Recording KD Lang

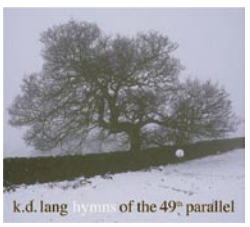
When it comes to recording one-take, unpretentious musical performances, KD Lang's latest album is hard to go past. Mark O'Connor keeps his finger hovering over the record button.

KD Lang has described her most recent album *Hymns of the 49th Parallel* as "my Canadian soundtrack". *Hymns* is a collection of songs by fellow Canadian artists Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Neil Young, Jane Siberry, Ron Sexsmith, and Bruce Cockburn, all performed by Lang's long-standing musical collaborators who just happened to be fellow Canadians. Reuniting with Teddy Borowiecki on piano and accordian, bassist David Piltch and longtime collaborator and co-producer Ben Mink, the result is a minimalist, well-measured reading of the songs, backed up by uncontrived arrangements and production. The album came together over little more than two weeks at LA's Conway Recording Studios, recorded predominantly to two-inch tape and mixed by engineer David Leonard [Prince, Indigo Girls and John Mellencamp, Bruce Hornsby, Michelle Shocked]. I spoke to David to learn more about how *Hymns* came together.

Tape it to the Limit

Mark O'Connor: Hymns of the 49th Parallel strikes me as a very intimate-sounding record, How was that intimacy achieved in terms of the production?

David Leonard: The 'intimacy', as you describe it, came mainly from the atmosphere of the recording situation, which was setup to encourage intimate performances. They're all friends and they've spent a lot of time playing together, so recording the album was an experimental musical process. They set up very close together in a small circle out on the floor, and they just worked through the songs. It was very much a situation where the recording process was secondary



Top Left: The recording of Hymns of the 49th Parallel took place at Conway Recording in Hollywood. This picture shows the cello quartet in action in a setup typical of the recording process – 'in the round'.

to them finding a way to feel these songs, to make them their own. KD would be sitting beside the piano as the band worked out the arrangements, and on some songs, if I felt like there was something happening I would just hit record. On other songs where we felt like we had an arrangement she'd go into the booth and we'd start making takes from there. The bass and piano were out in the studio live, but she was still very close – I put the piano just inches from her booth door so there was just a pane of glass between them. She was literally only three or four feet away from the piano player.

Mark O'Connor: Which obviously helped to maintain that sense of connection amongst them?

DL: Yeah. Everybody was within a six-foot radius of each other. And they were right at the back of the live room, the lights were low and they just got into a zone with it.

MO'C: So the priority was very much about creating a mood and getting the musicians comfortable rather than any attempts at separation?

DL: That's right. Spill is not really a problem with a smaller band like this where you keep everybody close together and tight. The fidelity doesn't suffer because it's a small acoustic trio sitting very close together, so the ambience is all useable and all good. It's very much the 'old school' way of recording – you capture a live performance and, because everything is open miked closer together, that's what you get. If there's a problem with a great take there's still a possibility you can try to punch in and fix it – it was all recorded on analogue tape, with Dolby SR – but it remains very much a live recording.

MO'C: It would seem there was no pre-production period for the album as such. Or if there was it was actually in the studio and you were recording it. Is that true?

DL: That's right, all the arrangements were worked out in the studio. I always pay attention to where the music is going and if I feel that it's headed somewhere really cool I'll record it – even if it's incomplete or not necessarily magical. That way if the band gets off track and a little discouraged you can roll back and say, "I think you guys were onto something right here" and play it back for them. I think the engineer is often the observer of when things are starting to ripen – it's a good time to be aware, not to be thinking about knobs and buttons but to pay attention to what's happening musically and be in record at the right time.

MO'C: You must have had quite a supply of tape!

DL: I think we went through probably 15 or 20 reels of two-inch tape. I started recording over stuff once we had picked masters and I knew what were outtakes.

MO'C: Tell me about the decision to record to tape.

DL: It was a conscious decision by KD that it was going to be analogue and organic and not a 'digital record' – just due to the nature of the material and how they were going to approach it. There's no click track, no tempos, it's all just ebb and flow of KD and the band, of her following them and them following her. It's all live off the floor. I think in a couple of instances we may have cut between performances, but given there wasn't a click track you had to take the whole group performance at once, editing between whole performances of the band.

