



A SURFING SAFARI



The story behind the recording of *Delightful Rain*

Delightful Rain is a 'celebration of Australian surf music', recorded over a two-week period on location at the Freshwater Surf Life Saving Club on Sydney's Northern Beaches. For the musicians involved it was all good times and good vibrations.

Text: Mark O'Connor & Christopher Holder

► Say, one morning, you were moved by the spirit – swept up in a wave of religious fervour, you might say – to record a choir of monks performing a Gregorian chant. How would you proceed? Would you book a studio and send a bus to the monastery to pick up the monks for a recording and overdub session? Or, would you assemble a rig and record the monks in their environment – soaking up the atmosphere of the chants as they resonate throughout a glorious gothic cathedral? Surely the decision is obvious – giving the music its sense of place and capturing authentic atmosphere is far more desirable.

There is another religion in this nation girt by sea, of course – surfing. And surf culture has its own hymns, and recently a few of its disciples embarked on a project to record them in the nearest thing they could find to a 'cathedral' – the Freshwater SLSC. The project is *Delightful Rain* a 'celebration of Australian surf music' and itself a reference to a lyric in Pete Howe's song, *I'm Alive*, from the soundtrack of *Morning Of The Earth* – "I spend a lot of time inside the world of delightful rain". An appropriate description of surfing, and the project's producers figured it also seemed to be a perfect description of surf *music*.

SURF CLASSIC

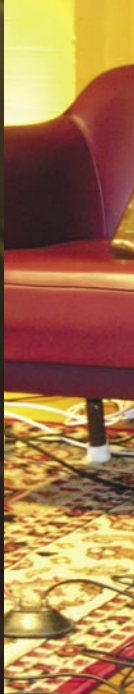
To accommodate the recording, the surf club's Freshwater Room was transformed into a temporary studio, an exercise pulled together by recording engineer, Mick Wordley.



The morning I came to pay my respects, GANGgajang were assembling down one end of the room while Mick was busying himself over his recording rig, resplendent in his 'Nothing Sounds Like Tape' T-shirt.

Not just the session's engineer, Mick is one of the key protagonists behind this inspired enterprise and a good person to explain its genesis:

"David Minear, who runs Bombora Creative, and Kerryn Tolhurst [onetime prime mover in seminal Australian rock band The Dingoes, now a NYC-based music producer] came up with the brainwave of doing a record and a film celebration of Australian surf music and culture from the '60s through to the present. From *Bombora* by The Atlantics (probably one of the first really big hit surf culture songs – The Atlantics are still together and one of the first bands in on this project), through Tamam Shud, Midnight Oil, The Celibate Rifles, Richard Clapton, The Cruel Sea, GANGgajang, Pete Howe and Tim Gaze, then throw in the Pigram Brothers and young guys like Beau Young and Andrew Kidman, and you have one hell of an interesting blend of coastal music. Not a re-hashed, re-mastered compilation of previously recorded tracks, but a whole new fresh recording, bringing in new material, with a bit of a glance back as well, doing some of those old songs but in a more contemporary sort of way."



Mick, by the way, downplays his own surfing prowess: “I tried... but I was more the guy up on the beach keeping the fire going and making up cassettes.” Nevertheless his passion for the project is obvious. “These are mostly artists who were very much a part of the backdrop to all of my ‘hanging out’ years. The opportunity to record them and work with them in one location away from the studio is bloody amazing, to say the least. We booked this hall out for two weeks. It’s on the beach, the doors are open, the waves are crashing in, the surfers are out there – that’s the backdrop against which the record’s being made. It’s quite exciting. Every day’s a new project – we set up for it, record it and then Kerryn and I go through all the takes and work out what we’re gonna use. By and large it’s all live, there’s very little overdubbing going on.”

