

## GETTING THE CALL, GIVING IT ALL



What's harder: Getting into Frank Zappa's band, cranking out top-40 hits, or convincing Bösendorfer to make a digital piano? Ask Peter Wolf, who makes it all look easy.

by Mr. Bonzai

*Hitmaker and keysmeister Peter Wolf in his Malibu studio, surrounded by (clockwise from foreground) Bösendorfer C&USmaster piano controller, M-Audio Ozonic atop Hammond B-3, Leslie 122, and Bösendorfer Imperial grand piano. He's holding his pride and joy, a vintage Telefunken 250 mic.*

Between his roles as composer, producer, songwriter, and arranger, Peter Wolf has been directly involved in about \$75 million in record sales, including eight #1 hits. Though classically trained, he won the soloist prize at the Austrian Jazz Festival at only 16 years old. In his early 20s, he moved to America and joined Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. Add Jefferson Starship, the Commodores, Wang Chung, Heart, Patti LaBelle, Santana, and Natalie Cole, and you've only scratched the surface of his résumé. Wolf is renowned for his film and TV scores, and his own project, PowerHaus, features some of the most A-listed musicians working today. We caught up with Peter in his home studio in the L.A. area.

**You were recently honored by the government of Austria with "das Groesse Ehrenkreuz der Republik Oesterreich fuer Kunst und Kultur," the equivalent of being knighted in England.**

The president of the Austrian songwriters' society, AKM, which is like ASCAP or BMI in America, told me that I was the first person ever to get it in the music entertainment field. I only made some hit records, yet there were lots of deserving "entertainers" that never got this award. Johann Strauss never got it. Gustav Mahler never got it. I'm a huge Mahler fan, so this award meant a lot to me.

**As a Vienna-born Austrian, what's the first music you remember hearing?**

Though my parents were both pianists and I grew up with classical music, my father loved Louis

Armstrong. After the first record of his I heard, I wanted nothing more than to play with this guy.

**When you were young, did you have an important mentor?**

Though I played my first Beethoven concerto when I was nine, I felt like a trained monkey. I never understood anything. My love was really this jazz music that my father loved. Since I associated the piano with classical, I started playing guitar, drums, bass, flute, sax, trumpet, anything to get away from piano. My father said "Why don't we get you a teacher who will show you that stuff on piano? You play so much better piano because you've already acquired the technique."

That teacher was Walter Hörler, a fabulous jazz pianist. He took me under his wing and started to give me a concept of modern piano playing.

**How did you make the move, musically and physically, from that Viennese world to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention?**

All my heroes were Americans. Coming from white-washed Austria, I wanted to go where everything was happening, and that was America. I was 23 when I came here in 1975, and I was in hog heaven! I went to New York, then Atlanta, then Birmingham, playing in clubs. I saved some money and came to California in 1976. I arrived here and met a lady by the name of Lalomie Washburn, who I met through a guitarist I had played with in Vienna. He'd come to America a year or two prior and was always telling Lalomie about me. So when I came to L.A., I called her and she



# GETTING THE CALL, GIVING IT ALL

## A SELECTED PETER WOLF DISCOGRAPHY

With Frank Zappa



Joe's Garage  
(Zappa Records)

With the  
Commodores



Nightshift  
(MCA)

With Jefferson  
Starship



Nuclear  
Furniture  
(RCA)

said, "Why don't you come down to the studio? We're rehearsing for my new record on Casablanca."

I wound up recording the album with her, playing on it and working as musical director and arranger. Lalomie's roommate was Andre Lewis, a keyboardist and friend of Zappa. One day, I went to Guitar Center to try some synthesizers, and this tall man came over to me and said, "You must be Peter Wolf." I nodded, and he asked for my phone number.

Apparently, Frank had asked Andre if he knew any new keyboardists. Andre said he had heard "an Austrian kid who sounded pretty good." He gave Frank my number and the next morning — at 7 o'clock! — I get this call, "Hi, this is Frank Zappa. I'm looking for a keyboard player. Want to audition?" I said, "When?" And he said, "Now."

I drove up to his home and spent the entire day. He had a Bösendorfer Imperial grand, which the family still has, and he put all this heavy music in front of me. I stumbled through this hard, hard, stuff. I thought I would never get the gig. Then Patrick O'Hearn walked in, with outrageous long hair. I didn't know who it was at the time, but Patrick was the bassist for Joe Pass for years. We started playing and had a really great time. Frank asks Patrick, "Do you want to play with this guy?" "Yeah," says Patrick. Frank turned to me: "Okay, you're hired." That was it.

