**BAND IN A BUBBLE**

Few failed to notice Regurgitator’s antics during the recording of their recent album ‘Mish Mash’. To some, recording in ‘the bubble’ seemed like a very thinly disguised publicity stunt, while others just wished they’d thought of it first. Mark O’Connor discovers what it was like for Regurgitator’s cast and crew behind all that perspex and glass.

...Regurgitator then proceeded to make its fifth album **Mish Mash**. In the process they turned reality television culture on its head and pushed the boundaries of the record-making process as we know it.

**Recording in a Bubble**

**Mark O’Connor**: This is the fourth album you’ve made with Regurgitator. How did the experience and process of making this record differ from those other albums?

**Magoo**: It was very tiring for one thing, which did get to me. As soon as you woke up there were people outside watching you eat your cereal – you always felt like you were on show, so you were constantly on your toes. I was very much aware of the band feeling the pressure to always be performing, to always be doing something. And my philosophy was, “Well, of course performance is a part of making a record, but not every minute you’re in the studio.” I was always trying to push the fact that people want to see how a record is made – which was, after all, the premise of this whole thing – and part of that involves a lot of sitting around and waiting for something to happen. Also we don’t usually record over such a short and intense period. We did the whole record in 21 days – usually you might do a week or two and have a bit of time off, and then come back with a couple of different songs or a different stylistic approach to one or two of them. That didn’t really happen that much this time. Ironically I don’t think we got as experimental as we usually do.

**MO’C**: To what extent did the television component encroach on the record-making process? Was it a distraction?

**M**: The television aspect was very distracting, but it didn’t take long before we got into a pattern. We’d basically wake up, there’d be a few interviews, we’d do a couple of hours work, Jabba would do his crosses, we’d do another couple of hours work, then there’d be the half-hour show. Everyone just got used to it after a while: “Right, we’re playing… no… we’re not.”

**MO’C**: There’s a delightful sense of controlled chaos to the album. Is that intentional, or just a spilling over from what I imagine must have been an often chaotic time in the bubble?

**M**: Yeah, it is a chaotic album, which is good. I definitely like recordings to have a lot of life in them. I’m by no means a perfectionist. I love the whole concept of songs and where they can take you first and foremost, more than I do the little intricacies of the bass drum tone or how you double-tracked or triple-tracked the guitar part. I’m much more concerned with the overall picture.

**MO’C**: So you’re not one to necessarily spend hours finessing a sound?

**M**: No, although I’ll definitely have a picture in my mind of how I want it to sound. If I want the drums to be really dead in a song then I’ll make sure they’re all in tune and deaden them up with as many baffles as I can fit around them. Conversely, if I’m trashening something up, I like to keep it open – I’ll usually have one or two mics around the drums to trash up.
rather than adding that distortion in mind’s own. I’d rather have those couple of mics there doing that job, with the close mics there for clarity if you need it so. It’s organised chaos, I guess. It depends on the song. But I don’t finesse things too much – I like to leave a bit of room for it to go somewhere else you may not expect. And I do like changing things quite a lot in the mix. Thankfully, we mixed the record at Studios 301 in Sydney – I think mixing it in the bubble would have been quite disastrous.

M: Notwithstanding the obvious presence of technical challenges on this record, M. Manuk still sounds essentially like a three-piece band to me – drums, bass and guitar. M: Definitely, probably more so than any other record I’ve done with Regurgitator. In the early days they were always playing with samplers and embracing technology.

Hugh Webb – Blowing the Bubble

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Black Box in a Bubble – The Gear List

Mago: The actual recording gear was pretty much my Black Box mobile recording studio. We had a few endorsements – Red & Ultrasonic helped us out, for example. Additionally we used a fair bit of gear from Joe Malone’s JLM Audio in Brisbane, including an AKG C414, which is an amazing microphone – I’d love to have it forever.