As I sat back listening to GANGgajang put the appropriately titled *Surfing Around The World* through its paces, it’s quickly apparent that this is indeed live recording. There are no headphones for the band. All the band set up in onstage gig formation on a huge rug at one end of the room, beneath a huge 16-foot surfboard suspended from the ceiling. Mick informs me later that this is the original surfboard on which someone called ‘The Duke’ [Duke Kananamoku! – Ed] – sorry, I’m no surfer – demonstrated the first ever exhibition of surf board riding in Australia in 1915, right on Freshwater Beach. To revisit my original metaphor, the ‘monks’ on this gig should have no trouble catching a wave in this holy place of surfing. The vibe can’t help but find its way into the grooves of this recording.



ROB HIRST - MIDNIGHT OIL/THE ANGRY TRADESMEN

Midnight Oil stalwart drummer, Rob Hirst, recorded a track with his new band, The Angry Tradesmen.

AT: Looks like you were having fun Rob!

Rob Hirst: It was a fantastic afternoon – one of the most enjoyable days of recording I can remember. And part of that was because Martin [Rotsey] from The Oils dropped by as well and I haven’t played with Martin on any project since Pete left Midnight Oil. Dom [Turner] and I play regularly with the Backsliders, and it was Dom and I that worked up the idea of our band, The Angry Tradesmen. But, amazingly, since recording that track at Freshwater

we’ve now co-opted Martin, so it’s become a three piece... turning into a twin guitar/drummer assault. It’s sounding fantastic.

AT: So you obviously found the location conducive.

RH: I loved the sound of the room, the air around it, and just the atmosphere of the old Freshwater Surf Club, with its vintage surfboards and memorabilia... It’s a very inspiring place to play, particularly when you’re recording a song called *Big Wave!*

AT: Did you get into a mindset of that era when The Oils were playing pubs in Sydney’s north and the surf community was getting on board?

RH: We didn’t actually see it as a nostalgia project. We wanted to take that surf drumming from the ‘60s for sure, but we actually wanted to kick it up the arse with guitars. And I hope that’s what we’ve got on the record.

AT: But you obviously dusted off some vintage kit for the sessions.

RH: Martin was using his vintage Gretsch Duo Jet through a Vox AC30, and Dom had his National slide guitar with a Fender Bluesman amp. I set up an old Leedy piccolo snare drum from the ‘40s, a [Ludwig] Down Beat bass drum from the ‘50s and a Slingerland floor tom from the ‘60s... all thrown

together with a sizzle cymbal and a pair of hi-hats. That’s the only kit I used... really stripped down. So, you’re right, they were vintage instruments, and they were all sounding pretty amazing on the track as well.

AT: Has the experience influenced any future direction of the band?

RH: It spawned an entire album! It’s an album that was already on the way, but we were so happy with that day’s recording we thought, let’s finish this off and make this a project. So it’ll be launched on an unsuspecting public later this year – as a three piece.



LOCATION LOCATION LOCATION RECORDING

Mark O'Connor: Freshwater SLSC is an inspired and an inspiring location, Mick. I'd imagine its choice was by no means an accident.

Mick Wordley: Well, that's sort of my passion really, to get out and record in different locations, and to take a bit of the sound of that location – and more so the spirit of the location – away in the music. To capture a sense of the space we've chosen to work in. I've always loved the connections of the music and sounds in records that are obviously recorded in one space – recent records such as Willie Nelson's *Teatro* or Dylan's *Time out of Mind*, and even oldies like The Rolling Stones' *Get your Ya Ya's Out* and Neil Young's *Tonight's the Night*. These aren't slick sonic records and the performances aren't necessarily tight, but they seem to capture a time and place rather than

an audiophile experience, and performances that have years of depth behind them and a confidence that you just can't miss. And they have incredible longevity – they just get better with age.

So as the idea for this project evolved, thoughts of reverberant beach halls, wooden sandy floors, sand, waves, loud guitars, and crusty old PAs started to cement themselves in our minds – the sound should connect the artists, the theme, the hall, and the performances all together. Kerry, David, Chris Moss [another party to the project] and myself came to Sydney to find a location; basically looking for an old surf club hall, on the beach, with a wooden floor that had good pictures and good sound – somewhere where we could take the whole project and make it a journey, an event. We originally wanted to use the Royal Antler hotel where the Oils got

going, but that's been pulled down.

