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Summer at Shatter Creek From Headgear to Headphones

by David Galvez

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People never stop surprising me. A couple of years ago, a neighbor of mine came over to my house and handed me a record he'd been working on. I hardly knew he played music. He never talked about it. I was surprised that this guy I'd been living down the street from for the past year or so had made a record. I was even more surprised that it was good. I was more surprised than that, when he told me later that he'd done the entire thing himself. Two years later, and Craig Gurwich, a.k.a. Summer at Shatter Creek, is set to release his second full-length CD, *All the Answers*. I sit down with my neighbor to chat about the new album, his home studio (Liberty Canyon) being robbed, and a little dental history.

How'd you get into recording?

I was playing in bands, and a friend was doing a compilation and gave me his 4-track to borrow to record something, and I thought it was cool, so I bought one. I think I used it three times then I put it away. I couldn't make it sound good, so I just gave up. But then a few years later I moved to Portland, and my friend Steve, who's in The M's, came to visit me there and ended up sleeping on my floor for three months. He had just finished recording school, and we ended up spending a lot of getting drunk and messing around with the 4-track in the basement.

What made it different than before? What'd you learn?

Before I didn't know how to get good sounds, or conceptually what it meant. But just really thinking about things, and messing around with recording, I started to realize what it meant to sound good, and that any instrument, or voice needs a certain amount of space from the microphone to get a good sound. So I started backing off a little, not swallowing the microphone when I sang, and it moving it a bit away from the drum kit, and everything started to sound better. I decided to take a kind of basic approach - keep it simple, make it quick, and have fun. The first Summer at Shatter Creek recording came from that time, a four-song cassette.

So then what?

So after that first four song tape, I really started to understand recording a little, and I started to get excited by it, and then when I settled in Los Angeles after moving around a bit, I decided I wanted to make a record, just to see if I could, and I figured I'd just do my best, with what I could afford, and to write the best songs I could, and come up with parts that were fun for me. That's how the first Summer at Shatter Creek full length came about. It was just to see if I could do it.

That first record was a real learning experience then, huh?

Definitely. That album was recorded on a Tascam 388, the old 1/4" 8-track, which I got for \$100. Since there were only eight tracks, and I didn't want to bounce anything that meant being really creative. I was just learning how to record and didn't really know what I was doing anyway, recording the drums on one track, and doing stuff like singing my lead vocals while playing a glockenspiel and tapping on a tambourine with my foot. I would never do that now!

Yeah, that'd make it a pain to mix if you wanted to change how one of those elements sounds.

I wasn't thinking about that sort of thing, I just wanted to get everything in there.

You play all the instruments on all your records. Was your family musical?

My dad plays piano, but when I was growing up we used to yell at him to play quieter so we could hear the TV better. So no, we weren't any different than most families. But in my elementary school we all had to take a music class, and my teacher asked me what instrument I wanted to play, and I said

saxophone. But I had horrible teeth, and when I told him I wanted to play sax, he said that I couldn't because of my teeth. After my teacher told me I couldn't play sax, he asked me to try singing a little, and I did, and from then on he made me sing solos in all the school assemblies, and my parents always made me sign up to be in choir after that. And they made me try out for the high school musicals, which was a mixed bag. They were fun to be in, but I really can't stand musicals.

Me neither. They're so over the top. So is that when you started playing an instrument?

I'd tinkered around on my dad's piano a tiny bit growing up, and I took piano lessons for a couple months when I was thirteen, but I never practiced and hated the lessons. I didn't start playing guitar until I was 19, and that was the first instrument I really took to. And then when I moved out to L.A. about five years ago I didn't know anyone and had a lot of free time, so I signed up for piano lessons and practiced non stop for a year. I was pretty determined, and since I was older, I really enjoyed it. Everything else I just learned along the way.

Drums too?

Yeah, there was always a drum kit lying around somewhere, and whenever I'd go see bands I'd inevitably end up watching the drummer. I learn well by watching.

You went through a musician's worst nightmare last year, having your studio robbed, how'd that affect you?

That was the worst. It really took the wind out of my sails for a while. When it happened I was working on the artwork for the first album and was bummed that I had to redo it all because my computer was stolen. It just really sucked. I still go into music shops to check and see if any of my old stuff is there. Especially my bass, I really liked that bass.

