



Got 'em in black... got any blacker?

RECORDING

THE VINES

Don't try and tell Wayne Connolly there are no rules to recording! Wayne hasn't sat in the studio for the last two decades to have someone tell him that! With dozens of successful albums to his credit including the likes of Youth Group, Dallas Crane, You Am I and The Underground Lovers, Wayne Connolly has developed quite a reputation in Australia for producing quality albums with a rich tone and depth... and none of it's achieved by accident.

Text: Andy Stewart

► To say that The Vines have been riding an emotional rock 'n' roll rollercoaster in recent years is an understatement of Amanda Vanstone-like proportions. Since 2002 The Vines have gone from nowhere to superstardom – and back – in record time. When Craig Nicholls made his now famous – and then all-too-familiar – spectacle of himself at the Annandale Hotel in Sydney a couple of years ago, the end of the band seemed as certain as it was tragic. Punters who walked away down Parramatta Rd after the show that night must have figured they'd never see (or perhaps want to see) the band ever again.

That was two years ago... and yet now, by some miracle, the band is back... in black... or so it would seem. The new Vines album, *Vision Valley*, comes in one colour – black. The cover artwork's 'vision' seems to almost cast a pall over the band's Lazarus-like return, a choice that could easily be construed (by fine arts graduates, perhaps) as a deeply melancholic statement of regret and remorse (along the lines of Joy division's *Closer*)... or maybe they simply had no money for the artwork, who knows. But whatever the reason, this sombre exterior belies a vastly more colourful musical landscape that can be attributed in no small part to Wayne Connolly's production values. In many ways *Vision Valley* is a celebration of life itself; a simple yet subtle return to form for a band that had nowhere to go except, well... nowhere.

It would be easy to make a glib statement at this point along the lines of: '*Vision Valley* is a perfect example of what can be achieved when the pressure's off and there are no expectations'. That may be true for some of those involved in making the record, but for Wayne Connolly at least, the pressure to deliver a successful outcome was intense.

Between managing Craig Nicholls' illness, arranging and recording the songs and mixing them down, Wayne had to embrace a Vines world of antics, pranks and low-level mayhem that, from an outsider's point of view, still seemed far from sane. Not that I mean to suggest for a moment that Craig, in particular, was unmanageable, disagreeable or up to his old tricks. The fact is, Craig Nicholls is a friendly, polite individual who suffers from Asperger's Syndrome – that's it. He's not the malicious psycho that the media once made him out to be, and in the studio, when his mind's on the job, his focus and delivery are extraordinary. That's of course when he's not flying down the halls pretending to be a pterodactyl (as I one day discovered when I walked out into the halls of Turtlerock during a mastering session), falling off studio chairs, knocking his head against walls, making crazy animal noises and generally making a (harmless) spectacle of himself.

Wayne and I spoke about the new Vines album at length recently and, in his typically super-relaxed manner, Wayne offered some insight into the making of *Vision Valley*; from its humble beginnings as a series of demos, to the fully realised vision. This is some of what he had to say... ►►





“I don't really want to be going into a session experimenting with preamps and mics”

WAYNE'S WORLD

Andy Stewart: So Wayne, casting your mind back to the start of this project, how did you wrap your head around the prospect of recording a Vines album, given the band's tumultuous history?

Wayne Connolly: It was actually a relatively simple project to take on because it was originally set up as a 'demo' project, so I was eased into it, if you like... but with everyone ever hopeful that it would turn into something more. The first session at Velvet Studios [in Sydney] went really well – we recorded seven songs in a couple of weeks and a few of those tracks ended up on the album. The band was just playing live, so it was pretty simple and straightforward. There was no real rush or pressure; we just felt our way into it. The pressure really only mounted towards the end as we strived to get the record finished. And in many ways the pressure I felt was mainly an immense personal one to make it all work out...

AS: Did it become obvious from the initial 'demo' sessions how you'd need to approach the album proper?

