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Green Pajamas

by Erik 4-A

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For the last 20 years Seattle's Green Pajamas have been cranking out great records. Since their debut album, *Summer of Lust*, in 1984, to their latest releases of *Northern Gothic* and *Through Glass Colored Roses* the Green Pajamas have maintained a strident DIY ethic while not sacrificing quality for it. I sat down to chat with Jeff Kelly and Joe Ross about their accomplishments over the years.

How did you record "Summer of Lust" in 1984?

Jeff Kelly-We recorded it on an old 7" Teac 4-track (it was a very good machine), and we had one, or (maybe) two mics at the most.

Joe Ross- We could only do one track at a time. The basic tracks were mono.

JK-We'd do the drums and bass at Joe's and then take it back over to my house...

JR-We could play loud at my house, but at Jeff's house we played quiet. So we would record the guitar, drums and bass, one or the other; I would play either rhythm guitar or bass depending on the song, then go down to Jeff's house and bring the deck back...

We would record 4-tracks on the reel to reel, do a mixdown to cassette and then copy the cassette back to 2 tracks of the 4-track. By that point we would have two more blank tracks on the reel to reel 4-track. So they were basically 6-track recordings.

What kind of cassette machine did you use?

JK-It was a Teac. Joe still has it too. We could edit on it without a click on the tape. Cassette decks always made a click.

JR- It wasn't just a click, there was no delay. It was powerful enough that it would start up right away. On "Summer of Lust" we do a mix from the 4-track to the cassette deck and there would be a few times that we would be rolling tape, hit pause and then hit pause again, the cassette would start up again and it would be seamless. That was the beauty of that cassette deck.

What mics did you use?

JK- I had an Audio Technica \$30 one. I had a stereo mic too, but I only used one side of it...

JR- You put a 9 volt battery in it and it separates out. It was a Realistic with two things that separate out. It sounded really great. A little later I got a PZM mic from Radio Shack with a little battery pack on the chord. That sounded really cool. If you put it in the center of the room, it sounded natural.

How long did it take?

JR- Almost a month to the day.

How did you do your vocals on "Summer of Lust"?

JR-We did basic tracks at my parent's house (drums & guitar), but then going back to Jeff's to sing.

Did you just put a mic in the center of the room and move in and out from it?

JR-Most of the vocal tracks definitely. Harmony vocals were often done at the same time. If there was a tambourine, or a piece of percussion we would hold it in our hand and when it came to a chorus in order to not waste a track we'd play a tambourine for that part, quit playing the tambourine and then sing again.

When you listen to the solo the tambourine comes on and when the solo quits the tambourine stops and the vocals start again. When we're mixing we gotta quickly adjust the level.

How did you mix the record?

JK-Just on my Advent stereo system in my bedroom, because I was living at home.

JR-There was no mixing board used. The Teac 4-track had an Output volume knob for each track on the deck, because we always set the volume, but we didn't have a mixing board. There was no EQ either. There was also a switcher box with "Left/Right/Middle" switches. Everything was either hard pan left, hard pan right, or in the middle and there was no pan at all. You can definitely hear that. It has that, "Rubber Soul" sound where it was all hard right, or left. That was all The Beatles were doing. I don't think they said "Let's pan it over" they probably just had those three options; Middle, Right or Left.

Did you use any effects?

JR-No outboard gear at all. We didn't own any digital effects (reverbs, etc...). We could echo on the deck [using Simul-Sync & Playback function].

JK- All effects were done as it was going onto the recording. Mainly tape echo.

It was setting one track on Monitor [while recording] instead of in Record and then playing the second track back to the first in Record . We would send the signal from one channel to the other and that would cause the Echo to happen and then record it on the first track.

JR-If it was the last track left we couldn't do it, but if we had a blank track we could do it. It's only one speed, was [7.5 IPS or 3.75 IPS].

What were your Influences?

JR-We both loved the way "Rain", the Beatles song sounded. As a bass player I've always tried to achieve somewhere between, " I am the Walrus" and "Rain". That's what turned me on.

JK- That wasn't hot then, it was [the bands] The Rain Parade and the Three O'Clock.

JR- The Paisley Underground.

JK- There have been so many diverse influences. There is that "Baby You're a Rich Man" sound, where we go "let's get that cool groove." Joe and I were just talking about [the Band] Joy Division and I was playing the bass, trying to make it sound like Joy Division's album "Closer" when we wrote the riff to "Kim the Waitress". There is always a diverse mixture. I was really into the Paisley Underground. When I played my guitar loud, I played in a sort of primitive fashion and almost a sort of droning sound which Karl [Wilhelm] and Joe and I clicked on and led to that sort of Psychedelic Sound.

