

HOME GROWN

Not all pop production is done in the box. In the case of this dynamic duo from Melbourne, lots of boxes are preferable.

Text: Brad Watts



PLW boss, Paul Wiltshire, set up his studio after successful production stints in The United States.

▶ In a back street of South Melbourne, amongst car repairers and the South Melbourne market, I'm wondering if my GPS unit has sent me on a wild goose-chase. I'm looking for the offices of PLW; an acclaimed 'pop factory' with a string of Australian (and international) hits behind it. But all I can find are smash repairers and fruit and veg. I've received a tip-off that PLW has just installed an SSL AWS900 console – a desk I would love to own myself – such are the trappings of platinum-selling single production teams. I find the address in plenty of time and step into the 'factory'.

PLW is the baby of Paul Wiltshire, a man with production and writing credits for the likes of Vanessa Amorosi, Delta Goodrem, Marcia Hines and the Backstreet Boys. He's worked alongside the uber-successful Matrix production team – responsible for tracks and albums from U.S. acts such as Avril Lavigne, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Korn.

Like many, Paul initially set up PLW in his lounge room. Nowadays, unlike most, after stints in Los Angeles working with some of the world's best, there are a number of framed/gold records on the walls of PLW's converted inner city factory. Along the way Paul hooked up with his future wife, Victoria Wu. The pair has since gone on to produce and write hits for Human Nature, Marcia Hines, Anthony Callea, Shannon Noll, Guy Sebastian and many others.

STRADDLING THE PACIFIC

Brad Watts: In a short 10 years Paul, you've certainly made an indelible mark on the Australian charts. What brought you back to Australia rather than persisting with the American market?

Paul Wiltshire: Victoria and I actually spent quite a long time in Los Angeles. We had studios set up there and were certainly attempting to expand into L.A. We used to travel back and forth; two months in L.A. and two months in Australia, maintaining our production work here while starting up new jobs over there. We eventually managed to get tracks placed with the Backstreet Boys, and this led to a much greater understanding of pop production on a worldwide scale. It was all really great until we started to have babies [laughs]. Our experience eventually led us to putting together this place a couple of years ago, which combines four studios – they're nicely decked out, with the main room now including the SSL AWS900.

BW: And how is the SSL coming along?

PW: It's fantastic! The automation makes things really simple. I really love working with it.

BW: That's obviously the most recent addition, so what else drives the ship? I notice you're Logic people here as well.

PW: Well, most of the rooms are ProTools but I'm definitely a Logic man. Victoria is a Logic user as well. We run that with the ProTools hardware so we've got 24 ins and outs from Tools going straight into the SSL. It's a simple patching system – the outboard is just inserted when required. The only thing that's done differently is I always keep a Distressor and the Avalon preamps set aside for vocals. They're the most crucial part of any pop production and I always have these units strapped across them.

Our second room has a 1987 Amek console. As I said, we set this up a couple of years ago because

we were so reliant on studio services from the major record labels. In 2006 I think we did 130 different tracks. The same year we had our second kid, so it was hard work as a two-person show. Victoria was actually editing vocals about 48 hours after giving birth – it was the only way we could get everything done!

The business kicked off in about '97 when I got some cuts on Vanessa Amorosi's record, which ended up expanding into other things. It was one of those situations where I worked for Mark (Holden) and Vanessa for about a year and a half on spec. I just had to keep persisting until I finally ended up with four tracks on her album, which led to publishing deals and opened up doors elsewhere.

We're quite focussed on pop music, simply because it's what we're into nowadays, but Victoria and I both come from a rock background – we just got stuck in pop music land. That's not to say don't branch into other genres; our stable of acts is actually quite diverse.

BW: So what came first, the writing partnership or the marriage and kids?

PW: Victoria was in a band called Culture Shock years ago. We started dating in 2000 but didn't really start working together on projects until 2003.

Victoria Wu: Yeah, I was writing as an artist primarily and met Paul when I was looking for production assistance. That project kind of fell in a heap and we ended up...

PW: Pashing!

VW: Well, not on the first date but yeah, we did end up pashing. After that though, Paul asked me to write songs for a couple of groups and those songs got placed. We actually got quite a few placed that year.

