



LOCAL PRODUCE AARON CUPPLES

One of Australia's most talented young local musician/producers, Aaron Cupples, lifts the lid on two of his most recent (and very different) recording projects: Dan Kelly and The Alpha Males, and The Drones.

Text: Greg Walker

► Two great local Australian releases of recent times are Dan Kelly and the Alpha Males' *Drowning In The Fountain Of Youth* and The Drones' *Gala Mill*. Dan Kelly's ARIA-nominated record is a feast of sonic treats featuring great songwriting complemented by exotic production values and some wonderful treatments of vocals and instruments, which help to flesh out the recurring themes of tropical dystopia. The Drones record, by contrast, features a very raw, hard-edged sound, which again wonderfully complements the incisive lyrical themes of alienation and early Australian settlement history. The record brilliantly captures the urgency of one of Australia's most captivating live bands and finds them completely at one with their material.

The producer in both cases is Aaron Cupples, working from a mix room in the loft of a barn in Victoria's Gippsland and various live environments, ranging from Melbourne's illustrious Sing Sing Studios to a disused mill in rural Tasmania. As well as being a busy producer and live mixer, he is an artist in his own right and an Alpha Male member (electric guitar). I was keen to have a chat with him and lift the lid on the making of these two great and totally different Australian records.

THE KELLY GANG

Greg Walker: I'm really impressed by the sonics of the Dan Kelly record and how it complements the songwriting. Did you have an overall production philosophy in place at the beginning of the process or did it just evolve naturally?

Aaron Cupples: Both. Except our production philosophy was to have a minimal, restrained aesthetic, and it evolved naturally away from that into multi-layered tropical pop psychedelia! We ended up filling every gap we could find in a song with an instrument or an effect. We would listen to a mix and say, 'There's a gap! Fill it!'. And once we filled them all we added harmonies. It was like a mosaic. If there was a gap, it was like a dead pixel on a computer monitor, it seemed incomplete. But despite the sheer volume of overdubs, it wasn't random; we cut a lot of stuff out and made sure everything sat 'right' and occupied a unique place in the mix. We were very conscious not to 'over-produce' the record.

GW: Where did you track *Drowning In The Fountain Of Youth* and what gear did you use?

AC: We did a week of tracking with Andy Baldwin at Sing Sing South, playing live as a band and recording everything: drums, two guitars, bass, keys, and a guide vocal, and

doing a few instrument fix-ups when we had a good drum take. I can't tell you a lot about Andy's techniques because this was the first time *ever* that I'd been involved in a recording when I wasn't the engineer! So I made the most of it, watching telly, eating curries and trying my hardest to ignore the technical aspect of the session. But, alas, being a hopeless gear fiend, I had a bit of a peek.

Andy has a penchant for SE mics; they were everywhere! Snare, overheads, room mics and the bass mic, I recall, were all SE mics. Toms were Sennheiser 421s, kick was a Beyer M88, Dan Kelly's guitar an AKG 414/Shure SM57 combo and mine a Royer ribbon/Shure SM57 combo, both in an X/Y configuration. We mostly used the Harrison console's mic preamps or Sytek and Avalon outboard.

After the week was up we took all these basic takes away and set up a studio in an empty house on the south coast of Gippsland – owned by Dan Luscombe's [keyboards] parents – to do overdubs. We had pretty basic recording gear: 57s, 58s, a couple of Rode NT1000s, an SE Gemini we borrowed off Andy, an Avalon valve pre and a Digi 002. What we *did* have, however, was an impressive range of instruments. Everyone in the Alpha Males is a guitarist, and between us we've quite a collection. We also borrowed some gear, including an ancient Binson Ecorec delay (the same as Pink Floyd used in *Live at Pompeii*), which got plenty of use.