JR-The Paisley Underground wasn't what we were first hearing, we loved the Paisley Underground [movement], because we could tell their influences were ours and they were doing what we were doing. We loved, "[Our] Satanic Majesties, Request" [by the Rolling Stones], which was also a big influence on the "Summer of Lust" at the time, and the "Baby You're a Rich Man"/"Rain"/"Its All Too Much" era Beatles. We were blown away when we heard the Paisley Underground [movement].

JK-REM were influenced by the 60s. I wasn't influenced by REM. I thought that first album was cool with the Rickenbacker guitars and stuff, but its not like REM influenced us.

JR- I remember Jeff saying, "Wow, Listen to this!" It confirmed the concept that we could do this too.

What made you want to make a record like "Summer of Lust"?

JR-We were jamming a lot that Spring at my parent's house in the upstairs where my drum set was. Karl [Wilhelm], or Frank Walsh, Joe Bauer, Jeff or I both played drums too. We would jam up there. One time Karl, Jeff and I had a ghetto blaster and we just recorded this jam. Jeff was really on fire that day making up songs, and I remember playing it the next day for him and it was the skeletal works of "Katie Lied", "With a Flower in Her Hair" and "In This Castle".

JK-I listened to those jam sessions on the way to work, and thought, "Those are some pretty good ideas." Joe came and said 'Let's make a tape', (because people in those days instead of making CDRs or their own CDs made cassettes and put them out themselves.) "so let's do that." "Summer of Lust" was almost already done.

JR-When I met Jeff the Summer of '83, he already had his whole top dresser drawer in bedroom full of 90 minute cassettes of original tunes that he recorded on his 4-track. It was definitely my idea to market a cassette as a product and the "Summer of Lust" concept.

JK-We got the inspiration.

JR- Cellophane Square [a record store in Seattle] would have cases full of home made cassettes.

Did you run the duplication yourselves?

JR-No, we took it to Horner Audio [in Bothell Wa]. His little logo [for Horner Audio] was on the first batch of 50. The Rocket [magazine] thought we were a Bothell band. Horner listened to the tape, EQ'ed a little bit and made a production master. Any time I called him, he would run them off and I would pick them up. I did that for about three years calling him about every four or five months and picking up another batch of tapes.

What's sort of Band Gear did you guys have? What kind of instruments?

JK-I still have the same Telecaster!

JR- My bass was an old \$40 Lyle (SG copy) bass.

JK- And an old gray Supro amp.

JR-I still have that tube amp.

JK-I still have my Peavy Classic which I still use on stage now. Some of the other "weird instruments", Joe had a sitar...

JR- I had a zither and a bagpipe chanter and we used a recorder...

JK- and a Mattel® electric drum for the more exotic tracks.

JR- A lot of the time we would put the Mattel® drum down and then mic the speaker and use the kick sound from that , then mic the snare drum and hit the drum pad with a stick and then the snare drum so you would have the mic and the electronic drum going to the same track at the same time. Sort of, "Boom-Pap, Boom-Pap". The song, "My Mad Kitty" [off "Summer of Lust"] definitely uses that sound.

What did Tom Dyer do for you?

JK-He had a little studio in his basement in Fremont. Tom was always full of enthusiasm. That's how we came to know him. He recorded lots of singles [for his Green Monkey label], until he had to go make a real living.

JR- From 1985 to 90 almost every Pajamas recording was done at Tom's Studio [TDS sound]. The pre-Tom and the post-Tom periods definitely sound very different.

How long did it take to record "Kim the Waitress", "Peppermint Stick" and "Jennifer"? Any stories you can relate?

JR- There were about 3 sessions and probably about 16 hours for the whole thing. 6 or 7 hour sessions. Maybe 12 hours.

JK- I think it took more than 12 hours for the mixing, the re-mixing and all that.

JR- "Peppermint Stick" (the last of those three recorded) was the first vinyl on the "Monkey Business" compilation. Then "Kim the Waitress" and "Jennifer" were our first 7" single. In 1985-86 putting vinyl out was a bigger deal. Now-a-days CDs are easier though. Putting out a cassette those days was nothin', but It took money to cut vinyl.

What "Studio Records" have you done? Where?

JR- Nothin's professional (not even the Tom stuff). "Book of Hours" was the first one (which I was not on). After that "November" was done with Jack Endino [at Reciprocal], was done really quick & live (but has never been properly released). "Ghosts of Love" which took several years to make. Those three were done with Tom Dyer.

Why did you start recording at home?

JR- Jeff had been recording at home all along. All through the period of recording at TDS, there would be a great Home Demo and we would go and re-record it properly. On some level it is technically maybe better, but another level it was maybe missing something. At home we record when the mood strikes us and Jeff has always been better when the inspiration strikes. Y'know at 3:00 a.m.

