

TAPE OP MAGAZINE

The Microphone! with Phill Elvrum by Bryan Bingold

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An article on Phill's recording adventures with Dub Narcotic Studio in Olympia, Washington, will appear in an upcoming issue of Tape Op.

How did you first get into music in general and then a skill or a love of recording?

Elvrum: Well, I grew up in this town called Anacortes - it's a few hours north on this island. In high school I was pretty swept away by the grunge movement and I hold that deep in my heart. I've actually been rediscovering grunge lately, but during high school there were these bands in Anacortes that were not famous, but similar to Nirvana. I got this sense that people in my town could play music in the same arena as MC Hammer. It just made sense that kids my age would play in a band with me after school. We went to Seattle and recorded at Egg Studios for \$600. It was an amazing experience, because it was so foreign - what all that equipment was. I was just the drummer, so I didn't say anything. The guy just knew what he was doing. 'Wait - to mix you have to unplug all of those things and then plug them all in to there? What's going on? What's that weird tape? That tape isn't like a normal tape it's all small!' But later in high school I started working at this record store in Anacortes and a friend got a hold of this reel to reel 8-track, some Tascam home recording thing. I setup a makeshift studio in the back of this record store - I guess I played around with some four tracks before then - I just sort of figured it out. Through that figuring out, how to record, layering tracks, I also taught myself how to compose in that way. How to play simple parts on different instruments because I wasn't really skilled at any instruments, but through necessity, making up an accompaniment part to each thing. I developed it I guess.

An acquaintance with a whole bunch of different instruments?

Yeah. I mean the songs back then were so basic and simple. The guitar part might be super simple, because it was probably the only thing I knew how to play on the guitar at the time, but the

fact that a song needed those parts made me learn those parts on many different instruments. Like I wanted a flute thing, and I didn't know how to play flute at all, but I knew three notes because they were the guitar line for that song. I really like discovering instruments through necessity. Not really knowing how to play it, but faking your way through it.

So you worked with the 8-track in the record store and you joined D+ and you guys came up here soon after?

Yeah. Pretty much the first time I came to Olympia was with D+ to record. But already in Anacortes, I was doing the Microphones, on that 8-track, doing all the instruments, collaborating with my friends and putting out tapes from a label up there.

Just listening to the Microphones, there is a definite core of grunge to it'

Yeah!

But on top of it, you have a strange sense of '60s melody Did you get that from your parents' record collection or from the record store you worked at?

My dad used to make my sister and I mixed tapes of the Beach Boys and the Beatles when we were little, but I went through this whole Beach Boys phase - of course, everyone probably does that. I remember a specific night, recording in Anacortes, where I did a vocal harmony where I went 'Aaaah' instead of saying words on top of other words. It was 'wow this really changes the texture, I've got to explore this more.' Then I got really into working with thick harmonies in that way. Just listening to the Beach Boys music and hearing how they use that. I don't know. I was also really into Phil Spector, of course, and would think about recording... especially in here where all the equipment is really old. I always wanted a book that tells us specifically what they did to get those crazy sounds. I just want 'then they placed the U-67 in a bucket and had 45 people singing.' I've heard so many rumors about crazy studio things, I just want to read about them. Like those Beatles log books - they're pretty explicit, so it seems like they are written down somewhere.

With the space you guys have here, it might be a hassle, but you could get 40 musicians in here to get the Wall of Sound.

Oh yeah, it's tough because it's a small town, there's not that many people that live in Olympia. I've done a lot of things like

getting people to come in and all do just one thing. But most of the recording I do here is one thing at a time, though I've done one song where there's a bunch of people playing all the instruments, but it's really not necessary now that we have the 16-track.

Have you've worked with any digital recording equipment?

Not really, just in editing and mastering a couple of CDs, and then I recorded one song at Yo-Yo Studio over at the Capitol Theater, but that's ADAT. I've guess that I've played around with it at people's houses just briefly. I don't know. I'm not into it at all, I'm kind of a purist.

In the Microphones, what's with the love of the Tympana?

Well, that sound of a huge powerful blast, in any form, like a big bass drum or an amp falling over. That sound represents a really concise and powerful punch that I really like to use. It can be used orchestrally for swells, but also that BAM! Distort it a little bit and keep it really low. I've been working for years on designing this bass drum. Going on tour with this bass drum on the back of a semi-truck. Maybe made out of a grain silo' like 12 feet across. Just get a bunch of cow hides and sew them together and stretch them and hit it with a baseball bat. Have that on stage with a guitar, bass and a singer, like those Taiko drummers in Japan - I love huge drums like that.

The shockwave would just floor the audience. You could sell tickets to be inside the drums when you hit it, providing ear protection.

