



HOME GROWN

Country rock. Now there's a genre we've not covered yet. How do you make a slick, mainstream, catchy-as-hell, skirt-lifting yet God-fearing album? Let's ask producer Darren Mullan. He's made a classic in good ol' Adelaide with a new true talent, Jac Dalton.

Text: Gavin Hammond

► What happens if you cross a hunky, soulful singer from North Carolina with some seriously seasoned Oz Rock legends? Pretty tough and dirty music – that's what! Oh, and a lot of jaw line in the promo shots...

Ladies and ladies, meet Jac Dalton, an Adelaide-based legend in the making. His album *From Both Sides* presents an abundant quantity of polished and mighty country rock – courtesy of his strong voice, some classic songwriting and a legacy in American music. Oh, and a cast of a thousand Aussie rockers.

These include: Mark Evans (ex AC/DC), Russell Morris, David Moyses (Air Supply), Paul Demarco (Rose Tattoo), Rockin' Rob Riley (Rose Tattoo), two members of The Angels, Paul Wetton (Robert Plant Band), Gwyn Ashton (Mick Fleetwood, BB King) and Trevor Warner (Lee Kernighan & Kasey Chambers).

And whose job was it to convert some early demos (created using a cheap Sony stereo microphone plugged directly into a PC laptop) into a highly produced and acclaimed CD? Similarly-Adelaide-based producer and keyboard player, Darren Mullan.

And although Jac's music is straight-down-the-line, the production process was far from it. Here's how it went for the studio diplomat...

Gavin Hammond: Darren, tell us how the Jac Dalton project came about and what you were trying to do, musically.

Darren Mullan: When I was first approached by Jac to track some original songs, all he handed me was a CD of scratch tracks (guitar/vocals recorded using a stereo Sony microphone plugged directly into his PC laptop)! I had to have a good think before I got down to work.

We had a month to get them all down roughly,

so I decided to start by doing demos with programmed drums to see what was working and what wasn't. I used [fxPansion's] BFD and a few [Logic] ESX24 samples to get the beats happening, and then our Yamaha C7 grand for the piano. Quentin Evers played the bass and guitars.

I quickly realised that his lyrical style was country (Jac is from North Carolina) but he wanted it to be more like classic rock. So with the help of his management we were able to get hold of all these great players.

We also had some songs written by the legendary Russell Morris and former AC/DC bassist Mark Evans – and once that all fell into place, I knew we were on our way to making something really special!

We sent out the demos to all the players and booked them in between their busy touring schedules. Some tracks had up to six guitarists, three drummers and three bass players, and they were all legendary 'name' players. It was my job as producer to choose who got on the final mix. No pressure, Darren!

GH: So let's go through the recording chain, starting with Jac. He is quite a dynamic singer, how did you deal with that?

DM: Almost everything that enters via our Avalon preamps is compressed on the way in. Jac's vocals were compressed on the Avalon using a surprisingly fast attack and release compared with most vocal settings. It helped smooth out the sound and suited his singing style.

A problem I used to have with vocal tracking was how to get a great level all the time without compressing too much (this is not a mixing oxymoron!). A technique I use is to record a guide vocal for the whole song with minimum compression (tell them you're just getting them warmed up) and use the waveform as a visual gain controller when I track again. Press record, watch the waveform (muted on a spare track below) and 'ride' the preamp gain on the 737 over and under any surprises.

This gives the compressor a better signal while outputting a nice even vocal take that needs less processing afterwards. It may seem a bit of a task but it gets fantastic results if your singer's a little too dynamic in their performance.

In terms of mics, I used a B&K 4011, Røde NTV, Beyer MCE90 (my fave), and a Neumann U47.

Backing vocals were always two takes of each line, spread around the stereo field (sometimes up to 20 tracks for BVs alone, bussed into a stereo group with compression and hi-lift/low-cut EQ).

GH: How about the acoustic instruments?

DM: I've found that miking an acoustic guitar from above pointing into the sound hole at 45 degrees (Rode NT4 mic into Avalon M2 preamp into Avalon 747 EQ) gets a much better result than point and shoot front. I get less image distortion from the player strumming in front

of the mic. For piano I use a Røde NT4 and a Beyer Opus51 lying flat on the frame to give you the centre.

GH: Guitars are a big part of that country sound – how do you get the twang out of (or into!) them?

DM: There are a few tricks that I find useful. Firstly, I try not to over-compress while recording electric guitar and I pay particular attention to the attack speed and threshold, making sure that it complements the style of the player and the sound of the guitar. I always record a dry and clean DI signal direct from the guitar and before the amp. Then I'll mute that track while it's being laid down so I have more options later to re-amp the guitar.

If I'm working with a track that has already been recorded and is over-compressed, I use the Logic distortion plug-in (set to work on the lower frequencies, without too much drive) combined with Waves C1 compressor (set to expand). Basically, this adds warmth while suppressing the midrange harshness.