JK-The TDS recordings were a lot better sounding in most ways. When the new technology came along, I was able to mix on my own speakers and hear how it sounded in my own room. I always had a problem with that. With "Book of Hours" we always took it to different places and tried mixing it and it would never really sound that good. I get it home and I would always be disappointed. This started back when I did some recording at Crowe Recording Studio [in Seattle], pre Green Pajamas (with the Larch) and I was always disappointed with these recordings. I know how recordings sound here in my home studio and I know how I want my records to sound in reference to other ones. That is one big advantage of doing them at home. I got my first dose of sitting and worrying about time and money at Crowe Recording. We were like, "Jesus, we are really racking up the bucks!" So we hurried and then the engineer who wanted to run the whole show tells us, "Oh you want to do this" and " You want to do that", but that's not really what I want. "I want the drums to sound different", but " No, no, no, you want them like this."

JR- Jeff spent all this money and the drums sound like generic demo band drums.

JK-I got my fill of that very early. Luckily as we got more involved with Tom [Dyer], I could spend hours there and not really worry about it. In fact, I owe Tom hundreds of hours of studio time which he fronted me. But that's because he wasn't just running the studio, he was managing the band too. He only granted all that studio time because he loved the music and he was an artist too. That's why I can't replicate what a professional studio does. People go to recording studios, so they can have an engineer and all the modern stuff to make it sound good. In fact I don't think my records even do now.

JR- It only works if the band has a real relationship with the engineer. It doesn't work if the engineer isn't interested in the band's music.

JK- At Hanszek [Audio], Chris [Hanszek] gives input when we want it and when we want him to do something he does it. He is not like some guy who goes, "No you don't want to that..."

JR- Chris is really great to work with. The Beatles trusted George Martin [their Producer] and he trusted them. They were creating together. It later got to the point with Tom, that we were creating together and Tom wasn't keeping track of hours, it was more like he was a part of the band, because he had an equal vested interest in the band as the manager and as Jeff's publisher.

JK- I also had big arguments with Tom where I would go home mad. At home you can do whatever you want. That's the main reason for recording at home. The technology was the reason we started to do it all at home. I got this little 8-track cassette deck and it was like I can do everything right here and have fun doing it. I am not a technical recorder, I am not a technical musician. I am not the kind of guy who could be a very good (unless it is very spontaneous) session musician, because it takes me a long time to get a track. Sometimes it will take me one take, but sometimes I will spend an hour trying to get a piano part, or two hours trying or something, over and over again. When you are in a studio, you're very self-conscious of this. I remember being in Tom's studio and being so nervous because the tape's running, or [Conrad] Uno's [Egg Studio] place. I had been at Uno's working as a session musician for Eric Lichter, it was much easier the last time, because I was more confident, but I remember feeling like, "They are all watching. They're all waiting for me to do this piano bit." My hands were shaking. It wasn't like I was on NBC TV, it was just Uno, Eric and somebody else watching.

JR- But there's money burning.

JK- It's Eric's money burning and there's something about that role. At home you roll the tape, you're by yourself all you have on is headphones, no one is waiting for you if you do a part over and over again.

How did you learn how to record?

JR- I worked up to it when I started doing something, with Jeff especially, but I did it too before I met Jeff where I would record something, then play that tape back through speakers while playing along to those speakers and then with a new mic record onto another deck. I might do this a couple of times and pretty soon I started to figure out how to do this well.

JK- That's how I learned about tape echo. In fact we used to have the stereo turned up just slightly and we used to stick the Monitor switches up instead of in Record so we would hear the playback echo while we were playing and singing coming out of the speakers. It would make an echo/delay. I got interested in it, despite the fact that I was sort of a low-tech sort of person, I was always fascinated by pictures of the Beatles doing "Sgt. Pepper" in the studio. I could look at that for a long time and think about it all.

JR- The pictures of "Let It Be" of them and what was going on and the towels on the drum set and the microphones. We used to do that after "Summer of Lust" era, we used pillow cases (instead of towels) on our drums and realized that it makes it sound like we have compression. We didn't have any, but it makes it sound like we had. It sounded like the record when we put the towel on the drums.

Tell me about your Home Studio? and your gear? How did you decide to purchase it?

JK- Currently I have 2 Alesis ADATs and a digital reverb which Eric Lichter got for me and a Mackie 1604 board. Tom Dyer came along again when I needed him and got all that stuff for me. In fact when I was thinking about what kind of studio to set up, I was looking at these little digital things that are all in one that are either 8 or 16-track units (like my old Perception [cassette 8-track]). Jack Endino came over one day and I told him, "All I want to do is press buttons. I don't want to think about computer stuff, I just want to hit record." He said, "If you just want to hit record then this is what you need." So I trusted him and got this stuff and it's perfect. Very simple.

