

KELLY'S CATALOGUE

You'd need to have been in a pretty deep hole not to notice Paul Kelly's contribution to Australian music. After thirty-odd years of songwriting, he's started on an ambitious new project.



By **STEPHEN BRUEL**

Paul Kelly is a legendary Australian singer/songwriter, having captured the essence of the nation's cultural landscape over the past 30 years with hits including *Before Too Long*, *To Her Door* and *Dumb Things*. With such a vast body of work, the upcoming Kelly A-Z project to make his catalogue free for download from his website, required a complete remastering of 100 or more songs. Sydney-based Damien Gerard studio's The Red Stairs mastering suite is currently undertaking this long-term project with Andrew Beck at the helm, and are currently up to the letter 'T'.

"Andrew has been doing a great job on this long term mastering project," said Kelly. "Every month I send him a batch of live recordings from different sources to master for download from my website. I plan to release most of them on CD to accompany a book I'm writing which will be published late in 2010."

BACKGROUND TO BECK

Born and raised in USA, Beck's previous recording and mastering highlights include working at Bad Animals Studio in Seattle. As an intern, Beck met and worked with bands that were recording there at the time including Soundgarden, Screaming Trees, Mad Season and Pearl Jam. Moving to LA, Beck worked with artists Mother Tongue, Rilo Kiley, Quincy Coleman and Alien Breed, and companies MCA Music Publishing and Trauma Records. A chance meeting with Damien Gerard managing director Marshall Cullen brought Beck to Sydney in 1999 where he has since worked on projects featuring Grinspoon, Epicure,

Mental As Anything, Tex Perkins, Josh Abrahams and Amiel to name a few.

"I've been interested in audio since my first band in 8th grade, and have somehow managed to extract a career from that interest," said Beck. "I'd been planning on a move to Sydney from L.A. for about a month when, late in 1999, my roommate at the time met up with Marshall in San Francisco while they were both doing live sound on the same show. Phone numbers were exchanged, and when I got here I was able to get a start more or less right away."

THE STUDIO STORY

Damian Gerard studios, situated close to the CBD in Balmain, has been in the recording business for over 20 years and a great place to get acquainted with the Australian music scene. With a who's who of the Australian pop and rock landscape as clients (INXS, Midnight Oil, Hoodoo Gurus, Rose Tattoo, Radio Birdman and The Church – just to name a few), the facility offers a recording environment consisting of a classic combination of old world analogue and the latest Pro Tools digital recording equipment. Furthermore there is an in-house production team, the independent record label Foghorn Records for unsigned acts, and some of the best engineers in the country.

"The studio has always been designed to be as comfortable as possible for artists and the most conducive to creativity," said Cullen. "This philosophy came first and we have built everything else – the label, publishing, distribution, media servicing and 'soundslikecafe' from that base."

According to Beck, Cullen saw a gap in the market for good mastering on a budget and The Red Stairs was created. Although not purpose built to be a

mastering suite and still used for other activities including music pre-production, voice-overs and overdubs, the company focused the set-up accordingly.

"In order to keep costs down, we've only really been able to splash out on gear that can be used for many things – namely the ProTools HD1 system," said Beck. "This also meant keeping signal chains short and simple, sound quality high, and all the while making the room as versatile as possible. We can master, mix, overdub... almost anything that needs be, all with the one system/room."

HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE

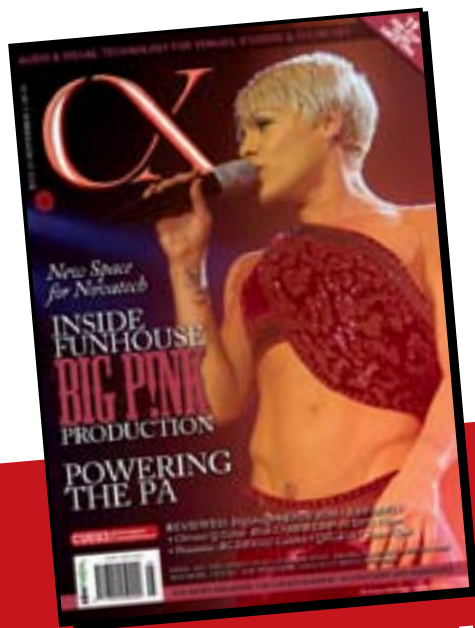
The core system is a ProTools HD1 set-up running off a quad-core Apple Intel Mac Pro with 6GB of RAM. An Apogee Rosetta 800 24 bit 8-channel AD/DA converter sits at the front end, with a set of standalone dCS converters available for A/B testing. A Digidesign 96 I/O audio interface provides extra channels if required. At the control centre sits an Allan & Heath MixWizard console, specially chosen for its compact size coupled with great sounding microphone preamplifiers and EQs. The main monitoring is conducted through either Behringer Truth 2031As, or Yamaha NS-10s powered by a Crown 'K' series amplifier. There are also various other sets of speakers available for different references. The room also comes equipped with key plug-in bundles including AudioEase's Altiverb, the McDSP Classic Pack and a few others.

