

YOUNG MODERN

Recording silverchair's album of the year

Some albums come together fast, but not this one. *Young Modern* was a marathon performance, but the results have made it all worthwhile. AT investigates.

Text: Mark O'Connor
Photos: Nabil Elderkin

► In the short "Making Of..." DVD doco that accompanied my copy of Silverchair's *Young Modern*, Daniel Johns briefly relates an encounter with a fan while sitting in Sydney's Hyde Park writing lyrics. "Daniel, maaan!" comes the greeting, followed by a dismayed; "Frogstomp... what happened?!" After thanking the interloper for ruining his day, Johns responds to the fan, and to camera – "Heaps! Heaps happened!"

'Heaps' indeed. Since three 14-year-olds from Newcastle turned out that raw slab of grunge – recorded in only nine days and went on to sell 2.5 million copies worldwide – Silverchair has enjoyed an international career that, while not without its share of slings and arrows, remains nothing short of spectacular.

And things just keep getting better and better. Their recent clean sweep at the 2007 ARIA awards, including the prestigious Album Of The Year award for *Young Modern*, confirms them as the most successful Australian band in that institution's history. Artistically, their recordings have consistently been characterised by a boldness of invention and re-invention, collectively forming an evolutionary arc in which each successive

release constitutes a creative leap forward from the one before. Now with *Young Modern*, that evolutionary trajectory may just be approaching the vertical. *Young Modern* is epic pop, an artistic, stylistic, and sonic extravaganza, with big sweeping production gestures. In short, it's a tour de force.

Among Silverchair collaborators past and present, the consensus holds that Daniel Johns is indeed highly evolved. The legendary Van Dyke Parks himself, whose orchestral arrangements are almost a signature component of both *Diorama* and *Young Modern* (and whose salutation upon greeting Johns gives the album its title – "Hello, Young Modern!"), doesn't hesitate to compare him with that other boy genius of his past acquaintance, Brian Wilson.

Johns' 'dream line up' for this project – he calls them the "Harlem Globetrotters of music" – once again includes the indispensable Mr Parks, *Diorama* co-producer David Bottrill who returns to mix the album, and long-time collaborator and fellow Dissociative Paul Mac serves as a permanent fixture on keyboards and renders production assistance.

New in the mix is engineer, producer and co-owner of Sydney's Big Jesus Burger Studios (BJB), Scott Horscroft who met Johns through The Sleepy Jackson and, after striking a chord with him, was invited onto the project at the demo stage.

But perhaps most notable is the return of Nick Launay, the producer of *Freak Show* and *Neon Ballroom* when the band were still teenagers.

Having served an engineering and production apprenticeship out of London's Townhouse studios, peering over the shoulders of Hugh Padgham and Steve Lillywhite and working with Public Image Limited and Kate Bush (among countless others), Nick's first official production credit was Midnight Oil's *10,9,8...* For a time he became a part of the Australian cultural landscape – figuratively and literally – taking up residency in the Harbour City for eight years before being lured away to the City of Angels. I spoke with Nick from his home in LA ("...an apartment just off Hollywood, and it's a beautiful sunny day") about reuniting with the young Novacastrians in the Seedy Underbelly (Nick's studio) to co-produce.



THE BAND'S BACK TOGETHER...

Nick Launay: *Young Modern* was a big undertaking from the very beginning. Daniel had been writing the songs for over two years and whenever he was in LA, we'd go for a drive and he'd play me stuff. Consequently, some of those songs have been in my head for quite a long time as well.

Originally *Young Modern* was going to be a Daniel Johns solo album, but everything changed when Silverchair performed at Wave Aid, which was the first time they'd played together for something like two years. I think it was a combination of meeting up with Chris [Joannou] and Ben [Gillies] again, and actually going onstage with them, rekindling that feeling of a band, that security and the knowledge that you can rely on people, that sparked it back into life.

