



Homegrown

JOE HAMMOND & SEZ WILKS

Greg Walker hits the auto-rhythm button and finds himself strangely moved.

Text: Greg Walker

▶ Minimal arrangements and an instrumental palette consisting mainly of one cheap and cheery Italian electric organ, column heater percussion and vocals: potentially a very tough production gig. But producer Joe Hammond and artist Kikuyu (aka Sez Wilks) have turned less into much, much more. Kikuyu's album *Hunter Gathered* is a great listen and the organ gives excellent support to Wilks' fine voice and lyrics without ever feeling too narrow or relentless. While the production is restrained, sonically things keep moving in a satisfying way and there are always enough twists and turns to hook the listener. How have they achieved this musical feat with so little? Let's find out.

HAMMOND TIME

I first met Joe Hammond during a session at some-time AT contributor Jonathan Burnside's old studio, Eastern Bloc. When we mysteriously couldn't get a satisfactory bass DI sound out of Jonathan's great preamp collection we were advised to go 'upstairs' to Pots and Pans Recording Studio, where Joe could help us out with a tasty Chandler Germanium pre. Joe was extremely helpful, the Chandler sounded great, and I made a mental note to check in on Joe at a later date to see what was going on in that upstairs room. Fast forward two years and I finally made it back up the stairs and hooked up with Joe to check out his room, his gear and the fantastic album he's just finished producing for Kikuyu. As luck would have it Sez herself was also in the studio working on some new material

so I was able to sit down and have a good chat with both artist and producer about this unusual project.

Greg Walker: Can you tell us a bit about your musical background Joe, and how you ended up becoming a record producer?

Joe Hammond: I got into studio work through playing drums in bands. I played in a band called Love Outside Andromeda for many years until that eventually folded, and then I did stints in various local Indie bands including the Red Sun Band. I ended up joining Deloris who have since called it quits but have sort of continued playing under the name Near Myth. I've been working as a producer for that band recently too. When Love Outside Andromeda folded I decided I wanted to learn a bit more about audio. I was always the guy in the band who stayed back with the engineer and listened to the takes and helped with the edits and chose the best bits, and I just naturally developed a bit of a curiosity about that side of things. Also, being the drummer, you always have to get to soundcheck early, where you eventually end up standing around a lot and looking at the mixing desk and outboard gear. After a while I just started asking questions. Around 2006 I enrolled in the Music Industry Technical Production course at RMIT and that gave me a pretty strong basic education in engineering, mixing and so on. I managed to get some recording gear together and eventually said to myself, 'f**k it, I'll rent a space and just start.'

GW: So did you come straight up here when you started?

JH: I was actually in one of the downstairs rooms at Eastern Bloc, across the hall from where Jonathan was working, but it wasn't quite right. There was a bit too much noise coming out of his studio so I came up here.

GW: I know Jonathan mentored quite a few people while he was over here. Did you work with him as well?

JH: I got to assist him on quite a few sessions actually, which was great, but also I was able to go into the studio in my own time and do things like compare two Neumann CMVs as overheads against a pair of B&Ks and just generally get to know lots of boutique gear – it was a really great opportunity to try out stuff I would never have had access to otherwise. I also found that it's the repetition of doing 20 different drum sessions that enables you to really hear what the gear does. You go, 'Ah okay, those mics are a bit more sparkly; those ones are rounder' and so on. The repetition of all those sessions definitely taught me what to listen for.

HAMMOND'S ORGAN

GW: Let's talk about the Kikuyu album. There seems to be a pretty minimalist approach going on. How did that come about?

JH: When Sez came to me to do the album she already had a vision, which was to centre the record around this old Baleani Supersonic organ and that really dictated terms. We did branch out as the recordings went along, adding some guitar parts and percussion parts but the bulk of the album is made with that one organ. We did use a couple of other organs for certain small parts, and we also discovered that playing the column heater as a percussion instrument sat really well with the organ's drum patterns. The real challenge was to create textural depth using mainly the one instrument.

GW: So how did you go about doing that?

JH: We'd generally record the organ direct into an Avalon DI or a Universal Audio 610 preamp, but then I'd often send it to a little speaker out in the hall and mic it up with a stereo pair of Shure KSM 141 omni pencil condensers in the bathrooms or the stairwell, to capture some room sound or some kooky ambience. Because we've got two pokey bathrooms at the end of the hall, one of my tricks is to put an omni condenser in each one and then pan them hard left and right in the mix. This approach worked really well for the organ, it just immediately gave the sounds a sense of space. We did broaden the palette a bit with a Casio and an old Hammond on a few tracks but the other thing that eventually happened was that the hand claps and percussion took on a more ambient role. I always tried to have one keyboard part be up front and in your face as the grounding one, and then have different levels of depth for the others.

GW: So are all the rhythm parts generated on the Supersonic as well?

JH: Yeah 95% of it is the automatic rhythm on the organ. We did use one other drum part from a toy organ, but everything else came from the Supersonic. We also used its auto bass feature a fair bit. We mostly used whole drum rhythms but sometimes we'd cut them up a bit. I occasionally doubled the beats on a real drum kit too, just for a chorus to have it explode outwards for a section of a song and then pull back to the smaller sounds.

