

HOME GROWN

Forget the analogue versus digital argument – use both! ProTools for recording and then tape as a mixing tool... on a home PC. Confused? Don't be, Melbourne-based cinematic instrumental band Silver Ray can explain everything...

Text: Gavin Hammond



ProTools as your recording medium, but tape as a mixing tool? Yep, that's correct. How about hi-fi speakers as your main monitors, yet mixing by committee? Nuendo plug-ins as your EQs, but only using EMT plate and room reverbs for recording? Six-minute instrumentals all played live, but no need for a mixing console? A record deal in the UK with a cool underground label, but no conscious effort at promoting your gorgeous-sounding album? What is going on with Silver Ray? The band's guitarist and mix creator Cam Butler says: "well, it goes something like this..."

SILVER BULLET

Gavin Hammond: First up Cam, can you give us a brief history of the band.

Cam Butler: The current line-up of Silver Ray – Julitha Ryan on keyboards and piano, Brett Poliness on drums and myself on guitar – came together in mid 1999. We've released four albums since then: our first in 2001 and our latest in July this year. Our second and third albums were released in the UK via Broken Horse Records. I'm not sure if we fit into a 'scene' or not. Our version of instrumental music has no 'shoe-gazing' quality to it at all.

GH: So how and where was *Homes For Everyone* recorded?

CB: *Homes For Everyone* was recorded to ProTools HD at Soundpark Studios in Melbourne and engineered by Idge, the studio owner. The files were then (labouriously) transferred onto some secondhand reels of two-inch Quantegy GP9 via the studio's in-house machine; an early '70s two-inch 16-track Optro 1000 (made in Melbourne) running at 15ips. No digital reverbs were used – the sounds were sent to a fabulous EMT 140 plate reverb. It was mixed at home on a modest PC running Nuendo at 24-bit/48k through 12-year-old generic hi-fi speakers.

GH: So what was the process once you got everything home?

CB: The mixing was a pretty complicated process from start to finish. There was lots of automation, riding EQs in and out, etc. For instance, on the

song *Not Far To Go* I filtered the chorus sections with a low-pass filter at about 8k and edited these parts into the rest of the song so there's a tonal change whenever the chorus occurs – a simple idea but it seemed to work. I also played a noise guitar track when we recorded this track, which I later chopped up into various parts and used pieces as backing loops, by filtering them, reversing them, etc.

But not having to look at the clock (and using tape and natural reverbs) was the most important factor in getting a sound that I was happy with.

GH: Can you expand on the analogue side of the recording process for us?

CB: I've been recording at Soundpark Studios for about two years now. It has a wonderful feel and Idge has collected a fantastic range of old gear. We moved Julitha's upright piano into the studio so all the piano sounds on the album could be recorded acoustically (a first for a Silver Ray record). The drums were recorded in the main room using lots of room mics, particularly Coles and RCA ribbons, Neumanns and AKGs.

I really like using ribbon mics, I find the top end much more pleasing to the ear. The sound is warmer. Idge also has a great collection of preamps from API, Neve, Universal Audio, even an old Ampex 351 tape machine from 1962 that he uses as a preamp. The room has a particular sound, too.

GH: So let's get into details: how do you get your atmospheric guitar sounds?

CB: I seem to have two areas that I work on with my guitar playing – the straight-out-of-the-amp playing side and also a computer-treated loopy side.

I used my Les Paul though my Fender Blues Deluxe amp miked up with a Sennheiser 421 and a Royer ribbon. There's a Neumann U47FET room mic in there, too. The guitar mics ran through a pair of Neve 1272 rack modules, with a bit of very light compression from a UA1176.

I don't like doing guitar overdubs, I like just the one guitar in there; it's more powerful with just

one person doing their thing.

I also used acoustic guitar on about half of the record – my Maton 12-string... well, 11-string (there's no bottom E octave string). It's mixed underneath to give a more propulsive effect, which helps out with the grooves.

But as I said, I also like looping up amp noise, scratches, chord fades and so on, which I use as background atmosphere, and for intros, etc. I often do some kind of radical filtering on this stuff, turning a 'tap' on the guitar into some sort of other-worldly percussive effect, for instance.

GH: And the piano sound?

CB: Julitha used her upright Howard piano, which was miked in stereo using two AKG C414s. These ran through a pair of Neve 33415 pres. No compression to tape, but I compressed the piano in the mix.

Julitha is very skilled at arranging her parts, so she was able to take the opportunity to record quite a few piano layers (particularly on tracks such as *Prove It*, *Don Quixote*). She also utilised some of Ige's effects, such as his Roland Space Echo and Korg MS2000. On *Not Far To Go* he ran the acoustic piano through one of his custom valve preamps to the MS2000 and then to tape to emulate the sound of an old Korg MS20 analogue synth. Most of the other more 'iconic' sounds are from Julitha's great old Korg Polysix.

The piano needed to be EQ'd a bit to sit it in the mix with all the other sounds going on – rolling out the lower mids around 180Hz or 200Hz and adding quite a bit (maybe 5dB to 8dB) of presence at 4kHz, too. The aim was to have the warmth and woodiness of a real piano as one of the main features of the record.