Daniel demoed the album twice – there are two complete sets of elaborate demos that you could basically release, if you wanted to. They're 'finished' and fantastic (See Scott Horscroft's account of demo sessions below), many of the songs are even more grandiose than the final album tracks – they're very, *very* big. My feeling

was – and I talked to him a lot about this at various stages during the two years leading up to the project – that some of it was so complex that most people simply wouldn't get it.

So my big trip with the album – before we started – was for us to work out what these songs were really about and simplify them so that we recorded only the key parts, without having layers and layers. In writing a song you might record lots of different instruments as you come up with the parts and layer them all up. But when you play it back there are certain instruments that catch your ear, and these become the 'top' melody lines, so to speak. So you might then keep these parts, and get rid of all the other stuff underneath. These other parts might have seemed important at the time but you're not actually hearing them because your ear is focussing on the top lines – whether it be a flute part or a guitar part or a tambourine!

I was actually very hesitant about doing the album because I feared it was going to be a nine-month project, and having made many, many records over the last (laughs)... whatever it is – 27 years – I know that it's not enjoyable to spend that much time on one album. It becomes

really tedious. I'm more into making fast albums these days.

REHEARSALS

NL: So upon agreeing to do the album, I said we'd have to go into rehearsals for a good amount of time, two weeks or so, and really pull these songs apart and put them back together to make it sound like a band; make it work just with the four musicians – Paul Mac on keyboards being the fourth. So that's what we did, and it was fantastic. We went into Stagedoor in Sydney and had a great time simplifying it all, before flying out to LA where we started work at my studio – Seedy Underbelly. We spent about a month and a half there, recording it all.

INTO THE SEEDY UNDERBELLY

MO'C: Is there not a Seedy Underbelly studio in Minneapolis – or so my research tells me – where you've previously worked?

NL: That's right, it was previously in Minneapolis and was a wonderful place to work. The gear belongs to a friend of mine called John Kuker who's one of these guys who collects vintage microphones and equipment and travels all over



"At no point was there any drum that didn't have tape, tea towels and weights on it"



the world to get them. He decided he'd had enough of Minneapolis and moved the whole box and dice to LA. We found a house that had a studio area (and a pool) so we put all the equipment in there. The house can sleep about six people and it's set up the way I like it – it's become the studio where I work all the time.

MO'C: So by the time basic tracks were being recorded the arrangements were pretty much fully fleshed out, having been distilled somewhat from the earlier more elaborate demo arrangements?

NL: Very much so, yes. It was very much arranged, very worked out. The first four days at Seedy Underbelly involved setting everything up really well so that everybody could see each other and hear everything. We then ran through all the songs again and recorded them as listening demos, so by then it was an incredibly well-rehearsed album. From that point we just got stuck into it and the whole thing was a lot of fun.

Daniel wanted it to sound organic. He was quite a fan of Nick Caves' *Abattoir Blues* record – he was very curious about how that was made and I explained that that was recorded all at once, with live vocals. Then I mentioned that that's exactly how the Beatles did it. *The White Album* actually became a bit of a benchmark for this record, and I went for those kind of sounds; very dry drum sounds, to allow more space for other instruments – having a big drum sound like the one on *Neon Ballroom* wouldn't have worked for these songs. And the drumming is quite different anyway.

MO'C: During those live recordings did you record Daniel's vocals and were they keepers?

NL: They were recorded, but we found in the end we were better off overdubbing them later. Daniel is a great singer and when he concentrates on just singing, he tends to perform better than when he's also concentrating on guitar. He's one of those people who can control his voice; he's in command of it – born with a fantastic sounding voice and great pitch, probably one of the best singers in the world. He's certainly one of the best singers I've ever worked with. It's a very different thing to working with someone who's more of a mood singer, or a character singer. The whole thing of capturing something 'live' doesn't really apply to Daniel. So we did record his vocals in live takes but he was mainly concentrating on his guitar playing, basically.

MO'C: Has he matured into that singer over time as you've recorded successive albums with him?

