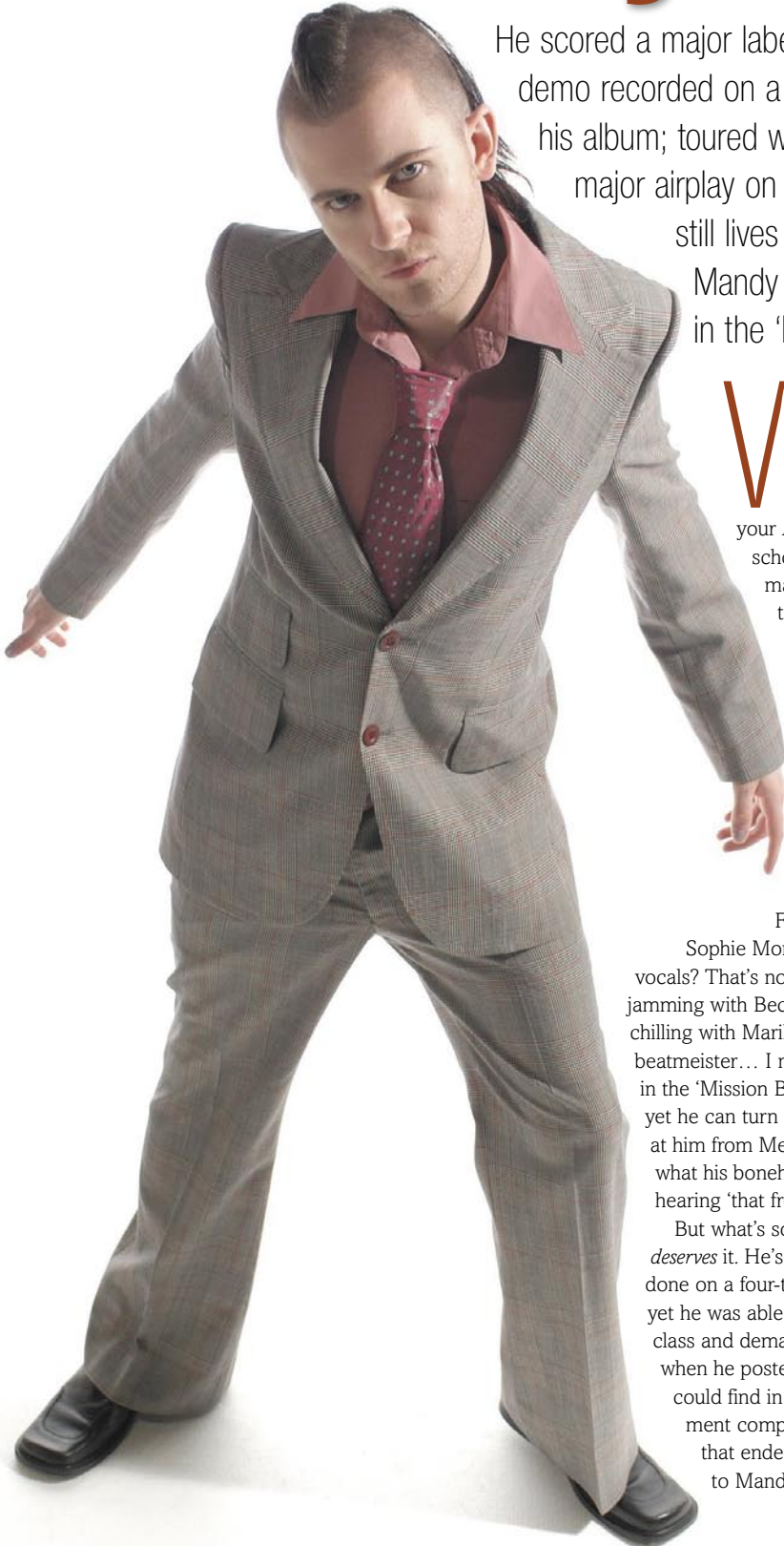


# Mandy Kane



He scored a major label record deal on the basis of a demo recorded on a four-track; went to LA to produce his album; toured with Marilyn Manson; has enjoyed major airplay on the commercial networks; and he still lives at home... Christopher Holder tracks Mandy Kane down to his bedroom studio in the 'burbs.

