

When 70s supergroup Sherbet wound up, Garth Porter had time on his hands. What's he been doing with it? He's brought the cream of Australian Country into the city to record at his



Garth at console

RANCOM STREET STUDIO



Garth and Lee Kernaghan



Ted Howard at console

By **STEPHEN BRUEL**

When I think of country music in Australia, I conjure up images of the outback, cattle stations, country pubs, blokes and sheilas strumming guitars, dusty utes, large weather-beaten Akubra hats, western shirts, blue jeans and Tamworth. I think of artists such as Lee Kernaghan, Troy Cassar-Daley, James Blundell and Gina Jeffreys. I certainly don't think of inner-city Sydney, a vintage analogue audio gear collection to knock your socks off, and the iconic 1970s Australian band Sherbet. However there is a connection, and that is Rancom Street Studios in Botany.

Situated in Sydney's inner-city, the studio is owned by former Sherbet songwriter and keyboard-player Garth Porter. No stranger to picking up numerous gold and platinum albums and awards in Australia and overseas as part of the supergroup, Porter has continued his previous pop success in the country music genre.

THE MAN

"After Sherbet I concentrated on writing and producing and began to work in country music with James Blundell," Porter said. "I met and encouraged Lee Kernaghan to record, wrote with him and produced all of his 12 albums which have

won numerous Country Music Association of Australia (CMAA) awards including Album of The Year, Single of The Year and Artist Of The Year. I also personally won nine Producer Of The Year Awards, along with several songwriting awards."

After working in most Sydney studios over the years, Porter began to consider the possibility of setting up his own facility. Several key factors were critical in selecting the Rancom Street site and layout including plenty of off street parking, a large control room, good line of sight for all-group recording, no external noise issues from air and road traffic, and natural daylight. The first recording session took place in 1998 with building

still being carried out in the main room.

"I wanted to combine good acoustic spaces and equipment to create a comfortable high quality-recording environment," Porter said. "Plus, my big collection of outboard gear was becoming too big to cart from studio to studio."

THE MACHINERY

And what a jaw-dropping and salivating vintage and modern equipment and microphone list this is. At the centrepiece is the MCI JH-600 analogue console with KRK monitors, with the option of an MCI JH-16 24-track two-inch tape recorder for analogue recording or Pro Tools HD rig running off an Apple Mac Pro for digital recording.

A nice selection of Neumann studio microphones including the M49, U47fet, CMV563, U87, KM56 and KM 84s are also available for use along with AKG, EV, Shure, Royer and Sennheiser models. EQ units from Pultec and API, compressor/limiter boxes including an original black face UA1176LN, RCA BA6A and Manley Variable-Mu, and microphone pre-amplifiers include Telefunken V72, Neve 1064, Focusrite, API and Buzz Audio barely scratch the surface of top line gear available.

There is a great selection of original vintage amplifiers including a 1958 Fender Bassman, 1963 Vox AC30, 1964 Fender Princeton, 1960s Ampeg Convertible and a 1971 50 watt Marshall. The impressive guitar selection includes a Gibson 1967 ES330, Gibson 1962 Melody Maker and a 1965 Framus Television semi acoustic. The studio also houses a 1964 Hofner President semi acoustic bass and a Fender 1971 re-issue Jazz bass, amongst others.

As Sherbet's ex-keyboard player, Porter has a comprehensive collection including two vintage Clavinlines from the 1950s and 1960s, the first synthesizer by Selmer and Jennings, (valve of course) a Vox Super Continental, Mini Moog, Hammond M100 and Wurlitzer Electric Piano. A great in-house Pearl kit with vintage Ludwig and Premier snare drums completes the studio instrument range nicely.

THE METHODS

Porter's role as producer/writer incorporates being involved and hands-on with all aspects of the studio and recording process including pre-production and songwriting, band recording or 'tracking' sessions, overdubs, mixing and mastering. Porter also often gets involved with the post recording elements including finding and negotiating a label or distribution deal for the artist, securing a publishing deal, advising on promotion needs, and

introducing the artist to his strong industry connections including managers, agents, CD designers, photographers etc.

"I doubt I would take on a project that I couldn't visualise the complete life of the album we're making and care a lot what happens after the recording, mixing and mastering is completed," Porter said. "After such a long time in music, I know how critical the post recording period is to the album reaching its potential. Having a great album is really only the beginning of the life of the album."

After meeting, liking and being inspired by a 'new' solo artist or band, Porter likes to encourage a lot of discussion to help understand what the artist wants to be, their style, turn offs, turn ons, influences and ambitions. He'll then look at the strengths and weaknesses of the material brought to the table. Often he'll bring in other experienced writers to further broaden the song-writing strength, a process that can take from three months to two years.

