



IN THE STUDIO
WITH
Melbourne Ska
Orchestra

Muso finds the Melbourne Ska Orchestra kneep deep in recording their debut album, due out in March 2013. Sean Pollard dug Nicky Bomba out of the trenches for a chat.

version of Pro-Tools through an iMac. Perched next to the studio's huge in-house mixing console is an API-6B lunchbox with a JLM HPM500 mixer, four JLM TGS500 mic preamps and two JLM PEQ500 EQs. This sits atop a collection of Golden Age Pre-73s. Also in play is a Shadow Hills Mastering Compressor (belonging to Nicki) that features two compressors and a selection of three classic console output transformers. "When we record we'll bring in stuff like the Shadow Hills, JLMs, bits and pieces and our engineer (Robin) and they'll stay here," Nicky details, although Mai is obviously free to come and go as he pleases. "When we're not here though, there's still the converters, all the amps, the lines in and everything. It's all eighty per cent there and if you want to bring in the extras - which we did - you can." All of these compressors and pre amps are working to serve the sound fed in by Bomba and Mai's collection of microphones. Bomba is obviously a man passionate about his mics and spends some time detailing every setup and individual piece he's using. "We had the Shure SM57 on the snare as that's a bit of a classic sound, then we put in a bass drum mic and a Royer ribbon mic behind the kick as well to get that nice rumble that you need in ska music. All of the guitars were individually mic'd up with a Bayer 69, which is a really versatile mic, and the Hammond has the PZMs already in there so they're part of the studio now. We just used them." Of course, no live recording would be complete without some killer room mics. This is a fact that Bomba and Mai knew well when they went into the recording process, grabbing an OPR (Open Plan Recording) Pill mic in conjunction with two Golden Age Project R1 Active mics. "Spill is a natural part of the sound. We embrace it and work with that. So in the end, the room mics were an integral part of the whole process. Fifty per cent of it. With all our recordings, we don't want it to sound slick and polished and pristine. The music that we love and that we're drawing from has got that warmth. It's not about having full range frequencies, it's about having character and a bit of ambience." Next, the inevitable mixing process. A tough thing to master at the best of times but with a project this laidback, it's not surprising to hear the duo will be heading to Bomba's property in Mt Hotham to do it. "We've got most of the vibe down already," Mai explains. "So it's really just going to be a case of consolidating that and cleaning it up a little bit."

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Walking down Johnston Street in Fitzroy, there's a street sign just opposite a row of bizarre furniture shops (one presumptuously decked out for Christmas trading in early November) that reads 'Juddy Roller'. A footy fanatic might mistake it for a tribute to Carlton's chicken wing-loving captain, but most know it as the totem for a top notch Chapel Street cafe housing work by up and coming and established artists. On this particular sunny Thursday afternoon, Juddy Roller is also playing host to a gaggle of horn players, most decked out in black and white checkered shirts and hats. The reason? Nicky Bomba's ska-based behemoth, the 30-piece Melbourne Ska Orchestra, have settled in just three doors down in Adelpia Studios to record their latest collection of love letters to the genre. With a tracking rate of roughly seven songs a day, they'll be needing some caffeine.

The studio is a hive of activity as we wander in through its tiny and unassuming facade. Bomba himself is in the live room going over takes with vocalist Pat Powell, trying to nail down a ska-based tribute to The Espy's Gershwin Room. The two engage in a lighthearted back and forth while trying to get the phrasing perfect and the mood is suitably relaxed. Several other members of the band are in the kitchen and living area trying on a plethora of new duds delivered to them by a ska-loving clothing line from the UK. Melbourne Ska Orchestra as a whole are also preparing for a signing party to celebrate their recent deal with Four/Four music, a subsidiary of the ABC, which will be releasing the album they're currently tracking. The deal itself has allowed Bomba and longtime producer Robin Mai to set up camp in Adelpia for the foreseeable future, a unique opportunity to utilise a room that normally acts predominantly as a rehearsal space for the likes of Gotye and Kylie Minogue.

"Adelpia has been in the family for many years, ten or fifteen years," Bomba explains, perched on a piano stool surrounded by mics.

"The Greek brothers (Ange, Phill and Kev Andrianakis) run it. A lot of big bands rehearsed here, like Kylie and also David Hirchfelder did the soundtrack to *Shine* here. The first time I saw the studio it reminded me of Studio 1 in Jamaica - it's just got that sound. We'd record something and say to ourselves 'that's got a distinctive sound' and would usually figure out that it was in the way that we'd set it up and the makeup of it. I'd always said to the brothers that I'd love to make a studio like this place one day. When the opportunity turned up and when we signed with the ABC - instead of going into a studio, hiring it and losing the vibe that we'd built up here, we said 'why don't we pool our resources?' So

the brothers put in their time, we pooled our microphones, Robin's gear, my gear and everything and created our own studio right here."

Bomba himself is a man who thrives on big ideas like this. With a CV reading like a who's who and what's what of Australian music over the last decade, he is arguably best known for his work as John Butler's drummer, as well as his prolific solo career and work as an in-demand session player. As we find him right now, he is busy working on a new record with Butler, touring his Caribbean-inspired Bustamento and, of course, tracking with the Ska Orchestra. There is barely a dull moment in his day as he runs around the studio chatting to various visitors and showing off his brand new, ska-styled Vespa. It would seem that the only thing that phases Nicky Bomba these days is the task of trying to relocate 30 ska-loving musos to the same room at the same time.

"The hardest thing really has been the scheduling," he agrees. "Other than that it's been surprisingly smooth. We've been having clean days, starting about 11 o'clock and finishing about eight with time for lunch and dinner. We haven't whipped ourselves into a frenzy or anything. We find that keeps our heads in the right place. We tracked bass, drums, guitar, organ, piano, horns and percussion all at once. The only reason we wouldn't have tracked organ or piano is because the guys weren't here. In the end, we've allowed ten days but after the fifth day we'd already tracked nineteen songs, so we ended up just taking the day off. We'll track all day tomorrow and then Sunday will just be party day."

The secret weapon behind this superhuman rate of work is undoubtedly producer Mai, the ARIA-nominated workaholic behind records by Nick Cave, Beasts of Bourbon, Daddy Cool, Augie March and far too many more to list. Mai's experience and deft

touch has allowed the Orchestra to track as fast as they can in a live environment, netting the laidback vibe required. When recording a live band, everything has to be perfect. Mic placement and the types of mics themselves need to be sympathetic to the situation at hand. Ska music is famously heavy on the horns, and Mai's experience allowed him to make the right choices. "The horn microphones were all Neumann's - two 87's, an 89, a 67 and a TLM. The trumpet gets the smoothest top end mic, which is the 89, and the other saxes have a very similar setup, except it's the TLM, which is a little bit lighter. They're great mics for the job. They can be distant and still get a really nice top end."

As far as outboard gear goes, Mai and Bomba are running a relatively simple setup. Again comprised of pooled equipment, Mai is utilising the latest

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