PW: Yeah, we did have a lucky run that first year. Sony/BMG picked up the first songs we wrote together for an act called Mercury 4 – who didn't go anywhere. But the next song we wrote was used for Rob Mills which did get airplay, then Shannon Noll and a few others. At the time I was still going back and forth to America trying to get a studio and career happening there. It was endless travelling, but then we wrote a song that we pitched for Guy Sebastian. Unfortunately Guy didn't go for it but my management then placed it with the Backstreet Boys. It was like beginner's luck even though we worked hard to get it accepted – three long months of chopping and changing the one track. Once we got the cut we figured the rest would be easy. But what followed was a period of writing song after song after song, pitching them at the highest level to the likes of Britney and Hillary Duff. But of course there are ten thousand other producers in the same town going for those same acts. Following that we were struggling to get another cut; it was really tough.

At the same time the industry was shrinking, so we decided to come back to Australia and set this up – essentially a self-sufficient production

house. We're now developing a number of Australian acts and in the process of changing from being a service to the rest of the industry, into a self-sufficient entity that creates and markets its own products. We've still got that core business of 'studios for hire', the problem is the public seems to think it's out of their reach and too expensive. But putting together tracks isn't an expensive proposition these days. We still make records for the major labels as well, but that industry has just shrunk so much.

MP3-FALL

BW: What's your slant on the decline of record sales?

PW: I think it's a combination of factors. The figures tend to suggest people are moving away from albums and focusing on singles. Obviously the mp3 file is largely responsible. We're really in the midst of a huge change and we're not really going to see the outcome for a few years. Nobody really knows what will develop.

VW: This is why we've really stepped this facility up a few gears. Because of the changing market, we've shifted the focus to our own artists.

PW: Yeah, we have a number of avenues

“
If you don't strive for perfection in pop music – with the drums as accurate as possible – it instantly starts to sound a bit 'indie'.
”

Paul likes his compressors and keeps a few lying about the place. The mighty Yamaha NS10 monitors (below) are only there because Paul "can't stand anyone enjoying what they're listening to!"



“ I remember a mix I was working on in L.A. on an 80-channel K-series SSL, and I think it took me about 16 hours to fuck the mix completely! ”



happening at once. We're in close contact with the touring companies, we have our own monthly club night called PLW Live. That's been running for about 12 months in Melbourne and we're just about to kick it off in Sydney. It's a great showcase for our artists – they can road test their performances in front of decent-sized crowds. It's a great opportunity, especially for pop acts who don't really get many chances to perform. There are plenty of venues for bands to get their feet wet, but pop artists are often left out in the cold. In Sydney it's at the Vanguard, which is uncharted territory for us. With most of our acts based in Melbourne, they tend to bring a crowd with them, so it'll be interesting to see how Sydney pans out.

PRODUCTION TIPS

BW: So what's the secret behind your methodology?

PW: Production-wise we have a definite process in the way we do things. A good example would be the Human Nature Motown album. We'd track all the musicians in L.A., which only happens when the budget allows, but I've got a great team of players in L.A.: Paul Bushnell on bass, the very authentic Jim Cox on keyboards and Brian McLeod on drums. With an album like that we'd go in and track bass and drums at once and get an album done in a day – which is a lot easier on a covers album, admittedly. Then we're always gridding drums and adding samples. Six or seven kick drums, half a dozen snare drums all mixed together.

BW: So with pop production you always bring everything inline with the grid?

PW: Oh yeah. Pretty much. My mentality is: grid the drums and percussion till they're perfect, and allow the movement around the bass and guitar. Even bass has to be pretty tightly in the pocket, but guitars, keyboards and vocals are the movement and the texture. If you don't strive for perfection in pop music – with the drums as accurate as possible – it instantly starts to sound a bit 'indie', which is appropriate for some things, but not what you'd expect to hear from say the Veronicas or something along those lines. So we'd have Ash, one of our in-house guys, do all the gridding and any drum

replacement work, Victoria does all the vocal editing and I'll take care of production. I try and keep as far away as possible from editing if I can and just concentrate on the big picture – tracking and mixing primarily. I just hate editing nowadays.

VW: That's the only reason he married me – so he'd have someone to edit vocals!

PW: Well these days I just don't have the headspace, and you've really got to be in the zone when you're editing. But still Victoria will give me say three choices of vocal take, out of perhaps 15 options. So there'll be room in there for finer edits amongst what's presented. Victoria's awesome with Melodyne and those types of plug-ins.

BW: Is Melodyne what you're finding the better option for pitch editing?

VW: It took me a while. I wasn't a friend of Melodyne at first – everyone was telling me to give it a go. So I did and now I absolutely love it. It's just fantastic because you can see where the pitch of a note is set before you actually start changing it. It's just fantastic... but I still have a soft spot for AutoTune.

KEEPING TRACK

BW: So getting back to the console, you're finding the SSL has enough channels for what you're doing?

