

I COVER THE WALKABOUTS

by Jack Tremaine

One of the few things that got me through my time inside Men's Correctional was my goddam Walkabouts cassettes. Songs of hope and dreams, squashed under a boot heel. Hell, I related. No, Jack Candy was not based on my story, but I have known the band a bit. And when I got sprung, there was no finer way to pass a Saturday night in Chico California than sip frosty lemonade and go see my favorite local band, Vomit Launch. The bass player was this guy Larry. Later on he ended up getting into recording, and most recently engineered the upcoming Walkabouts release, **Ended Up A Stranger**, after practicing for a few years on the likes of Elliott Smith, Sleater-Kinney, Quasi, the Go-Betweens...

He's also started a great magazine about creative recording called Tape Op (if you're reading this you can check it out – later, of course – at www.tapeop.com) and even with the wild success of his own Jackpot Studio in Portland, Oregon, and the Tape Op dynasty, he still takes my calls. As I said, we go back. I couldn't resist asking him about this upcoming Walkabouts record. Here's the skinny according to Larry--

Your association with the Walks goes all the way back to your time in the band Vomit Launch?

I met the Walkabouts in the Summer of 1986 via mutual friend Rory Cox. We played with them at a house party in Chico and a show at the Mabuhay Gardens in San Francisco. Of all of the bands that we played with, the Walkabouts made some of my favorite music, plus we all became pretty tight as friends. Since moving to Portland I've had more time to hang out with them, which is great too.

*Was the recording and playing you did for the Chris Eckman solo record **A Janela** the first time you did any studio work with members of the Walks?*

I hung out at Avast! once to watch Peter Buck lay down tracks on **Satisfied Mind**. I wasn't working, though!

*For the benefit of Walkabouts fans who will be hearing **Ended Up A Stranger** in a couple of weeks... to your ears, how does it fit in so far with the rest of the band's catalog? A continuation of the widescreen, almost cinematic approach of **Nighttown** and **Trail of Stars**?*

Ahh, so that's the title! I think it's a little less cinematic. More like a cross between **Train Leaves at Eight** and **Nighttown**. My first concern was that it wouldn't be as complex to record as I imagine **Trail of Stars** was. I'm no Phill Brown! Sometimes it's funny, because I know all their old songs really well, and I'd bring up "Linda Evans" or something and they barely remembered it!

Rumor has it you played bass on a song ("Lest We Forget") on the new record...

Why yes I did. Actually Joe and I both do, but I think the song title changed since tracking. Joe didn't have a concrete bass line planned out and when I started suggesting an idea for it he handed me the bass and said, "You do it." I laid down a very simple root line and then Joe heard what I did and put a couple of tracks of beautiful high parts on top. It wouldn't have happened the same without both of us there. I was really honored to play on a song.

It's getting pretty common these days for bands to have one person engineer the basic tracks, and have someone else come in to mix the record. Was your approach any different knowing the performances you were recording were going to be mixed by Phill Brown?

I emailed Phill and asked him some specific questions about what he'd like.

He said I did a good job and that the tracks I laid down gave him plenty of options. That's a very nice thing to say! I wouldn't say I did anything really different than if I was gonna mix, but I did want to leave some choices open to see what he would do. I really like the mixes but I only have an unmastered copy that Phill sent me. The vocals seem a tiny bit loud, but you know what, I always say that when other people mix stuff I tracked!

Do you prefer recording the songs, or doing the final mixes? Or rather, is there one facet of the process you particularly enjoy?

I like getting paid, but beyond that I do enjoy getting creative with micing during live takes and also shaping the song with overdubs. Mixing, to me, is fun but sometimes too much of trying to please some silly band who can't hear the forest for the trees.

In addition to being a damned gifted tunesmith, Chris Eckman is a pretty strong personality. How did you find working with him? Hell, Larry, what I'm asking is... who ran the damn show?

Who ran the show? Chris by far. He's rather headstrong but usually his instincts are correct. I felt I was in a co-production situation with him and the band, but you never know how credits will read. And I usually forget to ask.

I felt like I brought a bit of ease to the sessions, in that I've been friends with everyone for years (except for Joe, who I got on with right away). I'm usually joking around a lot and pretty relaxed in the studio and I think it was appreciated.

*Bassist Joe Skyward, who joined for **Train Leaves at Eight**, played bass on **Ended Up A Stranger**, his first recordings of original Walks material. Joe's known mostly for his longtime stint in the Posies. Did he bring any of that power pop sensibility into the mix?*

I think Joe is an amazingly talented bass player, with a very solid groove and a great tone. I pay a lot of attention to bass players, for obvious reasons, and saw him do stuff I'd never imagine or play. As far as power pop... I wouldn't say he brought any, and that the Posies songwriters are the ones responsible for that.