When I told Mandy Kane that his life should have been written into the plot of an '80s teen movie, he gave me a knowing look, as much to say 'uh huh'.

If you don't know your *Breakfast Club* from your *Pretty in Pink* then let me fill you in: Cool high school kids rule roost (ring leader always a particularly malignant James Spader); weirdo outsider breezes into town (cue a downy-faced Christian Slater); Misunderstood freakoid cops crap from all quarters (not least from a gurning Molly Ringwold); subversive, anonymous stunts soon ensue that rally school nerds and D&D dweebs; Weirdo reluctantly owns up to being responsible for jock-jacking pranks; The Freak gets Molly Ringwold while James Spader gets his convertible towed away in a, like, so-o-o humiliating way.

Mandy Kane is a self-confessed Christian Slater character, and boy is he the 'freak turned hero'.

Forget about Molly Ringwold, how about having

Sophie Monk pop into your bedroom studio to lay down some vocals? That's not the half of it: in the last 12 months he's been jamming with Beck's band, working with big-time LA producers, chilling with Marilyn Manson, collaborating with Nine Inch Nail's beatmeister... I mean, the guy is only 21, he still lives with his folks in the 'Mission Brown' suburban wasteland that so informs his music, yet he can turn on his radio and hear his own songs beaming down at him from Melbourne's Mt Dandenong. You really gotta wonder what his bonehead ex-classmates must be thinking when they're hearing 'that freak' on Triple M!

But what's so inspiring about Mandy Kane's story is that he *deserves* it. He's talented. He can write songs. His demos were all done on a four-track and a Midi sequencer with a Radio Shack mic yet he was able to build them up to a point where they had guts, class and demanded attention. And it was attention that he got when he posted out that demo to all the record companies he could find in the Yellow Pages. First came a call from a management company and then a bidding war by the majors ensued that ended with a contract with Warners because, according to Mandy, he "liked the people there" and the agreement

meant he wouldn't be "flavour of the month one minute and on the scrap heap the next". Mandy is about as far removed from the whole Popstars-led crusade of crap as you can possibly get and that in itself gets a standing ovation from AT.

### **(Not so) Tragic Daydreams**

**Christopher Holder:** *Your album **Tragic Daydreams** has just been released. Can you tell me about how it came into being?*

**Mandy Kane:** The album is really based on the 12-track demo I recorded at home and shopped around. I was signed to Warner about two and half years ago now. After signing up it was suggested to me that I might want to go to The States to meet some people and decide if I wanted to go over and do some work. I met a lot of different producers and programmers. Of all the people I met it was Chris Vrenna (Nine Inch Nails) and Joe Chiccarelli (see Issue 31's Rickie Lee Jones article for more on Joe) that impressed me the most – they were the standout individuals in terms of their character and what they'd done.

**CH:** *Tell me some more about Chris Vrenna.*

**MK:** I was drawn to his 'hard' sound that no one else seems to have. His programming and his guitars are so tough – the way he EQs stuff is just huge... massive. And his attention to detail is amazing. He'll chop up all the programmed drums and lock it all to a grid so it's dead-on then tweak

everything individually – a nudge here or there – to give it the right feel. I don't have the patience for all that. So for a track like *Stab* [Mandy's first electro-style single] I would give Chris my demo and ask him to beef it up. So he triggered new drum samples, try some fatter bass sounds etc.

**CH:** *And what was Joe Chiccarelli doing for you?*

**MK:** Joe fitted into the more traditional producer mould – helping me with song structure and the overall sound. That's why I thought Joe and Chris would be a great combination – they're both consummate professionals, and they both bring very different skills to the table that complement each other.

**CH:** *Okay, so you've got two industry heavyweights working on your material; where did you go to bring it all together?*

**MK:** We went to a studio called LAFX. We used that to record any live material like drums or guitars. That was an experience in itself. We had Joey Waronker [REM/

Beck] on drums and Justin Meldal-Johnsen on bass. So effectively we had Beck's rhythm section in the studio. We even had [another Beck's muso] Roger Manning on keyboards at one stage. The track *Mannequin Ball* features them. That was a good experience, doing live stuff.