IT'S ALL IN THE AGREEMENT

GW: So Sez, what were the challenges for you in working with such a minimal sound palette?

Sez Wilks: I actually found the process quite liberating because I stacked a lot of background vocals and often found myself improvising and things would just start happening. We did use a lot of different mics on the vocals and I was singing in different ways to achieve different moods and create different textures. There was one song I wrote and demo'd really quickly at home very late at night. The whole house was asleep so I was doing this husky whisper into the mic and we both really loved the sound of that vocal. Then we tried to find a way to replicate it here.

JH: I think we even got you to bring in your mic, which was this \$20 rip-off of a Shure SM57.

SW: I showed him where I plugged it in and he went 'What!' I was doing totally abhorrent things in my chain but it sounded good.

The advertisement features a central image of the Marantz PMD661 Professional Field Recorder, a rugged black device with a large OLED display showing '17:37:39'. The device is surrounded by several callout boxes highlighting its features: 'Large, easy-to-read OLED display', 'Uses stable, reliable SD or SDHC memory cards', 'Digital recording at 44.1/48/96 kHz fs at 16 or 24-bit quantization', 'Ergonomic, one-touch transport controls & More', and 'WAV (Broadcast WAV File) or MP3 recording format'. The background is a dark, atmospheric landscape with a blue sky and a large rock formation.

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Clockwise from above: The 'champagne sparkle' Slingerland four-piece takes pride of place at Pots and Pans; there's some tasty outboard but no pots and pans in the Pots and Pans control room; Sez Wilks recording vocal through the Coles 4038 ribbon microphone; Coles, Mojave, Shure, Sennheiser and AKG mics gather for a line up.

“ I was doing totally abhorrent things in my chain but it sounded good ”

JH: When we recreated it I got Sez to sing really close on the mic and drove the shit out of the preamp to get it to go foggy and weird. The level was obviously far too hot for the converters by then so I passed the signal through an RNC purely so I could wind back the output to a useable level. The compressor's threshold was set high enough to not actually be touching the signal – an elaborate pad, if you will.

GW: So how was your producer/artist relationship? Did you have to negotiate any major differences of opinion?

JH: We were really lucky like that. We'd be in the middle of doing a part and then I'd go [Joe clicks fingers], 'why don't we try doing this?' and Sez would say, 'I was just thinking the same thing.' I really can't think of a single time when I wanted something to go one way and Sez wanted it to go the other. We always seemed to naturally see eye to eye on how things should evolve. Also Sez had already nussed out a lot of the vocal arrangements at home during her late night sessions and that probably helped. We definitely had a lot of fun in here using found percussion objects. I found the column heater made a pretty great guiro.

GW: And what was the usual recording chain for the main vocals?

JH: I found we got the best results with a Coles 4038 ribbon, but having said that the Coles mics only arrived halfway through the sessions. Before that we also used a no-name brand Chinese ribbon mic, which sounded okay. Pretty trashy sounding, especially for a ribbon, but sometimes that was a good thing. We mainly ran the vocal mic through the UA 610 preamp or the Avalon 737 and generally didn't compress the vocal too much on the way in.

MIXDOWN MEANDERINGS

GW: When it came to mix time were there a lot of decisions still to be made?

JH: I think we really let the tracking process dictate how the final mixes were going to turn out. By the time we got down to mixing the shape of the songs was pretty settled, although I did spend a few days playing with levels and trying

different keyboard parts as the main bedrock tracks. When you're recording a rock band you know, you have a pretty clear formula for how it's going to sound, whereas with Sez we had the luxury of...

SW: ... meandering.

JH: Yeah, meandering and messing around finding cool sounds and trying different keyboard sounds to get one we really liked.

GW: Can you get technical here Joe and tell us what gear you used for the mix?

JH: I mixed it all here in ProTools, monitoring through Event Precision 8s and summing through the Neve 8816 summing unit into one of the older Apogee converters: an AD 8000. I used the McDSP plug-ins a fair bit for compression and EQ, and their Revolver reverb, although I didn't really use too much reverb on this record. The main vocal was compressed through the McDSP CB4 compressor bank, and generally I used the emulation of the Neve 33609 compressor in the CB4 for Sez's vocals. I also used the Massey limiter to tame various things. The rest of it was really about balancing the sources and running things out to the stairwell or the bathrooms now and again.

GW: The bathrooms definitely work because the mixes sound nice and full and balanced even when there are only a handful of sources. I must get 'round to building a couple of new bathrooms in my studio! One last question for you Sez, how are you planning on reproducing this music on stage?

SW: The answer's pretty simple – live loops. The band I played in before this had so many instruments, this keyboard for this part and that synth for that part. So playing solo I really wanted to reduce all of that to the point where now it's just this dear old organ and a loop pedal and a few other little things. Someone asked me last night how I control all the loops because the organ doesn't have MIDI and I said – 'with my mind!' ■