

Home Grown

Gavin Hammond

Who'd of thought it? A seasoned studio engineer like Daniel Rejmer – converted to the joys of home recording by a gentle diet of red wine, daylight and home cooking. Aah, makes you all warm inside...

This issue's Home Grown is a family affair. It's about how that sense of family converted a dedicated young studio engineer, who always dreaded working in 'home studios', to the cause.

It's about how a legendary singer/songwriter was so enthralled by the family atmosphere in his band that he decided to let his next album be an entirely collaborative effort between its members.

And it's about recording backing vocals with a bunch of close (and merry) friends around a dinner table in the backyard under the great southern sky.

So who are we talking about and why?

Well, to quote the engineer concerned, Daniel Rejmer: "Paul is Dan's uncle. Peter and Dan are brothers. Bill has played in various projects with all of them for years. Peter played drums in the Black Sorrows. Dan played in the Black Eyed Susans. Dan has his own band as well. Bill played in Rebecca's Empire. And Paul... well... he's Paul Kelly!"

Yes, in a characteristically selfless fashion, the next album by Aussie icon Paul Kelly will not be a Paul Kelly album, but a Stardust Five album (the band's latest working moniker), that will be released through Paul's own label on EMI.

And his band: consisting of Paul Kelly – lead vocal, electric guitar and acoustic guitar; Peter Luscombe – drums, percussion and BVs; Bill McDonald – bass, double bass and synth; Dan Luscombe – electric guitar, slide and keyboards; and Dan Kelly – electric guitar, banjo and keyboards; all shared in its creation. Songs, arrangement, production – the lot.

But for the man who recorded the album, Daniel Rejmer, an engineer at Sing Sing in Melbourne, it was a dream session. He managed to lay down all the band tracks at Sing Sing in under four days, then complete the overdubs over a relaxed couple of weeks at Paul's home studio in his shed, then attend the mix sessions at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios in the UK with Tchad Blake on mixing duties (Sheryl Crow, Tom Waits, Mitchell Froom).

And best of all, along the way: "there's daylight, there's food,

there's healthy hours and... home-cooked meals!"

The Kelly Gang

Gavin Hammond: So, Dan, tell us how the project began...

Daniel Rejmer: The band was looking to do a record that wasn't a 'Paul Kelly' record as such. They wanted to take a fresh look at it and get everyone involved: songwriting, production and everything.

The idea was that they wanted to make a true *band* album.

It would involve the same line-up as the last record but they wanted to do something where the writing was shared between everyone. What this meant was that even up until about a week before the recording, everything was really open and up in the air. I went to a rehearsal just before the recording session started, and if the band hadn't been made up of those guys, I would have been scared. But I trusted them; after all, as individuals they've been

playing music for longer than I've been on this earth, and playing together for a long time, too.

GH: Yet the Sing Sing stint was really only a four-day session?

DR: Yep. Ninety percent of the record was tracked in four days. We even finished *early* on the last day, which shocked everybody! We really powered through it.

I recorded everything on a two-inch Otari 24-track on BASF 900 – which is that company's version of GP9, but a bit nicer in my view. GP9 can get a bit hard on the top end, I find. You can hit BASF 900 harder and it's a bit sweeter. I ran the machine at 30ips; no noise reduction.

The studio we recorded in is big enough to enable everyone to play in the same room but we decided to put the drums in a separate space anyway so Paul could do live takes of acoustic guitar and vocals without spill. I put Dan Luscombe's amp in a little iso booth and stuck Dan Kelly's amp in a baffled off corner of the room. Paul's amp was baffled off at the other end of the room. Bill, the bass player, had his amp in the machine room with a really heavy piano cover over the top of it to block out all the machine noise. Bass was recorded onto two different tracks,



Daniel Rejmer (right) at the Stardust Five/Tchad Blake mixing session at Real World.

with the DEX valve DI feeding one channel and a single Neumann U47 FET in front of the bass cabinet on the other. That way everyone could stand in the room without disrupting the acoustic guitar mic.

GH: What about drums?

DR: Because we didn't have a lot of time to try outrageous stuff out on the drums, I just went for standard 'vanilla' mics for a lot of the drum sounds rather than anything weird. I just threw up a couple of extra, crazy mics for good measure last minute.

I used a Neumann U47 FET on the kick in the middle of the skin on the outside, and the Beyer M88 on the inside. There's a length on your arm where they're in phase; a friend showed me that trick. On mine, the distance extends from my fingertips to somewhere near my elbow.

On the snare, I tried to vary the sounds a bit because Peter changed his snares over, song to song. If he was playing brushes I used a condenser for a bit more detail; if he was playing harder I used a Shure Beta 57. The two mics were taped together so I could change them over really quickly, allowing either mic to feed the same signal path. With only four recording days you don't want to mess around too much.

On toms I like to use condensers like a Neumann U89. There's something about toms recorded with a condenser that makes them sound more like they do in the room. When you're using a great kit – especially an old one – the toms tend to sound better that way. Otherwise it seems like a clash if you use Sennheiser MD421s or whatever – a bit too '80s for mine.

I had AKG C414s as overheads, although normally I try to use ribbons in an X/Y configuration; unfortunately I didn't have enough matching ribbons to do that on the day. To compensate, I also placed a single Neumann U67 above the centre of the kit as a mono overhead as well as a replacement if I needed it, for a retro kit sound.

