAMI JAFFEE

the time he reached high school, he'd started collecting vintage synths. At the same time, he reached a musical crossroads. "All my friends started getting into real difficult music and playing super-fancy riffs," he recalls. "I realized it was time to make a choice. I knew what kind of music moved me, and I wanted to stay on that path. I wanted to play music I liked to hear, instead of riffing away into oblivion."

That realization led to an immersion in vintage organs — a fashionable sound today, but one rarely heard in the late '80s. In fact, Jaffee credits that infatuation with landing him the Wallflowers gig in 1990. "When I first luxury. When the Wallflowers play live, I do everything in my power to duplicate the records note for note. And since I used so many different sounds on Breach, our last record, my current setup looks almost as scary as Rick Wakeman's or Keith Emerson's."

But there's at least one shiny new instrument in Jaffee's sprawling keyboard collection: a Yamaha P200 digital piano. "I used to play only acoustic pianos," says Rami. "But the band decided that tuning a piano at every show — and losing our soundcheck because of it — was a bad idea. So I talked to all my keyboard gurus and played every damn piano there is, and from the singer's voice. "The singing style and lyrics always direct me toward certain sounds or parts," he says. "For that matter, pianos and other keyboards are great for doubling or answering a vocal line. I do that a lot, and it never seems to get in the way."

After 11 years with the Wallflowers, Jaffee's enthusiasm for the gig remains undimmed. "The band is ideal for the instruments I love best," he says. "In fact, playing in a group like this is all I'd prayed for since high school. I just wanted to be in a rock band with great songs and a singer who wasn't annoying." He chuckles again. "And that girls dug."
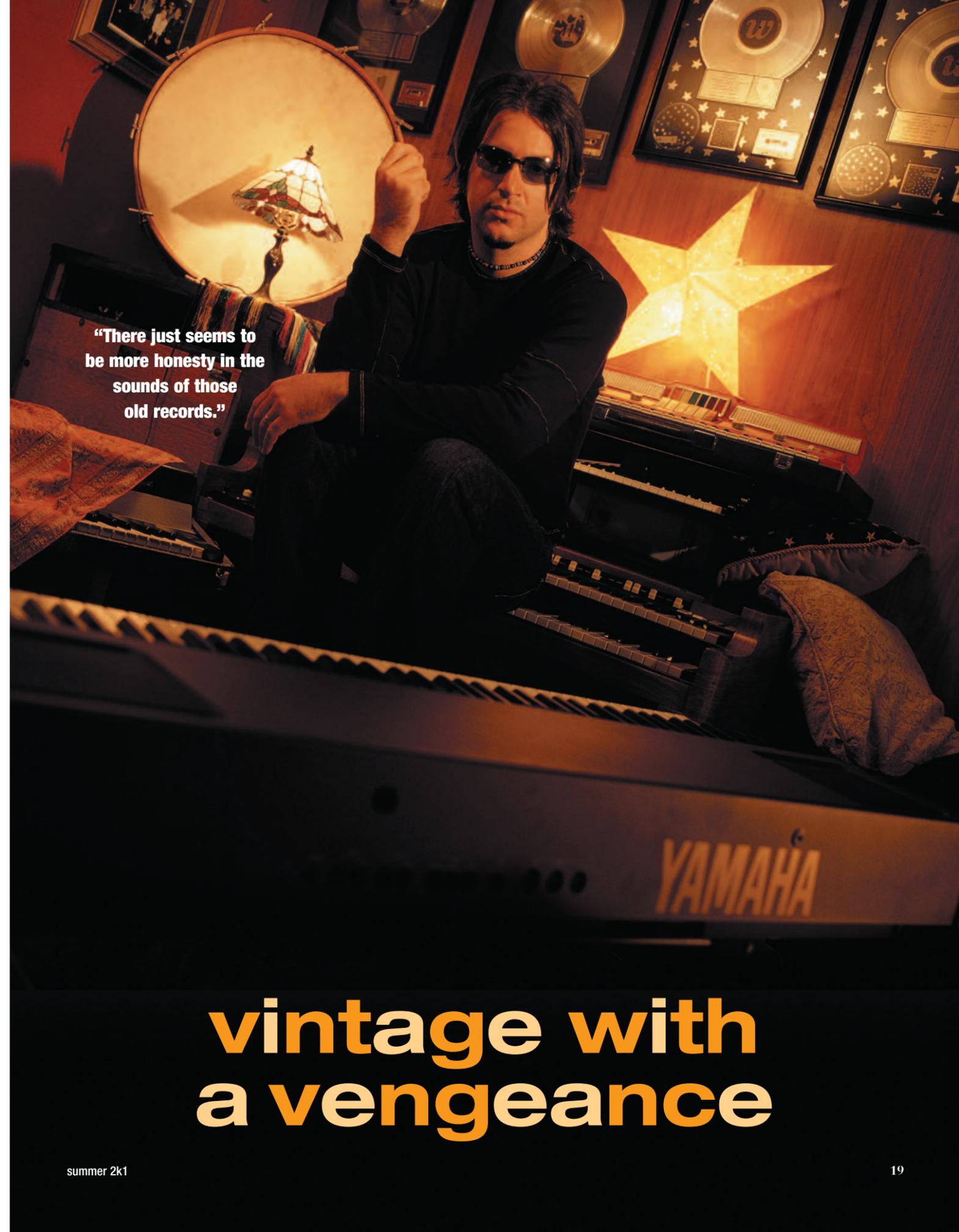
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vintage with a vengeance