Everything we wanted effected, we tracked effected. We had a Fender Twin in the tiled bathroom (which was very live) that I recorded with the pair of NT1000s placed quite high and back-to-back, which gave a very wide 'bathroomy' effect. We tracked some vocals in that bathroom too, which can be most noticeably heard on the 'Beach Boys' harmonies in the middle eight of *Star of the Sea*. We recorded a few new songs in the house as well: *Mail Order Bride* and *My Brains Are On Fire* amongst them. Both were tracked to a drum machine, although on *Brains* it was later replaced with a real kit. We experimented a lot with guitar sounds, often splitting the signal and recording one modestly and the other through a ridiculous array of effects pedals into a separate amp.

GW: There are some great vocal sounds on the album. Were these mainly captured at the source or treated at the mix stage?

AC: Captured at the source, like everything else. We had three main techniques for this. On the previous album, *Sing the Tabloid Blues*, Dan recorded a lot of his vocals with a Neumann U47 but found the end result to be too clean. To rectify this he ended up running them through a Boss Blues Driver guitar pedal at the mix stage to get a more Indie lo-fi edge. Some may find this akin to drinking a fine single malt whiskey from a foam cup with Coke, but it worked well. This time around, however, we were both keen to avoid adding distortion on

vocals but still wanted a gritty, textured sound. For this reason I recorded almost all the main vocals with a Shure SM58. Recording main vocals with a 58 can make you a little nervous because of their non-audiophile 'not a serious studio mic' status, but it's completely fine if you remember two crucial things: firstly, use a great preamp (in this case a JLM 99v); and, secondly, repeat this phrase in your mind: 'It's good enough for Bono'.

The second way we recorded vocals was to use a Shure 'green bullet' mic. These have no top-end at all and sound like you're singing through an amp. We used it on a lot of songs but only for backing vocals. The third was to use a Rode K2, which was used for clean group harmonies with everyone crowded around. We also used this bizarre Italian mic of Andy Baldwin's that had the most paper-thin, crappy sound I've ever heard come directly from a mic. I loved it, but I don't think it made it onto the album in the end because we re-did most of the vocals after we left Andy's. After trying a few methods, Dan found a position in which he was comfortable to sing. He ended up holding the SM58, sitting in between the monitors, with earplugs in,

Let's go to work! Aaron's Loft Studios is situated in a loft (funnily enough) in Thorpdale, Gippsland. It's a classic home setup that seamlessly combines instruments and recording gear... and with nothing better to do around the traps, lots of work gets done.





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and headphones on! But he was happy and recorded a lot of the vocals that way.

RECORDING THE GUITARS

GW: How did you record the guitars and who performed all those great solos?

AC: Guitars sounds were mainly determined by the guitar and pedal combination. The main amp was a Fender Blues Junior. We also used a great little Australian valve amp made by Dison... and the Fender Twin in the bathroom I mentioned earlier. We made good use of Fenders: ’78 Telecasters (we had two), a ’66 Jazzmaster, a ’60s electric 12-string, a Jaguar and a Strat. A Danelectro Baritone guitar and a Gibson SG copy also got a look-in.

Almost all of my guitar parts from the original live takes were used, and most of Dan’s were too. Dan did a lot of the overdubs, including the solos. I remember sleeping-in one morning and I could hear Dan nutting out the solo for *Fountain of Youth*. I fell back to sleep and woke up later and could hear that it was getting more and more complicated. Not wanting to interrupt this creative outburst I went back to sleep again, and when I finally got up, a smirking Dan played me this intricately silly solo; it was perfect and we recorded it then and there. Then he doubled it exactly, an octave higher.

GW: There’s also some wonderful keyboard and drum machine action on the album. Are these hardware or software generated?

AC: The keyboards are mainly a Roland electric piano and a Korg MS2000 synth. We also used this little novelty radio with a keyboard built into it and a Roland TR808. There were also some samples from a ’70s Rhythm Ace, which we cut up and re-sequenced into our own rhythms. We also used Dan’s great old Baldwin organ, which he bought from an op shop that has these preset

drum grooves, spring reverb and a Leslie-style speaker built in. We used that for the drums and organ in *Vice City* but then it developed this horrible problem of playing a chord incessantly all the time whenever you turned it on – so it didn’t get used after that.