Producers – ProTools 24-bit MidiPlus system, Version 5 – 1.1 software, ROK 24-bit 8 I/O audio interface, ROK 20-bit 8 I/O audio interface, ROK 20-bit 8 I/O interface, ROK 20-bit 8 I/O interface for watching the vocal overdubs. Sometimes it was standing and hanging a piece of acoustic tiling and going, "How does that sound there? Maybe take it back a foot and a half and angle it down slightly..." to take out any big bottom end lumps in the room.

M: Once you’d achieved that, did it remain static for the duration, or did you find yourself moving stuff around during the course of the recording?

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There was some interaction between the bubble and outside world, in so far as you had the facility to record musicians playing from outside the bubble. How did that work?

We basically had the facility to record from either mic or DI. Because we weren’t allowed outside, we’d give a microphone to the site manager with placement instructions, and communicate with the musician through the intercom and headphones. At one stage Ben wanted a heavy metal guitar solo on Shopping Mall Soul so they ran a competition on Channel V and got four or five guys down, dropped a DI out there, put them through AmpFarm and off they went. The band ended up comp’ing four of the solos together to make one crazy solo. There was also a Sennheiser 416 shotgun mic suspended in the roof outside the bubble so we could capture ambience at any time; from drunken idiots to people singing. Sometimes we just miked up the intercom, recorded it on MiniDisc and then cut it up later for banter segments between songs.

I don’t think I can compare it to any other studio situation. It was very weird, but also amazing at the same time. There were moments where it got quite insane, but I mean we were living inside a 9.5 x 6.5 glass box under 48 fluorescent tubes – with 48 fluoro tubes on all day, you start to go a bit grey. It was a bit like being inside a 7-Eleven laboratory.

I spoke finally with Regurgitator’s Quan Yeomans about working with Magoo, about the beauty of transparency, and the pros and cons of a live gig that lasts three weeks.

It was both. This is our first independent record ever, so I was basically thinking, “How the f**k can we do this?”, in terms of distributing a record without having the promotion that’s involved and the money behind you etc. Times have changed in terms of marketing and getting your message out there. You’ve got to work out interesting new ways to do it, and keep on challenging yourself on a personal level as well as an artist. So far it’s debatable whether the marketing aspect has helped album sales at all. Had we had commercial television saturation I think it would have been a different thing – much more like a publicity stunt and a novelty. But because we were broadcasting through a cable channel, which is a bit less mainstream, I think it retained its integrity as an artistic idea and expression. As it was, I was terrified because of the corporate element and the sponsorship – I was unsure how it would look to people on the outside. But I think it was fairly transparent, no pun intended.

Initially, the bubble was going to be a hexagon with two levels, but all sorts of things changed and the budget eventually brought it down to being a simple box, which wasn’t very exciting from my point of view, sonically or acoustically – which was my greatest concern – though they did angle the glass walls on the inside off centre, which was good.

The main control room, which was also the main living area, was 9.5 by 6.5 with double-glazed perspex in between it and the studio, which was 9.5 x 3.5. Upon entering the studio through double perspex sliding doors, to your right was the ‘live’ end, with polished wood surfaced, kind of laminate floors and a polished roof – no acoustic treatment in the ceiling at all – with a perspex wall one side and glass the other two. In the corner at that end was a little Perspex booth which was basically a communication point with outside, and which doubled as a booth for the guitar amp. To your left was the ‘dead’ end which had a carpeted floor, fully acoustically treated, bass traps in the corner, and a dead vocal booth with Fonics foam on the inside – it had big double doors which, when closed off, left a completely dead room. This also acted as a bass cabinet room – when we were doing bass tracks or putting down beds we’d chuck the 8 x 10 in there to put as much separation between the tracks as possible, to minimise bleed onto the drum tracks etc.

