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### Interview with Nick Valensi



Many groups believe less is more when it comes to making music, but no band has ever pursued the policy as rigorously or as effectively as The Strokes with guitarist Nick Valensi.

On October 28, 2003 The Strokes released "Room On Fire". The album is the band's second, and the follow-up to "Is This It", the band's debut which has sold over 2 million copies worldwide. It contains 11 songs and, like its predecessor, is so tautly and perfectly constructed that there is not one excessive note or lyric anywhere in its 33 minute and 15 second duration. Tense, fierce and emotionally complex, it's a masterpiece that refines and advances everything that made the band so unique in the first place.

Recorded at TMF Studios on East 12th Street in New York between May and September 2003, it was produced, once again, by Gordon Raphael. It is a product of both The Strokes' obsessive work ethic and what Raphael refers to the band's "weird science", it's a record of precision spontaneity and primal sophistication that effortlessly hurdles the band's greatest fear - that of ever releasing a song that sucks.

While Strokes fans may be familiar with songs like "Meet Me In The Bathroom," "You Talk Way Too Much" and "Between Love Hate" (which was known as Ze Newie on the road), from hearing the band perform them live, *Room On Fire* offers up surprises from Nick Valensi's synthesizer guitar part in the album's first single "12:51" to the reggae rhythm of "Automatic Stop" the raging "Reptillia," and the sometime cool and sometime pleading "The End Has No End." But the album's biggest surprise may be the soul ballad "Under Control," which early critical response has repeatedly called it the finest song the band has ever done.



Praise has come fast and furious for "Room On Fire" with a 4 out of 5 review in *Rolling Stone* and a 9 out of 10 in *Spin*. Both magazines subsequently putting the band on their covers. Fan reaction has been tremendous as well with the album debuting at #4 on the *Billboard* album chart. And the success has not only been in the US, but all over the world, where the band had Top Ten sales in the UK, Ireland and Canada.

Recently the band noted: "As soon as you think, 'I'm the fuckin' man, I'm the shit', you're setting yourself up for trouble." The Strokes never do that. The Strokes are driven by a ceaseless desire for perfection. And unlike any other contemporary group, The Strokes don't release a song until it actually IS perfect. That's why "Room On Fire" - their second album - is a masterpiece and it's why this group never, ever sucks.

Epiphone's Don Mitchell recently had the chance to talk with Strokes guitarist, Nick Valensi.

**EPI:** Hey Nick! How's it going?

**NICK:** Great, just wrapping up a pretty hectic tour.

**EPI:** At what age did you first pick-up guitar?

**NICK:** My parents bought me my first acoustic guitar when I was five years old. They were very encouraging, I guess. By the time I was eight I had convinced them to get me an electric.

**EPI:** Who were you listening to at the time?

**NICK:** When I was a kid I was really into Guns N Roses. That was sort of the thing that made me want to be able to really play. Then when I was 12 or 13 Nirvana came out and I started listening to stuff like that...and also started seeking out older music which I hadn't yet gotten a chance to be exposed to. My parents always played the same three tapes: Whitney Houston's first album, some Gypsy Kings tape and Bob Marley, Legend. So I think those things must have somehow made an impression on me.



**EPI:** Who was the biggest musical influence on your style of guitar playing?

**NICK:** It's a mix of a bunch of different things. That's the textbook answer, I know, but it's true. I mentioned I was into GNR, so I obviously admire Slash's guitar playing, not to mention

Brian May, who Slash ripped off a lot. I also love all the guitar work by the Velvet Underground, whom I got into as a teenager. The Beatles -- and George Harrison specifically -- were an influence. The Cars had good guitar sounds, and awesome solos. It's hard to say who the biggest influence would be because I listen to a lot of shit.

**EPI:** A lot of magazines have made a big deal about you guys being from Prep School....So how did a group of Prep School students become one of the hottest groups in rock&roll?

**NICK:** I was actually in public schools all my life, until I went to a private school for a year when I was in high-school. I don't think it was a "Prep School", though. And I don't know how we became "one of the hottest groups in rock n roll". That kind of stuff happens when you're not paying attention, I guess.

**EPI:** How much effect did the New York club scene have on you?

**NICK:** We took advantage of the fact that there was a club scene in New York by promoting ourselves shamelessly through it. We'd show up to all the shows, the bars, and the parties to hand out fliers for our next show. I think that had a lot to do with how fast we gained a local following. I mean, we were everywhere. You couldn't pee in a bar without having to stare at a Strokes sticker above the urinal. And then, all of a sudden, everyone in New York knew who we were.

**EPI:** Your first major success was in the U.K. What was it like being a band from New York and having to trek overseas to support a project that had yet to catch on in your own country? What was the reception there?

**NICK:** It was great. Our first tour of the U.K. was sold out before we even booked our plane tickets. We didn't mind going overseas, we were just happy that people wanted to see us play. We would've gone to the fucking North Pole if that's where our fans were.

**EPI:** Tell us about touring with the Rolling Stones. How was the crowd reaction to your music? Did you get to jam with Keith? :-)

**NICK:** Well, as you can imagine, it was a very cool experience. That being said, their fans were completely indifferent towards us. Lesson learned -- when people pay \$150 to see their favorite band, don't waste their time. I didn't get to jam with Keith, no, but I did watch him play a game of snooker against Ron Wood. I don't remember who won. I don't even remember if I spoke. You have to understand, I was pretty nervous.

**EPI:** In 2002 you were named Band Of The Year by SPIN Magazine and many other publications have been quoted as saying how hugely influential you have been. What is your take on this?

**NICK:** My take? Uh, well, yes. I agree.

**EPI:** How did you hook up with Epi?

**NICK:** I've played Epiphone guitars since I was 13. Back then, I bought one because I wanted an archtop but I didn't have the money for a Gibson or a Gretsch. And now, I just like my Riviera better. It feels nicer than a 335 to me.

**EPI:** What is it that you like about the Riviera or in other words, what is it that gives you your sound?

**NICK:** I wasn't happy with the humbuckers in my Riviera so I fitted it with P-94's, and that's been my main guitar ever since. A friend of mine dubbed it "the greatest guitar Gibson NEVER made," because, for some reason, no company ever made a semi-hollow archtop with P-90's in it. I am currently talking with Epiphone about releasing a signature model Riviera, which is cool because I've been wanting to see this kind of guitar made widely available for a long time.

**EPI:** Tell me everything in your touring arsenal. Guitars? Amps/ Effects?



**NICK:** I've got a few Epiphone Riviera's fitted with P-94's, and I play through a 2x12 Fender Hot Rod Deville amp. I use a Jekkyl & Hyde pedal (made by Visual Sound) for light distortion when I'm playing rythm, and when I do solos, I use a MXR Micro-Amp pedal. I also have a Boss Tuner pedal. That's it. It's a pretty simple setup.

**EPI:** What would be your advice for aspiring rock & roll guitarists?

**NICK:** Practice. And think about practicing when you're not. When you've spent eight hours in some bar, think about how much you could've improved in that time if you would have been practicing. Drink at home, and practice more.



Be sure and check out The Strokes on-line at [www.thestrokes.com](http://www.thestrokes.com).