I probably looked at 10 or 15 halls along the beaches, and eventually we stumbled across the Freshwater SLSC. The original surf hall is hidden in the front of a whole new club complex. It's been tastefully renovated, and it's built literally on the beach. The hall itself is magnificent. The moment you walk into the building it sounds exactly like what it is – a surf hall with a polished wooden floor. A bit of sibilance, but nothing a few human bodies, amps and rugs wouldn't tame. Perfect.

MO'C: What sort of factors do you consider as you make the transformation from surf club to recording environment?

MW: I trucked all my gear over here from Adelaide. My choice of equipment was pretty clear. Essentially it was my 'travelling rig', which I've built up over many of these types of projects,



MICHAEL SMITH - THE ATLANTICS

Michael Smith offers a personal account of his *Delightful Rain* experience after getting the call-up to step in for The Atlantics' bassist Bosco Bosanac:

So here I am, Saturday 13 May, at [The Atlantics' drummer] Peter Hood's rehearsal/recording studio in Earlwood, learning five new surf instrumentals – *Riff-a-go-go*, *Rio*, *One More Summer*, *Night Star* and the 'Russian' tune (the guys still hadn't decided on a name by the time we'd finished) – as The Atlantics' contribution to *Delightful Rain*, and boy am I out of condition! I haven't played in over two months and no amount of 'warmup' finger

exercises the preceding two nights prepares me for the punishment my hands are getting as we go over the songs for three solid hours. The energy of Peter Hood in particular is amazing – those rumbling trademark drums never missing a beat.

Sunday 14 May and we're setting up at Freshwater Surf Club for a soundcheck/rehearsal. Though it's not officially a recording day, engineer Mike Wordley is already taping us as we wobble around the tunes, pushed along by an energetic Tolhurst and an excited Minear, with the film crew never far away. Look Mum,

I'm in a doco! Not bad for a non-surfing kid from London!

Monday 15 May and the recording is now in earnest. My hands are throbbing, the band sounds fantastic and everyone's just so chuffed we're here. Long day though, 10am till after 8pm.

Tuesday 16 May: overnight the producer decided we should do a version of the Oils' *Wedding Cake Island*! Four hours of rehearsing/recording and it sounds like The Atlantics! We do a quick version of *Bombora*, so the drums and bass tracks can be overdubbed by a few of the other guitarists coming

in the fortnight ahead. We play a seven song set (all this lineup knows!) for a small invited crowd of surfers and for The Atlantics. It's a wrap.



Dressed to impress: Mick Wordley was responsible for the 'sound' of *Delightful Rain*, from choosing the venue and engineering the tracking sessions (as well as playing his Bindara bass on *Blue Bay Blues* with The Pigram Brothers) to mixing the album back at his Mixmasters studio in Adelaide.

and it works a treat. It all packs into road cases and fits into the back of my old Merc wagon (just) and can be set up in a few hours. With minimal sound-checking, it hopefully enables the band to just step up and play. We recorded to 24 tracks of RADAR with Nyquist converters, in my view the best sounding and most solid recording engine going – unless of course you can load your two-inch machine into a ute, with a second vehicle loaded up with tape (which I've done many times!).

Each band set up as if playing a gig. We set up a 'stage' – basically a huge red rug on the floor in the most comfortable part of the room, with a view out to the beach and the waves. Everyone recorded without headphones, everything live, basically mixing themselves

and balancing their own volume, with just a bit of vocal monitoring through monitor speakers where necessary. The monitors were Genelec 1029As – they're very compact, and when you're travelling with your studio in the back of a wagon every piece of real estate is important.

The emphasis was on flat recording through great microphones, with plenty of room mics, which I think is the most important ingredient and tool for this type of recording.

The mics were all set up, so there was no sound-checking as such. But while they were working their songs and finding comfortable volumes, everything was recorded and levels basically found themselves in seconds. When the players sound good and the hall sounds good and everyone is comfortable, the most important thing is to be in 'Record' – fiddling at the receiving end will never make much of an impression on the source.

SEA 12

MO'C: What about you, how did you monitor what was going to 'tape' with all that volume around you?