MO'C: Recording an album to tape has surely become an increasingly rare phenomenon in today's music industry?

DL: Very rare. I've done a couple of albums on tape in the last couple of

David Leonard in a moment of contemplation during one of the Conway Recording sessions.

years but no more. It's getting harder and harder to actually record on tape because of the maintenance of the machinery and the availability and cost of tape. All the main studios still have tape machines but it's just not in the room any more, and it becomes a big deal when you've gotta drag this machine in and see if it's still working because it's been sitting in the closet for six months or a year – you cross your fingers when they turn it on. The tape machine at Conway Recording Studios was a Studer A-827, and we had some issues with it because of that. I'd urge anybody who's thinking about working on tape just to make sure that the machinery is still working well because the bearings get a little dry from not being used, while the capstans and the pinch rollers can get brittle. You've got to get the speed tapes out and make sure it's working well. But I think it's worth the extra effort. If you A/B digital versus tape I don't think you can audibly detect much difference between them – they both sound great. But for me it's a cumulative effect. Over the course of two weeks working on analogue tape you just feel so relaxed. Just to sit there and play it back, you realise you've got a very warm sound. And you're not watching the blobs go by on the screen. You're just listening to the music, and whole performances of the band – which may be one of the things that we've lost, bands recording as bands.

MO'C: No shortage of that for this particular album though?

DL: No, you're right, it was all about the live performances – it was a joy to work on, and every time you put a tape up it felt very warm. Actually, the struggle in analogue is to *wake it up* to a level of excitement and brightness. With digital you're often trying to drag the warmth into it, but with analogue I found that when I took the rough mixes home after tracking I was like, "Whoa! We've gotta wake this thing up." It was a little bit on the round side. Analogue is so warm and wonderful when you're sitting there in front of the speakers in the studio, but when you take it out into the real world and play it in your car or on your speakers at home you feel that it needs a little bit more brightness and compression – which I addressed in the mix phase.

Thoughts from co-producer Ben Mink

Producer and multi-instrumentalist Ben Mink has been a part of KD Lang's musical journey for the best part of 20 years, serving as both producer and co-writer on early albums including 1992's commercial breakthrough Ingenue. *Ben plays acoustic and electric guitars and fiddle on* Hymns.

Ben Mink: We started recording right off the bat, and basically completed the album in about eight days. With musicians of that calibre and the fact there were no drums involved, we just played through the songs and usually within half an hour or an hour the take was done. Being Canadian, we understood what the songs actually meant to KD and what she was trying to do.

Using Tape

BM: That was KD's call. Tape with Dolby SR is still my favourite recording medium. It's a completely different philosophy of recording – it really reminds you of what music should be. In the digital domain working with tracks you're much more tempted to digitally correct a lot of things that could just as easily be corrected with a fader move. And you don't get a record done in nine days digitally – you might get your kick drum sound! I've done albums digitally that just ruin your nervous system – and your carpal tunnel! I don't think music was meant to be that. I mean, I'm comfortable with both digital and analogue, but I'd carry the flag for performance above anything and it really doesn't matter what you record on. With digital the options become just too wide.

Having said that...

BM: KD was very apprehensive about doing the song, A Case Of You *– such a personalised piece of work for Joni Mitchell. She started running through it very casually, just sitting beside the piano holding the Neumann TLM 103 in her hands. Often in the studio she'll just take the mic off the stand and hold it, and march around the room with it and sing – she's got phenomenal vocal and mic technique. So she was sitting with the piano player just rehearsing, and David Piltch would occasionally join in on bass. It was very casual because it was just a rehearsal, but the mics were all set up and it was sounding really great, and we just rolled tape. And over a period of 45 minutes she'd run through it enough times that I figured we'd give this a listen later and she may have the whole thing because it really sounded wonderful – very natural, not self-conscious. And they ended up trying it again later but it didn't come close. So I cut it together with David Leonard over a day of piecing together all the performances, transferring them to the digital domain. On that occasion digital technology really served us to create a beautiful performance that really couldn't have made it to the record otherwise. But it was still capturing the moment. So that particular track is digital – it was the one song that has a digital master.*

On Brazilian arranger Eumir Deodato

BM: It's so easy to kill something when you add strings, and Eumir understood that they have to work in waves and pulses. You really have to play hide and seek with the parts, that's absolutely the art of it, and he did a great job. There were two songs where he used a cello quartet which I thought was unusual – it was just a gorgeous sound, I'd never heard that before.

