

Their amp still goes up to 11

It was the movie that made a spoof heavy metal band real — and, 25 years on, Spinal Tap is back on the road. Alexis Petridis talks to the heroes of the greatest rock satire in cinema history

BY ALEXIS PETRIDIS
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Nashville's Ryman Auditorium has fair claim to have seen it all. Elvis played here, as did Johnny Cash, Bob Dylan and Patsy Cline. Hank Williams was fired after turning up drunk one too many times. In 1968, the Byrds got a frosty reception from the crowd who sat in the venue's wooden pews, as much for the length of their hair as for their music. And yet even that seems less improbable than what's happening on the stage tonight: three sixtiesomething actors are performing a selection of songs from a film 25 years old to a response verging on mild hysteria. Presumably for the first time in the Ryman's history, the phrase, "This song is called *Big Bottom*!" rings around the auditorium. The resulting cheer nearly takes the roof off.

Christopher Guest, Harry Shearer and Michael McKean are midway through a North American tour celebrating the silver anniversary of the release of *This Is Spinal Tap* and its unchallenged position as the greatest rock satire in cinema history: the tale of a gormless, deluded but ultimately endearing British heavy metal band and the indignities heaped on them as they tour America. It is a film that has caused Tom Waits to cry ("I'd like to hear that," Shearer chuckles) and innumerable hard rockers to claim it was based on them, at first indignantly — a band called Foghat angrily alleged Guest, Shearer and McKean had bugged their tour bus to gather material — and then, as time went on, with increasing pride. The only person apparently immune to its charms is Liam Gallagher, who, his brother related with relish, stormed out of a Tap live show in protest at the jokes, having apparently believed Spinal Tap was a real band, the film a serious documentary. "It's fair enough," Shearer says. "I was under the impression for some time that Oasis was a real band."

If nothing else, Gallagher's reaction highlights *This Is Spinal Tap*'s unerring accuracy and attention to detail. When the film was released, Guest says, British interviewers at first refused to believe the trio were American, so convincingly had they nailed Spinal Tap's English accents (a situation possibly further confused by the fact that Guest is the US-born son of a British peer: his full title is Christopher Haden-Guest, 5th Baron Haden-Guest). Furthermore, all are accomplished musicians. Before *Spinal Tap*, Shearer had focused on comedy and acting, working with Jack Benny as a child, then on *Saturday Night Live* and in *The Credibility Gap*, a radio comedy troupe also featuring McKean. Guest and McKean, who had been friends since acting school, had both attempted to run entwined careers as musicians and actor/comedians. They had success — Guest doing musical parodies for *National Lampoon*, McKean as Lenny Kosnowski, leader of a band called Lenny and the Squigtones, on the sitcom



Members of Spinal Tap Christopher Guest, left, Michael McKean and Harry Shearer, right, are shown in this publicity photo released in March. The trio are currently performing music from their *Spinal Tap* days as well as from subsequent film collaborations like the folk-music spoof *A Mighty Wind* in a 30-city tour of North America.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Laverne and Shirley — but their efforts also provided them with a crash course in the kind of anticlimax that became *Spinal Tap*'s trademark.

In the mid-1960s, McKean had joined the Left Banke, a "baroque pop" band whose combustible relationship was not helped by the fact that their hits were agonized paeans of unrequited love written by the keyboard player about the lead singer's girlfriend — on their biggest hit, *Walk Away Renee*, he neglected even to change her name. McKean joined after the original lineup had split up, just in time to be groomed for stardom — "We got bought clothes, instruments, had our photo taken trying to look like the Beatles in Central Park." Before he'd played a note, the band had split up again: "I kind of grabbed my clothes and instruments, and sneaked out the back door."

A decade later, McKean and Guest performed together in a band whose record label announced, mid-tour, that there was no more money for flights and they would henceforth be traveling across America in a small car, their equipment tied to the roof. "It was 1979," Guest remembers, "a period when a lot of people were high a lot. So now we're in a car, being driven by our drummer, who

was also, how shall we say, not sober most of the time. He would keep going on about health food, how good it was for you, and the whole time he's..." He mimes frantic drug taking. "It didn't seem funny at the time," he adds, darkly.

