

MAKING MUSIC

In all of his endeavours, Paul Casserly considers himself primarily a "collaborator". Phase one of the electronic dance-pop act Strawpeople was the collaborative effort of Casserly and Mark Tierney (along with various guest vocalists), that lasted 10 years. The current Strawpeople line-up has him teamed with Fiona MacDonald; and additionally, he has a production company, Battersea Productions, where he works alongside Greg Johnson. Creative interaction also characterises the latest Strawpeople release, *100 Street Transistors*, a remix album of tracks largely from *Broadcast* and *Vicarious* (Strawpeople's last studio album), reconstructed by some eminent local producers and DJs including Unitone HiFi, Zane Lowe, and ex-Headless Chicken, Michael Lawry.

Casserly explains there is some confusion over a remix album is perceived by the public: "99 percent of people seem to think that it's a greatest hits compilation."

So, what is your take on the concept of "the remix"?

"It acknowledges that the process of making electronic music is just as important as the song itself. In the remix context, the song is just a vehicle, really. It's sort of like a cover version, but it's also like a director's cut, getting someone else's spin on a particular song. Often mixes take a song from one genre to another, like the Moby remix of Soundgarden, it's just a plane from one aesthetic to another."

"In a sense, it's the natural progression of the evolution of sampling — as sampling is about stealing bits of other pieces of music to build a new piece and a remix is acknowledging that by basically sampling a whole song and then fucking with it. It's born out of that as much as anything. There's really no need for a concept as long as it sounds good."

Why do a remix album?

"Why not?" is the answer to that. It's easier than doing a brand new album for a start, because you don't have to write a whole lot of new songs. You get to tap into a whole pool of talent of producers, engineers and mixers that if you were hiring to work on an album you couldn't afford. If we were doing a new album and I hired those people to produce, it would be a different ball-game, because they would be like contractors or labourers. But because it's a remix and they have some authorship over it, that's an incentive to make it good — and to make it their own. So doing a remix album is a way of getting some excellent talent on your record, on the cheap."

What remix technology are we looking at here? Big studios or bedroom?

"I think the only one that could be considered a big studio remix was the one done in Germany, by Schallbau. The way things have changed with electronic music, as long as you've got a few nice pieces of equipment you can do it in your

bedroom. A few were done in my bedroom; some in very small studios around town. Most were done in a project studio environment: a small desk, sampler, sequencer, a few boxes with sound modules and effects, and that's basically it. The Short Fuse remix of 'Vicarious' was done entirely on a Mackintosh, but you're looking at some reasonably expensive software like Pro-Tools there."

"It's really all about the people. You can have the flashiest studio in town and make the crappiest record — people do all the time. There's a level of technical know-how, and knowing what the basics are in terms of having enough bass or whatever, but no rules really."

With changes in technology, has it become quicker — and therefore cheaper — to record now?

"Yeah, essentially you don't need a lot of money in terms of the technical side of things, especially if you avoid using a lot of live instruments. But what costs is your time — taking time out from working to write, that's the real cost."

Is familiarity with the song on the part of the remixer a help or hindrance?

"It can be either. It can help, but sometimes it's fun to ignore the hook and bring some other part of the song to the forefront, and that will become the highlight of your remix — you actually change what the hook is. The great thing about electronic music is that there are essentially no rules."

Do you think there's a danger in exposing your material to a current but perhaps fleeting trend — like a mix that may already be last week's style by the time it comes out?

"With the people we gave the stuff to, there weren't any major directions as such. But pop music isn't separate to the latest trend or breaking sound — punk became pop, and drum 'n' bass also becomes pop. It's interesting there are elements of drum 'n' bass in lots of the mixes, it's obviously equally affected everyone and can't be ignored. There is always a risk, especially when you are consciously doing a remix album that is tapping into new directions in electronic music, to go overboard, change what you do and become a chameleon. That obviously doesn't work, but if you hear something exciting and think you can use that to make what you do better, you've got to be open to it. There is a fine line — how far do you get on the bandwagon?"

Did anybody's mixes miss the point completely?

"There were a couple that were commissioned that we decided not to go with. A lot of it had to do with that when the album came together as a whole, it had a flavour, and those two tracks — one that I did myself — just didn't fit in with the soup we'd come up with."

Anything particularly come alive?

"I have favourites that change every now and then, like if I hear one of the tracks when I'm



Stirring The Soup Remixing the Strawpeople

sitting at a bar or cafe. I think the most surprising was Breaks Co-op ('Inject Me') — in the singularity of what they've done, how it's quite cold, and the sonic space on it. That's my favourite in some ways, but at the same time I really like all of them."

"What Joost (Langeveld) did with 'Spoiler' — it's really atmospheric and that has taken it somewhere completely different. He's changed the rhythmic structure of the song, which you really notice if you've heard the single a few times. You're expecting the beat to fall in a different place, which is in a way the essence of drum 'n' bass, getting disorientated about where the beat is. It's not always on the 'one' or whatever, it moves around. What Michael (Lawry) did with 'Trick With A Knife', making it darker with some beautiful, fat analogue sounds — I'm quite jealous of that. 'Porcelain' was the one that threw me the most. It's almost like a sound sculpture. When I first heard it, I thought it was weird and I didn't know if I liked it or not, but now I love it. It really has maintained the spooky essence of the song. 'Dreamchild' — after 'Taller Than God' — that's the next most commercially viable mix, in terms of getting across to a wider market. It's quite pop, but it's also quite deep house, with a minimal vibe at the same time — it's house, without being too cheesy."

You retain creative control with this sort of project, but there's obviously less involvement than doing an album from scratch.

"You have less control, and you put less effort in, so it's an easier way of putting an album together. The control is choosing the people, and choosing the songs you want them to do. I did a bit of editing on a few things afterwards — the selection, the running order, and what's between the tracks. It's fun — you give someone a DAT with just a vocal, and they give you back a completed track. I imagine it's like famous

painters who don't do all of their paintings, they give it to someone and just sign it — not that I am really trying to draw a stupid comparison like that."

Different territories hear music differently. Are remixes intended, or necessary, for foreign success?

"Yes, in a way, because you can turn it around reasonably quickly, and give it a contemporary edge that the album may be lacking if it was recorded a year and a half ago, though that's all hindsight and was not the reason for the album."

You had some success in Australia with Broadcast. Are there plans to follow that up with Vicarious and 100 Street Transistors?

"I don't know for sure, but there is some talk of them (Sony Australia), having now heard both, wanting to mix and match a bit; which is good because it gives them part ownership over the project and an incentive to make it work."

And elsewhere?

"In the US, there are no solid release plans. In Europe and the UK, there will probably be 70% of the *Vicarious* tracks and 30% of the remixes. We're hoping that the European release will happen within the next few months."

The recording approach changed between Broadcast and Vicarious. Which way do you see yourselves going in the future?

"That was partly the result of doing *Vicarious* in a short period of time, compared to *Broadcast* being the work of four to five years. We sat down in February and put it all together in a more normal way. It was a conscious effort to go in the direction of songs rather than instrumental soundscape type things. A combination of the two is probably the ideal, and I suspect the next album will be a combination of the two ways of writing and recording."

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