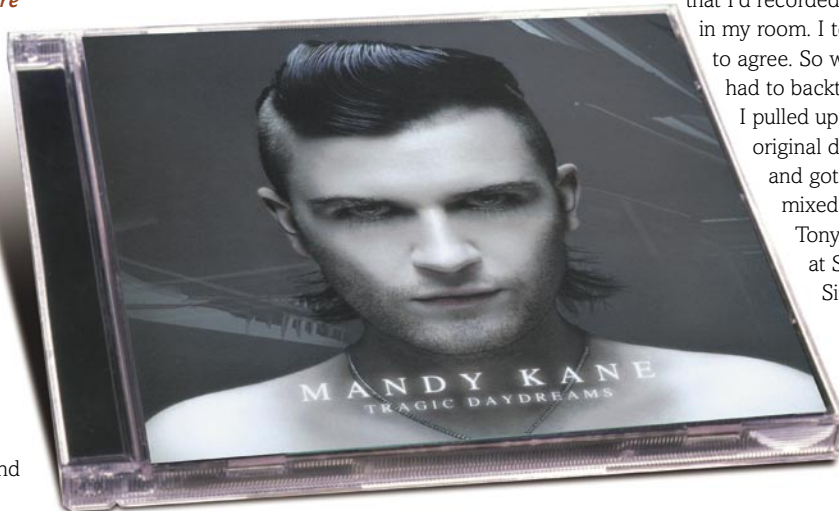
**CH:** *I should imagine! What was the vibe like in the studio? You've got session musos from hell there, and in pops this kid from Australia?!*

**MK:** I know. It was great. I think they really enjoyed it as well. Especially Joey and Justin. They thought it was great because they're big Bowie fans and Bowie has got to be my single biggest musical influence. So they got the whole thing and were really into it. We had a great time. Having that whole Beck crew in the studio... it was fantastic.

**CH:** *So after a few months of that you came home with a finished album?*

**MK:** After three month's hard work we ended up finishing the whole album, and brought it back to Australia. Then Dan Hennessey, who was doing A&R for Warner at the time, said that after a lot of listening he thought it had lost the spark

of the original demos that I'd recorded here in my room. I tended to agree. So we had to backtrack. I pulled up the original demos and got them mixed by Tony Espie at Sing Sing



Studios in Melbourne. Tony mixed The Avalanches and has turned out to be a great friend. He did a brilliant job. So we kept a lot of the original stuff for the album and then probably four or five tracks which has Chris's programming and/or Joe's work. One track in particular, *The Mannequin Ball* turned out really well and Joe had a big input in that. The story of the song describes an abandoned mannequin in a warehouse, and also I wanted Chris to create an atmosphere of a rickety old warehouse. Chris got a bunch of samples of cutting scissors and sound FX, and actually cut them into rhythmic loops. That's what's on that track.

**CH:** *Scrapping a lot of the LA production must have been a difficult thing?*

**MK:** It was a hard thing to do but I think it was for the best – the spirit of being able to have my own time and pace, doing it alone, was what gave the demo that special feeling.

**CH:** *How do you look back on that whole LA*

### adventure?

**MK:** I think it was a good experience. It was always one of my ambitions to go overseas and experience that process. Having the opportunity to work with people like Chris and Joe – who are just absolute pros in their fields – was great. The great thing about the Americans is the way they work together. Chris and Joe are two completely different people from way different worlds, and I was there somewhere in the middle. And you had this collection of personalities, but somehow everyone respects what each other does. You don't get that so much here in Australia. There's a real sense of a musical community in the US. You can move freely there, you can cross genres and no one bats an eyelid – it's accepted that that's what they do. And they're respected for what they do. And in Australia I think there's still a grey area as to what a producer does – many musos still aren't sure what a producer can bring to the project. While in the US they're held in very high regard.

I'd definitely like to return. It's such a productive place, creatively. And in terms of your career, it makes a lot of sense. If you have the opportunity to work in LA then it's not something you turn down.