Oh yeah, or hook it up in some way that the drum is so big that it's also your touring vehicle. It was so big you just got inside it and rolled it down the street, because it was too big to fit on the back of any car, so it had to be the car.

'We can't book you here anymore the drum's too big.'

'The building doesn't exist anymore, three people died last time, please stop playing your drums.' [laughs] Yeah, my plan was to get some land in North Dakota, because I heard land is really cheap there, and just set up this drum. There are all these contraptions I had designed, like pulleys and stuff, because even the batter would be too heavy to swing, so it would have to have all these counterweights and pulleys. Get a cymbal that is like 30' in diameter.

Get the guy from Octant to help you out with that.

Yeah I wonder if he does science fiction.

Have the people flock to you. Well they wouldn't have to'

Yeah I mean the idea is if you were within a mile of it you would die. I mean the houses would be flattened like atomic bomb footage.

But to balance the sound out on stage, you would have to have a PA science hasn't invented yet.

Yeah it probably wouldn't work, but it's a nice dream.

Have you had any technical training in recording or electronics?

I moved to Olympia for Evergreen, and I took this one class about recording, but I wasn't into it at all. It was all about making sure that the dimensions of the room were right so all your frequencies would be precise. Everything that this room and studio stands for is totally the opposite of that traditional way of recording. I'm really into making it sound as fucked up as possible. It seems like Calvin and other people have recorded bands in a more traditional way, like putting a regular mic on a regular guitar amp and record it playing regular chords. So it's possible to do that here. I guess it's not possible to get the type of isolation that they taught me at Evergreen. That was the thing about that class: isolation was the most important thing in recording. Making sure that the guitar didn't bleed into the drums, but the whole history of recording was blending everything together. Letting the sound merge in the air naturally and then going into the microphone rather than merging electronically in the mixer. It seemed way more natural to me, especially in a room like this where there is so much air for it to get mixed up in. Just as a rule of isolation, I mean ruling out the idea that it could sound good with a lot of drums in the vocal mic, maybe it would sound good, you know?

So with the Microphones, do you record the basic tracks yourself and then invite friends to overdub?

Yeah, a lot of times I could do it myself. I'm pretty much always playing the instruments and then a couple of my friends will help out with singing the harmonies.

Do you recruit them to play live?

Sometimes - lately my friend Mira and I have been playing and touring together. I recorded her record the same way the Microphones did, going a song at a time. Just doing the whole song instead of doing the assembly line. Just fleshing out the

songs and each section on its own, independently.

Have you've done the assembly line style of recording?

Yeah. Right now this other band that I play drums in, Old Time Relijn, we're working on some new stuff and we are kind of doing it the assembly line way, and then with D+ Calvin recorded us that way. It's more efficient to do it that way. But kind of the way I make up songs is through recording them. As I record them I get more ideas and it gets fleshed out that way. I don't know what is going to be on each song, and it helps to record one song at a time so that you don't get confused.

So how long does it take to record an album's worth of songs?

Lately I have had a lot of songs come out of me. I don't know why they choose to come out when they do.

On *Tests* did you used a lot of sound collaging?

On *Tests*' that CD was collected for a couple of years' worth of stuff from Anacortes, mostly. There's a whole song on that record which is just me sampling from a bunch of other records. I've read reviews where they say 'He uses found sound recordings and field recordings,' but actually it's a car driving by when I'm recording the vocals, or the wind or a siren. There's a song on my last album where there's this amazing wind whistling across the windows. It was doing it across the hall one night and I just ran over there and recorded it, it was incredible. Mostly, though, it's just actually things with this room. I really like when songs have that other texture. Not just an instrument playing a part, but when a car is driving by, I mean here it is inevitable because the street's so loud and the windows are so thin. Seagulls live on this roof as well, so there are a lot of seagulls on the recordings from here.

Have you ever altered a specific instrument to get a unique sound from it?

I love the sound of muting the strings on a piano. In fact I just got that piano this summer, so I haven't had time to experiment with it, but I'm excited to. It's a piece of crap piano, I got it for \$200. It's really quite trashed, that's why I have to play it really loud. It doesn't sound very good, but it is a piano. I mean it sounds like a piano, so that's good. I'm hesitant to get it tuned because in the winter it's so cold in here that it will just go out of tune again. I'll just wait until the summer to get it tuned and use it a bunch. I do want to record vocals on this old vibrating chair that we have in this corner.

How much time do you spend in the studio?

I spend days here. Well the power has been out in my house for like two weeks. Something major happened, but my landlords went to the Olympics, so I've been cooking and pretty much been living here. I made myself a little nook in this corner. K leases this whole building. Not that I'm always recording - I mean I have also made a book of sheet music for my newest album. I wrote out all the songs' parts, each instrument's part in sheet music. I can't really read sheet music, but I kind of figured it out roughly for this project.