Recording The Whitlams

Christopher Holder goes in search of the definitive Australian album, and debunks some rumours along the way.

Prior to the release of The Whitlams' latest album, *Love This City*, there was some interesting gossip floating around the industry. The band were mixing the album at Studios 301 in Sydney and apparently the scale of the operation was immense with a capital 'I'. That's when the rumours mill began to grind. Initially, I heard that they'd brought in four analogue 24-track machines and an additional console, then I heard there were five 24-tracks, a couple of digital multitrackers, and three consoles. It didn't take long before rumour had it that every 24-track tape machine in the country had been seconded, SSL had custom-designed a 192-channel 'Whitlams' signature series console for the session, the Berlin Philharmonic were in town to do some last minute overdubs, the Discovery Channel had assigned a film crew to make a 'behind the scenes' documentary, and Brian Eno, George Martin and 25 assistant engineers had popped in to lend a hand!

As with all outrageous rumours, these ones were probably based on a modicum of truth. I thought AudioTechnology had better get to the bottom of the story and tracked down Rob Taylor, the album's mix engineer and long time Whitlams co-producer.

Rob Taylor: We're doing an album of huge proportions. All Whitlams' albums have been long processes, but this one has been pretty intense for a good 12 months. It's evolved like all Whitlams albums, involving a huge range of instruments, guest artists and other musicians. After the success of *Eternal Nightcap* we had the money to do *Love This City* on a larger scale but our methods have been exactly the same. But this time, instead of scamming studio time and getting friends to play, we were actually able to afford to pay people and get what we wanted.

Christopher Holder: So I gather the previous album was financed on the smell of an oily rag?

RT: *Eternal Nightcap* was done on $25,000, a lot of people don't realise that. Some people have called that album patchy. Patchy?! If you knew where we recorded and what we recorded on you'd understand why. We were re-doing vocals as we were mixing, we were scamming studio time in some of the most ridiculous places. Crazy scenes, some things I couldn't even believe were happening, it was like recording in Beirut sometimes! By the end we got a little money to mix the album. But, we could only afford 10 hour blocks, so we had to quickly rush in and mix, and then it would all get pulled down for something else. This time we didn't have those constraints, for this album our motto was 'no compromise'.

CH: So all the rumours of studio excess are true then?

RT: They're all true... to a degree. In any one song we always used a hell of a lot of tracks, sometimes up to 150, but they're all condensed down. We might do 20 tracks of the one vocal just to get an effect, but it's not that much of a drama after you bounce it down. We've got the technology.

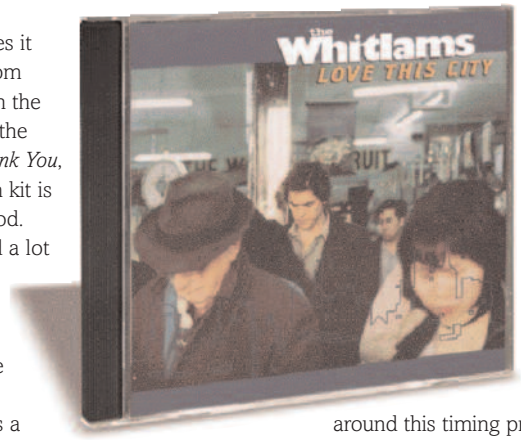
CH: Was it hard for this to be a Whitlams album when the scale of it had changed so radically?

RT: Tim Freedman [Whitlams songwriter and front man] and I have been producing music together for seven years, and I've seen The Whitlams sound develop. The band evolved from an acoustic three piece, through to stadium rockers on their last tour, with a big single. I was very conscious of not destroying their sound. That sound had very lo-fi beginnings which began to get more and more ambitious – the concept never changed it was just refined. With that in mind I was careful not to make the guitars too polished, for example. They still had to be very rough and ready, and have that distinctive Whitlams' sound, and that was my link with the indie world. Also we tried not to get too good a sound on the piano, so we used an upright a lot. We tried to trash sounds out, we tried to make the overall product sound very polished but still maintain that lo-fi vibe.

CH: So what other techniques did you use to trash out your songs?

RT: It started with careful sound selection when recording, trying to avoid that LA effect where everything sounds too 'nice'. We had to try and be grungy, rough things up a bit, so we added loads of distortion. We distorted the snare through a Tech 21 Sansamp or the Yamaha SPX900 distortion program (which I love on snares), or via a Sherman filter bank. The input on the Sherman is designed to distort and I use it for distortion a

lot. Distorting the snare makes it sound fatter, almost like a room reverb. Daniel [Denholm] is in the studio at the moment, doing the Motown-sounding song *Thank You*, and basically the whole drum kit is distorted. It sounds really good.