MIXING DOWN THE FOUNTAIN

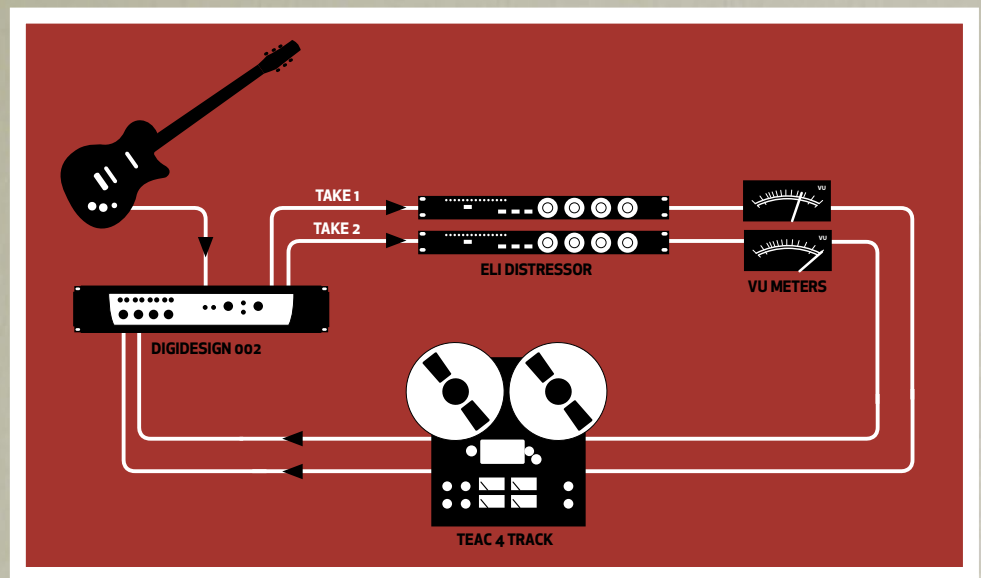
GW: Talk us through the mix process. There’s a great sense of tropical psychedelia wafting through a lot of the tracks... how did you go about creating that in the mix and what gear did you use?

AC: We mixed the whole record in my own studio, ‘The Loft’, which really is a loft in a big old barn in Thorpdale, Gippsland. It’s a great place to mix – because it’s so remote there really isn’t much else to do. It has some nice views of the green rolling hills and the sheep thereon. It’s also a great-sounding room, which is a bit of a fluke as I’ve done no acoustic work on it, but having old uneven timber with a pitched roof and a floating floor doesn’t hurt.

Most tracks were recorded effected, which I prefer because even though you get all this floatiness from the delays or reverbs you also get this dryness by not having delays and reverbs in the mix – it really tightens things up. I used a bit of outboard spring reverb and analogue delays, but even then I would record them back in as a new track. This has the major benefit of recallability and I do this with all outboard processing for that reason.

A major contributor to this album’s sonics was a TEAC four-track 1/4-inch reel-to-reel that I ran a heap of different stuff through – guitars, bass, vocals, piano... nothing was safe. I would typically bus these sounds out through an ELI Distressor into the reel-to-reel, monitor off the play head and record it back to the DAW in one pass. The benefit of this technique is that you can choose exactly how

On *Babysitters of the World Unite!* Aaron bussed the main Baritone guitar to two separate tracks of a four-track tape machine – one mildly saturating and the other severely slamming – recorded them back to separate tracks, re-aligned them with the original (which was then deleted) and panned hard left and right. The result? A 'pretty cool' stereo effect with width and full mono compatibility.



much tape saturation you want in the mix, at the mix stage. I can also have a Distressor going to tape on as many channels as I like! On *Babysitters of the World Unite!* I bussed the main Baritone guitar to two separate tracks on the tape machine – one of them saturating quite a bit and the other one severely slamming – recorded them back to separate tracks, re-aligned them with the original, which I then deleted, and panned them hard left and right. This made a pretty cool stereo effect with plenty of width and full mono compatibility.