### Kane (Studio) Furniture

**CH:** Tell me a little bit about what gear you've collected here.

**MK:** I started out with a little tape-based four-track recorder, which I used by just playing synth lines into it, singing and playing guitar. I then loaded a copy of

Logic onto a PC I had laying around which I used to sequence the synth and a Zoom drum machine I bought. That's when I started to get into sequencing and learning some tricks of the trade, and those few things were the backbone of the setup I used to produce the demo I shopped around.

**CH:** Tell me some more about the Zoom machine.

**MK:** It's a Zoom Rhythmlink 234. It has some nice live drum samples which you'll hear on the album. Many of the sounds are very roomy, while others are very raw – you can stack the sounds up and get good results. It's got some good electronic bit and bobs in there as well. Interestingly, some of the bass guitars sounds on *Tragic Daydreams* come from the Zoom. It's got 48 different bass patches, and I discovered that one of the patches is about as close to a live bass sound as you'll get.

**CH:** Then once you got your advance for the record deal, what were the main purchases?

**MK:** I bought a Digi 001 pretty quickly. I knew I needed something that would allow me to talk the same language as the guys I was about to meet in The States and the Digi 001/ProTools LE setup is a good one. It's brilliant to be able to do something here in my room and send it to, say, Chris Vrenna and he can add his bit and send it back.

I've been using Soft Samplecell at the moment for all the banks and banks of samples I use. Digidesign has given up on Samplecell but I'm thinking of getting an outboard sampler – I like the idea of having it all in a box, taking it out live etc.

## Mandy Kane Describes the 'Billy Bones' ProTools Session

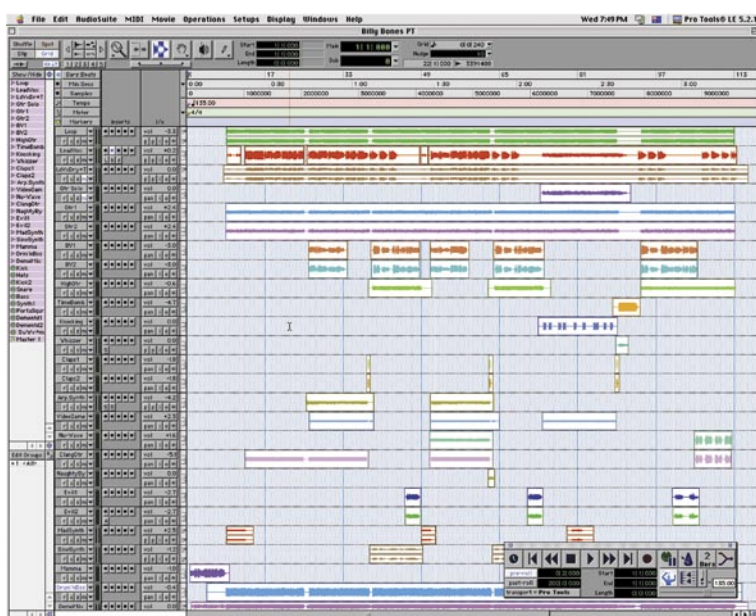
This song began with a concept. Billy Bones is a character I created, based upon my experiences recording at home. Only, Billy plays with explosives in his room, whereas I play with sounds. His Mamma is constantly knocking on the door, telling him to "Turn that crap off" – I know this feeling well.

First, I used FruityLoops to program a thumping, subby drum loop. I later added some other drum tracks to add more punch.

Then, I programmed the bass line, triggering a very trashy, 'live' sounding sample from my Rhythm-Trak drum machine.

Next came the fuzzed out guitars, panned hard left and right. I was running through an old Digitech RP6 Multi-Effects board at this stage. That got stolen at a show one night, unfortunately. I also layered a high guitar part in the chorus to boost the energy.

The 'Mad Synth' hook can be heard in the intros and re-intros, and was comprised of two discor-



Right in the middle of the track, there is an explosion sound effect made up of several different samples I found on the net. I cut up the ticking to match the tempo of the song.

