

# TAPE OP MAGAZINE

## Peter Visser of Bettie Serveert on Making *Log 22*

by Larry Crane  
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I've been sitting on this interview so long that a new CD, *attagirl*, has already been released. Check out any of their albums to hear the best band in The Netherlands!

### Is *Log 22* the first record you produced for the band?

Yeah. One time, at one point we did a live show with only Velvet Underground songs. [*Bettie Serveert Plays Venus in Furs*] That was the first, "How can we make that into an album?" It was recorded in the Paradiso in Amsterdam, and they had a 24-track machine upstairs a recording the thing. A lot of work. And then we got to Hilversum and there was a guy [Hans Bunt] who we wanted to mix it with. Herman [Bunskoeke] and Carol [Van Dyk] and I went there, and he started off with the drum kit [makes whooshing noise] and the bass ['whom' noise] and the guitars totally soft and vocals in echo and all that.

### On the Velvet Underground stuff?!? [laughing]

Yeah. That's how it starts. And so we said, "Well, let's do it different. Let's turn the drums into like a jazz kit almost." And he said, "You can't do that" Why not, just give it a shot, you know? And finally, after a couple of hours, he really got into it and then we got it the way we want it. I'm still really pleased with the sound of that album. After that, we did the John Parish [produced] album, *Private Suit*. We go through ten years and watching and paying attention - we thought, "Let's do it ourselves." First of all a producer, that's a lot of money, you know and that's a lot of budget, and second, the really horrible thing about studios is it's so expensive and you have to work in the hours that the people tell you from 12 to 12 or whatever. You can never do something in the moment you feel like it, because you have to wait for the drums 20 times over then the bass guitar then the guitars then the vocals. The studio we recorded *Private Suit*, a great studio [E-Sound], it's in Weesp near Amsterdam and they have a lot of that vintage stuff like Moog synthesizers - a lot of stuff. But then, every day after a drum was on tape and the vocals were there and all that stuff, I said, "Well, I prepared some weird freaking keyboard stuff" and there was never any time, or it was never a lot of time to do it and that freaked me out a little bit, because I'm the person who wants to get away from the usual of songs and give them a little edge or weirdness or strange. It was never the time or the place to do that, so that.

### Because the time was so regimented?

Yeah. 'Cause when I said, "I have this part. Can we do it?" "Uh yeah, you got five minutes." What's that all about? The drummer had 20 hours to do it? And without the money, poor guy, so I bought this 16-track machine.

### What is it?

It's a Fostex 16-track hard disk recorder. I don't know any model number or any. So I bought that, and Carol had said, a half year before that, "I want to do a year off. I want to have a break." Then Herman and I said, "Well it's so cool, you're a songwriter and a vocalist, and a guitar player. You can work with anyone." We were kind of scared that she wouldn't get back to us, to the Betties, you know. The people she worked with, that's a country band in Belgium, called Chitlin' Fooks, those people in that band are like so talented, and we are kind of not like in their same building. I bought the thing that looked the easiest to work with. I just want to play. I don't want to read a lot of manuals - the manual that came with that machine was directly translated from Japanese into really horrible English. I was reading it and it was so dry and not fun and, "Oh Jesus". So I figured out how to record simple - just one microphone into one track and another microphone into the next. And then from a to b to c to 16. Then one day Carol came to my place, and I said, "I bought this!" And she said, "What are you going to do with it?" "To be honest, I haven't a clue" So, she said, "How does it work?" "I don't know, cause the manual is like really difficult." So she and I sat together and we figured it out a little bit. And what we wanted to do was just play, but we didn't have songs, because we had a sabbatical. So the trick we did is that well, let's listen to a song that I like. I'm not going to tell you what song. It's from a certain artist. And we listened to it and we said let's try to improve that song and try to change it around. So we played with the chord structure and change the drums. When it went loud, we went soft, and the other way around. And in the end, nobody, 'cause I let a couple people listen to first thing to the CD and to our version, completely, and people said, that's not even a cover. That's not even the same.

### That's great.

And it was a trick to, for the first song. Carol was a lot in Belgium to record, to play with the Chitlin' Fooks band. So what we did is, whenever she came up with a song, or she and I, we recorded her vocals and acoustic guitar and a simple rhythm machine track and then she went off for Antwerp again and then I had like two weeks time for a couple of songs to work on it again. A couple of synths and guitars and I had this Line 6 Pod guitar thing. With any song I played a little game between I and me, I guess. I'd listen to it and I thought well, this sounds a little bit like that genre or that band and then I'd try to like stretch it over the top, in that certain genre. And so there was always like 13 tracks to fill, and that was a lot of fun, because you can do it with the headphones on, at night, with a bottle of