If you're trying to achieve the opposite, you can add 'twang' with the Waves Renaissance Axxe plug-in. This is a fantastic tool if you need to add more presence or punch to a lifeless guitar. Insert it either before or after a guitar amp simulator for pre- or post-gain lift. If you don't have Waves plug-ins, the standard Logic compressor works a treat to get that extreme punch.

GH: And how about a good thumping bass?

DM: Bass tracking has never been the same for me since the arrival of our Avalon U5 DI. Combining a passive tone selector, and a variable gain, you can really find the sweetest tone for every bass. I prefer a warm deep bass and always use the Renaissance compressor on the standard bass guitar setting. If you want to resurrect an ordinary bass track, firstly insert an EQ, turn on the analyser and take a look. Now do the same with the kick drum and decide which one provides the all-important 'click' (found generally around 3 to 5kHz).

If I have a bass track that's not perfectly synchronised with the kick drum, I prefer to suppress the click on the bass track to smooth out the sound. Ultimately for me, the kick drum is the boss. To keep the bass channel sounding full, while still leaving room for the kick drum to punch through between 50-65Hz, I low-cut the bass at around 70Hz.

GH: What are your techniques for drums?

DM: Drums are comprised of a stereo overhead through your best preamp/comp/EQ with the rest of the mics supporting. I like my kick sound tight and deep without too much ring most of the time: AKG D12 inside on a cushion/pillow and a Beyer M88 just poking its head through the hole. I don't want to record the air, it's the energy just inside the hole that I want. Snare mic'd top and bottom with in-line padded Røde NT5s or Behringer C2s switched to -10dB, flipping the phase of the bottom and gating it

using software gates (not outboard). I'm not a big fan of pre-gating since discovering the energy in my drum recordings is better when I leave the toms open all the time. Use 'soft' mics with 'hard' sounds and vice versa – or it can be too edgy or limp.

GH: But you're a fan of occasional re-triggering, aren't you?

DM: Yes, and Logic Pro can easily turn drum audio into MIDI notes for re-triggering. To do this, place a copy of the kick audio on a spare track and mute it. If it's made up of multiple takes, use the Glue tool to merge the audio or make a backup copy of a single take. Place an audio instrument track nearby and load up your favourite drum samples and select this track with your mouse. Double-click on the audio file and normalise and/or energise the audio to adjust the dynamic levels.

Choose 'Audio to Score' and set to 'drums MIDI' and the velocity threshold to about 35. Select all the MIDI notes generated inside a matrix window and then choose Functions/Transform/Transposition. 'Fix' all notes to a single note and process. Simply shift the notes to the desired sample on the keyboard and you have a replacement for your kick. It seems complicated but when you do it often enough it can take as little as 30 seconds to re-trigger a kick, snare or toms track. Tune samples to the same pitch as the originals (remember the overheads are still in the mix).

There are some easy ways to make drum samples sound more natural, too. You'll need a snare drum. Place a small speaker (I use an Auratone) face down on top of the snare. Feed a *softly* played kick and snare through the speaker and record the rattle from under and around the snare drum. Add to mix and hear the difference!

GH: Do you use pitch correction?

DM: I rarely use AutoTune anymore, and prefer to process pitch and groove in Melodyne. For those who haven't used it, you don't know what you're missing. This is the most exciting software I've seen for years! You can manipulate the pitch (without the harmonic 'flutter' of most competitors) and timing of anything using Melodyne.

I use it to fix drum and bass synchronisation, vocal pitch and/or time aligning (very handy for backing vocals), guitar/sax solo tweaking (watch out boys!) and anything I have time to put through it. Because the key commands are changeable, I use the same as my Logic ones so I can work faster.

GH: So talk a bit about the mixing process...

DM: I demo, sometimes co-write, track and mix all the songs myself with the occasional listen from Quentin Eyers down the hall in Suite 1. I start by listening to each bus (drums first then bass, guitars, etc) for the whole song making sure any edits are seamless and there are no surprises in sound or performance. Paul Demarco (drummer from Rose Tattoo) broke

VITAL STATS

Name: Darren Mullan.

Occupation: For this album – country rock producer.

Location: Adelaide.

Sounds like: South Carolina country meets Oz rock.

Claim to fame: MD and producer of Jac Dalton's band and music. Engineer in producer/writer Quentin Eyers' studio, QEM.

History: Keyboard player since eight years old. Toured around Australia for years; settled in Adelaide. Worked at Derringers Music in the hi-tech department selling equipment to studios and assisting in the design of control and live rooms, etc. Wanted to be a producer so much that he worked for free until he was irreplaceable. Worked with jingle studios and rock studios and was a whiz on ProTools, but kept going back to Logic. Found a home at QEM studios sharing a TDM/Logic rig with multi-talented producer/writer Quentin Eyers.



many sticks during his hard-rocking session on the album and sometimes an expletive made it onto the recording (Dirty Mean & Nasty). I kept it in the end because in the mix you couldn't really hear it and those sometimes-angry takes were my favourites!