I chucked another mic directly in front of the bass drum: a big old Neumann M49 which I sat on a piece of foam and went the hack with compression and EQ, facing it away from the kit, providing a big distorted room sound. Then I had a stereo room mic, and that's it.

GH: What was the setup for Paul Kelly?

GH: I had a Neumann U48 on his vocals and a Beyer condenser on his acoustic. With the vocals, Paul never sings too loudly, so it rarely spills onto the acoustic guitar mic. There were a couple of songs where there was some minor spill though, so to compensate I had a DI on his acoustic as well, allowing for a potential mix of mic and DI to reduce that problem.

GH: What was the recording process like; you must have had to move fast?

DR: I was always ready to hit record. There'd be times where my levels could have been better adjusted but I wouldn't let all that get in the way of them wanting to get on and play. There was no: 'oh, I just have to get this level or do this'. If you can keep all that to a minimum it makes for better playing.

If you can capture the first two or three takes, it's great, especially with a band like that, where they're into capturing a great performance together. If anyone starts to think about it too much, the immediacy can evaporate. That's how I



Real World's rear wall acoustic treatment is a sight to behold. Looks more like something out of St Paul's cathedral...

tracked 90 percent of a record in four days!

GH: How did you do the overdubs?

DR: Paul has a Digi 002 and Mac setup in his shed at home with a loom that runs into his lounge room. We did basic overdubs, extra guitar parts, redid all the vocals, and added horns on one song in there. We also redid the drum tracks on a track called *Lovers' Field*. We hadn't done any backing harmonies at the studio either, so all the backing vocals were done at Paul's as well, along with percussion and all the polishing off stuff.

We worked on and off at Paul's place for a couple of weeks when everyone was available. It was great: really relaxed – and Paul makes killer coffee, which helps! There was one memorable night when Paul had a bunch of people over for dinner after we'd been recording all day. While I was still working out in the shed, everyone was getting stuck into the wine and suddenly it was decided they'd do a group backing vocal. So I set up a mic and sent a line out to the stereo system for foldback and turned it down really low. We did a few passes of that and it sounds almost like a gospel backing vocal. It sounded fantastic!

GH: How did you go about mixing the project?

DR: Tchad Blake mixed it at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios. He's done all of Paul's previous records. I've been a huge fan of his work for a long time now. Coincidentally, I was already going to be over in the UK before the Real World sessions were booked, so I joined them there and it worked out brilliantly.

A hard drive was sent over and I had everything backed up onto an iPod as well, just in case. I think the whole album took up about 20GB, which isn't much at all for a full album – that's the benefit of being committed to your takes. They also sent DVDs over in a separate parcel, in case something happened, because they only had a narrow window to work in.

We had four days to mix the whole album. I knew Tchad had very limited time so tried to keep my files as organised and as well labelled as possible.

I laid everything out in the order that you would normally expect to have it come up on a console: drums, bass, main

guitars, backing guitars, keyboards, vocals and overdubs, etc. You don't want to hand someone a file that's not explicit about what each track contains. There's nothing worse than getting files labelled Audio 1, Audio 2, etc, so that you have to listen to one track at a time before you can even get started. If there are two guitar parts I try to label which one is the main part and so on.

GH: Can you describe working at Real World and Tchad's mixing technique?

DR: They have a 72-channel SSL G+ at Real World – although Peter Gabriel just bought SSL, so that console is about to be upgraded to a K Series. The whole control room is enormous and set up in this huge U shape. Not only does it sound amazing, but there's loads of daylight – no other studio I've worked in has so much daylight. It feels like a healthy place to work.

Tchad treated the ProTools sessions as if they were two-inch tapes. He listens to what the plug-ins are doing, but tries to keep that 'haven't thought about it too much' vibe, unless there was something wrong.

He's certainly got his own thing going on with his [Tech21] SansAmps. He really likes them on the bass drum. He mixes the SansAmp return and the bass drum together. We were joking during the mix sessions about Tech21 building a console just for him with a SansAmp in every channel.

He obviously doesn't like to conform to the norm. All the discussions we had were about how he loves the warts in music. He's putting all the imperfections back in where everyone else is taking them out. His sense of space and tonality is amazing and he manages to fit things together really well. He left it pretty dynamic.

He mixed all the tracks onto a Sadie system through Apogee converters, with safeties recorded simultaneously into ProTools, apart from one or two that were run onto ¼-inch BASF 900 tape for the mixes that needed a little distortion.

GH: So what were your overriding feelings about the sessions at the end of the project?

DR: This project was about capturing fantastic performances when the band was ready to record them. There's so much family in that band, I was aware that they knew better than I did when they were ready to record.

The proof is in the pudding really. I mean, Bjork, Bono and other big names record their vocals in the control room with the monitors on into a 58. It's not the height of sonic perfection, but that's how they get that performance. And if that's what it takes to get it, then that's what it takes. I'd much rather hear it done that way than capture a pristine vocal recording that's complete garbage.

I love recording in a studio but nearly every project I've worked on in the last five years has been started and finished in studios, with editing and overdubs done at home. I used to cringe about recording stuff at home, but now my opinion's really changed. There are so many benefits to it: there's daylight, there's food, there's healthy hours and... home cooked meals! 

For more information on Paul Kelly releases, go to:
www.paulkelly.com.au