wine, or smoking a cigarette. After a while Carol came back and she listened to it and she was sometimes horrified and sometimes like, "Wow! This is so great!" So the deal was she had to like it and I had to like it, like every little detail and every part of it. If that was not the case, then throw it away - go to something else. We know each other so good that there was a lot of psychological trying to influence the other, "Well, I know you don't like it, but listen, man, it's going to be great." But we were really extremely strict to that rule, thankfully, because we didn't want to have any compromise or whatever. So it has to be what you like and what I like. Herman, the bass player, because the drummer was out, he said, "I'm leaving", so that was the end of that. So I called Herman, and I said, "Well, we're busy doing a demo, right, so you've got to come over and play your bass part." But he was in a school, to study to cook and he worked in a restaurant after that, and he was like, had to get up at 7 o'clock in the morning, get home at 7 o'clock in the evening. Do the children and the house and pay attention to the wife and study and cook for the family. He said, "I don't have any time to do it." So well We had a deadline, because if you don't do that, then you're going to over-sugar or over-polish and I didn't want to do that. Because Carol and I wanted to be like fresh and wild and weird and like us, you know

### **But not over-think it.**

No. Just when it feels good, it feels good, and then don't touch it. So after a couple of months, we had a demo ready and we sent it to a couple of people, like the management and the record company who brought the previous CDs out. And everybody was, "Wow! You're onto something. Don't spoil it if you go to the studio." And because of the demo a certain amount of money, like low-key money came out, and we went to the studio for one week and Carol and I talked about it a lot also with the manager and a lot of other people and they said, "Well, you've got to produce it." And I said, "I've never done that." So I was kind of afraid. I was always kind of big-mouthing, "That album we did a couple of years ago sounds like shit man. If I would have done it blah, blah, blah." I started to get nervous you know. Because it's easy to criticize other people but I thought if I'm going to do it and if I'm going to do a lousy job then I'm fucked you know. Because my reputation of nothing. And so I was kind of scared. Also with the limitation of the budget we had to do all of it in one week, seven days, in the studio. And I wanted to do strings and we wanted to do horns and vibraphone and keyboards, and I had to make sure that the whole band could play live together. I'm not the guy who says, "You've got to do this and you've got to do that." But I had to, you know. So I learned a lot and it was all new to me. And it was kind of weird too, you know, because you say, "I'm the producer and we're going to do what I say." And everybody's like, "Okay." That they accept that so quickly! It was kind of weird for Herman though, in the beginning, because we never had that level of kind of almost boss - it was kind of weird, for him, that I'd say, "Well I'd really like it if you played this way and that part and not that part."

Did you put the demo tracks down and then build around them?

Yes all of them. Yeah. It's the first time that we've ended with the drums instead of starting with it.

### **Was that hard?**

We have good drummers. They had to get used to it. But Jeroen [Blankert], I found him, when I was playing on the sabbatical with another band. Carol found Stoffel [Verlackt] with the Chittlin' Fooks. So the two of them are like so schooled and trained and they can improvise. Because we had a pretty clear mind what we wanted with the drums, they started off drumming and then we said, "Well a little more Keith Moon, can you make it wilder and not like 'tst tst tst'." And they did it.

### **So you did all the tracking in that one week. You didn't have to mix it in that time-frame?**

No, no. Thank god. It was hard work. First the 16 tracks had to go into the computer of the studio and then we had this 24-track tape recorder to record drums because then you have that natural sound.

### **So that had to sync...**

Yeah and that was kind of difficult. And then we wanted to do the violins and the vocals on Pro Tools. The three things had to be together. Then the first day the tape ran out of it and it was one big mess.

### **The tape wasn't running right?**

I don't know what happened but the tape sprung out and it was a big mess. I said, "Let's record the drums for this day on Pro Tools." Shouldn't have done that because we had big a lot of difficulties with the digital sound of the recording of the drums.

### **What studio was all the tracking done in?**

That was in Weesp [E-Sound] which is a great studio. So that was quite an experience but it was the best one.

### **So did you feel a lot of pressure being kind of in charge and then things going wrong?**

On the one hand yes and on the other hand no, because we knew that and it's kind of like patting yourself on the shoulder but we knew that we had a good vibe on the 16-track already and the songs were good because a lot of people listened to it. And we worked at it, at my house, like half a year, like every day almost, except for Sundays or whatever, from 2 o'clock in the afternoon to like 3 or 4 o'clock at night. Every day. It was really great to record it at

home. And that made Carol feel extremely comfortable because there was no people she didn't know. Sometimes when there's other people and there's a lot of pressure, you tend to hold back and now it wasn't. She felt totally at ease.

### **Did you use a lot of vocals from the home recordings on the sessions, though?**

I think, 80%

Really, that's great.

And there is the talk of people in the studio world that you got to use those Neumann microphones. We recorded all of it, like every instrument except the stuff that went through the line six with a Realistic PZM microphone. \$50, not even.

### **Acoustic guitar, vocals?**

Acoustic guitar, vocals. Carol had this thing where she got a lot of [popping clicking noises] 'cause we lost that thing that you put on it, so she found a way to keep the microphone like this and sing. That was the way we didn't have too much of the 'p's and the 't's. And then I had to go like crazy with like the knobs, because we didn't have any limiters or compression or whatever.