WC: I s'pose so – it evolved pretty naturally. For instance, during the initial tracking at Velvet we recorded vocals straight after we'd tracked each song, which turned out to be a brilliant approach because Craig was always warmed up and able to deliver those gut-wrenching vocals – singing like he wasn't in a studio, basically. The first track on the album was borne out of that approach, where he's really uninhibited.

Craig's actually pretty comfortable in the studio. He absolutely loves it and has no problem just

standing there for hours... sometimes... some days... singing and improvising and trying different things all the time. He's kind of in his own universe, admittedly, but at the same time he knows exactly what he's doing.

AS: Without dwelling on Craig's illness, did his situation mean you had to be quite touchy-feely with him, especially tracking main vocals?

WC: Initially I think I was a bit touchy-feely with him, but eventually I got to know him well enough to realise that you don't need to take that approach at all. I was really grateful that we got to work together long enough for me to feel comfortable around him. He's not comfortable around strangers anyway and I guess I wasn't that comfortable around him either, because in some ways I was in awe of him; he's a genius and I really love his song writing. His home demo recordings for instance are inspired pieces of insanity committed to tape! They're full of digital overload and recording 'mistakes' that just somehow, by some quirk of fate, sound brilliant! I mean, you wouldn't even call his knowledge of recording rudimentary, it's truly remedial!

AS: There are no rules with his recording then?

WC: There certainly aren't, no! But somehow at the end of the day, he'd get this violently distorted, digitally overloaded piece of audio; put 1000kg of reverb on it and make it sound like some kind of magical thing. And it's very hard to reproduce that 'magic' in the studio. As a 'professional' engineer you approach a recording session armed with your working methods and experience; it's difficult to bring yourself to blast the inputs of the ProTools rig and go, 'Hey, that's really cool!'

We talked about using some of his demos on the album, but we ended up leaving them out. They were just too much like reverb soup – they sounded fantastic, but they just weren't very useable in the end. They did influence my approach though, I must admit. They proved beyond doubt that Craig's got a very strong vision for how things should sound. He seems like he's off with the fairies at times, but he has a highly developed sense of what things should sound like, right down to the pronunciation of words and exact levels for vocals.

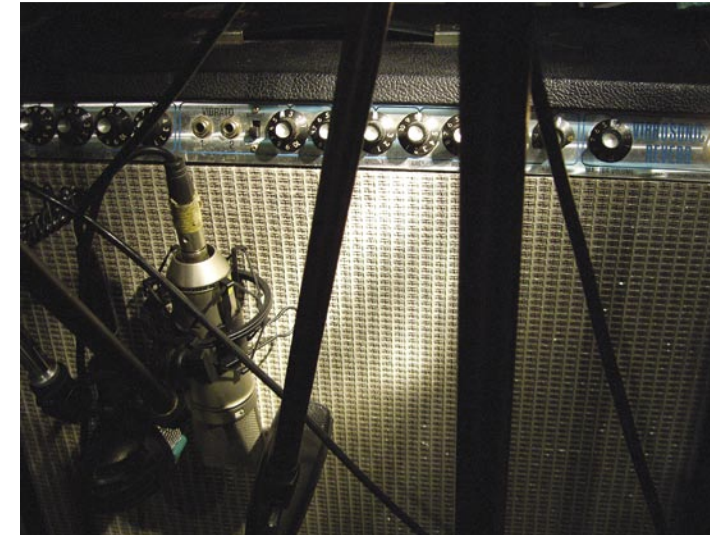
He can let a lot of things through the net – for instance he doesn't get too concerned with drum sounds and would often try and convince Hamish [Rosser] not to ask questions: "We love them and that's the way it is. They're great," he'd say. But if there's a consonant that's too loud in a vocal, that's the thing he's most obsessive about. A consonant that's slightly too loud will drive him to utter distraction. That, in a sense, is all part of his fluid vocal style. He has a very fluid sound to his voice and not pronouncing consonants is a big part of it. He's a dream to record in a way because there aren't any Ps or Ts popping out. He's got beautiful control over his voice and it comes out sounding like a violin or a theremin almost... just pure tone.

AS: I was surprised to hear lots of very disciplined double tracking on the album. How

A simple four-piece kit setup. Note the Reslo ribbon mic just above and to the right of the bass drum, and the stereo Neumann pair in the background. Note also the amount of baffling placed around the kit.