For vocals, we always used a lot of treatments. We used to experiment with Leslie cabinets, or singing into the back of the microphone – we did that by accident and we actually liked it! Bass guitar is a classic, you always distort the bass, everyone does, it just fills up an area the guitars can't reach and gives it a bit of fuzz. On a song like *Pretty As You* it's almost like Pearl Jam when the chorus comes in, so I had to add so much distortion in there to fill it out and make it feel tough.

CH: How did you set yourself up when you started pre-production for Love This City?

RT: First up we bought a Fostex D160 digital multitracker and a Korg 1212 card. I use the card with Logic Audio, and went with that computer setup rather than ProTools. The Fostex D160 is a digital 16-track recorder and served us mostly as a mobile recording unit, it went everywhere and we did everything on it – all the different studios we went to, it would slave to anything. It also gave us the ability to do a lot of work at home. For example, we did a lot of backing vocals in the home environment.

CH: So before the Fostex D160 you had sync problems from studio to studio?

RT: Yes. It's the analogue/computer hard disk timing problem. Most hard disk recording systems don't manage to cope with the fluctuations in the speed of analogue two-inch systems, and every two-inch machine is different. Basically you need a hard disk system to have the ability of varispeed SMPTE chase and adjust the sample rate accordingly, so your audio stays in time and doesn't drift off – but those systems are very expensive. For instance, ProTools will sync to almost anything but you're spending about $20,000 for the privilege. We got around the problem by using the D160 (which does have varispeed SMPTE chase) as the 'sync interface', and let it deal with all the speed fluctuations that we encountered (23.2 to 26.1 FPS on various machines when it needs be a steady 25 with a fluctuation of about ±0.1FPS). Anything I needed editing, I firstly transferred to the D160 from analogue two-inch. Then the D160 becomes the master machine and the computer is the slave, controlling the D160 via Midi Machine Control. The D160 runs at perfect speed and the computer has no problem running audio in sync at all. I can then dump eight tracks at a time using ADAT optical from the Korg 1212 card to and from the D160 and the computer. Once the edited material is returned to the D160, it can resume its place as slave to the analogue two-inch and transfer the edited material back to its place in the 'master reels', in sync! This system offered me enormous editing capabilities using Logic Audio (up to 96 tracks of vocals/drums/guitars etc, all edited to the max – not all running at once mind you), as well as Midi running in tandem. The whole thing cost only about $8,000 including extra drives to handle the workload (excluding the computer, of course), and gave us a variety of options.

There are other ways of getting around this timing problem, like resolving the analogue machine to a SMPTE source using a Lynx module. That would be good for whole passes but wouldn't work on an edit level. Analogue recording on the whole is a pretty dodgy affair anyway, so you just have to live with all its 'funky' failings and work out ways to beat the problems that occur.

CH: Talk us through a Whitlams mix.

RT: I always start by getting the gain structure right. That's going to be the reference point for me – if you can't hear the kick then turn everything else down. Some people start with vocals, I can't do that, most of the time I leave the vocals to the very end. When you mix for radio the vocals are so loud they mask everything else. Because of this, I find you can miss things underneath – you can mute the vocals and listen to the instrumental and often it's surprising what's happening... or what's not happening! With this album I'd start a mix with the bass drum, the bass guitar, the piano, other guitars, and then start sub mixing in things like the brass.

CH: What's your stance on compression in recording and mixing.

RT: I compress pretty heavily, and I do a lot of processing to tape. So when I bring up the mix, all the sounds are there and I'm not using a great deal of outboard, unless I'm really twisting things. I also use a lot of stereo bus compression. My secret weapon is a Joe Meek compressor. The Joe Meek was the sound of *Eternal Nightcap*, it really was. It just filled the mix up, filled up every nook

Rob Taylor and Tim Freedman mixing at Studios 301

"sometimes you've **got** to **chuck** fashion out the **window** and just **do** what **works"**

and cranny. For this album I've been trying to vary things, using different combinations of compressors – driving one hard and the other not so hard.

CH: What sort of processing do you apply to the vocals?

RT: We try and get the vocal as loud as we can in the mix – and we're always experimenting to achieve that. For some tracks, where we really wanted it to scream, so we used all three of our compressors going hard. The result is a really squashed sound, and a lot of the sibilance is accentuated, so we try to de-ess with two different de-essers. It's a lot of work but the vocals are of paramount importance and the result sits on top of the mix and it sounds good. For the ballads we've just applied gentle compression, letting the vocal breathe, and we tend to dull the vocal down a lot more when we're doing quieter tracks – it gives them a much warmer feel.

CH: You mention using three compressors in series. What would be a typical processing chain?