PW: Oh yeah. I used to mix on the SSL K-series at Sing Sing, which is a lovely board, but it can become overwhelming. I remember a mix I was working on in L.A. on an 80-channel K-series SSL, and I think it took me about 16 hours to fuck the mix completely! It just does my head in. I find this console is really easy because we're sub-grouping all the time, we'll bring all the drums down into five channels. But if I'm not happy with a mix I'll just bring the 24 faders down and start again, and it only takes me a few minutes to get back to a new sound I can work from.

BW: I see you've got three Distressors in the rack. Most engineers are happy with a pair – why the abundance of EL8s?

PW: Actually in my home studio I've got four,

but the reason for three is that I'm a big fan of it on bass, and a big fan of it on vocals. The reason I've got four at home is I like to keep three available for vocals. I'll generally run BVs through an 1178 but for the main vocal lines I always have a Distressor available, especially now that we're developing an act comprised of three lead vocals. Having said that the 1176s are just awesome. We've got eight channels of 1176s there, 10 if you include the 1178.

BW: So compression's one of your primary weapons?

PW: We do go pretty hard on compression. My theory is not to be afraid of compression on individual tracks, but be afraid of it on the overall picture because it compounds. You can really manage a mix well if the individual parts are controlled, then you can edit in your dynamics.

BW: So you'll go back in and automate any dynamics changes?

PW: Absolutely. One of the principal reasons for running this desk is for the automation. Almost every channel will be moving by the time I've finished a mix. Little jumps on the kick and overheads when you're coming into a chorus. I'll still edit fades with the mouse occasionally.

BW: With the main vocal being the 'money channel', what's your primary vocal chain?

PW: I usually feed it through the Avalon preamps, generally with a Neumann U87 – depending on the singer – then through a Distressor on the way in. During mixdown I'll have a Waves C1 sidechain compressor for de-essing, I may compress it again through a Distressor, then just the EQ on the AWS900.

BW: I also notice there are Yamaha NS10s in all the rooms. Is that your choice?

PW: Yes, I'm responsible for that executive decision – based on the fact that I just can't stand anyone enjoying what they're listening to!

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WHAT'S ON

Text: Brad Watts

Sydney Opera House recently recorded The Necks live in the Studio Venue over four nights. Sessions were recorded at 96k to ProTools and Genex recorders, through the Euphonix System 5 console, with Neumann, Sennheiser, DPA and RCA mics: recorded by Tony David Cray and Jason Blackwell. They've also recording and mixing (along with Tod Deeley) the latest album for the Sydney Symphony Live series: Maestro Gelmetti conducting Ravel. Tony David Cray mixed and Nathan Waks produced.

Rancom Street Studios recently upgraded their aging OS9 ProTools TDM system to a new HD rig on a Mac Pro eight-core. In-house engineer Ted Howard is singing the praises of a new mastering application, Sonic Studio's SoundBlade. Recently finished Leo Sayer's latest album, *Don't Wait Until Tomorrow*. Ted used mostly ribbon and vintage tube mics to keep the sound smooth and warm. Leo sang beautifully and the AutoTune didn't get a look in! He's also tracking an EP for singer/songwriter, Cassandra Smiles: Garth Porter producing. All vocals were live without a single punch-in or edit. Lindsay and Jessie Fraser behind the cameras for YouTube release. Tracking for Talia Wittmann with Graham Thompson producing.

Aisle 6 Recording's Scott Mullane has been producing and engineering an album for Phil Smith for completion mid June. He's also working on a new Alt/Rock/Pop album for Grand Atlantic for completion late September, a new rock EP for Ripple Effect and a debut Alt/Rock/Dance album for The Slow Push (ex. Teapot Dome Scandal).

Brendon Gallagher has been beaver away down at **Gigpiglet Head Quarters**. Brendon has moved his ProTools rig and TAC/Amek console into his basement in Bondi for use as an edit/mix suite. Gareth Stuckey who owns the Redfern space has installed a DDA 32 input console, HD ProTools system and Meyer HD1 monitors. They've combined their outboard gear into one rack – Quad-Eights, UA6176s, LA-2, Distressors, Peach preamps and some TC stuff. Gareth is currently mixing Pinky Beccroft's (ex Machine Gun Fellatio) next album. Brendon has just finished tracking his second solo album, recorded and mixed onto his Studer B67 1/4-inch tape machine. Currently re-mixing some stuff for a Karma County 'Best Of' and doing pre-production work with Lucinda Peters.