"Admittedly, most big budget mastering studios tend to have tens (if not hundreds) of thousands of dollars' worth of analogue gear, and that's great if you can afford to go to one, but since

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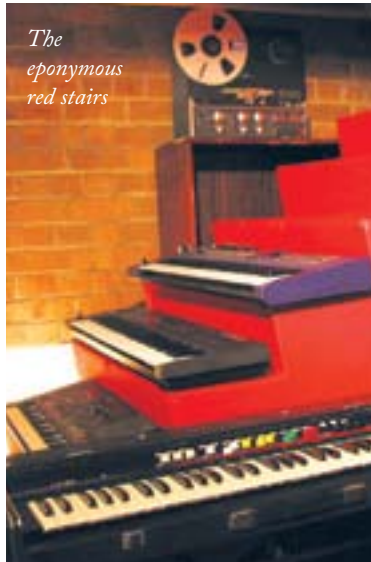
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The eponymous red stairs

Andrew Beck is by no means limited to working digitally.



Working in the digital domain means a smaller mastering suite.

we've started doing this we've discovered that there really is a sizeable market for low-cost mastering," said Beck. "The Red Stairs is, for the time being at least, all digital mastering which has actually been great. In a perfect world, we'd of course just have all the great expensive outboard gear and still have reasonable rates, but sadly that's just not how things work! The important thing is the end product, which I believe stands up really well."

THE PAUL KELLY PROJECT

For the A to Z project, Beck received all of the songs on CD. All songs were live tracks featuring mainly just a single acoustic guitar and a vocal, with a few others as solely a Capella arrangements. With a brief from Kelly to '...just bring up the volume a bit, and don't make it too bright', Beck set about the task.

"At the beginning there was a bit of tweaking to try and find the right approach," said Beck. "With Paul's brief I had to rein the tops in a little."

Beck started with multiband

compression for the broad strokes, some EQ (usually a mid/side matrix with other EQ/compression), and then just a touch of loudness maximizing on the end.

"I find the key to getting things loud without sounding too compressed is several compressors/limiters all doing a little bit," Beck said. "Where one compressor working hard is quite audible (and usually terrible on a full mix), four of them sharing the load really opens up the sound, while still making things loud enough."

According to Beck the placement of EQ in the signal path is important as well, particularly as the songs were originally recorded during different concerts, in different spaces and on different equipment.

"If there's a track that needs a fair amount of bottom end taken off, you almost always want to do that before the compressor, otherwise you end up with a limiter choking on stuff that's not even there in the end," said Beck. "Each session/song ends up being a little different though, as these tracks have

been recorded in many different venues, through many different systems.

Beck was also concerned about the effect mp3 encoding would have on his final masters, particularly the side chain information, as all of these tracks are destined to be released in mp3 format.

MASTERING MP3

"I send them as mp3s which I know are not ideal for mastering and some of them are pretty rough," said Kelly. "They all sound different to each other. But it's the same guy singing and playing guitar. So between us we manage to make it reasonably coherent. We will have worked on over 100 songs by the end of this year. Each batch of songs have only been available for a month at a time."

Beck used a mid-side matrix for mastering where you combine the left and right channels 'in-phase' for the middle, and combine these channels polarity-reversed for the sides.

According to Beck, what you end up with is essentially a mono mix on one channel, while the other channel has all the information that is in either the left or the right side, but not both. This can then be processed and matrixed back into a standard left/right pair. This allows you to make adjustments to the centre or middle of a track independently of the stuff on the edges and vice-versa. You can widen (or narrow) the stereo image, and sometimes even focus in on specific instruments.

"Mp3s do really awful things to music in general, but the encoding is especially brutal on the side-channel information," said Beck. "Listen to some mp3s in mono with one channel out of phase sometime – it's an eye opening experience."

With plans to install a second ProTools rig into the room to accommodate adding analogue boxes into the mastering process as budget allows, The Red Stairs is certainly a great investment for artists after great sounding mastering at an affordable rate. As for Beck, the A-Z project has offered a further insight into Australian contemporary music composition and performance, and the catalogue of one of its very best exponents.

"Not having grown up in Australia, Paul wasn't really a part of my musical landscape at all until I moved here about 10 years ago," said Beck. "Being able to work on and properly listen to what essentially amounts to Paul's songbook has been amazing. I've always been a fan of good songs, and since starting this project, it's pretty obvious to me why Paul is such an Aussie music icon." CX