RT: My typical vocal chain is a Pultec EQP-1A followed by an Amek 9098 Stereo Compressor, into a UREI 1176, then into two dbx 902 de-essers. Not all of them are necessarily working simultaneously, it could be a combination of any element to get a particular vocal sounding appropriate. Not surprisingly we get a lot of hiss, so I actually prefer to mix vocals from digital. That way I haven't got an extra layer of hiss introduced and amplified 10 times by the vocal chain of compressors. That's heresy really, everyone says you can't do that – vocals off digital?! But sometimes you've got to chuck fashion out the window and just do what works.

CH: Do you use gating in the mix?

RT: I rarely use gates on drums. I automate the toms in. Toms add in so much spill that they can be either really good in a drum mix or really bad. The biggest problem I've found is when you start to EQ them, they alter the snare sound and they alter the cymbal and high hat sound. It's a problem. I always EQ toms to tape slightly to get an overall sound, then I bring each tom in individually using the console's automation. It takes a bit of time, but once they're automated in you can turn them up, brighten them up, so they can be massively loud without affecting the sound of any other drum or cymbal. Sounds much more natural.

Although, I do use gates as a 'techno trick'. When you want to give a sound a forced envelope using another sound as a key. And, come to think of it, I do use SSL module gates as a noise reduction measure. I guess I just don't use gates in your traditional sense as a thing to create 80's drum sounds.

CH: Are you a big EQ man?

RT: I go berserk, you've got to. I try to work with my mastering engineer Don Bartley as closely as I can to almost get the end result before mastering. The overall EQ of a mix comes about from a culmination of the EQing of all the channels running, not a final tweak of the stereo bus. The temptation for me is to mix too bright, as if it's about to go out on radio that day, but I've learnt to get it nice and bright without slicing my head off. Later on I let Don open up the tops in a controlled fashion to suit the destination of the product. It was great having Don down the corridor during the mix, as he would come in daily and listen to where I was up to and offer comments – he was involved in the entire mix process almost. I value his input greatly, he's been doing my stuff for so long now and we've become quite a team. Besides, I like a nice raw, sparkly mix, with lot's of depth. I like transparency in my mixes, I like to hear everything.

CH: How do you achieve that transparency?

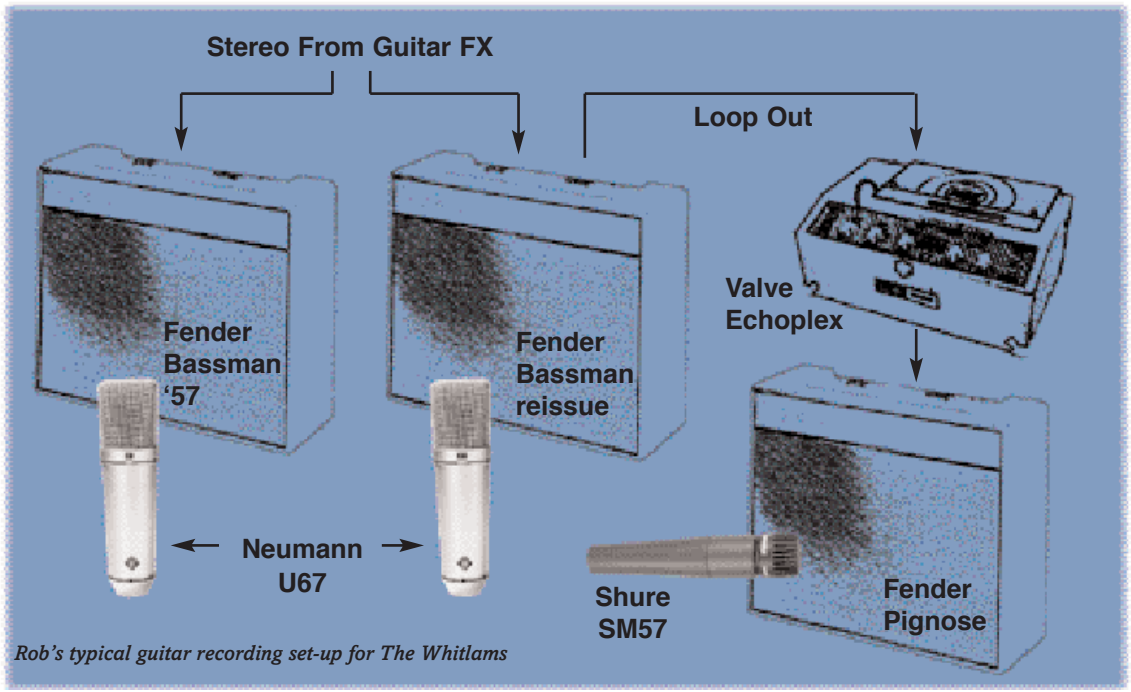
RT: Organise all the frequencies around the mix so they don't clutter each other – that's a pretty standard one, but really needs doing. And also regulate the output of the stereo buss, organise the gain structure. The gain structure for each individual mix is the most important thing for me. Three or four times at the beginning of each mix I might go back to zero and bring all the faders up to unity gain and mix off the gain trims, getting the right output from the stereo buss, without compression. I experiment until I find what I call the 'G spot', which is the cool gain structure and sound for that particular mix.