"As a producer, I guess my primary role is to prop up the areas that need assistance, whatever that may be," Porter said. "About this time I work out a process that fits the artist's budget."

Once the material is finalised, usually consisting of 14 songs, Porter books a band (to accompany a solo artist) that he believes has the right instinct to interpret the songs into a style that will suit the artist. If working with a band, they usually have the songs written, and maybe Porter will provide a bit of help in improving them, helping to make sure that all songs reach their potential.

The next stage involves the recording or 'tracking'. Band tracking usually has to be done in two days for solo artists due to the expense of hiring session players, and Rancom Street aims to cut six to seven tracks a day. Bands however can take longer as there are no session player costs.

"Often I have a very strong vision for the musical parts to make the song work, and sometimes I throw it open to the band," Porter said. "I couldn't do what I do without the amazing musicians I work with. Hearing the songs burst into life is a huge buzz."

MAKING IT HAPPEN

For Porter this is the best and most critical and intensive part of the process. To ensure a great outcome, Porter relies heavily on in-house engineer Ted Howard. Starting as an assistant engineer at EMI 301 studios in 1985 and having worked at Battery Studios in London, Howard assisted on recordings by Black Sabbath and Jeff Beck, and engineered albums by Leo Sayer, Paul Kelly, Lee Kernaghan and

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The Church. Howard is also a three-time winner of the CMAA engineer of the year award. Having first worked together in 1988, Porter and Howard are still making records today – 21 years later.

“I’ve worked with the best in Australia and overseas, and Ted is a step ahead,” Porter said. “Ted’s musical and golden ears allow him to create and capture great sounds whether tracking, overdubbing, mixing or mastering. He is the very best.”

A recent project from Rancom Street is Australian country music star Jayne Denham’s new album *Shake This Town*, due out on in early June 2009. Howard opted to record the album direct to digital using the Pro Tools HD system via a combination of Prism, Apogee and Digidesign analogue to digital converters, to capture the current Nashville trend for country rock sounding very digital. During recording, Howard rarely if ever uses plug-ins on the way in, preferring to use analogue microphone pre-amplifiers, compression and EQ.

“When recording live bands direct to Pro Tools, I approach it like a tape machine – storage only,” Howard said. “I don’t like to open any plug-ins (especially EQ or compression) until the band has left the building. That way you really know what you’ve got from the microphones and the room – plenty of time to mess with the sounds later.”

For Howard, one of the concepts was to create enough recorded ambience on the drums to avoid digital reverbs in the mix where possible. To achieve this,

Howard positioned EV 667 cardioid dynamic microphones back from the kit and went inwards from there. He set a pair of AKG 414 large-diaphragm condenser microphones as stereo overheads, and a heavily compressed AKG D19c dynamic microphone as a mono overhead.

For the kick drum Howard placed a Neumann U47fet microphone to capture the ‘front’, and also used an old Yamaha NS10 monitor (modified to use as a microphone) and placed it 2 feet off the ground to capture the really low frequencies. Howard positioned a Shure SM 57 on the snare, Sennheiser 421s on the tom toms and Neumann KM 84 small capsule cardioid condenser microphones on the hi-hats to finish off this pretty straightforward setup.

“The D19 has a bright percussive character and squashing it a bit helps to bring the room forward – less reverb needed later on,” Howard said.

Howard used a vast array of microphone pre-amplifiers on the drums including a Focusrite ISA 110 on the U47fet kick drum feed and hi-hats, Neve1064 on the snare, Buzz Audio SSA1.1 dual on the overheads, and the MCI JH600 console pre-amplifiers on the NS10 kick, toms and room microphones.

“By the time Rancom Street was built, Garth had already collected quite a few nice microphone pre-amplifiers,” Howard said. “So that we were not dependent upon the console as being the main

source of microphone pre-amplifiers, this collection was expanded and incorporated into the workflow through an XLR patch bay, situated next to the bantam patch bay.”

For compression, Howard used an EL Distressor on the snare, an Amek 9098 on the overheads with a medium/slow release for cymbal decay, and a DBX 160A compressor on the mono overhead.

“If I was recording to analogue tape, I probably wouldn’t compress the snare on the way in,” Howard said. “But for a country music recording direct to Pro Tools I like to hit a Distressor lightly to simulate a bit of tape compression.”

For the bass guitar Howard was after a very tight direct input (DI) sound. To achieve this Howard bypassed Porter’s beautiful vintage Ampeg rig and plugged the bass guitar straight into an Avalon U5 DI unit and then on to a Neve 1064 channel strip. This was then passed through an original black face UA1176LN peak limiter set at 4:1 with a slow attack/fast release.