We moved the drums around in the studio depending on the sound we wanted – the live end with a couple of room mics to give it that reverberant live feel, or close miked at the dead end of the room to get that close, more in-your-face sound. There were four baffles in there as well, two with Perspex middle sections that you could manipulate – you could make it a completely dead baffle or you could take away the foam bits to liven it up a bit around things like hi-hats.
intended. That was one of the nicest metaphors about the thing: transparency of process, transparency of personality – I think that was a key element to it. We were really insistent that it be as natural (and boring a lot of the time) a view of what it's like for a band to record as possible.

MO'C: How did the experience of being constantly under scrutiny affect the recording process? Did it dilute your focus?

QY: No, if anything it enhanced it. If our focus was scattered it was probably more by the media than anything else. Having to do a half hour live TV cross every day, plus interviews and sometimes a morning breakfast show – that was distracting. The public were a pleasant relief by comparison. But the TV element was a priority and I think that was fair enough.

MO'C: Did you experience some self-consciousness in terms of the trial and error aspect of the creative process?

QY: Oh God, yeah. When you're doing vocal takes you're self-conscious enough. I'm a very average singer, so it's terrifying when you're doing it like this. Being on screen the whole time in front of lots of people, you're vulnerable. I think it's about confidence. If you have something to say, then go for it – that's the only motivation I have really. And the bubble pushed our confidence levels to the limit.

MO'C: In what other ways did being in the bubble change the way you went about making a record?

QY: Our time management methodology changed – the way we worked, the amount we worked and how fast we worked. There was a heightened sense of performance because we were being watched all the time. There was a stage-like quality to it all because of the cameras and the people around you, so you're pushing yourself harder and getting a lot more done in the time you have because you feel like you should be entertaining people. That's what burnt Jabbal out so quickly – it's his job to entertain people on TV, so theoretically he was on 24 hours a day. For us, as a band as well, it felt like we were playing one very long live show. The adrenaline rush was the same. When you get up on stage in front of people, no matter how many or how few, it's kind of ephemeral connections – intimate connections – with just the glass between you. When they realise it's all being captured live.

QY: Did everyone kindly shut the...? Ross Irwin from The Cat Empire steps into the 'Iso booth' for some trumpet overdubs. Meanwhile behind the glass, Magoo does his best to minimise the background hubbub.

Although, on this album, I think a part of Magoo was pissed off he didn't have more time, particularly in the mixing. We only gave him 10 days, and his brain was completely fried from the 21 days in the bubble, with only something like three days off in between. So he really worked hard. He's one of those incredibly stoic personalities, easy-going, and very experienced with what he does.

Thought Bubble

MO'C: Was there perhaps, somewhere in this exercise, an element of subverting the whole voyeuristic culture of reality television and multimedia?

QY: There was certainly that intention there, but it really had a life of its own. As it grew we started realising what a crazy animal it was. You'd have these mad cross-media type things with feedback loops occurring.

MO'C: How do you mean?

QY: Magoo might be scratching his beard – and then he would catch himself doing it on the giant screen 300 metres away in Fed Square. Or we'd be conducting web chats with kids and they'd be listening to us on their TVs and typing back responses to what we were saying; or doing interviews with various media people outside the bubble and seeing their faces change when they realise it's all being captured live.

But as I said before, I really liked the metaphor of the transparency of the project itself. It's something that's missing in this democracy we live in. That's the reason why so much corruption and exploitation occurs in the capitalist system, because of this lack of transparency in the corporate world, the political world, the economic world. Although all media is propaganda, there's no way you can get around – there's still somebody in control of these cameras, there are still editing processes occurring and they're actually dictating what's being broadcast. The only true reality TV out there would be miniature TV cameras on a person without their knowledge recording their life.

Mo'C: Can you describe your working relationship with Magoo? What's his role as you see it?

QY: We usually come to him with these fairly well structured demos, which we've often become quite attached to – and in that respect I think it's sometimes quite hard for him as a producer. But Magoo just says what he thinks; he's a musical second opinion outside the band. And he's willing to take risks with sound and do stupid things to see how they'll turn out, which is what he's built his sonic sense out of – playing with sounds and having a non-precious attitude towards altering sound and sound-making.

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