A year previously, Guest had been staying at Los Angeles's Chateau Marmont hotel when he had overheard a jetlagged British rocker and his manager holding an interminable, agonizing conversation about whether the former had left his bass guitar in the airport. The character of Nigel Tufnel was born, lucklessly trading around the US with his childhood friend and vocalist David St Hubbins (McKean) and bass player Derek Smalls (Shearer). All three co-created the film, which was largely improvised (though directed by Rob Reiner).

In theory, the gag should have worn thin over the last quarter century. The kind of music *Spinal Tap* satirized — grandiose heavy metal with lashings of lyrical sexism — has largely vanished, in part, it might be argued, because they satirized it. Even people who haven't seen the film know the jokes off by heart: the drummer who choked on someone else's vomit; the Stonehenge model that descends from the rafters,

50cm rather than 5m tall; the beautiful piano piece called *Lick My Love Pump*. The most famous of the lot, about the guitar amplifier that goes up to 11, has been added to the Oxford English Dictionary. St Hubbins' desperate cry of, "Hope you like our new direction!" might as well have been, so often is it invoked when a band bullishly refuses to play its hits onstage.

Furthermore, you might expect those responsible to have left Spinal Tap behind long ago. It's not as if they haven't other things to do. McKean is an acclaimed Broadway actor. Guest has created semi-improvised films — *Waiting for Guffman*, *Best in Show*, *For Your Consideration* — that have made him one of the world's most respected comedy writers and directors. Shearer is rumored to earn US\$400,000 per episode providing the voices of Mr Burns, Ned Flanders and others on *The Simpsons*, and hosts a hugely popular satirical radio program, *Le Show*: it is that, not *Spinal Tap* or *The Simpsons*, that has earned him a star on Hollywood Boulevard. But Spinal Tap just kept going.

The trio have toured intermittently as the band ever since the film came out, amassing a lengthy roll call of superstars

who've joined them onstage: Metallica, Pink Floyd's Dave Gilmour, Cher, Elvis Costello, Ry Cooder, the Beastie Boys and Jeff Beck, the latter apparently unperturbed by his striking physical resemblance to Tufnel. In 1992, they released a "new" Spinal Tap album, *Break Like the Wind* — the cue for much bathos of the life-imitating-art variety. Their parodically sexist video for the single *Bitch School* was banned by MTV for being too sexist. When it became apparent that the album wasn't going to be a chart-topping hit, McKean says their label withdrew financial support midway through the subsequent tour: if Spinal Tap didn't actually end up playing second on the bill to a puppet show, as happened in the film, they still found themselves reduced to staying in "the kind of hotel rooms where you stood by the liquor cabinet and realized the floor was really wet and something really bad had happened there."

On this tour they are performing out of character, without wigs or costumes, enabling them to include material from their other famed musical "mockumentary," 2003's *A Mighty Wind*, in which the trio played the Folksmen, a dreadful early 1960s folk band. They're about to play Wembley and Glastonbury,

the latter for the first time, in costume as Spinal Tap. And there's a new album to promote, *Back From the Dead*, which largely consists of re-recordings of songs from the film's original soundtrack. As Shearer notes, "The length of Spinal Tap's fictional career in the movie is now eclipsed by the length of Spinal Tap's career as a fake band. That's a little: huh? What?"

Indeed, the ongoing career of Spinal Tap seems to baffle its participants as much as it would an impartial observer. "I don't think we've ever known what the hell's going on when we do Tap shows," Guest says. "It's possible the audience are effectively getting to see more of the movie when we play. You know, they know the songs, so anything we do onstage, whether we're meaning to or not, is an extension of the film. Other than that, I wouldn't understand what's going on."

