



Capturing the Basement Birds

By **STEPHEN BRUEL**

Awash with luscious four-part harmonies, well-structured catchy melodies, alternate time signatures and acoustic instruments, we look at recording the Basement Birds, although I can't help thinking Basement Byrds may not be a bad name either – now where is that 12 string Rickenbacker?

The Basement Birds is a music project that involved Kav Temperley (Eskimo Joe), Kevin Mitchell (Bob Evans, Jebediah), Steve Parkin and Josh Pyke coming together to write and record material based upon a mutual love of the American 1960s folk sound of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young – and alcohol. The album is available via download on iTunes or in stores nationally.

RECORDING AT KAV'S PLACE

Audio engineer Andy Lawson, whose previous credits include Eskimo Joe and Little Birdy, was brought in to record and mix the project at Temperley's home studio in Freemantle.

"I guess Kav's studio was the best choice as most of us live in Perth, there are no costs, it's comfortable and we can

use it anytime we want," said Lawson. "The studio itself is basic. There is no control room (boo) so there was lots of recording with headphones on. Although being in the same room can be a challenge, I think this situation ultimately added to the intimate feel of the Basement Birds record."

According to Temperley the studio has seen some improvements over the years, but at a cost of comfort.

"The biggest technological advance that's happened in the last few years is there is now floor boards and curtains and not carpets on the floor and mattresses on the walls," said Temperley. "Though I do miss having somewhere to sleep when the moment takes me."

However, to improve the acoustics of the room, Lawson made use of those disused mattresses and anything else he could find.

"There is definitely some weird midrange frequencies bouncing around in the room so we put some foam up on the roof, we had baffles to move around, and we made a vocal booth out of a few mattresses," said Lawson.

Although basic in nature, the equipment used on the recording, a combination of gear owned by Temperley, Pyke and Lawson, was quite impressive.

FEEL THE FORCE

"We ran a Digidesign HD3 system with 192 converters, two Vintech 473 microphone pre-amplifiers (amazing pre amps, they are a Neve copy, maybe not as thick as a 1073 but damn close) and two Quad Eight channel strips that Josh informed me came from the desk used to mix the Star Wars film on," said Lawson.

For compression Lawson used a UA 1176, Distressor and a UBK Fatso and his plug-ins of choice included the Waves CLA classic compressor bundle, Waves V-Series EQ's, Crane Song Phoenix analogue tape modeller and the EMI TG Limiter representative of the vintage Abbey Road Studio hardware.

"For microphones we used two Neumann U67s, two AKG 414s, a Neumann M149 tube, Neumann TLM 49, two Reslo ribbons (modified by Glen Phimister in Sydney), Royer 121 ribbon, Beta 52, 57s and 421s, Rode NT5s and a Rode K2," said Lawson.

THE DRUMS

Lawson's standard microphone set up consisted of U67s as overheads placed fairly high and over each tom pointing slightly towards the snare, a Beta 52 in the kick, 57s on both the snare up and down and 414s on the toms. Lawson also

placed a few room microphones up as well in random positions including just in front of the kick at the back of the room facing away from the drums, in the piano with the lid just open, and also some on the floor.

However, for the song *Skin of the Sky*, the set up was anything but standard.

"Mal (Malcolm Clarke) the drummer and I came up with the idea of putting rack toms on top of the floor toms to create a unique sound for the main beat of the song," said Lawson. "We decided we were going to keep the snare out of the song until the outro, so that influenced my microphone set up a lot.

"I had a 67 on top of each set of toms, 414s on the bottom heads, a 52 on the kick, a 57 on the snare top and the M149 as a mono overhead. I felt like a crazy man putting the 67s on the toms but I really wanted the toms to be the soul of the drums. The two 67s went to the UBK Fatso in splat mode 'Drum Heaven' and the overhead went to the Distressor with both signals not pushing more than 4dB of reduction. *Skin Of The Sky* is Steve's (Parkin) baby. His songs always have this cool indie thing going on, so that created the vibe."

Another variation from the standard set up was used for the song *Hardest Part*.

"We were after an old school sound for this song so I just ended up using two microphones in total on the drums for this track," said Lawson. "I placed a Royer 121 ribbon above the hit over the snare and a Reslo ribbon in front of the kick."

THE MANLAR AND BANJITAR

Although the band tried to be authentic

in terms of recreating the sounds intrinsic to the 1960s American folk genre, a few tricks were used along the way. Kevin Mitchell admits to playing "a little mandolin guitar which sounds like a mandolin and has the body of a mandolin but the neck and tuning of a guitar". He also played what he calls a "cheater's banjo".

Lawson recorded the acoustic instruments on either a 414 or a U67.



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Lawson at work

"I preferred the 414 in that room as it got the best sound," said Lawson. "It would be as simple as standing in front of the instrument with a set of headphones and sweeping the instrument until I found the sweet spot, then sending that to the Distressor on its acoustic setting."

"It's amazing. When recording the banjitar I always put a microphone behind it to capture all of the resonance from the skin that came out of the back. It gave a very cool depth to the instrument."

ELECTRIC FOLK

As a predominantly acoustic project, electric instruments were kept to a minimum.

"There are maybe only two or three electric guitars used on the whole record and they were always recorded through a Bad Cat guitar amplifier with a Roland Space Echo pedal," said Lawson. "I would use a 57 up close and either a U67 or the Royer ribbon microphone about 30cms back from the speaker, depending on

which one sat in the track better."

For bass guitar, Temperley had a 1967 Hofner bass guitar (Beatle Bass), his new hollow body Warwick model (similar to a Gibson 335) and a double bass as his disposal.

"Both the Hofner and Warwick had round wound strings and went straight into Kav's Aguilar bass amplifier," said Lawson. "We took a straight DI out of the head and then had a 421 on the bass amp speaker."

"For the double bass I took a straight DI and placed a U67 in front of the 'f' hole. Pretty damn cool instrument. All of the DI sources went into my 1176 compressor (I love that thing on bass) and the bass amp signal went into the Distressor in Opto mode for added warmth."

THOSE SWEET FOUR-PART HARMONIES

Lawson said recording the vocals was the easiest part of the process.

"The 67s to me sound amazing on vocals as they're very thick in the midrange which is perfect for acoustic music," said Lawson. "The boys really could sing so it was fairly easy."

THE LAST WALTZ

Lawson said it was the most fun project he has ever worked on as the band were relaxed and always having a laugh, the talent of the musicians was of a high standard, and the 1960s folk genre allowed him the opportunity to tinker and experiment with different recording techniques.

"I wanted to make a really honest record and I think that's what we've done," said Lawson. "I also really wanted to experiment a lot more than I usually do - try different mics on the guitars, stack drums on top of each other, send pianos to a Leslie speaker, that kinda thing. I have been doing a lot of rock recently and sometimes there is not much room for tinkering." CX



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