GW: I'm curious about a few of your effects setups as it seems to me you've got some great techniques with filtered delays etc. Any favourite plug-ins or hardware units you care to mention?

AC: The plug-in delays I've used are too clean for my taste, the echo is too close to the original; I prefer the repeated sound to be more mangled. Analogue delays are good at this. There were two main ones we used. One of them is a little silver Japanese unit from the '70s, which has a very thin echo that sounds like a distant AM radio transmission – it's got a very nostalgic *Lost in Space*-type vibe, which is pretty cool. The other is a Boss DM-300, which has chorus and echo, but you can't use them both at once, which is unfortunate. The echo on it is very much like a tape echo; it even gets duller the longer the repeat rate is set! We often 'play' the delay unit like an instrument, tweaking the Tone or Intensity and sometimes the Rate dials in real time. I'd record a few performances and pick the best one. There's a bit of this going on in *Get Wise*. Actually, there's a bit of everything going on in *Get Wise!* On the computer screen the whole song resembled the cascading steps of an ancient ruined temple. The intro was added last and was put together with tracks that we axed from the first chorus, including a friend singing obscurities in French over a drum machine! In the next section, among other things, is a glockenspiel and Christian Strybosch [drums] doing some Rolf Harris-style heavy rhythmic breathing.

The guitar solo in *Get Wise* was achieved by plugging the guitar through the Korg MS-2000 synth. Dan Kelly played guitar while Dan Luscombe and I were fiddling with all the controls on the Korg, all the filters and delays and stuff. Then I bussed the recording back out through the Korg again and we tweaked it out some more, then I got that track and bussed it out again through the synth. By now it was sounding quite bizarre. I used all three tracks at once, panned left and right with the original take centre. On this track there is also liberal use of a Doppler plug-in that's set to make things sound kind of woozy and unsettling, like an old cassette tape. This is all over the intro and on the string groups.

RECORDING THE DRONES IN A GALA MILL

GW: I'd like to switch over to talking about recording The Drones *Gala Mill* album... Again the sound of this record wonderfully reflects the songs and the lyrical content. Can you tell us about working with Gareth Liddiard and the band, and how this sonic philosophy developed during the tracking and mixing process?

AC: Something we talked about before we started recording *Gala Mill* was that we wanted an honest and uninvolved recording – kind of like *Tonight's the Night* by Neil Young. We weren't trying to replicate a studio outside of a studio. We wanted somewhere that wasn't designed for recording and all the imperfections that come with that. Another thing that I wanted to do was not 'hide' the process of recording from the listener, which is what you usually do. Because this was such a simple recording there wasn't much to hide anyway, but all the 'tops' and 'tails' and drop-ins and outs are all just laid out bare. For instance, there's the most obvious crossfade ever in *I'm Here Now* (on the guitar about two minutes in, we dropped in some new guitar to fix something). A drop-in is the most common thing in the world when you're recording, and I made a crossfade so it would smoothly change back to the old guitar part. The crossfade was

quite long at first but before I made it smaller I listened to it and it sounded kinda cool; a bit like a volume swell that you can do on a guitar with the volume knob. Gareth dug it too so we just left it. Why hide it if it sounds good?

GW: How did you become involved in this project and whose idea was it to go down to Tassie to make the record?

AC: I'm a good friend of Gareth's, having played in a band with him for over a year [Gareth, The Drones' main vocalist, was the original bassist in the Alpha Males] and he asked me one day if I would like to help The Drones make a record. They had new songs and wanted to try something different, so we sat around one night and talked about how it would be cool to go to Tassie and do a record in an old farmhouse. It was one of those conversations that you get excited about, but after a day or two you forget about it and it never gets organised. Well, Gareth talked to the rest of the band and they were all up for it, and before I knew it the flights were booked and it was on! The idea was to just borrow all the gear we could, chuck it in a van, put it on the ferry, spend a week recording and come home. If it was good, we'd put it out; and if it was crap, well, we had a good holiday.