The question of why they've chosen to re-record the songs from the film for the new album is equally confusing. McKean explains that the music in the film was supposed to sound like Spinal Tap playing live, but these versions, complete with "strings and horns," are meant to sound like the actual records Spinal Tap is supposed to have released in the 1970s and 1980s: "This recording is more how those records would sound if they had really existed," he says. If that sounds nit-picking, then at least it fits with the trio's infamous attention to detail: the intricate history of Spinal Tap they wrote before filming began, "with biographies of all 37 people who'd played in the band;" the string of gigs they played around Los Angeles at the same time, to ensure their joke band was sufficiently authentic ("No one in the audience realized it was a gag," says Shearer); the fact that every time they write a new Spinal Tap song — there are nine on *Back From the Dead* — they feel impelled first to come up with a suitable back story to explain its existence. "It gets very arcane," Guest admits, "but that's what's great about this, the specificity."

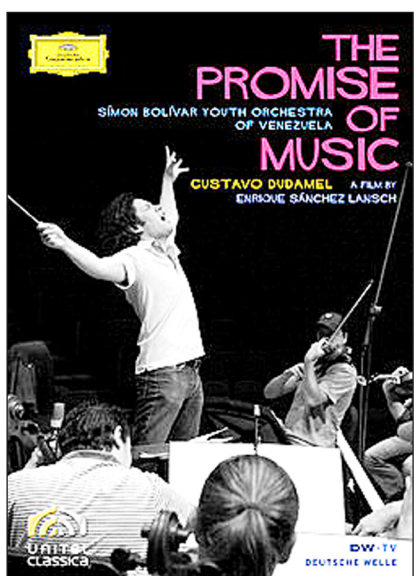
But there seems to be another, more prosaic reason. "We wanted the songs to sound better," Guest says, "and we've accomplished that, I think."

There's something hugely appealing about the idea of Guest and co entering the studio, concerned that they hadn't done Spinal Tap's oeuvre justice, determined finally to give *Sex Farm* the treatment it richly deserves.

It also makes an improbable suggestion about Spinal Tap's continued appeal: that it might rest not on the jokes, but on a genuine love for the music, in both audience and band. Watching the crowd in Nashville, it's easy to forget that these songs are meant to be gags, intended to satirize the awfulness of heavy metal.

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[CLASSICAL DVD AND CD REVIEWS]



THE PROMISE OF MUSIC
Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela
A film by Enrique Sanchez Lansch
DGM 073 4427

play is *Land of Hope and Glory*!

But the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra itself is a very different matter. This represents the cream of a quarter of a million students. And it really does make you wonder if the adage that the future of classical music itself lies, not in Europe or the US (where most of the young typically haven't listened to this sort of music for almost half a century) is true. If Asia and South America really do represent the future of classical music, the only significant difference would appear to lie in the stronger female presence here (in Taiwan, anyway), whereas the Venezuelan team looks to be more weighted towards the male.

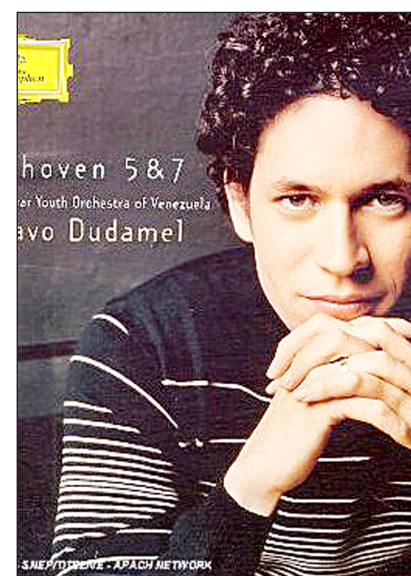
Insights are provided by extensive interview material with one of the orchestra's drummers (and his brother), as well as with conductor Gustavo



LIVE FROM SALZBURG
Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela
Dudamel, Argerich, Renaud Capucon, Gautier Capucon
DGM 073 4515

Dudamel and his family. It's remarkable how God, country and family feature prominently in these young people's minds and feelings — all three attitudes very characteristic of traditional societies, but all markedly on the wane in so-called "advanced" countries.

