

Brett Tuggle is one of the most in-demand keyboardists in rock, with credits that include Stevie Nicks, David Lee Roth, Chris Isaak, Coverdale/Page, Steve Lukather, Joe Satriani, and Whitesnake — not to mention his current touring gig with the reunited Fleetwood Mac.

TUGGLE GREW UP IN DENVER, COLORADO, WHERE HE STUDIED CLASSICAL piano — until he caught the rock 'n' roll bug. By age 19 he'd been drafted into Mitch Ryder & the Detroit Wheels, a group famed for their incendiary live shows. Then came Rick Springfield, then Roth, and then. . .well, everything else.

We recently tracked down Tuggle and quizzed him on what it takes to make it as a top-flight sideman.

You have a pattern of being enlisted into big-name bands. How do you strike a balance between literally reproducing their old songs and adding your own touches?

My overall approach is pretty simple. If it's an older song, I learn it note-for-note from the record — that's what the artist usually wants anyway. After I'm comfortable with the songs, I find places in the arrangements where I can do my own thing, but it still has to be right in the context of the song. Take Fleetwood Mac's "Don't Stop": everybody in the venue has heard the song a million times, and they want to hear it like they remember it. So I play it like the record, except for the end, when I get a chance to play a piano solo, and then I go for it. But I never forget that the audience didn't come to hear me jam through Fleetwood Mac songs. They're there to hear the music they know and love from the old records.

What's the key to successfully accompanying a vocalist?

Always remember that your role is to accompany. The singer is telling a story. Your job is to enhance that story and make it feel real. If you get a chance to take a solo, use that opportunity to say what you want — it's your turn to speak. But you should always play for the whole of the song. A great example is the way Lindsey Buckingham accompanies Stevie Nicks on the song "Landslide." He does a great job on that tune!

What can you tell us about the pleasures and pitfalls of making your living as a touring musician?

The upside to touring on this level is that you live in your own private world where all of your needs are looked after in an extravagant way.

All you have to worry about is putting on a great show every night. There's something very satisfying about getting the show together and making people feel good through music. The downside to touring is that you're away from home all the time, and when you finally get off the road, it takes a while to adjust back to a normal lifestyle. It can take a toll on your personal life. We have a lot of fun out there with the Mac, and we're definitely spoiled by the five-star hotels and chartered jet. I enjoy traveling the world and getting paid for it — it's a great way to make a living! But you have to like and want that lifestyle, and that's not always easy.

You've been using a Yamaha 01V mixer onstage with Fleetwood Mac.

