

Recording George's Unity



When it came time to record the follow up to their multi-platinum selling first album 'Polyserena', Brisbane band, George, chose once again to combine their considerable talents with those of Australian producer/engineer David Nicholas. Mark O'Connor discovers how Unity 'came together'.

It's probably fair to say that engineer/producer, David Nicholas, is one of Australia's great unsung talents. He began his recording career in 1981 as engineer on INXS' *Shabooh Shoobah* album, and over the next two decades has assembled an eye-popping CV that includes artists such as Richard Clapton, Australian Crawl, Midnight Oil, The Pretenders, Elton John, Pulp, Sting, Rod Stewart and Bryan Adams (to name a few). Also, along the way he's worked with producers of the calibre of Warne Livesey, Chris Kimsey and Chris Thomas before finally turning to production himself.

David Nicholas produced George's first album, *Polyserena*, and reunited with the band last August for pre-production work. Nicholas and George then convened at Studios 301 Byron Bay to record band tracks, before working on further overdubs at 'Coorabella' (a house in the hills above Byron Bay), and finally to the ABC's Ferry Road studios in Brisbane to record the Queensland Orchestra.

The resulting album *Unity* is a rich and complex piece, sonically lush and expansive, dynamic and imaginative in arrangement and performance. A happy marriage of the traditional and the new, it unites analogue with digital and contemporary pop sounds with the swirling textures of Melbourne composer Paul Grabowsky's cinematic orchestral arrangements. Yet underlying this apparent complexity is to be found an inherent simplicity. I discussed this and other aspects of recording *Unity* with David Nicholas, who spoke to me by phone from London's Townhouse Recording Studio.

Unity Gain

Mark O'Connor: *What's your overarching philosophy to recording David?*

David Nicholas: Technically, the rule is: always record it as simply as you possibly can. In practice, this means trying to find great gear to record great performances and record it as simply as possible.

MO'C: *How does this ethos translate into your choice of mixing console, for example?*

DN: For *Unity* we used a beautiful old Neve console at Studios 301 Byron, and the orchestral stuff was done on a really nice old Neve at Ferry Road (ABC Studios in Brisbane, home of the Queensland Orchestra). Then I mixed the album on the new SSL 'K' series at Sing Sing in Melbourne – which is a gorgeous sounding console... The problem with SSLs is that I find they're not nearly as warm as the Neves. But if you record everything through a Neve and then mix it on the SSL, the combination is really nice. I was really pleased with the results.

We recorded onto two-inch. Primarily I used the tape as a giant compressor, and then bounced the results into ProTools HD. The big problem with tape is the more you use it the worse it starts sounding, but if you record to tape and then bounce immediately into 'Tools, you retain all the beautiful sound that you get

from the two-inch and you don't lose all the top end... it's a great combination.

What with the Neves and SSL, as well as the tape and 'Tools combination, it was just a great mix of technologies.

MO'C: *Did you maintain that approach throughout, even when you relocated to Coorabella for overdubs?*

DN: No, Coorabella – which was all about percussion and other bits and pieces – was all direct into ProTools HD. The same applied to the orchestral recordings at Ferry Road – that was just four tracks coming out of the console into ProTools HD. Ferry Road has a really crusty old Neve (A3998 circa 1975), and you had to give it a kick every now and again when it stopped working. But it's just got that beautiful sound – very phase coherent, very simple, not a lot of electronics inside the console, and very clean signal path. And the Neve at 301 Byron is the totally refurbished console from what was Festival Studios in Sydney, which is arguably the nicest console in Australia by a long way (Neve 28/24 with 1081 EQ).

MO'C: *Which brings us to Studios 301 Byron Bay. How did you find working there?*

DN: I absolutely loved it – I can't imagine a nicer place to work. Every morning I went for a swim and a run on the beach before getting down to work. And the studio is absolutely magic. What makes it so magic is the console – it's absolutely beautiful. They've completely rebuilt it, so it's like a brand new console. And it's had so much music through it. I mean, it was at Festival Studios for 30 years, and all those great records they did there... it's seen a lot of action.

They've also got the big old grand piano [Yamaha C7 concert] from Festival, which is a beautiful instrument. We had it completely re-hammered prior to recording, so it was like brand new. And the room's really nice; so, yeah, it's my favourite place to record by a mile.

MO'C: *You spent a month at 301 Byron recording band tracks. What was your modus operandi?*

DN: On this record we allocated ourselves two days per song. We'd play the songs through and just sculpt all the sounds until they were exactly right for that song. Then we'd take a break, come back in and just try and perform the track as best we could. We'd do that maybe three or four times, and then we'd have it. So the idea was to basically cut everything live. George is such a great live band that it was a matter of just trying to capture as much of that band performance as we could.

MO'C: *Including the vocals?*

DN: Most of the vocals were actually cut live with the band. Having recorded four of five takes of the song we'd comp up the band tracks first. Then we'd just lay up all the vocal tracks and go through and pick out the best bits. Usually we found that the outstanding vocal takes coincided with really amazing band takes, so there wasn't a lot of editing to do. We'd have the full song done, all the instruments and all of the vocals, by



George's producer, David Nicholas.

the time we'd finished the band tracks.