MW: I set the 'studio' up at the other end of the hall and was monitoring through Extreme Sound Isolation headphones... which are exactly that. But there were no secrets or surprises as to what was going to tape – the sound of the hall was inescapable. I'm pretty used to recording sounds in a room and I set up four stereo pairs of room mics all around the room to pick up the ambience, so there's eight tracks of room noise in everything – and that's the main driving force of the sound. Once I've got that it's really just a matter of recording everything – everything's close-miked as well...



GEOFF STAPLETON – GANGGAJANG

GANGgajang's five original (and only) members laid down a couple of tracks. AT spoke to the band's Geoff Stapleton, for more.

AT: How was your day at Freshwater, Geoff?

Geoff Stapleton: It was an incredible experience on a number of levels. First of all, GANGgajang has long been associated with the surf culture all around the world – in fact, more so overseas than in Australia. And coincidentally we had this song called *Surfing Around the World*, which we'd written together on the road as part of our encore, which had never been recorded. So we had only recently been talking about recording it, and I was keen to get Mick Wordley to engineer it. So when Mick rang and told us about the project, and to then actually record the

track at Freshwater beach where the first surfer took to Australian waters... well, it was one of those magic moments where all the planets were aligned. Amazing.

AT: It sounds like Mick and Kerryn's approach suited the band and the session?

GS: Mick's a fantastic engineer. When we first walked in I was expecting to see a huge desk, huge monitors and all that, and instead it looked like the gear had just come out of a briefcase... very Spartan. And I thought... geez is this going to work? But sure enough... not a problem.

Kerryn Tolhurst's very good as well. I recall that the amp I brought in was just not doing my old Fender Stratocaster justice. And then Kerryn pulls out this little all-valve amp – I kid you not, it was the size of a little radio. We turned it on, gave it five minutes to

warm up, plugged in the Strat, and, mate, it was just the most beautiful sound. Kerryn was just fantastic. He didn't impose himself, he just had ways of suggesting things that almost made you think it was your idea.

AT: And obviously there weren't days and days to noodle around...

GS: That's right. We did it the old fashioned way. We went into a rehearsal room a couple of days prior to the session. We learnt the song and made sure we could all play our parts and that's how it was recorded. It reminded me of those sessions in the past where it cost so much to go to a studio that you had to have your shit together.

And Mick's a real 'sound from the source' guy – he wants it to sound awesome before you even start. There's no 'fix it in the mix' with Mick. So there was something incredibly

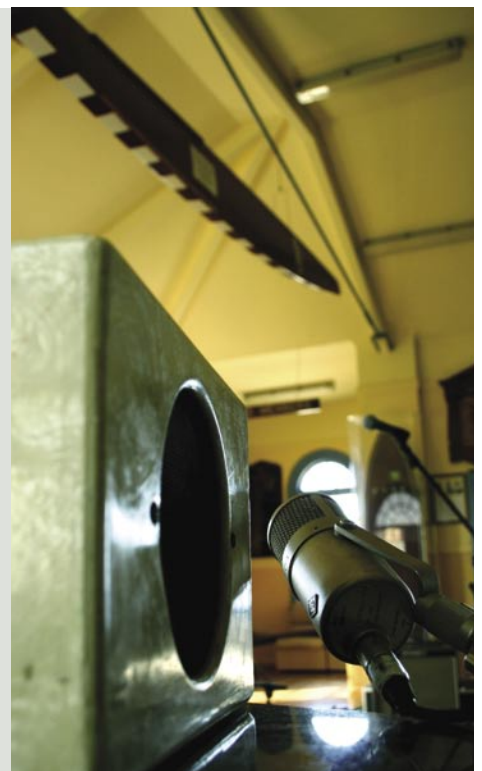
liberating and important about getting the sound right first and then just recording it.

AT: That elusive excitement and verve in recording is impossible to manufacture...

GS: When you go to record, there's got to be bit of truth in it. If the vibe isn't there and it's manufactured, it sounds phony and people won't buy it. But that's where Kerryn came into his own. He created an atmosphere that was quite magical.

AT: Sounds like you were quite energised by the whole experience!