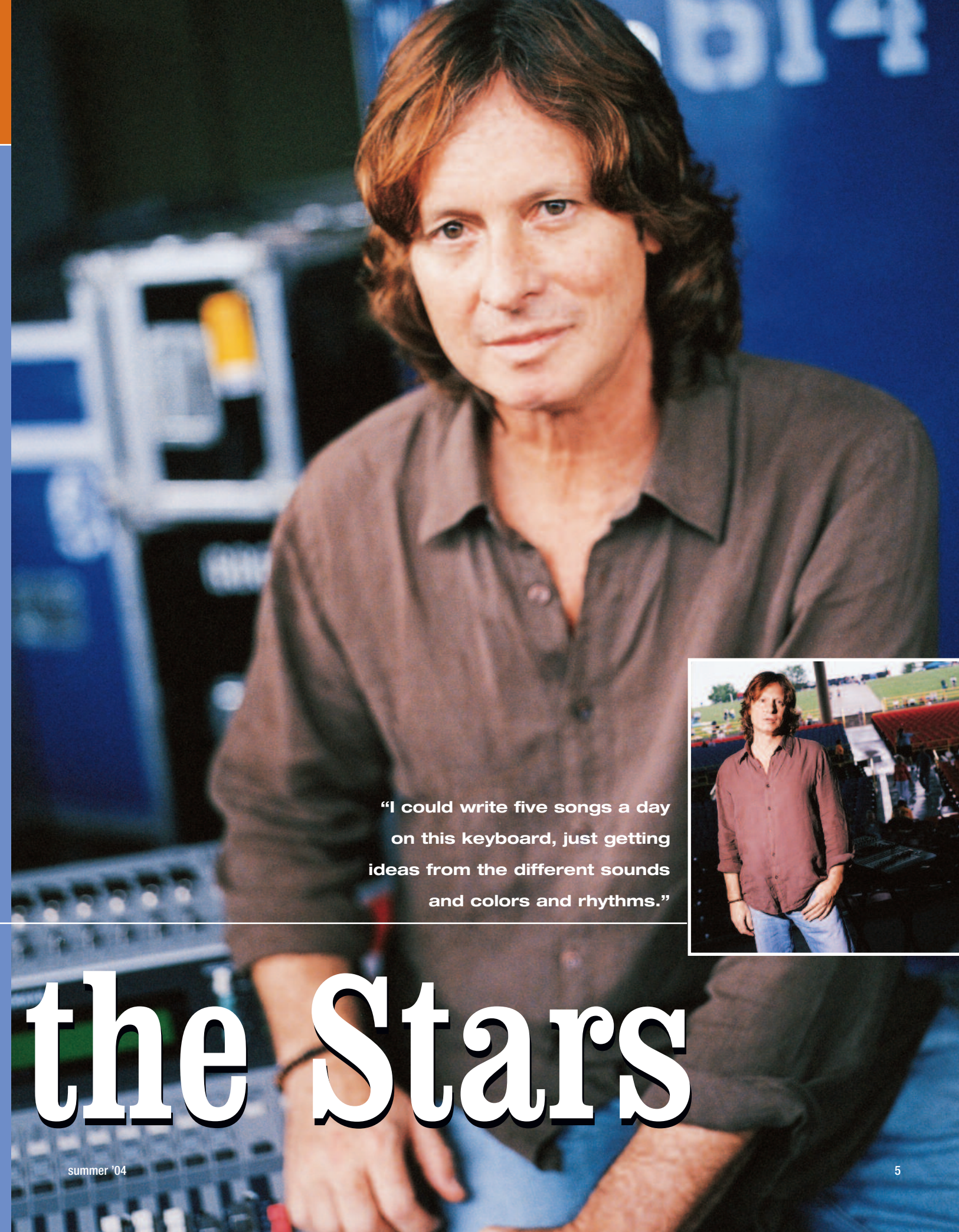
Yes. I love it. The 01V is extremely roadworthy and easy to use. I love it — I'll never do another gig without it. It's vital to the Fleetwood Mac show, because of its routing capabilities. For example, Lindsey wants to hear certain keyboard parts and samples, while John wants more B3 and piano stuff. Thanks to the 01V, I can send each of them a completely separate keyboard mix, and I use the stereo outputs to send a keyboard mix to the monitor desk and front-of-house console. Each song has its own program number, with its own EQ and effects settings. Having a programmable mixer with all of that flexibility in a live situation just makes a lot of sense.

Of all your gigs, which ones are the most memorable?

The Fleetwood Mac gig is definitely up there. After playing with them and in Stevie's solo band for so many years, it's like I'm part of a family. I dug working with Jimmy Page, even though the band didn't last long. I also liked playing in Chris Isaak's band. He's a good entertainer, and a very funny person onstage. The years with David Lee Roth were a lot of fun, as one can imagine. That guy could really throw a party! I was also able to write a lot of music for that band, which is always a good thing when you're selling albums! The musicians were outstanding as well: Steve Vai, Billy Sheehan, Gregg Bissonette. There were great jams, great parties, and great royalties — what more could a guy want from a gig?

BRETT TUGGLE:

The Keys to the Stars



"I could write five songs a day on this keyboard, just getting ideas from the different sounds and colors and rhythms."

