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American Music Club, CVB, Pedal Steel

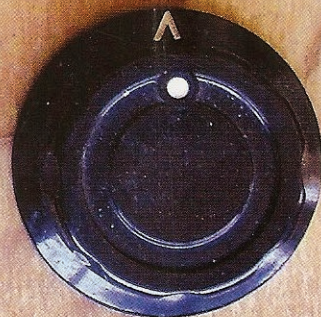
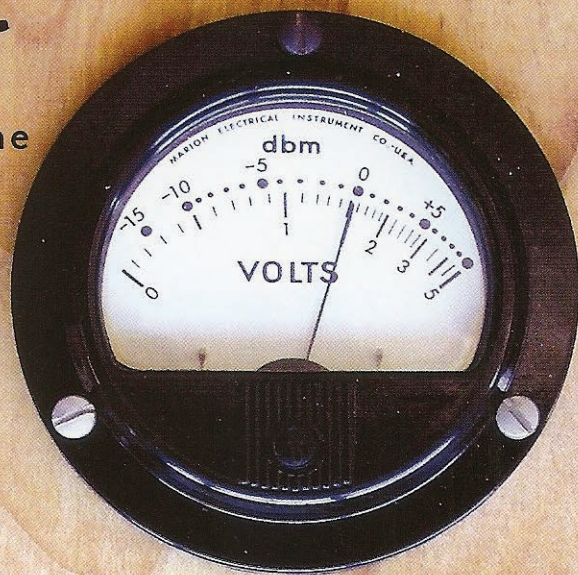
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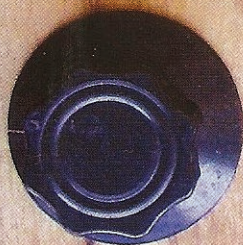
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Bruce Kaphan

Excursions in the Recording Studio

interview and photos by Chris Xefos

"Slooooooowly I turned... step by step, inch by inch..." so goes the old Three Stooges routine, the source of the name of Bruce Kaphan's Bay Area home-based recording studio, Niagara Falls. As a member of American Music Club, Bruce not only brought his voice on the pedal steel into an already unique group, he also helped realize the combined vision of the band through his production and engineering. Through AMC, work as a steel player came along with sessions for R.E.M., Jewel, Sheryl Crow, The Black Crowes, Love and Rockets, Francesco de Gregori, Chris Isaak, Red House Painters and Jellyfish, plus touring with folks like David Byrne. Bruce's album, *Slider- Ambient Excursions For Pedal Steel Guitar*, came out on Hearts of Space Records in 2000 and is an enjoyable, late night listen. In addition to composing for soundtracks and doing mastering projects, Bruce has engineered and produced recordings for Victor Krummenacher, Camper Van Beethoven, Cracker, The Crooked Jades, Jerry Vessel (formerly of Red House Painters), Danny Caron, Real Vocal String Quartet, and Amy X. Neuburg. He's currently engineering an interesting project for Kenny Feinstein, who is doing an all-acoustic version of My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* album. (Jeff Kazor of The Crooked Jades will be producing.) Bruce and I hadn't seen each other in quite a while, so I used this interview as an excuse to catch up on Bruce's current work, and speak to him more about the methods behind his madness... or is it madness behind his methods?



We haven't worked together in a while. What has changed at your Niagara Falls studio?

I have collected some gear. I bought a pair of [Empirical Labs] Distressors. I had used them before in other studios, where I was always kind of under the gun. I would get a sound and go with it. Now that I've had a chance to really study them, I am floored by how great they are. I hosted and sponsored a tube preamp shootout over at Fantasy Studios [Berkeley, CA]. We had about ten different boutique tube preamps there, and I ended up choosing the D.W. Fearn VT-2. I also got a Pendulum OCL-2, which is a tube opto-compressor. It's incredibly transparent. I've been working towards revamping my pedal steel rig recording path, so the Fearn and Pendulum were the choices that I made based on optimizing that.

You also write for Recording Magazine.