How did all of this mess with your plans for *All the Answers*, your new album?

I really didn't know what I was going to do on the record anyway, so I'm not sure it messed with it at all. After the robbery I kind of had to work with what I had and I just borrowed everything else or did without. Like my guitar amp was stolen, so I just used my Danelectro Honeytone when I needed an amp.

The one that runs on a 9-volt?

Yeah. I think that thing sounds pretty good. Use what you have.

Good mantra. So did you record *All the Answers* on the 388?

No, it was time for me to move on. My ideas started to outgrow the Tascam, I wanted to try something new, so I got a Roland VS 1880 digital workstation, and the record was made on that. I also got a Universal Audio M610 pre amp and a Lawson LP 47 tube microphone around the same time. It was a big step up.

The album definitely sounds bigger, seems as if you're not lo-fi anymore.

Some people would think I'm still lo-fi! I think it's more like mid-fi. I aspire to be hi-fi one day.

Still, you've recorded everything in your garage. How'd you turn that into a studio good enough to record in? Was it expensive?

Not for me it wasn't! When I first moved to L.A. I bought a drum kit and then immediately put up flyers and answered ads for bands looking for drummers. I just wanted to meet people. I ended up trying out for only one band, and we played together a few times before they deemed my skills unworthy, which was probably true. They were a couple and we became good friends. They'd made their garage into a studio by putting up drywall, insulation, and a drum riser. They even had air conditioning in it. But it was tiny, something like 8X10 ft. One day they called saying they were moving to New York and asked if I wanted to take over their apartment. It was \$400, came with the studio, a private yard, and it was in a great part of L.A. [Silver Lake]. It was perfect. I'd already bought my 388 and a few other things but I just didn't know where I was going to use it. So I moved in and started recording.

That's amazing. It sounds as if it were meant to be.

It does. Getting that garage was a true gift. Sometimes I wonder if I didn't have that studio if I would have even made a record. I guess it was fate or something.

Yeah, it seems inevitable. How come you never go into a regular studio to record?

I have recorded in studios a few times, and I like it, but I just can't afford it. When I start recording I don't usually even have any finished songs, so I'm always starting from the ground floor. Doing it that way it would be super hard to get a band together, and I just really enjoy recording at home and playing everything.

Let's talk about what's in your studio. Do you have any favorite equipment?

I really like my Space Echo a lot. I use it a bunch on vocals and guitar. I also have a piano from the 1800's that was just left in my previous apartment, which is cool. But you know, I really don't have much, mostly just the basics. A couple guitars, my Rhodes, some pedals... I have one keyboard, a Casio. Not too much in there.

You'd never know it by listening to your records.

I guess so. I never think about it. I'm pretty happy with what I have, although it would be nice to get a compressor.

You don't use compression at all?

Well I mixed the record with my friend Bruce [MacFarlane] in Pro Tools and he has some plug-in compressors that we ended up using, but I don't use compression when I record. At least not yet.

So you mixed in the computer? Did you have to transfer everything over into Pro Tools?

Yeah, and it was a pain. I didn't decide to mix it with anyone until I was finished recording, and then we had to transfer everything into his computer two tracks at a time. We spent three full days doing that.

Yuck. How'd you like mixing in Pro Tools?

I liked it enough that I bought an Mbox to use with my laptop. I like recording in the computer - it's pretty fun. I do get sick of staring at a computer screen, though.

Let's talk about your live show. I've seen you play about five times, and you always play solo. Why is that?

Well it's a two-piece now – Emmy [Maslich] plays drums. But I just wanted to figure out a way I could do a live show myself, which would be interesting and cool, and still be full sounding. So I modified my Rhodes, added some spaced out effects, a built in light show and a Boomerang live loop sampler, which I use for beats and background vocals. There's one song, "Structure", that I build in front of the audience that's almost entirely vocals.

That song is cool. So did you add a drummer because it was time for a new live show or were you just too sad and lonely out there on the road?

I did three tours by myself, and there are some long stretches of road, but the live show just evolved, and I started to want more sound, and just someone to be up on stage with me to play with. So when Emmy came up to me after a show and said she wanted to play drums, I was game. The whole process seemed very natural. I guess it was all about timing. I was ready for more, and she wanted to do it. I just try to let things evolve naturally and keep an open mind. You never know what might happen. r

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