GH: How about your drum sounds?

CB: Brett always tunes his drums very carefully, which is half the battle. We set aside 10 tracks for them – a fairly standard setup: an EV RE20 on the kick, Shure SM57 on the snare top, Sennheiser MD421 on the floor tom as well as some more colourful things such as Coles ribbons as overheads and an RCA 44BX copy (made by Steanes here in Melbourne) placed about a metre in front of the kick and a metre above the floor. This mic captured most of the drums by itself and was run through a Universal Audio LA-2A compressor. Ige used API lunchbox modules

on the kick, snare, floor tom, his Avalon preamp on the rooms and the preamps from the Ampex 1/2-inch machine (Ampex 351) on the other drums mics. The kick and snare were lightly compressed to tape through a pair of [ELI] Distressors.

We definitely wanted to get a room sound for the drums – with lots of atmosphere around them. Brett has a freewheeling, open, almost jazzy style of playing, so it is very important to let the sound of his kit breathe.

GH: What did you use to overdub?

CB: All the overdubs were done in the studio after the main tracks were laid down using the same preamps and mics – APIs, Royers, etc. We added acoustic guitar on about half the songs, as well as synths, Hammond organ, cello and Julitha's clarinet, plus various percussion instruments. There's also a string trio on *The Streets Of Melbourne*. I wrote a chart for them and got three great players that we know (two violins and a viola) to come in and record it. Ige miked them in stereo with a pair of Royer ribbons running through two API lunchbox modules. Transferred to tape and put through the EMT plate, they came out really well – I hardly had to EQ them at all.

MIXING AT HOME

GH: So let's talk about mixing. How did you go about it?

CB: I'm not an audiophile; so pristine-sounding things often don't do it for me. Of course, it does depend on the music but I like things that have a mood and darkness about them, a sense of mystery – records that have a definite 'sound'. This can be a room sound, tape compression or any other strange elements (apart from the music and performances, of course) that make up a great record. I was listening to Miles Davis' *Sketches Of Spain* a little while ago – records don't get much better sounding than those '50s and '60s Columbia/Verve recordings. Subconsciously, I like to bring these sorts of elements into whatever I'm working on. This accounts for our use of plate reverbs, using tape and room sounds, ribbon mics, not much compression, etc. I often like to roll off a little high end in places too – at around 10k. Probably not the most successful sound for modern radio but... anyway!

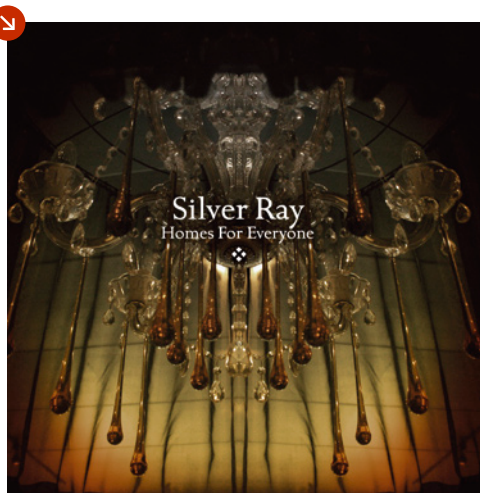
GH: What are your impressions about the pros/



cons of digital and analogue as a result of doing this album?

CB: Digital is obviously fantastic for recording lots of takes as well as for the editing side of things. Automated mixing is also great: I don't think I could go back to doing mixes on the fly again. But for me, putting stuff onto tape is essential – it gives the files life and dynamics, and it just sounds warmer and more organic. I've recently been working on some stuff that hadn't been transferred to tape and it wasn't quite working for me. As soon as I had it back after being dumped onto tape it all made sense. As if from nowhere, the songs had power and life; working on them became a pleasure.

For more information, go to:
www.myspace.com/silveraymusic or
www.myspace.com/cambutlermusic



Name: Cam Butler from the band Silver Ray

Location: Melbourne, Australia

Sounds like: Emotional, passionate, modern rock music with an almost classical aesthetic. They really don't sound like any other artists, but lazy journalists often name-check them with the Dirty Three. Which is a bit strange, as they don't even have a violin in the band. Maybe it's because there are three of them...

Claim to fame: 12-minute instrumental songs

regularly played on public radio in Melbourne (thanks to 3RRR and 3PBS). Toured UK and Greece with Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds in 2004. Released three independently produced albums, and have just released their fourth album (in Australia), called *Homes For Everyone*. Their past three albums have been released on Broken Horse Records, a small label based in Manchester, England.

Secret weapons: Pro Tools and an early '70s two-inch 16-track Optro 1000 made

in Melbourne, running at 15ips with GP9. No digital reverbs, just an EMT 140 plate reverb. It was mixed at home on a PC running Nuendo at 24-bit/48kHz, all through 12-year-old generic hi-fi speakers.

What have we learned?

There is no 'analogue versus digital' argument: they are both great at different jobs. However, the sound of tape really does make this type of musical genre 'glue' together.