### Can you point out one distinctive thing that you learned from Frank Zappa?

I learned so much from him. In my life, he was the most gifted bandleader I ever encountered. I will never forget when he put that band together. Besides Patrick, there was Terry Bozzio, this fabulous drummer from the Brecker Brothers in New York. We were the three jazz guys. Ed Mann was a percussionist who studied Indian music and could sight-read anything on marimba and xylophone. Adrian Belew was a talented singer and guitarist who had played Beatles songs in a cover band. Tommy Mars had played organ in a revolving organ bar in Kodiak, Alaska! He would improvise totally outrageous stuff, stride piano one minute and twelve-tone the next. I said to Frank, "Do you think this will ever be a band?" Frank looked me in the eye and said, "Yes, and it's going to be the best band I've ever had."

### Describe working with Carlos Santana.

I produced two or three songs for Carlos in '92, on a record called *Spirits Dancing in the Flesh*. Columbia/Sony brought me in because they "didn't hear any hits." We had a great time. I did the arrangements and Carlos, who can be rightfully skeptical and standoffish about producers, warmed up because we're both musicians and I could talk his language. I really tried hard to give him a bigger guitar sound, and I think I succeeded, working with engineer Paul Ericksen.

### Jefferson Starship? The Commodores?

I worked with a producer named Ron Nevison, who was working with Grace Slick, and he asked if I could write some music to go with her lyrics. We wrote her solo record together, called *Software*. She asked me to play with the Starship, and I became their musical director. We did *Nuclear Furniture*, then Ron asked if I could write them a hit. "No Way Out" became my first #1 record with Starship.

Then I did *Nightshift* for the Commodores with producer Dennis Lambert, which also became a worldwide #1 — that was when I started getting lots of

offers. I produced Jefferson Starship, and wrote the song "Sara."

### When did you feel you had really made it?

That was when I walked into a supermarket and heard a Muzak version of *Nightshift*.

### Tell us about the new Bösendorfer instrument you're working on, the CEUSmaster.

CEUS, which stands for "Computer Enhanced for Ultimate Sound," was originally Bösendorfer's player piano — a real Imperial Grand with the player mechanism added in. It used laser sensors that could distinguish around 600 stages of the hammer hitting the string. It's the best system ever invented, but it's outrageously expensive. The Imperial is \$180,000 and you add about \$50,000 for the CEUS option.

"Who can afford that much?" I told them, "You'll sell five pianos to famous players, another five to super-rich types for their kids, and that's it." However, we could use this technology in a digital instrument.

### How did you make your argument?


Mike a piano onstage, and the poor engineer has two or three dB of usable piano over everything else coming into those mics, such as the bass guitar, which gets into the piano frame from underneath, not to mention bleed from drums and cymbals. The pickup systems for pianos never sounded right to me, either. I suggested that if they already had an action with all those stages of articulation, why not use that to make an ultimate instrument for us jazz and pop pianists who sit next to a drummer. Usually, you can't really articulate because you can't hear yourself, right? You play out of your fingers and you hear it in your head, but you don't really hear it in your ears.

Use the CEUS technology to trigger samples done by the best sample guys — Vienna Symphonic Library — and you really have something. I brought the two companies together, and now we have a prototype with a full Bösendorfer Imperial action. It's the best-feeling controller I have ever played. The laser sensors determine which sample to play, and you have this huge library that was recorded from a great piano in a great room. They had the second prototype NAMM show, and a third is on tour with Robbie Williams.

### Tell us about your own band, PowerHaus.

It's a 13-piece band, with Alphonso Johnson on bass, Vinnie Colaiuta or Steve Ferrone on drums, Tim Pierce or Jeff Richmond on guitar, Luis Conte on percussion. We have the Jerry Hey horns with Gary Grant on trumpet, Wayne Bergeron on trumpet, Bill Reichenbach on trombone, and Dan Higgins on sax. The vocalists are Bobby Kimball from Toto, Tommy Funderburk from Boston, Richard Paige from Mr. Mister, and my wife, Michelle.

We're getting ready to record an album, and I am editing the DVD from our first gig, which was in Ojai, California. Jerry Hey and I had talked about all us studio cats who miss playing live. I asked if he'd play if I put a group together. He agreed, then a few months later a festival promoter from Ojai called. I said I could put together the best band on Earth. He gave me a budget and everyone was immediately into it.

We started out just playing all the hits that we'd been involved in. We had so much fun and the audience was great. Music is our first love and we're doing what we want. So, I think you'll be hearing more from PowerHaus. 



/110711

For an extended version of this interview featuring Peter Wolf describing his recording studio, go to [www.keyboardmag.com/](http://www.keyboardmag.com/) 1007111. Visit Peter online at [www.powerhausmusic.com](http://www.powerhausmusic.com).