Wayne's mic setups nearly always include a vintage Neumann U67... no matter what the occasion! Here's one placed in front of a Fender amp, flanked by a Sennheiser MD421 and an AKG D12.



Ryan Griffiths ponders his next chord during the tracking of Vision Valley at Electric Avenue.



WAYNE ON GUITAR REVERB

If you've got space to hear things, you might pan a guitar delay to hear it move across the stereo spectrum, but it depends on the complexity of the mix, obviously. When you've got a lot going on, you might just have it underneath to fatten up the sound. I mainly have things like spring reverbs up the middle

of the mix so the guitar reverb is not too disconnected from the source. I like mono stuff, and often have reverbs and delays behind the singer. Stereo placements are often down to whether there are two guitars or not. It just depends on the mix.

did you manage that?

WC: Craig's a huge fan of double tracking of all kinds. He's very disciplined and precise, and can't tolerate any deviation between performances. He's a double-tracking disciplinarian, in fact. It was actually a good lesson for me because he gets it to the point where it doesn't even sound like a double track. It's all there in his head – it's all been stewing in there for six months, every lyric and every nuance of the delivery, every meter and rhythm is mapped out, which means he can sing it and double it really easily. He's really quite amazing like that.

AS: And lead guitar doubles as well?

WC: Yep. Again, Craig loves double tracking. But it's not something I always reach for: the straight double-tracked guitar. In many ways I prefer a sound of one guitar that's true to the sound of the amp.

AS: Given that Craig's recording 'technique' tends to produce demo 'soup' as you describe it, did you make many changes to his guitar sound?

WC: Not really, no. Certainly he likes things to sound generally blown out, in terms of fuzz guitars etc, but he tends to go with the flow to some extent. He has a particular pedal that he uses – which I can't really divulge, otherwise he might kill me [laughs] – which he didn't even bring to the first session. It's got really hi-Q EQs on it, which can sound very nasty – more like a punk rock pedal than a heavy metal pedal. But he didn't bring it in for the first session! So after recording for 10 days he said to me, "Yeah it's all sounding great, but I didn't bring my pedal in so we can't use any of it; but yeah, it's sounding great!"

AS: Did the album flow to its natural conclusion without too many hiccups?

WC: The basic tracking sessions were pretty easy, particularly the early sessions at Velvet and Electric Avenue. The songs were all written (even though some of them sound like sketches) and each was very well mapped out in Craig's head. But once the band tracking had finished and Craig was left to do vocals, the pressure really got to him and things dragged on a bit. Craig's a chronic self-editor as well, so it got pretty tough. He'd often sing one line of a song and then stop and say, 'Nup, that wasn't right, let's start again'. I'd try to get him to sing whole takes to warm up, but to him a take is useless if there's a mistake in it. I'd say that was the greatest obstacle of the whole recording really.

AS: Were you recording all this to tape?

WC: I did all the basic tracks to two-inch tape but the vocals were recorded directly into ProTools because I knew what was involved by then. Having said that, the first session, where we did the vocals straight to tape immediately after we'd tracked the band, was so much easier because you've only got maybe two or three goes at it. The huge advantage of tape is that you're editing as you go, and you make all your ►►

RECORDING LIVE IN A ROOM

The Velvet recordings had baffles at chest height for line of sight, which worked well. The trick is to make sure the instruments are played at similar volumes... and to use the mics so that the overall ambience suits the song. When I record like this I don't get too worried about mistakes (which is one of the main reason why people opt for isolation). I simply edit whole tracks together, which is the traditional approach, getting great verses and choruses together from different takes and editing up a master performance.

I tracked Youth Group's *Forever Young* exactly like that. That song is all live, with each section cut together from a whole take. The perfect second verse is cut with the perfect bridge etc, and it works brilliantly. The hard part is remaining convinced that it's the right approach to take and not be swayed into recording with everyone in separate rooms.