### **So you had to ride the levels?**

Yeah. Because I knew, after a couple of times of recording that one song, that with this line she's going to freak out. She's going to scream. And with that line she's going to be almost silent, so I had to adjust that. And the mixer Jan ['Master Jak' De Ryck], he said what have you done. But thankfully he was really great, and he was really into it.

When you mixed it was it all in Pro Tools files or was some tape and Pro Tools and the sixteen track

What happened is that I had my 16-track thing and went into the studio for the recording then on Pro Tools it was like the Pro Tools tracks together with the 16 thing tracks and the 24 analog, so there was a list of like 45 or 50 tracks on each song, and I had to have them in my head, because I had to know, guitar five skip, vocal three and four we're not going to use it. Bass guitar on seven is the second bass guitar that comes in after the first chorus and we have to time stretch that. So it was quite cause when you mix it you see a lot of colors. Like every track is one color, but if you change the tracks, the guitar track that used to be green, is now pink, so I have to know in my head what is on what track.

Did you keep a journal?

More or less, but only with the 16-track. I knew, well drums is the same on every track. Kick on track 27, and with any song it is the same. But it got all mixed up because Pro Tools makes it's own sometimes and it was kind of difficult. But with Jan he was so used to working with that stuff, so. And after the recording in Weesp I made a best of eight tracks and put it on the first 8-tracks of my 16 tracks. Then, 'cause at the time I bought a new guitar, and I wanted to have that guitar on every song. So, ah, I had 8 empty tracks to even try more.

### **So after the tracking sessions at the studio you added more stuff?**

Yeah. It was great.

### **Amazing process!**

It was a BIG project. A really ambitious thing and it could have failed.

You said the drummers were really good, but getting drums to lay over a drum machine or a click track, was that difficult at times, just not getting performances that felt right?

Not really, because a couple of songs we played live totally. A couple of songs we played live with the rhythm track. I talked to the drummers and when they said, well, because I programmed the drum computer at my house, like manually, which is off beat all the time. It's not in sync.

### **Which is not a metronome**

No. So sometimes they said, Well, I cannot do this. I cannot work with it." But in the studio they can make a click track on the spot, so that's what they did and we figured out the type of click track that more or less went with the thing, and then the drummer played on top of it, and then with the mixing in Pro Tools we sometimes....

### **Nudged things a little?**

Tried to move stuff a little bit to make it normal.

That gives you some flexibility. To be able to move them in time.

And we needed it sometimes. Because a lot of stuff I wanted to use on the album, like there was a song called "White Dogs", and I wanted a solo that went from a to z in six and a half minutes without stopping in between or editing. So I studied that solo at my house over the rhythm computer and then I played it when I knew the whole thing because a guitar solo needs to have a story, like a rhythm or a melody line that you can sing along with. Every great solo you can whistle. The studio then, I put it on the 16-track machine and it felt really not good, because it was like on top of the rhythm machine thing, so I didn't like that. I thought, "I've got to loosen it up a little bit." I didn't know how to, and then I thought you know what just, and that makes me feel free, let's drink a couple glasses of wine. So that's what I did. A couple became a whole bottle. When I finished the bottle, I had my headphones on. I remember, it was 3:30 at night. And then I played a whole solo, and I couldn't remember how it went, and I still knew that is like "wa da da" and it was like over the top and like half drunken. So I put the headphones on the table, uh saved it, shut it down, went to bed. Next morning. Umm I thought well, "I did something last night. What was it?" I couldn't even recall almost. And I listened to it and I thought well, the performance is... that was kind of great. I was really pleased with it, because it was totally over the top, but it was like because of my alcohol thing, it was like out of rhythm and then, even with the drums and the bass playing live over it, it became a whole different story. So Jan had a lot to do with like moving parts to keep the track but to put it in time more or less like a sober guy would have played it.

### **But keeping the wild part**

Yeah. That was really fun. Another thing was that a friend of mine had this little thing, a box, and there's a couple of hundred violins or trumpets and stuff in it, and then with the cable you can play it on your keyboard.

### **It was like a module**

Right. And that was the song "Have a Heart" and Carol and I laid down the acoustic and the rhythm machine and the vocals, and I wanted to go off, like the usual thing we always do, so I thought, horns, that's what it's going to be. So there was a trumpet thing in it, and my keys are - if you press loud, then there's another sound, and if you press softly And it was really great cause if you pushed the button like really heavy then it was like [whooshing sound] and it sounded really organic. So I tried to start playing with that. And in the end I had a saxophone player and a trumpet and something else. three or four parts like extremely free jazz, against each other like, and then Carol came back from Antwerp and I was, "Well, listen to this" and she was like listening to it and she like threw away the headphones because it was in a different key, out of tune, and she wasn't pleased with it. And I was like, "Oh damn" because I was extremely happy with it. Totally free jazz. And then she said, "Well, I like the idea but it has to be in tune or in the key that the song is in." And I said, "I don't know" because I don't know how to play keys. So we figured it out, and then we put pieces of tape on the keys that I was allowed to use.

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