All the string sessions took about a day and a half. Everything was recorded at Conway Studios, which has a very warm, woody sound – the room has an awful lot to do with how the strings end up sounding.

MO'C: Isn't there some audible tape compression inherent in the analogue recording process that you don't get in digital recordings?

DL: Not so much as you'd think. Generally with drums and electric guitars in a rock band you'd be hitting tape pretty hard and you'd get that tape thing. But because of the acoustic nature of this project – because of the openness of the acoustic instruments and the fact that I was using Dolby SR – I wasn't slamming the tape very hard so there was probably very little compression coming off the tape. When I mixed I needed to do that, as well as to EQ and brighten things up a bit.

Noise Works

MO'C: Am I right in saying that, on occasions, there are audible amounts of hiss on this album?

DL: Yes, that's definitely hiss. It's the analogue medium, and even with Dolby SR there's hiss. Especially on the song, *One Day I Walk,* where we deliberately turned off the Dolby process – it's totally noisy. We were messing around with the alignment or something and had taken Dolby out and played it by accident – and went "Wow! Listen to the bass part without Dolby." We were on the fence a little bit about it – "Is that okay or isn't it?" – but we opted for the sound of the track versus the noise/fidelity thing.

MO'C: There's some sort of percussion track in that song, as though someone is tapping the body of a guitar perhaps?

DL: That's all David Piltch, playing with his thumbs on the body of the double bass. He's a fantastic bass player. That's the sliding bass, with one thumb rapping on the body and one thumb rapping on the back of the neck, and playing the bass part all at the same time.

MO'C: How did you mic him to capture that?

DL: I had a Neumann U47 tube down in front of the strings, and I put a Royer Ribbon mic up near the neck of the bass in front to capture a little more string noise. That was pretty standard for most of the songs. I put ribbon mics everywhere I can – I love them. In Conway they have those remote Neve mic preamps in the wall, so everything went into the Neves and then straight to tape. I rarely do much EQ or compression on the way to tape.

MO'C: Can you tell us about recording the rest of the ensemble, and indeed KD herself?

DL: For Ben [Mink] I have my own mics for acoustic guitar – a little Schoeps pencil condenser and an Earthworks TC30K omni, which is a microphone made here in New Hampshire. I place them both together right up around the 12th fret, maybe six to eight inches off the neck and then just treat them as a mono source, combining them 50/50. The Earthworks has a really extended high frequency and low frequency range – it's a very open mic, somewhat like a B&K measurement mic – while most of the colour and midrange character comes from the Schoeps.

Getting the piano to sound bright enough was probably the hardest sonic battle we had and I changed mics a number of times. It was a very 'round' sounding piano, and Teddy plays very quietly – it was hard to get any bite out of it. I was looking for as much attack as I could get out of the piano so I placed the mic right over the hammers.

As far as KD goes, she sang through one of Ben's microphones, a Neumann TLM 103 – they'd worked with it before, were comfortable with it and she used it on all the tracks.

MO'C: And the strings?

DL: Conway has a very small wooden room, not much larger than your average living room, with a very wooden sound. I had some Telefunkens up, some Neumann U47s in front of the cellos and a pair of Earthworks up in the room. Because it was a smaller room I had the mics further off the strings than I normally would – in a big room I usually come about four feet off the instrument, but the room was so tight so I pulled them more open.

MO'C: Has the experience of using tape again made you yearn for the old days, or grateful for the digital march of progress?

DL: Well, either way, what are you gonna do? Tape is gone! [laughs] Do you miss vinyl? It's gone. It's a shame. I don't think we've necessarily improved the sonic quality of anything, we've just made it more compact and easier to put in our pockets. And we definitely haven't made music more musical. But there are obviously things you can do digitally that you could never do with analogue tape. For example, the drum edits that you can do with [ProTools'] Beat Detective you could never do in the old days. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I don't know, but you can do it – and in some cases you *have* to do it. It's certainly made things easier in some respects – vocal tuning for instance, in the case of people that use it. Yes I miss tape, and I still use it – when I cut live I always roll tape *and* ProTools and put the drums, bass and guitars through the tape, almost using it as a processing device. But there are some amazing things you can do in ProTools, and digital is getting better all the time – it just hasn't made the recording process any quicker, in my opinion.