JR- Eric Lichter (the Green Pajamas keyboardist) got an 8 track digital porta-studio. Every little thing has got a little menu this big [gestures with hands] and everything is like [makes noises] ditk, ditk, ditk... OK here's reverb, OK here's this and it is like, "Can we pan this over?" "OK," [makes noises] ditk, ditk, ditk... "Here's the pan and pan it over this far" and then [makes noises] ditk, ditk, ditk... We just want knobs. "OK Pan it over to this side, here ya go." We don't wanna have a little [makes noises] ditk, ditk, ditk...

JK- More than that with this system I just can just plug a mic in and hit record. It's so simple it's like an analog tape recorder. The only problem with ADAT is that they sometimes destroy my tapes! That can be very frustrating and it has happened too many times.

JR- If they eat the tape it's Game Over.

JK-It's frustrating. Jack [Endino] told me, "Make sure you back everything up these things eat tapes!" but I don't always have \$20 to get a back-up tape for every recording. So I'm living dangerously and thinking, "God I hope it doesn't eat the tape!"

Have you ever lost anything on the verge of completion?

JK-Most stuff that was damaged or lost has been salvaged. There was one song, spontaneously recorded and the recording was wonderful. I did something I rarely ever do, because I wanted to listen to it. I did a rough mix onto a cassette. I just let everything run. I did nothing to it. It was the song, "Lost Girls Song" [off of "Northern Gothic"]. Just let it run through onto a cassette. Well the next day the tape got ruined. I put it in and it goes [makes a noise] "Crunch!" You go "OH NO!" We tried to get it out and it made it worse. As it turned out that cassette mix was used on that album. That song was written about a book and the author of the book actually contacted us (through Tony Dale of Camera Obscura Records) saying how much he liked the song. A friend of his gave him the album. So this song has this miraculous life to it. I love that mix and it was rough mix, but a rough mix can kinda grow on you.

JR-So the actual CD version was mastered off the cassette.

JK- And it's perfect.

What is a typical Recording Session with the Green Pajamas like?

JR- There is no typical recording session with the Pajamas. Really in the last 10 years Jeff has recorded a song and will call us to come and enhance it with something he wants.

JK-Like "Northern Gothic" [their latest release], I did a great deal of everything right here sitting with my keyboard or my guitar. The "live" Green Pajamas play the music. Sometimes the "live" Pajamas is almost like a cover band, because I do a lot of the stuff. In the old days with "Summer of Lust", Joe and I were fairly equal.

JR-He had all the recording experience that I didn't have, but as a project we spent the time together.

JK- I wanted it to be a band. I wanted it to have a feel to it. With "Kim the Waitress" and "Peppermint Stick" we recorded as a band. Everybody, Karl [Wilhelm] on the drums; with "Book of Hours" and "Ghosts of Love" Karl played drums and we recorded as a band through the end of that "Ghosts of Love" era. In 1997, I started doing a lot more of it and Joe was pretty involved on the early records of that time. Joe was very involved in "All Clues Lead to Megan's Bed" and "Strung Behind the Sun" and stuff. Now-a-days if Laura [Vanderpool] has a song that she thinks could be a Green Pajamas song, she'll come over and play guitar and sing it and I'll finish it. That's basically it. Eric [Lichter] will often record something at home (Because he primarily records everything on keyboards), bring it over here and I will put it on my ADAT system and we will mix it to stereo. Then I'll add bass or add lead guitar or something. His songs are an important element to those last studio albums, because they really put my songs in perspective. I love the balance of having an Eric, or a Joe, or a Laura song mixed in with mine, it gives a little more color. Eric has done some great recordings.

JR- The Home Studio has made it so anyone can record and get pretty nice sounding stuff. A guy like Beck, or Moby or whoever. There is no reason to do in a studio what can be done at home. If you own a studio now you are hurtin'!

JK- If we were going to do a Green Pajamas recording with a "live" version, it would very luxurious and nice to go to a studio to record a band proper.

JR- When we do that we are usually not happy with it. We listen back and go, "The performance is not that good, the sounds aren't that good" and when we are at home we are relaxed, we can smoke & drink and we can just let it roll when we are ready. If something is flawed, let's say that track is buzzing we say, "That's quaint, it's nice. Let's keep it", but if we paid a bunch of money for it then we'd say, "No that buzz can't go out!" When it is at home we have no one to blame but ourselves and if it works on some level we go with it. When we performed a great take, and the engineer (who is the hired professional and is separate from our band) says "Well you'll hafta re-do it we had a buzz going on this track." He is insisting because it is his record on the line now. We maybe would have lived with it at home, He makes us re-do it until the life is pissed out of our performance. So home is where it is at. r

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