The editor [Lorenz Rychner] of *Recording* was in town for the AES Convention. We had dinner, and we were trying to remember exactly how it was that we formed our relationship. I know that the Hearts of Space promotion department was reaching out. [The label's founder] Stephen Hill was encouraging me to try to get a bigger footprint by writing for various magazines. I was interviewed by Lorenz for *Recording* – he did a review and interview about how I made *Slider*, because they thought it was interesting sounding. I mentioned to him, "By the way, if I could ever be a contributor I'd like to give it a try." That was probably in 2001; since then I've been a part-time staff writer. I've done some kiss-and-tells – make a record and then tell how the record was made. I've reviewed gear for them a couple of times, but I think they don't like me as a gear reviewer. Most gear, especially equipment that's on the low end, the stuff that's cheap and contemporary, is not particularly robust sounding to my ear. Personally when I researched the tube preamp that I wanted to buy, I ended up buying the \$3500 D.W. Fearn preamp.

And you've released more solo recordings.

I was working on two albums for a while. I needed to do something in the same vein as *Slider*, to satisfy the people who like that. The second album is *Hybrid*, and it came out in 2010. I also recorded with a quartet – drums, bass, pedal steel and piano, and we released the *Bruce Kaphan Quartet* album this year. We're doing music that's jazz-flavored, like Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*; it's a modal jazz kind of thing with a Pat Metheny vibe. I played along with Miles Davis records a little bit, trying to grasp his phrasing better. With the steel and trumpet, in terms of the longevity of the notes, there's a cool parallel there. That work was inspired by conversations I had with Thomas Dolby, who is the musical director of the TED [Technology, Entertainment, Design] conference. Thomas wanted me to come play, but the selection committee at TED rejected us. The Quartet pieces sort of evolved out of an audition for TED.

Has anything else changed about your pedal steel rig in the last four years?



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Everything. My old steel rig had been sort of cobbled together over the years, based on playing country music and playing with American Music Club. Then I got the *Slider* gig and it worked for that too. However, there was a lot of noise in the system and a little bit of distortion that I didn't like. I decided to really go for it this time and get something that really speaks the way I want it to. I went to the annual International Steel Guitar convention in St. Louis and found a steel there that I fell in love with. Then I had to go through pickup selection. I researched pickups. I bought half a dozen different ones that I put in the steel. With each pickup I tried to record the same things as close to the same way as I could. You know you can't play it and then flip a switch and have a different pickup in the instrument. I finally settled on a pickup. I found a volume pedal, a Telonics FP-100 – you can customize its response curve and I ordered one with a voltage control output. The front end is a hand-built Sarno Music Solutions Revelation Tube Preamp. Then I went for speakers. I ended up going against my JBL fixation that I'd had for years and became an Eminence Speaker endorsee.

Are you still running your steel rig in stereo?

No. Now I record in mono. I also have an [Eclair Engineering] Evil Twin that I use for DI – it's for insurance purposes in case I overdrive my microphone system. I mic it with a Sony C-37 into the D.W. Fearn preamp into the Pendulum or Distressor, depending upon the material. It was a long road...

I've always considered you a very "hi-fi" guy. Listening to your recent work, there certainly are some "lo-fi" elements within them. Do you see yourself that way?

I don't really look at things as hi or lo-fi, necessarily. To be honest with you, I really don't think I have a sound, especially compared to some highly stylized engineer/producer types. I think that's intentional on my part. When I work with an artist, I want to give that artist what they came to me for, which is to make *their* record, not *my* record.

You've always pursued the path towards the highest fidelity, the most isolation, and so on...

I will disagree with the most isolation, but it's a double-edged sword, right? On that jazz stuff that I sent you, that was piano, bass and drums on the floor. The guitar amp was iso-ed, but only for pragmatic purposes. It was the guitar player's album and he wanted to reserve the right to replay his parts. However, it was the piano, bass and drums – acoustic instruments – live on the floor with very little baffling. Same thing with The Crooked Jades record [*Shining Darkness*], that's 100% live on the floor, other than backing vocal overdubs. Fidelity is *incredibly* important to me, when that's what the music calls for. However, like on Victor Krumpfenacher's record [*Patriarch's Blues*], there's the one last track, which we did at my place rather than at Fantasy Studios. That's about as lo-fi as you can get. That's what Victor wanted to do in that instance. If I'm in a situation where I'm trying to capture a room full of musicians and make it sound like what they sound like, to the best of my ability, then fidelity is super important to me. I don't want to be a coloration; other than colors I choose to bring to it, such as heavily compressing things or choosing an all-tube path vs. an all discrete path and so on. If I'm introducing distortion, I want it to have a purpose... and that's the one sentence answer to your question.