At **Matt Grey Mastering** Matt's gone berzerk on the gear front with a pair of Duntech Marquis

C4000s, completely re-built and set up by Kiat Low at Duntech. Driving them is a Pass Labs X250 power amp and a pair Velodyne DD12 subs. The monitoring path is a Dangerous Music 'Monitor' section incorporating the newer DAC, designed by Chris Muth. Since the death of Quantegy, Matt has substituted his beloved GP9 for the new ATR Magnetics formula to lace onto his ATR-102 half inch. He says the emulsion provides the operating levels of GP9 with a sound closer to 456. Long live tape!

Damien Gerards' Marshal Cullen has been on tour, managing and doing FOH for Hoodoo Gurus on Hamilton Island, then off to Glastonbury festival. Lucky bastard! All manner of toys have been used at the shows, most notably a Midas Heritage, Digidesign Profile, a great old Crest analogue board and the little baby Yamaha M7 for monitor engineer Davros and Matt Debien.

Paul Scott of Bad Machines fame and his production team have been creating a tune for Dolly magazine's *Write a Song* competition – won by Sarah and Shelly Chehade from Melbourne. Producer Jordan Ellery is continuing his orchestrated solo album and there's a *Two Worlds* live broadcast into Second Life featuring Dexter Moore. Nic Dalton from The Lemonheads is working up tunes for a new project along with recordings for The Passengers and The Bile Abductors.

William Bowden's mastering suite is as busy as ever with recent clients including The Herd, Snowman, Paul Greene, The Pictures, The Hands, Rapaport, Daisy Cutters and Rick Price.

Paul Mac has just finished mixing his first feature film score – a movie called *Beautiful* – using his favoured lineup of a Jupiter 6, Juno 60, Moog Voyager, Roland Space Echo and his grandma's piano. He recorded a 20-piece string section with piano at **Studios 301**, then mixed in his **Panic Room Studio**, using Logic Pro 8 and his Neve 8816.

Gasinc have taken delivery of a Fairlight Xynergi and are using a host of unconventional instruments and recording devices. Currently on air is their Arnotts commercial, recorded using '60s vintage AKG mics.

Bob Scott is back from Gallipoli after working as audio supervisor for the Anzac Day ceremonies. Bob's currently recording, editing and mixing the Australian Chamber Orchestra for Australia's first Blue-Ray release, along with recordings for the Song Company at **Trackdown**

Scoring Stage. Bob proffers that the Sennheiser MKH 8020 is "just bloody amazing," and that iZotope RX is, "a bloody lifesaver!"

Tim Powles from **Space Junk** is staying up even later than usual with his Toft ATB16 and Blackstar HT-Dual overdrive pedal.

Reddirt Recordings' Ross Muir has just finished arrangement, production, recording and mixing of a Steve Smith poem converted to song about the Finke Desert Race. The three track CD *Red Hot Barking Steel* will include the poem, song and instrumental.

He's also mixing 14 tracks for as yet untitled release by Scotty Balfour from Tennant Creek. Ross's day gig is teaching a music industry course at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre. Apparently the detainees have produced 350 original tunes on the ultra reliable Roland VS1680. Ross affirms the VS1680 only locked up three times during the last seven and a half years that he's been lugging it to and fro' the big house.

Jim Blackfoot has moved, rebuilt and renamed his studio from Audioscapes to **Blackfoot Sound**, and purchased a lot of new and old gear. The first session was a project involving Nathan Shepard on Rhodes, Richie Vez on bass and Jared Kneale on drums. Marty Hailey was knob-jockey and everything sounded great. Next was a post sync recording for a short film, then Louise Wheatley brought in Pedro Domingo for guitar and drum tracking. Jim exudes; "I had the pleasure of being in the company of some incredible people with fantastic talent & gear. Martin Rotsey, Lee Maloney on drums, Tim Gaze on guitar and DC gripping the faders. The amplifier and guitar assortment alone was worth more than my whole studio setup. The songs were strong and the temp mixes sounded polished. I'd love to have this bunch back any time they want. Now I'd like a little break so I can finish off about 100 little jobs to complete the studio. Will it ever be finished?"

Mick Wordley takes his RADAR traveling circus on the road again, recording an album for Jordie Lane. Mixing commences in July at Jonathan Burnside's **Eastern Bloc Studios**. Mick piles his RADAR Nyquist 24-track recorder into the back of a Magna station wagon, along with eight Neve 1064s, two 1066s, eight Syteks, an LA-2A, UA1176s, Avalon and UA preamps and a stack of choice ribbon and condenser microphones. All recording is at 96K. ■

Got any news about the happenings in your studio or venue? Email Brad: brad@alchemedia.com.au

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