The Beethoven performance receives a rapturous reception in Germany. After the tension leading up to the concert — the principal flautist has to withdraw following an upset stomach — the outburst of joy from the Venezuelans is manifestly real. Of course it had been rehearsed, but when they don their national colors, and then virtually dance while playing a *malamba* by Alberto Ginastera, the happiness was clearly genuine, and not confined to the orchestra. The future, in some sense, (or so the optimists must have felt) was being born.



BEETHOVEN SYMPHONIES Nos. 5 and 7
Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela
Conducted: Gustavo Dudamel
DGM 477 6228 (CD)

The following year, 2008, the Venezuelans appeared at the ultra-prestigious Salzburg Festival. The video recording of this, by Agnes Meth, is even finer than that of the *Eroica*. The suavely handsome Venezuelans are highlighted against often very dark backgrounds, and the cutting between instrumentalists, closely following the music, is outstanding. They first play Beethoven's Triple Concerto, with the two Capucon brothers, plus Martha Argerich, back at Salzburg after 14 years.

As if this wasn't magnificent enough, they then play Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and no music could suit them better. Ravel orchestrated this piece in the early 20th century, using many unusual instruments and creating an electrifying sound-picture. For it the Venezuelan orchestra was expanded, with 14 double basses, and a brass



ALL THE RUSSIAS: A MUSICAL JOURNEY
Boxed set (3 DVDs)
WellGoUSA
WD-2645

section stretching as far as the eye can see. Novel sound sensations are what Dudamel often aims for, and frequently achieves, and this particular live performance seems to me the peak of the Simon Bolivar orchestra's recording career so far.

The *Radetzky March* follows, with the orchestra beginning even before Dudamel has reached the podium.

This veritably orgiastic occasion is followed by a documentary of Dudamel conducting, and frequently stopping to comment on, Mahler's First Symphony. Speaking in English, he's funny, enthusiastic and invariably dynamic. This *Live From Salzburg* DVD is even more enjoyable than *The Promise of Music*, and that's praise indeed.

This orchestra is inevitably now firmly established in all classical-music enthusiasts' hearts. It represents everything they

had hoped for, that this music doesn't have one foot in the grave at all, but is instead being reinvigorated from unexpected quarters, and most importantly by the young from those quarters. The Venezuelan experiment may be unique at the moment but, as Dudamel comments, there's no reason why it shouldn't be emulated all over the world.

The third item from this orchestra is a CD of Beethoven's Fifth and Seventh symphonies. This has all the qualities the DVDs lead you to expect. Even so, it has to be admitted that seeing them in action on DVD does add a valuable, even a crucial, dimension. Both DVDs reviewed here have Chinese subtitles, by the way.

Lastly, WellGoUSA in Taiwan has now issued its three DVDs entitled *All the Russias: A Musical Journey* (featuring Russian music and its relation to Russian nature, religion and history, presided over by Valery Gergiev) in a boxed set retailing at NT\$800. It's five films, running at a total of 300 minutes. All three individual items were extravagantly praised in this column, and this collected edition consequently represents outstanding value.

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Last month I praised the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela's CD of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Three more items have now come to hand from the same lineup, and they're all of great, even overwhelming, interest.

The DVD entitled *The Promise of Music* consists of a film about this extraordinary orchestra at work at home in Caracas, culminating in their trip to Bonn, Germany to perform in the 2007 Bonn Beethoven Festival. There they play Beethoven's Third Symphony (*Eroica*), and that complete performance then follows as a separate item, doubling the length of the DVD.

The most interesting thing you learn is that Venezuela's ambitious music-education system involves teaching young children instruments as, from the very beginning, members of an orchestra. They are effectively taught en masse. Thus in one scene you hear a hall full of youthful instrumentalists blowing and scraping away to hideous effect. What on earth's going on, you wonder. Eventually you realize that what they are trying to