You are a very good facilitator in helping people find their voices. Patriarch's Blues is probably Victor's best record...

I think it's his best record too. Those two days were two amazing days, on a human level. Everyone that was there (during the sessions) was a person who had a deep, long-standing personal relationship with Victor and cared very deeply for what he had gone through [the passing of his father and stepfather]. The vibe in that room was intensely human and personal, and I feel that translates on the record. I've decided, in the last few years, that I'm not interested in *just* being an engineer anymore. My feeling is either, "You let me help you make your record on a production level, or find somebody else to be an engineer." Because that's not enough for me anymore. Victor and I, while making the record prior to this one, learned about making snap decisions in the studio, rather than everybody getting an egalitarian voice in it. I hate being on sessions where there's a dictatorial producer. I can't stand it! And I don't feel that I'm *that* producer. I feel like I give everybody the opportunity to be what they can be, as best as they can. However, I have learned how to say, "Let's try it this way and let's do it right now, because the clock is ticking." On Victor's record we tracked for two days and very little was done afterward. Very little

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editing and very little overdubbing. In fact, the most astonishing thing about that record is that all of the lead vocals were live. Victor is intuitive and has become so mature about his music. Our level of trust has grown considerably. When we would get to a particular tune, he would voice to me, "I'm a little bit scared about this particular person on this one, so maybe they need to be isolated in the other room..." We had everyone live on the floor – drums, bass in a doghouse, [Hammond] B3 in a doghouse and an acoustic piano. We had guitar amps doghoused. If you strip down to the drums, there was plenty of leakage, but we were able to do a lot. By and large however, it was a really viscerally exciting couple of days. Deep, intense, human – good stuff.

That dovetailed right into the Camper Van Beethoven sessions [for the collection, *Popular Songs Of Great Enduring Strength And Beauty*]. I'm assuming that was a completely different vibe.

Oh yeah.

They were trying to recreate songs from their previous major label albums. Did they really approach the recording with the goal of making songs sound exactly like the originals?

Yes and no, but we are talking about five people. It was a mixed bag. My instructions from David [Lowery] were, "We want this to be exact, in spite of the fact that my voice is 25 years older, and that's a different drummer..." Jonathan [Seigel] wasn't the violinist on the original recordings on three of those tunes. There were also people in the band who were a bit more anarchistic about their intent. So I had David on one hand saying, "It's got to be exact!" And then I had these other guys saying, "I don't want to do it exact!" It was a balancing act. I knew I was called upon to negotiate between these different voices and try to find common ground, which I think we did. It was an interesting challenge to me because those original tracks are some really singular sounding recordings.

What do you mean by that?

The original producer's [Dennis Herring, *Tape Op* #48] intent – his philosophy about EQ for instance – was extremely singular, as far as I'm concerned. What I was told about the way he envisioned things was that each instrument had a preordained space that it would live in. Therefore the bass guitar's focus would be at 800 Hz, or thereabouts. Then underneath that layer there's the kick drum; the kick drum gets to be what the kick drum needs to be, and there shouldn't any be competition between the two.

So all the instruments were relegated to specific areas in the frequency spectrum?

Kinda. Those recordings also have that SSL stamp on them, which to my ear was unnatural and harsh sounding. I had to challenge myself to pursue that sound, because that's not my thing at all.

Listening to your recordings of those songs, they're definitely not what you usually do.

[Yamaha] SPX90, dude.

Really?

Oh yeah. I put the original recording in my multitrack session for constant reference purposes.

I'm sure Frank [Funaro, drums] was probably playing the tempos of the originals exactly!

Absolutely. Plus we made sure we didn't forget any riffs or parts. When it came to mixdown time I would loop an eight bar phrase, listen to the reference and then adapt my mix to try to make it sound more like the original, as much as possible. I wasn't working on an SSL, so what we recorded was *very* different from the original source material. However, I think we really did capture the vibe of those original recordings, and I think we got damn close to the sonics as well.

It certainly doesn't sound like the 21st century Bruce Kaphan that I'm used to.