NL: Actually, no. If ever there was a person who was born with it, it's him! (laughs) The first time I worked with him I was just absolutely gobsmacked – he's just incredibly gifted with an incredible voice. It's a beautiful voice to record, and it's got a lot of power and grit as well. And he never sings out of tune. There are a few people like that – Freddie Mercury, and I think Steve Tyler from Aerosmith. Daniel's one of those. When you work with someone like that it's suddenly not a case of trying to get a good vocal any more, but more a case of, 'well, what can we do with this voice in terms of character?'

MO'C: How did you capture that vocal?

NL: My favourite microphone for his voice is a Neumann M49 – it's one of the better Neumann mics from the 1950s. It's a valve mic, with a very big diaphragm and an edge to it that a lot of other tube mics don't have. When you sing loudly into an M49 there's a lot of grit. I tend to use that mic on most male vocals, and I use a Tubetech CL1B compressor – the 'big blue compressor', as it's called.

I tend to record singers in a relatively live room too, and I don't baffle rooms off. I find that if you tell the singer to sing really closely to the mic and then back off a bit when they're singing loudly it has this great effect of naturally bringing the room into play. We also used a Neve 1081 preamp that's very smooth and rich sounding.

MO'C: And did this all go to tape?

NL: We recorded the whole album to two-inch analogue tape. All the drums, bass, guitars and keyboards that you hear; the basic rhythm tracks were all played at once. There's no manipulation, no ProTooling whatsoever – it's all live. And mostly not done to a click. So it's very much recorded in the old-fashioned analogue style, using vintage equipment: API desks with Neve 1081s and lots of ribbon mics.

TOO FROGGY!

MO'C: Van Dyke Parks' arrangements are another instrument, and though only featured on three songs, seem almost integral to this album...

NL: Daniel obviously knew Van Dyke from his work on *Diorama*, and it was on the cards that we were going to get him to do the string arrangements even before it became a Silverchair record. So we went round to his house and played him some of the songs and talked about some of the ideas... Daniel had just about all the parts in his head as usual, so it was just a case of him humming them or playing them on guitar. Then, of course, Van Dyke elaborated on them times 2000! He'd take the ideas and make them into these little movies. Eventually we went to Prague to record the strings. Van Dyke had heard that you could go to this old recording studio in a big hall over there and record the Czech Philharmonic very, very cheaply – much more cheaply than doing it in LA or London or Sydney. So we got to visit Prague as well for about four or five days – it became a little bit of an adventure.

MO'C: Had you worked with Van Dyke before? He seems a larger than life character...

NL: I'd met him before, and he's definitely one of the funniest people on planet Earth; constantly cracking the funniest jokes and making funny noises. He could be a stand-up comedian. Even though he's so talented and writes great string parts and all that stuff, what you're left with is his humour. The way he was talking to this very important orchestra in Prague was absolutely hilarious! Telling them to be sexier. At one point he said: "It's sounding too froggy!" The poor translator was saying, "What do you mean?" and Van Dyke responded: "You know, ribbett ribbett! Those little green things... too froggy!" No-one had a clue what he meant. I don't think I've laughed so much in my whole life – I know Daniel was actually on the floor, *in pain*.



“Everyone wanted to make the record challenging, *sonically*, but we all understood that this was a pop record.”

BACKTRACKING AND TRACKING

Scott Horscroft on Preparations, Demos & Outcomes.

Mentioned in dispatches during the band's ARIA thanks on the big night was producer, engineer and Big Jesus Burger studio proprietor, Scott Horscroft. Credited on the album with production assistance, Horscroft, who describes himself as a 'noise artist and an avant garde musician', met Daniel while producing The Sleepy Jackson's second album *Personality*, which he observes has a similar sound to *Young Modern* – "...very big, orchestras, very tight-sounding rhythm section – very lush with a commercial angle. Daniel came in and sang on two of the tracks and we got on like a house on fire."

Daniel subsequently invited him to work on the record. "He picked me up in his Jaguar and we drove around for about an hour listening to the early demos, ear-piercingly loud, and I was absolutely blown away. It was very psychedelic, very vocal orientated. There was no 'rock' orientation to anything at this point. They had these beautiful carnival style vocals, and reminded me of parts of the original *Smile* album."

DEMOS & MORE DEMOS?