GS: It was a bit of a shot in the arm. Over the last 12 months the band has been working on a double DVD 'Complete GANGgajang' release, so we've been very focused on the past, and this project really gave us some relevance to the present.





MO'C: Can you take us through that in a bit more detail?

MW: Okay, starting with the room mics – at the front of the stage was a Royer SF24 stereo ribbon mic, set about six feet in front of the drum kit and about two feet from the ground. This picked up the energy from the stage beautifully, and reflected the stereo spread of the stage set up. All the guitar amps were exactly where they were placed in the image, but still very tight.

About 12 feet back and at head height was the Calrec Soundfield mic, set to a 90° Blumlein. This picked up the more distant energy of the room, from the centre. I first saw this mic used like this with Steve Albini in my own lounge room in front of a drum kit and band, and was amazed at how much of the overall sound in the mix eventually came from this microphone. I very quickly spent my Christmas money on one, and I've used it ever since. Even when you wind in just a little of this mic the energy of the room comes through instantly, and like all great things you don't need a lot for it to have an effect.

On the floor at about 45° to the kit and about 10 feet back I had a pair of Coles 4038 ribbons, placed almost on the floor, one on each side.

These picked up the resonance of the wooden floor and added a 'boom' that was subtly very cool. And being figure-eight, all the rear information from the walls behind the mics wasn't missed.

Then way back, right up high against the walls, set to omni, were a pair of Studio Projects B-3s – a very cheap mic, but they manage to catch the 'clash and splash' of the room just right.

That's eight mics for the room, which was very much a player in itself and so deserving of much attention. When you get the right blend of these it all just comes alive.

MO'C: And close miking?

MW: For the amps it was always AEA R-92 or Royer 121 ribbons, with maybe a Neumann U47FET every now and again for a bit more crunch. A Beyerdynamic M380 on the bass cabinet, through an Avalon 737. Josephson C-42s for overheads and hats, E-22s for toms, and an Audio-Technica AT25 in front of the kick, though not too close.

Preamps were predominantly Neve 1064s, a rack of eight of them with very little or no EQ. Chandler Germaniums and TG-2s, with some Universal Audio 6176s and Avalon 2022s

"Kerryn pulls out this little all-valve amp. We turned it on, gave it five minutes to warm up, plugged in the Strat, and, mate, it was just the most beautiful sound."

DELIGHTFUL RAIN'S PRODUCER
KERRY TOLHURST SPEAKS



The whole idea for *Delightful Rain* came about from conversations I had with David Minear during the recording of John Schumann's *Lawson* album in Melbourne last year. We were talking about Hank B Marvin and the Shadows' possible influence on Australian bands of the early '60s, particularly the pre-Beatles surf bands. By no accident, David's company is called Bombora, so of course The Atlantics were paramount in our discussion – they epitomised the bands of that era. We talked about doing an album in vague terms in the near future based on some of the things we'd discussed.

I returned to New York and over the next few months I got to thinking about what sort of an album we should do. The last thing I wanted was a 'trip down memory lane.' I hate nostalgia. It's always been clear to me that the kind of music we make is largely a product of where we live, whether it be the Mississippi Delta, the Appalachians, the urban ghettos or, dare I suggest it, the Northern Beaches of Sydney. Since the early '70s I've been interested in finding something uniquely Australian in the music I

play and produce, even though I've spent most of that time living in America. For many years I think I was looking in the wrong direction – instead of the bush I should have been looking at the coast where most of the population and culture lives.

With this in the back of my mind and with David's unbridled enthusiasm, I started to look at 45 years of music from a coastal perspective, starting with the early surf bands like The Atlantics. Of course, they got wiped out by the British invasion in '63 and it wasn't until around 1970 that surf culture reappeared with its bongos and kombis. Tully, Tamam Shud and surf films/soundtracks like *Morning of the Earth* captured the era, while Richard Clapton so eloquently defined the northern beach scene – 'Sittin' out on the Palm Beach Road / I'm so drunk and my car won't go.' We followed the trail through early Midnight Oil to The Celibate Rifles, to The Cruel Sea and beyond. We thought maybe we were on to something. The thing was, how to do it?