Well, the SPX90 was a big part of that. I didn't like them back in the day – I thought they were really grainy and bombastic-sounding boxes. But the kick drum and the snare drum are immersed in that on those original records – gated and short reverbs on the SPX.

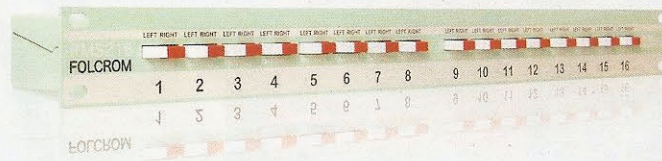
You work a lot at Fantasy Studios.

Studio A, for my sensibilities, is what a recording studio should be – the main studio room that is. I don't actually like the way the control room sounds and I would not want to mix there. I've worked, either as a player or as an engineer/producer, at Sunset Sound, Sunset Sound Factory, Criteria, Ocean Way and Schnee Studio. I've worked in a bunch of famous rooms in L.A. and Miami. I've also worked at a lot of the rooms in the Bay Area.

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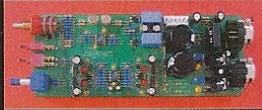
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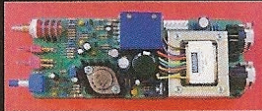
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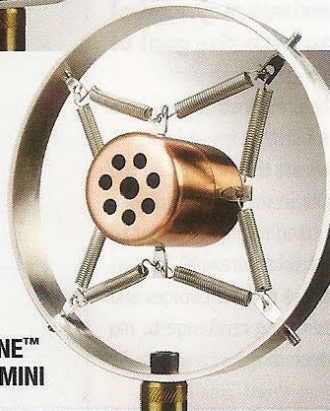
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To me, Fantasy Studio A is the most musical of any place I've worked – plus the gear they have is great. Unfortunately they were a little bit taken advantage of by the previous owner.

Yeah, I heard about some of that situation.

Concord Records basically raided their mic locker before they sold the studio. The mic locker was the deepest mic locker of any studio I've ever worked at. Sunset Sound didn't even have half the mics that Fantasy had. We're talking two [Neumann] M49s, two U 67s, five U 47s, and two ELAM 251s – it was a classic, world-class mic locker.

Although they don't have it anymore?

Well, they still have quite a bit. The other thing about Fantasy is the management. Nina [Bombardier] ran a tight ship, and Jeffery [Wood] now is running a tight ship. It was a super high quality experience, and it still is. It's a really great place to work.

When I stopped by Fantasy during the Camper sessions, I saw what looked to be an old Victrola horn attached to a microphone. Is that one of your homemade things?

It's actually from an Edison Dictaphone, probably made in the '20s. Obviously I did not originate the use of mechanical filters in recording. I have to say that before I ever worked with Tchad [Blake], I did play around with that, but not to the extent that I saw Tchad doing it. My hometown, Niles, California, is filled with antique stores and bars. There used to be one particular antique store that specialized in antique media. They had horns from various old gramophones and dictaphones. I picked up several of these horns and put them to my ear, one at a time, and was listening – the proprietor probably thought I was a Looney Tune. That particular horn that you saw was my fave. I was asked to do a review – DPA makes this miniature microphone called a DPA IMK4061 and it fits perfectly in the end of that horn. I jerry-rigged a little bit of foam in the end. I don't know if you caught it in one of those Crooked Jades tunes? I'll put up whatever vocal microphone I'm gonna use and put the horn right above, or below, and then fuck that up with super heavy compression. It's also a pretty typical thing for me to bring to a basic tracking session. There was one point on Victor's record where we broke down to the horns-eye-view of the drums. It's really fractured sounding and it is so powerful. There's comb filtering involved and weird resonance. It's a way of visiting the lo-fi vibe on Victor's album. It also worked with The Crooked Jades, given that they're an old time band. That was so cool. That's how sound was collected in those early days of recording. Though it's way more hi-fi than that recordings would have been back then.

Do you feel you've built up your skills well over the years?

I feel like, in the last five years, I've really finally learned how to mix a record. As you well know, it's a very complicated thing.

That's possibly why some engineers only mix.

Indeed, and I feel like I've finally gotten it after all these. ☺

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