Howard set up a stereo microphone pair on the acoustic guitar with a view to only using one of the two microphones for most of the mix, particularly for anything double-tracked. For his main microphone, Howard used a Neumann CMV 563 tube condenser bottle, the other being an Audio Technica 4033 cardioid condenser. Both microphone feeds were sent through an API 512c microphone pre-amplifier and onto a Manley Variable Mu compressor.

“I mainly used the two microphone sound for any finger-picked or solo parts where the acoustic guitar needed to have a bigger image in the track,” Howard said. “I find that stereo microphone pairs on acoustic guitars, if used too much, can really swamp a track with its sheer size and almost grand piano overtones.”

For electric guitar the set up was pretty simple. Howard positioned two microphones (an SM57 and a Sennheiser 421) in front of the amplifier and ran these feeds through a Telefunken V72 tube microphone pre-amplifier and a Pultec EQP-1AEQ. Howard said that the range of pedals used by the guitarist in combination with the many amplifiers used (Fender Deluxe, Fender Bassman, Vox AC30, Vox AC15 – depending on the song) provided plenty of compression and tonal variety.

For Denham’s vocals, Howard used a Neumann M49 condenser microphone into a Telefunken V72a microphone pre-amplifier and into an original Teletronics LA2A compressor. According to Howard, apart from sounding better than their plug-in cousins, sometimes it’s just

easier to grab a knob and turn.

"Where possible I like to record the band tracks of an album with the vocalist singing guides through their final vocal chain," Howard said. "You can build the tones of the band around the lead singer's voice, the singer often gets parts of or even the whole final vocal take done in the band track and there's less chance of red light fever stiffening the delivery. This worked really well with Jayne."

Although not used during the recording process, for Howard, plug-ins really come into their own in a mix situation - not necessarily to replace their analogue counterparts but to augment them.

"For me the most useful plugs are the ones that do things the stand alone gear can't do well," Howard said. "These include multiband compression, (Waves C4, McDSP MC 4000) mastering limiters, (Waves L3 Multimaximizer) and spatial tools (Waves Enigma and Mondo Mod)."

DIVISION OF LABOUR

Before mixing begins, Porter likes to discuss the project with Howard and the artist to ensure they are all on the same page regarding the audio image they are striving for, as well as take into consideration the time allowable as per the budget.

"From this point, Ted takes over setting up the mixes as I like to leave a space between recording and mixing, to help clear my head," Porter said. "That way I can come in near the end with hopefully a fresh set of ears to fine tune the mix."

With such an array of both digital and analogue equipment on the studio list, maintenance can be a big job. Porter likes to undertake most of the analogue valve gear maintenance himself.

"Col Abrahams and Greg Cameron take care of solid state maintenance, both very experienced techs," Porter said. "Piers Crocker is our guitar tech, and Gunter Wagner looks after the vintage microphones."

For the digital side of things, Howard is more than happy with the service he receives from Amber Technology, in particular their Product Manager Audio-Video and Audio Post Division, Julius Chan.

"Chan sold us our Pro Tools HD rig, a major portion of our plug-in list and our Apple Mac," Howard said. "He's just an amazing bloke - I call him at any time of the day or night with questions and he gets back to me with an answer every time, usually within five minutes."

Future projects for Rancom Street Studio include recordings for Rebecca Hancock and Stephanie Brownlee, mastering Liam Brew's debut album and working on Lee Kernaghan's next release.

"We've been writing this album for about two years, and now we have perhaps the best collection of songs ever for a Lee Kernaghan album," Porter said. "This will be about a six week project with some overdubs and mixing planned for Nashville."

BACK TO BASICS

After Kernaghan's album Porter will continue his recent return to pop songwriting. After being absent from pop writing for more than 20 years, Porter got a blast from going back to where it all began.

"I am having a lot of fun with it," Porter said. "We recently added Logic to the studio with songwriting in mind. I'm

also keen to embrace Logic into the more organic style of country that I usually write and produce."

According to Porter, the popularity of Rancom Street Studio has spread by word of mouth over the years, as they've never advertised the facility. Although a lot of country music has been recorded at Rancom Street, Porter has seen an increase in the number of rock acts that have recorded here.

"It was designed as a live band studio, in a comfortable atmosphere, and bands feel good here," Porter said. "There's also an outside tree-shaded area that is great for lunch or chilling out, which we call the Beer Garden of Eden".

It sounds like an ideal place to make records, and looking at the incredible array of vintage analogue and modern digital equipment on-site, I think the Gear Garden of Eden would also be a suitable title.





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