That's why I like Velvet in many ways because you don't have a lot of choice. You just set it up that way because there's no option. As soon as you go to a bigger studio you immediately feel obligated to go for the isolation, otherwise you feel like you're not doing your job properly. I mean, who in their right mind wouldn't use the isolation... and, before you know it, you're setting up totally the opposite way to before, and to me it never works as well. I'd say I've done 10 or 15 albums in the last few years with massive spill in everything and the number of times that's caused problems is almost nil.

decisions at the time. And no matter how much you pontificate about it, you just never do that with 'Tools. Obviously you keep notes about what takes are good, but when you end up with 20 or 30 takes of vocals – and despite the notes – you still feel compelled to listen to them all and check everything again.

AS: What vocal mic did you use in the end?

WC: A [Neumann] U67 – these days I just cannot use another mic. They've just got a great musicality and balance. Funnily enough I was never much of a fan of 67s until I bought some at an auction and had them modified by Gunter [Wagner] – who took out the broadcast settings inside them. U67s are often in really bad shape because they've been workhorse microphones in studios for the last 40 years. But if they're looked after, I think the 67 kicks the arse of just about every other mic I've tried! They're great for just about everything. They've got all the midrange information... they're just my favourite mic, no question.

And I have a great Mac Hamilton valve preamp, which is quite mellow sounding, that I marry to it. The preamp has 80 Volt rails so it has great headroom and the match is beautiful. You never have to worry about it clipping and it's great for driving the sound into my Daking compressor, which is a transformer input, discrete Class-A device. (I do find generally that if you're running audio directly into 'Tools you want to be driving it with something that is transformer balanced.)

The clipping of a preamp was something I learnt to be careful to avoid very early in my career. Sessions like *You Am I* where Tim [Rogers] would blast the living crap out of a mic taught me that. But with the tube 67 and the Mac Hamilton preamp it's never been a problem. I use that recording chain all the time because it allows me to relax and concern myself more with takes rather than levels.

AS: What about recording guitars, same 'set and forget' approach?

WC: I bought a few amps of my own in for the Vines sessions. I always like to have one or two amps of my own and then use whatever the bands bring in as well. We used Ryan [Griffiths'] Marshall for his rhythm guitar parts and my 1962 AC30 for Craig's parts generally.

AS: How were you miking those up?

WC: I recorded about three tracks of guitar per instrument. I always have a ribbon in there, particularly because it's often my approach to capture the band live in a room. So in that situation you never really know what's going to happen; whether someone might switch to the bridge pickups of their guitar and suddenly make things sound really trebly. That's when you want that dull ribbon there, to compensate for that and give you an alternative tone that you can bring up in the mix. So, as you might have guessed, I'm not really into combining mics to tape. I tend to keep them all separated. I'll use a U67 for a hard sound, an AKG C-414 or a C12a for a mellow sound, and then the ribbon.

AS: No dynamic mics?

WC: I've used [Sennheiser] 421s and a [Shure] 57 off axis. But for me, these days, the 67 replaces the 57, it's just got more depth to it, but a 57 is definitely a great mic for guitar... undoubtedly. But I tend to use a 67 in figure-8 so I can capture a bit of ambience with it. I'll usually throw up a room mic too, which is also usually in figure-8.

tone controller

AS: Your sound has often been described as possessing a pretty old-school tone. You're obviously someone who really listens to the instruments you're recording, would that be a fair assessment of your production style?