Any personal favorite moments during recording? Performances, happy accidents, bizarre behavior?

I enjoyed recording Mary Lorson's piano and vocal overdubs as I'm a big fan of her work, and really enjoyed hanging out with her... I liked that we were close to food and restaurants... We put a PZM mic on top of the open grand piano strings for some song but I don't know if I can really hear it...

Bizarre behavior would certainly refer to Terri who wouldn't stop talking about sports. Ask any Walkabout what, "Why can't we just nail this fucking thing?" means!

Anyone get your vote as Most Underrated Walkabout?

Curt Eckman? No really, I'm sure a lot of people look to Chris and Carla as the leaders, but Glenn has been in the band a long time and has amazing ideas, great chops and is so fun to work with - very funny, and joking all the time.

What's the secret to the Walkabouts Sound, Larry?

Minor chords?... I believe the band has a knack for playing Chris' songs with a grand sense so that the pieces feel very open and wide. This gives a lot of room for the lyrics, which on this record are more oblique than most of his work in the past.

Every time I hear the opening cut "Lazarus Heart", for a few seconds I think, "Tindersticks"...

I used to own a Tindersticks record but grew bored and sold it. I was thinking Scott Walker, or even Ocean Rain!

You also produced Elliott Smith. Do you think Elliot Smith could take Chris Eckman in a thumb wrestling match?

I co-produced a couple of songs with Elliott. He's a great songwriter, obviously, but a real wimp when it comes to thumb wrestling. Besides, I've been friends with Chris longer, so I'll take his side!

*If you didn't know them, would you assume by hearing **Ended Up A Stranger** that the Walkabouts are an American band?*

The vocals give it away. American. Plus, beneath the surface all of Chris' songs are very much American storytelling at its finest. There's a certain Western feeling, like settlers in a land they don't know that well, that runs through Chris' writing.

Previous to this new batch - any favorite Walkabouts songs?

Rebecca Wild. Last Train to Mercy. Cyclone. The Stopping Off Place... many more that I can't pull off the top of my head. Actually, that song "Death at Low Water" on Life Full of Holes is one of the best

tunes out there.

*Not including **Ended Up A Stranger**, a favorite Walkabouts record?*

Setting the Woods on Fire. It was the first where the band really gelled, and it was recorded better.

Back when Vomit Launch toured northward and played in Seattle, you crashed with the Walks. Were they good hosts? And what kinds of snack items did they serve?

I remember Carla cooking us all breakfast when Curt and Grant were getting bailed out of jail to play a gig in 1987. And it was good food, too. Then we stayed up until dawn that night.

Let's stop beating around the bush and get to the question everyone is asking. What's Glenn Slater really like?

A lot of people ask me this... and I really don't know. He's kind of an international man of mystery. I like his car...

Was everything pretty much mapped out musically when you began recording the basic tracks, or was there a lot of room for trying different ideas out, and having it all on tape to 'sculpt' the mixes from later on?

The arrangements were pretty much set. I had input about how to play them, etc. Some parts changed as we got to overdubs. And it was a joy to hear what overdubs got added. Some surprised me. The band had a Mackie 24 track digital recorder and we dumped rough mixes onto it. They added tracks at other studios, and then Phill synced it up to the 24-track reel for mixdown.

How much talking with the band did you do before recording began? Listening to demos, that kind of thing?

I drove up for a day and sat in on rehearsal and took notes. That helped a lot for me to see what the songs were like and really just to hang out for a day. We saw (the movie) Driver 23 that night, which I believe bonded everyone.

A really cool thing about this upcoming record - and the Walkabouts in general, especially nowadays - is that all the songs don't sound stamped from the same goddam sonic cookie cutter. The moods swing wildly, and so do the sounds. Each song doesn't have the same drum sounds, the same guitar tones, etc.

Was this a conscious decision, to give each song a distinct textural identity?

Thanks for noticing! We tried different little things to change drum sounds and feel. Moved mics about, etc. A lot was down to which room/overhead mics Phill chose too.

Did any songs get tried in markedly different arrangements, tempos, feels... or was the band pretty much set on what they were gonna go for even before the first reel of tape rolled?

I think some did change, but very slight. I may have pushed a few tempos a tiny bit one way or the other. It's always a group decision.

Any songs that you are particularly fond of not fit onto the final record?

Ask them about the "reggae" song. I hope it sees a new life somehow. It wasn't really happening and there were plenty of great tracks. I'm pretty vocal if I don't like something!

It's strange... sometimes I think of Chris Eckman's songwriting as equally influenced by Townes Van Zandt and by Mark Hollis... and you'd think that'd be an unlikely pair! I love hearing a songwriter who embraces the storytelling tradition and also thinks in terms of soundscapes, not just what a "rock band" can do.

Yeah, right. At least he doesn't drink as much as Townes, and is a lot nicer than Mark...



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