MO'C: That surprises me – given the sophistication of the arrangements, I would have envisaged a more layered approach.

DN: We spent a lot of time in pre-production working all that stuff out – really going over each song and making sure everybody's contributions were right and that everybody knew what they were doing. That way, when we came time to cut each song, the focus was on getting a great performance. And I really enjoy that sort of approach. I mean, my job as producer is largely about song craft. And, in my opinion you've won or lost most albums before you get to the studio – pre-production is where you craft the songs; the studio is where you're trying to get great performances.

MO'C: Is that essentially how you'd define your role as producer – coaxing great performances?

DN: For me the job is about aiding in song construction, and picking the right songs – trying to get the right flavour. Then there's the psychological component of my job, which is about trying to create the right atmosphere for people to be able to perform well. It's about trying to make the process of recording a fun experience, because when people are enjoying themselves it's manifest in the music.

Recording The Band

MO'C: There's a very clear, honest sound to the band's instruments on this record, which for me provides a bridge between the orchestral material and the hipper, quirkier, more contemporary sounds. The drums are a good example of that. How did you go about recording them?

DN: Mostly standard stuff really – a Neumann U47 FET on the bass drum, Shure SM57s on the snare, Sennheiser MD421s top and bottom on all the toms, and a pair of Neumann U67 valves as overheads – just nice old valve mics for all the room stuff and then mostly normal dynamic drum mics for the rest of the kit. For me, as with any drum or guitar sound (or anything really), the trick is to get the sound right at the source by picking the right drums, the right snare, tuning them appropriately for the key of the song – and then just recording them in as minimal a way as you can, so that you preserve the tonality.

MO'C: The piano too has such a rich, clear sound.

DN: For the piano I used a Neumann SM69 valve stereo mic. We actually set it up behind Katie, with the mic 'looking' at the piano from about a foot behind her and a foot above.

MO'C: *So it's not actually in the body of the piano over the strings?*

DN: No, I'm not a big fan of that really bright piano sound which close miking can produce. I tend to mic the piano as one entity, from a fair distance. I think it's impossible to close-mic a piano – you need too much phase manipulation and it gets all weird. If you step *back* from the piano it sounds like a piano!

MO'C: *Was Paulie's bass direct in?*

DN: Yeah, just straight in through a beautiful valve compressor. We had his amp running as well so I'd mix between the two sounds. He had this beautiful new Guild bass, which he bought on the first day of tracking. We'd always start out with his old Jazz bass because that was his favourite, but then we'd always end up using this beautiful semi-acoustic Guild [a hollow-body Starfire].

MO'C: *And recording Ty and Katie's vocals?*

DN: For different songs we used different mics, so that essentially the vocal EQ would be achieved by picking the right mic for the particular song – whether we wanted it to be brighter or warmer, that sort of thing. Generally, all the really pure-sounding songs for Katie – the ballad stuff – ended up being the Neumann TLM170, and for all the harder stuff like *Falling Inside* we used a Neumann M49. I'd compress the vocal before going to tape and then slam them quite heavily onto the tape as well.

MO'C: *What preamps did you use?*

DN: Really only the console's preamps. The Byron Neve is such a beautiful console there's no need to go anywhere else. And apart from that I just used Urei 1176s to limit the vocal.

The Orchestra

MO'C: *At what stage in the proceedings did Paul Grabowsky begin work on the orchestral arrangements?*

DN: We were sending him ideas down to Melbourne while we were actually tracking. As soon as we finished a song we'd send him a CD or mp3. Then he'd ring us up and play us his thoughts down the speaker phone and we'd all sit around and say "we don't like that bit" or "we like this bit" – so we were crafting it as we went along. When we finished all the tracking, we went to the ABC's Ferry Road studios for two days and recorded the orchestra. We recorded all the horns and wind instruments one day, and all the strings separately the next. In my experience, the hardest thing with a full orchestra is to avoid all the wind and horn stuff swamping the strings, so it was nice to have the capacity to mix between those two elements.

MO'C: *How much previous experience have you had recording orchestras?*

DN: I've done quite a lot of orchestral recording over the years. I tend to record the orchestra in wide stereo pairs and then close-mic certain instruments. In this case we very rarely used the close mics – it was more about getting a really nice sound in the room and recording that. I think the orchestral feel really suits George, it suits their style and it's something they're very comfortable with. And it's really great to mix that stuff with more contemporary instruments.

MO'C: *Where and how did you record those wonderful drunken jazz horns at the beginning of 'Falling Inside'? It's the first thing you hear on the album and they sound amazing.*

DN: We set them up in the lounge room at Coorabella – three trumpets, a couple of saxophones and a trombone. I had a bunch of AKG 414s and a couple of Shure SM57s, but most of it ended up coming from a stereo pair of Rode Classics we used as room mics.

MO'C: *Paulie B has said of this album: "Polyserena' was us learning how to make a record – 'Unity' was making that record." Is there still a learning curve for you, notwithstanding your years of experience?*

DN: I learn something every time I make a record. Musically, George has got an enormous amount of musical knowledge, so I can always learn something new from them, especially when it comes to integrating orchestral stuff into pop music. There are always things to learn – about the craft, and about how people work.