Once I've reached the stage where I've stopped tracking and started mixdown, I'll insert a gain plug-in on the top position of the master stereo output fader (stereo/helper/gain in the plug-in list). Then I press the Mono button and then flip one side out of phase. What you're now hearing is the phase-cancelled left over right or the 'ghost' track (the elements that disappear when your mix is played in mono).

In a perfect world, you would only hear delays, reflections (reverb) and maybe something panned a little too wide. If any instrument or vocal sound can be heard *clearly* in the ghost track (hopefully not vocals or the musical hook!), you may need to adjust its phase or pan position until it either softens or disappears. Drum overheads may need to be nudged back in sync with close mics to eliminate phase cancellation. Sometimes simply closing the width a little (eg. Waves Imager) will be enough to rectify the problem. This is my most powerful software mixing trick and I use it regularly to check tracking as well as during the mix.

After listening to all the buses and switching everything back on part by part, I turn down my monitors until I hear the first thing pop out (usually vocals) and make some changes. Leaving it at low level, I switch between my smallish Sony ghetto blaster (aux inputs essential when buying a beatbox for the studio) and the 'horribltones' in mono and stereo – which help stabilise all the elements. I use a Sampson C-Control as my monitor switcher and love it cause it has a footswitch talkback built in as well.

I've had my set of Sennheiser HD600 cans for years now and take them with me wherever I go to track or mix. They save me the time I don't have to get used to someone else's room and monitors. Okay, my real secret weapons for mixing is an Akai clock radio with CD player.

Lastly, I crank it in mono and just walk out of the room and down the hall for a coffee break. Don't really listen to all the individual instruments (this is the hard part after hearing it so many times) and listen for anything that leaps out or maybe something that should've leapt out but didn't.

GH: And you have an unusual technique for remembering settings, I believe...

DM: Yes, because it's easy to save settings on your plug-ins and channel strips but what about outboard gear? I use my mobile phone camera to take pictures of my knob positions on all outboard gear. Then it's as simple as sending via Bluetooth (a handy option in your computer, or buy a Bluetooth USB adapter) and saving them in the project folder.

GH: How do you approach mastering?

DM: It's very easy to mixdown by turning things up, and although it sounds okay, you just end up



Darren Mullan

with a signal that's either distorting or just not dynamic enough for the mastering suite. I bounce down each track at a conservative level without peaking if possible.

If the song peaks slightly once or twice, I will put a Logic A/D limiter on the mix with no squash. This to me sounds much better than the Waves L1 'cause it keeps the sonic integrity of my mix intact without any distortion.

If you mix with too much subs or highs, it really doesn't matter as long as all the tracks are similar in EQ and mix. This enables your mastering guy to set the basic EQ and compression for most of the tracks and focus on the little magic bits that we all want to shine through on the final product.

I was surprised to witness Adam McElnea – mastering engineer at Sonomax, Sydney – monitoring mostly through a somewhat large home-style Sony stereo *behind* him next to the couch. He turned his head slightly as he tweaked EQs and compressors and spent only 20 percent of the time listening through a close pair of JBL Monitor 1s (checking the centre channel) and his lovely ATC SCM50s for final stereo imaging.

I like to record in 24-bit/44.1k and bounce as a stereo interleaved AIFF, using Waveburner. I mock up the album and check (visually) all the song levels and listen to bits of each song by quickly switching from one to another. This way I get not just a big picture of the whole album, but an easy way of checking that all the individual levels are similar overall.

GH: And finally, how do you use technology to get a live sound in this band?

DM: I'm the MD with The Jac Dalton Band and have found that live playing with a click track has a couple of great upsides (I usually hate click tracks live and don't particularly like telling the drummer he has to wear cans onstage). One is that any footage taken can be edited into a film clip because you're locked to tempo. Another is the ability to add in any percussion grooves, etc, to enhance the sound. I use an iBook with Ableton Live through a PreSonus Firefox to make this happen – and it runs seamlessly. ■

For more information go to www.jacdalton.com or www.qem.com.au

SECRET WEAPONS

Dual 2GB G5 using Logic Pro, and an RME Multiface. "The original demos were recorded using ProTools Mix24 and even disregarding the extra DSP I have onboard the G5 for plug-ins and virtual instruments, sonically the RME is a lot sweeter and a little less 'digital' when using valve preamps."

Avalon, Avalon, and more Avalon: Avalon VT737 x 2, Avalon M2 (hooked up to an Avalon 747 as a sweetener), Avalon AD 2022 dual-mono preamp, and an Avalon U5 direct instrument preamp.

Mini Moog for 'hands-on' knob tweaking stuff.

Klark-Teknik DN780 Reverberator for realistic ambient spaces when you don't have the perfect room.

dbx 164 stereo compressor – only has one control; a slider marked 'More'.

The old red Ibanez CP835 compressor pedal – for killer clean guitar sounds.

Behringer Ultragrain Pro (no pads but silent and clean, not to mention cheap!)

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Make yourself a part of the music as if it's yours. This responsibility will allow you to 'feel' what's going on while tracking and mixing. Capture a feeling rather than a sound if you can. Make the musician's headphone mix so good that he forgets about tracking and just has fun.