My first prerequisite was to record and film it as live as possible 'on location' – meaning we had to find

a surf life saving club on a beach in Sydney where each act would come for a day's recording and hopefully we would capture some magic. I wanted that booming, ambient sound with the pounding of the surf in the background, like where the music began. Since so many artists were involved I figured the room sound would also serve as a unifying factor – a central character.

After some 'gruelling' location searching by Mick Wordley and Chris Moss, Freshwater Surf Life Saving Club was found to be more than we could have dreamed of – semi-isolated, scenic, historic and, best of all, it had that sound.

Mick and I have done about 10 albums in as many years, so we both knew the roles we would play. He'd take care of the tech side – after all, he owns the stuff – leaving me free to interact with the artists and concentrate on the musical side of things. In a situation like this I wouldn't work with anyone else but Mick.

Mick set the room up in such a way that optimised the ambience and made for the best way to accommodate so many acts, a day at a time. We were

blessed by the fact that many of the more 'mature' acts were still playing vintage instruments (Jim from The Atlantics played the actual red Strat he'd recorded *Bombora* with way back then) and amps (Voxs and Blackface Fenders).

One of the many joys in the process of making this album was re-connecting with old friends, some of whom I hadn't seen for 30 years or so, and finding them to be still on fire. Tim Gaze, Richard Clapton... The Atlantics and Tamam Shud both came with a lot of new material, thus allaying any fears that anyone would perceive this album as nostalgic. I came away with the impression that every artist involved really appreciated the experience and relished the challenge of live recording. It became apparent during the recording that we'd set up a situation where the parallel worlds of surfing and recording came together. When the wave comes you catch that moment or you don't. That wave is gone forever, but you come back tomorrow to try again anyway...

always for vocals if there were any. Almost no compression into the DAW – this kept the whole thing very open, and even in the board mixes this shows.

Vocals were mainly through Shure SM58s and an UA 1176, one of my U47s or a re-issue AKG C12. Acoustic guitars were mostly with a Shure SM69, or the C12.

WAVE FILE

MO'C: This style of recording would seem to require a degree of flying by the seat of your pants.

MW: On the one hand it can be daunting and a bit intimidating because you only get one chance at it – then after all the artists have gone home you pack it all up and go home and then see what you've got. But the exciting part is that you've captured something in a space that you'll probably never go to again, and you take away with you a documentation of that time and place. It's been a real journey, and I'm sure when everyone involved looks back on that time it'll have something special about it. And of course, hopefully this will be reflected in the final record.

For me, it was an amazing two weeks. Every time I do these projects I want to get out of the studio more and more and capture performances in spaces that invite you in. Then you all pack up and go home. Sort of like a picnic really – maybe on the beach. ■

Editor's note: As well as being an accomplished recording engineer, Mick Wordley owns an audio distribution company that imports some of the gear he's mentioned in this article. We in no way believe this compromises the interest of this story, but it's something we feel needs to be disclosed.



KENT STEVENS – CELIBATE RIFLES

The Celibate Rifles started life playing surf clubs just like Freshwater. Guitarist, Kent Stevens, tells us more.

AT: Playing a surf club must have brought back a few memories Kent?

Kent Stevens: Yeah, well a couple of us grew up playing in surf clubs. The band did some of its first gigs just down the coast at North Steyne. But one thing's for sure, Freshwater sounded a damn site better than those clubs used to... because they sounded like shite.

AT: So a pretty relaxed experience?

KS: We left the technical stuff to Mick and Kerry, which was relaxing for me. And they knew what they were doing. It was well recorded. It all went pretty fast and easy.

We recorded a new song we had lying around for ages that we actually wrote for a surf compilation about 10 years ago that never got used.

It was a fun experience and a good project. I always respect people who are prepared to take a punt on an idea. Hopefully people will support it. There's a bunch of good musicians and bands on there.



String 'em up: 'Cal' Callaghan preps his Fender for the GANGgajang session.

“Jim from The Atlantics played the actual red Strat he'd recorded Bombora with way back then”