The 'louder' you leave the stereo bus the more a mix becomes '2D', until it becomes an impenetrable wall, which is great for lots of things. I'm sure you get a form of compression by forcing so much signal out those 'two holes', like +18dB or something like that. Alternatively, the softer or lower you go, hovering around 0dB, the more 3D the mix becomes, and it gets to the stage where you feel the whole thing 'breathing', and you could almost climb inside. I lean towards either extreme depending on the nature of the song I'm mixing.

CH: Hearing the work of a US producer on this album, how do you think Australian engineers and producers match up against their overseas counterparts.

RT: The songs that Joe Hardy did were great and had a very distinctive 'American' sound to them. The UK and the US both have a particular type of 'sound', while I don't see a collective sound coming from Australia. Yet... I

Rob's preproduction set-up. Among others you'll notice an Akai S3000, Novation DrumStation, Roland JV1080, an Alesis D4, a Panasonic SV3800 DAT recorder and the distinctive Nord Lead in the foreground. Note the keyboard under the Nord mashed beyond all recognition, sporting a Rob Taylor 'retrofit'.



Rob's typical guitar recording set-up for The Whitlams

think it's because we're not quite as mature an industry here and we're not given the chance to do enough of the big budget projects. A lot of the stuff goes overseas, and it pisses us all off. Ironically, though, many of the biggest selling albums in this country recently have been completely home-grown.

I can understand the record companies' rationale though. If they're spending $200,000 on making a record, a big name overseas production team is like an insurance policy of sorts – they know what kind of sounding record they'll be getting. It's safer going that way... and they also get to sell the name of the producer as well. It's all down to radio airplay too, and what kind of 'sounding' record commercial radio will play. I would have to say, Australian radio definitely leans towards the loud and overtly compressed 'US style' product.

It's a Catch 22 situation. We need more big projects to improve ourselves and create our own sound as an industry, but the record companies don't feel they can take the risks along the way. So it's going to take time. It'll possibly take a few more big home-grown hits overseas to get that 'fashion' thing happening.

We certainly have good people here who have the ability to do it on a world-class level, but we don't necessarily have the projects to do or the number of good facilities to work in.

CH: What about the state of studios in Australia?

RT: I think we have some of the best tracking studios in the world, like Festival and Mangrove Music studios, but we've been a bit light-on for the past few years as far as mixing studios. I think you have to have a large scale SSL console with capabilities for a 48- to 72-channel mix with 'moving fader' automation and some decent monitoring to do the really big mixes, and to be able to compete in the world market.

We've got to get out of that mentality of, 'oh no, you've got 72 tracks', as if anything more than 24 tracks is going overboard. As far as I'm concerned, 72 tracks is standard. I can't imagine an internationally successful artist like Madonna having any budgetary constraints where she has to stick to 24 tracks. Get real! As if the record company is going to say, "No no, Madonna, what you're trying to do is ostentatious". She's going to have 96 tracks or more. She could have every tape machine in New York if she wanted it!

With The Whitlams' mix I really didn't want to compromise what we had recorded and I was after a mix facility that could give us the number of channels necessary to bring everything in, in a standard 72-track format. It just wasn't possible in Australia. We explored going overseas but that proved to be too expensive and it goes against the grain as well. So we settled on Studios 301's Phoenix room. We had two desks running two automation systems which gave us a ridiculous amount of 'straight' channels (something like 96 mono and 16 stereo!). It was a bit of a mind f@#! going from desk to desk, Supertrue to SSL automation all the time but having those extra channels made the whole thing so flexible.

Besides, I've been helping out since June last year, on the construction of Garry and Jodie Beers' Mangrove Music Studios new studio complex on the Central Coast. They've come up with what I consider to be a unique 'live-in' studio environment, with everything you ever wanted equipment-wise, including a very large SSL4000G with Ultimation. So I'm very excited at the prospect of having a place of that calibre to work in that's 'down the road' from my home and studio in Terrigal. Heaven!

This interview was done before the opening of the new Studios 301, which is truly a world class facility. For more information, see our 301 story on page 44.