MO'C: Were those first demos vastly different to the release?

SH: Yes, definitely! At that point they were just Daniel, without the band. Initially Dan wanted me to come on board to help with working up band demos of the tracks. We went to 301 for three days (unfortunately BJB was booked) with Chris and Ben, and with Paul Mac and Julian Hamilton (from The Presets) on keyboards, and did the first actual Silverchair demos. We spent a lot of time working up the textures and feels for

different sections, getting the rhythms and bass lines and grooves right. They were all played live, no clicks. Then we came back to BJB and mixed them here over two days and added a lot of extra stuff, did a lot of vocals and worked out all the harmonies and so on. For me it was very much getting to know the songs and where they were coming from, and getting to know where Dan was coming from.

It was a really inspirational time, and we were constantly referencing those demos throughout the record in terms of the mood and vibe we got, trying to recapture that same magic – and I think in 95% of cases we got it. It's always the case in making a record I think – the excitement of the first time you lay a track down is really important.

WORKING WITH NICK LAUNAY

MO'C: Nick Launay has referred to both sets of demos for this album as being complete (and releaseable) entities. What was your experience of working with Nick?

SH: Nick had a real plan of attack. We did pre-production at Stagedoor in Alexandria; really intense work, breaking down the songs, pulling them completely apart, restructuring the grooves, working bass lines, doing rearrangements, extending sections, shortening sections, developing whole new sections, evolving the best parts of the music and jettisoning others that weren't working. By the end of pre-production we all had a common goal of simplifying rhythms and parts so that everything was really understandable – regardless of how whacky or 'out there' the sounds were. Everyone wanted to make the record challenging, *sonically*, but we all understood that this was a pop record. That was very important in terms of keeping Silverchair on the map. We all understood that the record had to

be pop – it could be challenging on one level, but on a street level it had to be focussed and upfront.

UNDERBELLY BUTTON

Upon arriving in LA, Scott's reaction to Seedy Underbelly differed somewhat from Nick's.

SH: Seedy Underbelly was a very small studio, and we were all kind of like: "How are we gonna do this?" For this record we'd had ideas of grandeur and room sounds, especially after having done the demos at 301 and BJB – both of which have big spacious recording rooms. So we were a bit taken aback by the size of the place. The whole band couldn't even fit into the control room at the same time. But then, upon reflection, I think the size was a positive. We were all concentrating so much on really close, dry, upfront, present sounds because of the space that we had (or didn't have!), that in the end I think it really worked for the record. And besides, I don't think any great records have ever been made without drama or pain or some type of suffering!

MO'C: So you weren't able to record any room sounds?

SH: Not really. They were very close miked room sounds because you couldn't swing a cat in the drum room – the furthest mic from the kit was less than a metre away. But a big part of the drum sound for the record – and we were all excited about it – was a very dry, upfront sound. At no point was there any drum that didn't have tape, tea towels, weights on it – the drums were always completely deadened. We were using different materials to cover them to get a different sound. The snare drum was constantly covered in packing tape and newspaper, while the toms were deadened with tea towels or paper.

“There’s a lot of Jerry Lee Lewis-style playing on *Young Modern*, Paul thumped the hell out of them.”



Right: Seedy Underbelly’s control room and recording space. Far right: The Three Amigos – from left to right: Nick Launay, Daniel Johns and Van Dyke Parks, in Prague.



MO’C: It’s a real departure from the drum sound on previous Silverchair recordings, isn’t it?

SH: Well this is an interesting thing. Even in the demos I was really big on creating more of an electronic, punchy-sounding drum sound, that wasn’t ‘epic’ – but rather, more danceable, tight and upfront. And Ben Gillies [Silverchair’s drummer] also really loved that idea.

MO’C: Were other artists or albums mentioned as sonic reference points for the drum sounds?

SH: Yeah, I think Fleetwood Mac, Bowie, T Rex. But what Daniel was after wasn’t a realistic sounding drumkit so much as a synthetic, ‘designed’ sound, so there was room for an orchestra... at this point we were looking at having Van Dyke Parks with a 70-piece orchestra, and we had lots of vocals in mind and keyboard textures and so on. To have a big drum sound and then try and fit these other elements in... it just wasn’t gonna work.