Vocals and hand claps were recorded using my dodgy mic. The lead vocal is totally fuzzed out using Lo-Fi, and given width by using my short delay technique. It's a pleasant distortion, somehow.

The 'Mamma' parts were recorded with me screaming at 'Billy' to turn the music down, then using a pitch shifter to alter my voice. The door knocking effect was created by simply knocking on my desk, and adding compression.

Although it sounds like there's a lot going on, 'Billy

dant patches layered from my XP-10.

You can see there are several other synth tracks, which were taken from various sources. I wanted to create a kind of video game feel with lots of rhythmic blips and bleeps.

Bones' was one of the quickest songs to record. Tony tightened everything up during mixing, but it still has a raw quality to it. I think it tells the story quite effectively. Mandy Kane.

**CH:** *Soft synths?*

**MK:** I'm a fan of Native Instruments' Dynamo and Absynth. I like the sound of [IK Multimedia's] Amplitube on my electric guitar as well.

**CH:** *What about a microphone?*

**MK:** I recorded the demo with a cheap no-name mic which I bought for 100 bucks somewhere. It's got a very dull sound, but when you EQ it, it's got that dry quality about it that can be useful.

After signing to Warner I bought a Rode NTK. So I now use that to record my vocals, but I often still use the crap mic for vocal doubles or just as a second mic that I leave on somewhere else in the room when I'm belting out a vocal. Also, if I'm recording acoustic guitar I'll put the crap mic at the neck and put the Rode near the sound hole, then just pan them left and right. That way you've got one completely different tone in one speaker and the other in the other speaker – that's a nice little technique I learnt off Joe.

**CH:** *How did you perfect your vocal technique.*

**MK:** I never used to be able to sing at all, so it was a process of learning how to sing from scratch. What helped me a lot was to hear my performance back once I'd recorded it – I picked out all the errors in it and kept working on it. Performing live tends to improve your

## **Lessons to learn from Mandy Kane's Experience**

*You don't need expensive gear to get a record deal.*

*You do need great songs to get a record deal.*

*Your demo should exude an attitude, an obvious connection with the target audience.*

*Spend time to learn your gear.*

*Don't use presets – modify your sounds so they fit within the context of a mix.*

*Layer sounds – always a great way of achieving something different with limited resources.*

*Work on your vocals – listen back to your performances, perform live.*

*Use favourite CDs to hone your mixing – try and emulate the production of your favourite records.*

*Passion, talent and tenacity will win out in the end.*

vocals quickly as well, and I've been playing pubs since I was 16. I learned very quickly that you don't have to be a loud singer to be a good singer in a studio. Once you start using compression a softly sung vocal can still be very upfront and fit nicely in the track.

**CH:** *The gear you used for the demo was pretty basic and even now your setup is fairly typical of a lot of home studios, so do you have any advice to fellow home studio noodlers when it comes to producing something interesting?*

**MK:** Personally I try to never just take a preset and use it. I always try and tweak it a little bit. If you use a bunch of presets you're just going to get an unworkable jumble of sound. Even though each individual sound may be good in isolation it won't fit as a whole. I learnt that you need to make everything fit within the context of the track rather than just taking what people have already created. You've got to modify things to create an overall mood.

Mixing is the same. You might only have a tiny hint of something in the mix but if it's not there you lose the feel.

When it comes to vocals I always record lots of takes and comp it together. What suits my vocal the best is a short stereo delay. I'll put the delay time on one side a lot shorter than the other. You get this spread – almost like a chorus – which adds a lot more width.

**CH:** *What's this year going to hold for Mandy Kane?*

**MK:** It's going to be pretty busy. Currently I'm rehearsing for the next tour almost every night. Once the album is released I'd say we're looking at another tour on a bigger scale. Somewhere in between those tours I've got to get the next album well and truly under way and hopefully completed by early next year. I'm willing to spend the time on the next one.

**CH:** *So should Melbourne audio retailers be put on notice as far as major capital expenditure?*

**MK:** Definitely. I'll want a bunch of new synths – the Roland V-Synth looks appetising, for example – as well as another mic, a great preamp, a compressor...