



The Foo Fighters (shown here performing in 2014) take over RFK Stadium for an Independence Day blowout.

Sonic BOOM

TO CELEBRATE THEIR 20TH ANNIVERSARY, **THE FOO FIGHTERS** ROLL INTO RFK STADIUM ON THE FOURTH OF JULY WITH AN ALL-STAR ROSTER OF GUESTS TO KICK OFF THE NORTH AMERICAN LEG OF THEIR SONIC HIGHWAYS TOUR. FOR THE BAND, IT'S A MILESTONE, AND FOR DAVE GROHL, IT'S A HOMECOMING.
BY DEBORAH L. MARTIN

IN THE FOO FIGHTERS' WORLD THERE IS MUCH TO CELEBRATE.

There's the 20th anniversary of their self-titled first album, released on July 4, 1995. There's the continued success of their current effort, *Sonic Highways*, which started at number two on *Billboard's* Top 200 and quickly rose to number one on the *Billboard* Top Rock Albums chart upon its release last November. (The album sold a substantial 190,000 copies in its first week.) There's the critical and commercial success of the companion eight-part documentary directed by front man and newly minted rock historian Dave Grohl. There's the fact that none other than David Letterman counts the Foes as his favorite band and invited the group to be the last musical guest on his final show in May. And wherever they go, rock 'n' roll's best and brightest want to get on board. When the band rolls into DC in July, it will be accompanied by many of the musicians featured on *Sonic Highways*, including Buddy Guy, Gary Clark Jr., Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, and LL Cool J, among others.

At 46 years old, Grohl is the longhaired, hard-rocking, and passionately talkative nice guy of the music world. The band is as busy as ever—we scheduled our phone interviews around the European leg of their tour—but Grohl is eager to discuss the *Sonic Highways* project and the way it pays homage to the history that created him. The founder of the Foo Fighters has never lost his appreciation for the business that made him an icon among wildly disparate groups that range from grunge-rock kids to 40-something moms and dads. But he is quick to point out that he is surrounded by guys who also know their stuff.

"Our band is kind of a group of musicologists," says Grohl. "Chris [Shiflett] knows a lot about country. Nate [Mendel] and I know a lot about the underground scene. Pat [Smear] and Taylor [Hawkins] know a ton about classic rock. And so when we started choosing the cities [for *Sonic Highways*], people would say, 'Oh what about this guy? What about this club? What about this studio?'" The complicated project took years to produce, with Grohl interviewing music influencers in each of the eight cities the band visited, and then writing lyrics to new songs, weaving phrases and references from the interviews into each to place the song firmly in the city in which it was recorded. Each song was recorded in a studio that helped shape the music of the city. When Grohl explained the sequence to the band, they got on board immediately. Says drummer Taylor Hawkins, "Dave says, 'I'm going to take sentences from the interviews and write a song.' And I thought, 'That seems really difficult. But it's given him a whole new way of writing lyrics.'"

Sonic Highways is the Foes' eighth studio album, and after 20 years together the band members wanted to shake things up. "It used to be that just throwing your gear in a van was an adventure," Grohl says, "but after 20 years, you look for ways to change the process and make it more of a challenge." The concept came about, according to Grohl, after making his directorial debut with the documentary *Sound City*, about the studio outside Los Angeles where Nirvana recorded *Nevermind* in 1991. He was inspired to make the film when he purchased the Neve 8028 analog mixing console (one of only four made) from the legendary studio, which was closing its doors in 2011. Some of the musicians who had recorded there, including Tom Petty, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, and John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival, participated and wrote songs specifically for the film and recorded on the rare console in a 24-hour period. It was



FROM ABOVE: Dave Grohl reflects on his rock roots while filming episode two of *Sonic Highways* in Northern Virginia; another show comes to a close, earlier this year; the much younger Foes take the stage in 2000.

OPPOSITE PAGE: "After 20 years, we're like family," Grohl says of his bandmates (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) Pat Smear, Nate Mendel, Grohl, Taylor Hawkins, and Chris Shiflett.



"THE EXPERIENCES I'VE HAD IN [DC] SET THE FOUNDATION FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE AS A MUSICIAN." —DAVE GROHL



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSWELL FILMS (TOP); STEPHEN ALBANESE/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM); RINGO STARR (OPPOSITE, PORTRAIT)



music-tech-geek heaven. And from that project the framework of what would become *Sonic Highways* was laid.

Chris Shiflett, the band's lead guitarist, says, "*Sonic Highways* became a way to show our love and passion for what we do and for music history." Grohl continues, "The whole concept really came out of trying to explain how these cities seem connected somehow. Whether it begins with Robert Johnson or ends with Lady Gaga, it's all connected by something. If you think of it, it's the sonic highways that connect all of these people and places together." The cities they chose were relevant not only to the band members themselves, but to music history as a whole. Of course, Washington, DC, was a natural choice for Grohl, who grew up in Northern Virginia.

Grohl began his music career in the nation's capital, drumming for hardcore punk bands like Dain Bramage and Scream. Says Grohl in episode two of the series, filmed at Arlington, Virginia's Inner Ear Studio, "The experiences I've had in this city, from the age of 14, set the foundation for the rest of my life as a musician. The community, the support, the love that was here in the DC music scene has carried over into what I do now." The musician continues, "The way that the Foo Fighters work now, we're like family, and we try to treat everyone that way."

The result of the Inner Ear recordings, "The Feast and the Famine," is perhaps the most evocative of the songs in the series, due in no small part to the fact that Grohl is writing about his own musical history. The first few lines include references to the 1968 Chocolate City riots, which followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and began at the intersection of 14th and U Streets; the Bad Brains and the hard-core punk scene; and



Trouble Funk, a local R&B band that popularized the go-go style that not only influenced Grohl's own style of drumming, but also that of artists like Pharrell Williams, who grew up in the Virginia Beach area.

Sonic Highways represents the Foo Fighters' most ambitious project to date. The tour, which began in December 2014 and stretches into November, is its longest so far, and as soon as new dates are announced, they sell out. In true Foo Fighters fashion, in certain markets the band instituted a "Beat the Bots" system, where tickets are made available first at the box office in part to prevent scalpers from buying up all the good seats, but mostly because Grohl wanted kids to experience the fun of buying concert tickets the old-school way. The program has had varying degrees of success, and tickets still wind up in the hands of scalpers and agents, but you have to admire his style. Though many people connect him with Seattle because of his history with Nirvana, Grohl still refers to himself as a DC-area musician. Two of the Foo Fighters' albums were recorded locally, and episode two of the series is a love letter to that history. It is no coincidence that the show at RFK coincides with the exact date of the 20th anniversary of the release of the Foo Fighters' debut album. Grohl muses, "There really weren't too many musicians or bands that imagined life outside of the Washington, DC, music community. There was no music industry, there was just this sense of camaraderie; everyone knew each other."

The Foo Fighters play RFK Stadium, located at 2400 East Capitol St. SE, on July 4 at 2 PM. For tickets, call 202-397-7328, or visit ticketmaster.com. CF