MO’C: How did you record the drums?

SH: We varied it a lot. We hired lots of vintage AKG 414s and they were used on all the toms. We were using a Beyer M88 on the kick, and we varied the snare mics from Shure SM57s to different cardioids. But Ben Gillies had such an array of snare drums that we were able to change the sound with a change of drumkit rather than a different mic. Ben Lyons, one of Silverchair’s roadies, who was there as a drum tech, did an amazing job too. We’d say, ‘Okay, we need this type of drum sound for this song’, and he’d work for an hour to make the drums work. We’d be in the control room saying, ‘Hey can we try this?’ and he’d work for half an hour and always achieve something very close to what all of us were thinking. He’s a real talent.

MO’C: There aren’t really any heavy, distorted guitars on this record. They seem to have been displaced by Wurlitzer, pianos and organs...

SH: When we arrived we hired an upright piano. And we were going through about two Wurleys a day because Paul Mac played so hard. We also had a Rhodes, which we had to tune

every couple of hours for the same reason. (Nick Launay elaborates: “It was quite hilarious. I mean honestly, if we’d been in any other city we would have been buggered because there just aren’t that many Wurleys around. There’s a lot of Jerry Lee Lewis-style playing on *Young Modern*, Paul thumped the hell out of them. We had a lot of vintage keyboards... In fact the whole room was taken up with keyboards!”)

SH: We went to all the hock shops in LA the first day we arrived and bought the most amazing Farfisa organ, as well as a big custom organ with 15-inch speakers in the front of it – like a big LA ‘rock doom’ organ. We also had a synthetic Hammond. And all of these instruments were plugged into a mixer, which was then sent to three different amps and a Leslie cabinet. We could route the sounds and determine what tone we wanted from any of the keyboards. We could send any of the keyboards to a little amp, to the big amp, we could send it to the Leslie... it was like a little workshop.

TAKES & FORMATS

SH: On *Young Modern* there were usually two to three edits per track and we’d do up to 20 or 30 takes of every song...

MO’C: And then choose a master take and perhaps splice highlights of other takes in?

SH: That’s right. But we had this amazing scoring system happening whereby every take was completely mapped: double ticks, ticks, question marks were all drawn as they were doing the take, so that by the time they were exhausted and we felt like we really had it, we were able to go back and check the Excel worksheets and listen back to the best parts. We’d then do a quick mock-up edit in ProTools, make sure we were happy with it, and then splice it all together in the same fashion on the two-inch tape masters.

MO’C: Which brings us to the recording medium. You were recording onto tape and into ProTools simultaneously?

SH: Yes – after the Studer tape machine the signals were going directly into ProTools, which

enabled us to perform quick edits. After bumping in the spliced tape we’d work on ProTools for the rest of the time. Any overdubs were done through the tape machine and into ProTools – not using tape, just the transformers on the machine.

L.A. MODUS OPERANDI

MO’C: How quickly did you record the album once the setup was established?

SH: I think we were basically doing a track a day – it probably took us about two to three weeks before we had the bed tracks done. Then it was really time to be creative. We spent a lot of time doing keyboard and guitar overdubs – about a month all up on everything including backing vocals and so on. Once we were getting closer to leaving for Prague to record the orchestra things really heated up. Effectively, we all started doing shift work. Nick would come in in the mornings and comp vocals, then we’d turn up a little later and lay more down; Nick would go home, and Dan and I would stay up overnight and keep working on more eccentric things and then go to bed; Nick would turn up while we were sleeping and keep working; Dan would get up and Nick would work with Dan... we were working pretty much 24 hours a day.

Daniel’s the type of person where you press record and he sings and you wonder whether it’s worth doing another take, because there was something so special about that one. And the more you comp the more you feel like you’re destroying something. Most of the time we were trying to figure out what takes to use – they were all so good. It was hard sorting through all those great takes, but hey, someone had to! ■