GW: Tell us a bit about where you recorded and how this impacted on the sound.

AC: Mike Noga [drums], who is originally from Tasmania, teed up a farm through a friend of his sister, about halfway up the east coast of Tasmania. He hadn't been there before so no-one knew what to expect. We got to the farm and it's this magnificent old rambling homestead, with a river, apple orchard, collies running around... beautiful. The farmer meets us and shows us the building he thinks would be good to record in. It's a wool shed and it's hardly ideal – breezy, open and *stinky*. We begin to show concern and the farmer then mentions the old mill by the river. We check it out and it's perfect – old brick walls a foot thick, ironbark floors, three-stories high and

Run of the Mill: The Drones connected with Australia's convict past, recording in an old Tasmanian mill. The rate is reasonable but the nearest Stuyvesant soft pack is a good 30 minutes away.



“The thing about The Drones is they sound distorted when they’re sitting around playing acoustics!”

built by convicts in 1842! We set up the drums and quickly realised it had great acoustics, so we had our space.

GW: The record has an amazing sense of rawness and urgency about it. How did you go about capturing that?

AC: Having no budget, we had hardly any recording equipment, and what little we *did* have wasn't what you'd consider 'high-end'. We had some Shure 58s and 57s and a few Rode mics and the only pre's were in my old Allen & Heath System 8 16-channel mixer, patched into a DAW with RME converters across the first eight preamps and a blackface Adat via lightpipe converting the other eight.

We initially spent a long time placing the drums in the right spot so they sounded big – which ended up being almost in the middle of the room. Then we placed the two Rode NT1 room mics in the corners the drums were facing into, about 15 feet away. This provided us with a great room sound with plenty of low end; the main sound of the kit in most of the songs is just these two mics with a bit of extra kick and snare.

Gareth set up a chair facing the drumkit where he sat and played guitar and sang – his guitar amps, along with the rest of the control room gear, was upstairs. His guitar was recorded through two amps: one was the same Dison valve amp we used on the Dan Kelly record and the other was a valve Moody 'student'. Both of these amps are tiny, with six or seven-inch speakers, and quite different sounding – and we often panned them apart in the mix. I had a room mic up about eight feet away from them to capture a blend of the two. Room miking was always happening; we did some overdubs downstairs where the drums were set up, and those two main room mics were always being recorded. I also had a mic outside the

door recording the creek and the dogs barking, which ended up being used for a lot of intros and outros.

GW: How did you record the main vocals?

AC: Vocals were recorded live with the drums, using a Shure Beta 58. The majority of the album is quite down-tempo and this setup worked quite well. But on the loud songs there was tons of drum spill in the vocal mic and this proved to be the biggest problem when mixing those songs – consequently, a big part of the drum sound on these loud songs is the vocal mic spill!

GW: Distortion plays a very important role on this record. Can you take us through the ways you use it in both tracking and mixdown?

AC: The thing about The Drones is they sound distorted when they're sitting around playing acoustics! A lot of the rawness comes from the way they play. But technically the distortion you're likely referring to is from the fact that we mixed down to tape, and we hit it very hard.

We mixed in the same way we recorded it – very straightforwardly. All effects are either an outboard spring reverb or an outboard echo unit. There may be a dash of plug-in reverb here and there too, but not much. Compression was used quite sparingly also – bass, vocals and drum room mics received some, but not much else. The overall compression is a combination of the tape we mixed to and the mastering process. The entire record was mixed in two days flat in The Loft. It was tracked in four days, so the whole record production came in under a week, except, of course, that the tracking and mixing were done a year apart! ■