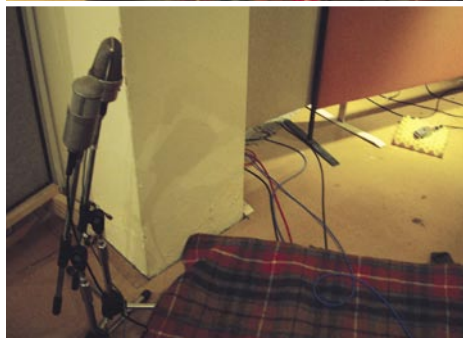
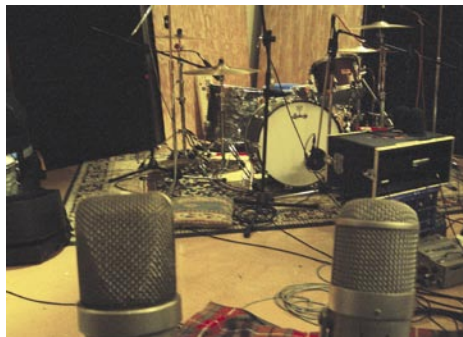
WC: Well, I spend a lot of time tuning snares, that's where it all begins for me. That's why I tend to go with stock things I know and trust, like Neve 1073s on drums, because I always like to experiment with the drumkit itself and with the drummer – what they play and what they hit. And the room ambience is crucial too. I don't really want to be going into a session experimenting with preamps and mics. I tend to like a standard setup. I do experiment with room mics though, I'm always experimenting with them, and that's why I've often got five room mics up these days.

AS: What have you been discovering?

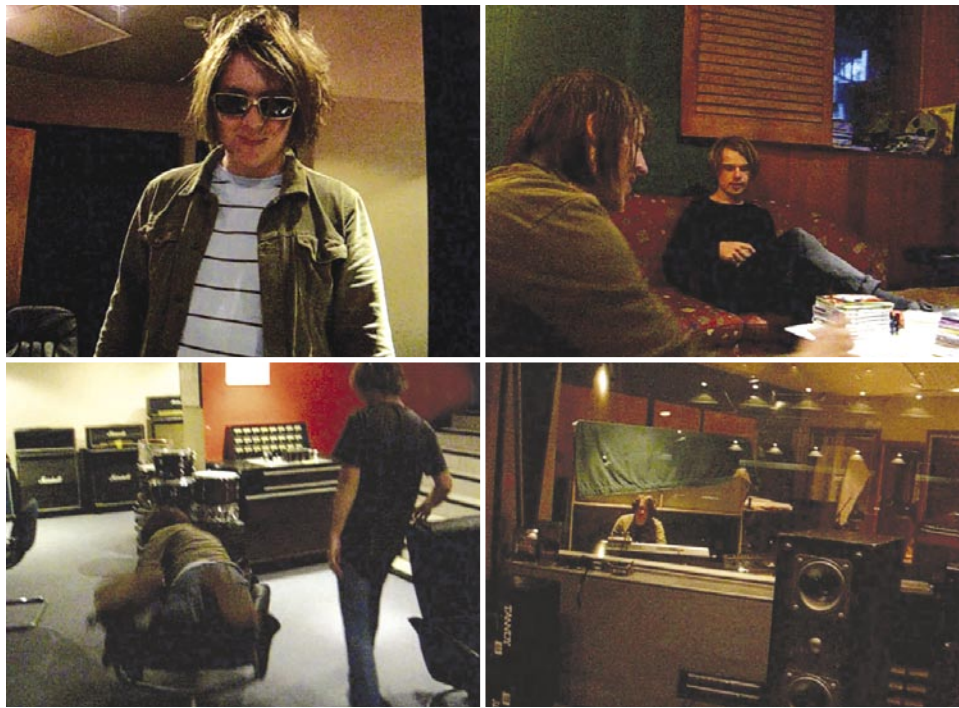
WC: Well, they're techniques that a lot of people use; they're not that special. I've got into the habit of regularly recording with two overheads plus five room mics... one close room and four distant rooms. For quite some time I've generally used a ribbon about six inches in front of the kit at about waist height. I just find that a ribbon right in front of the kit being blasted works really well. Ribbon mics sound great when they don't cope with the drum volume – they give you that splatty, blown out sound. And then I have two stereo room mics set up, perhaps 10 feet back or so, down low and pointing downwards so they're picking up the bottom of the snare and the kick. I find this method gives you more complexity in your room sound – you're not just getting a big 'snap' off the snare. You can always get that from the close mics, so the room mics don't need to be about that. The more I've used this approach the more I've tried to go for more snare bottom and ambience.

I'll generally use a mic lying on the floor as well – which I did with *The Vines* recording – actually lying a C-414 on a towel on the floor to pick up some thunderous roar, which you can bring into the mix as and when you need it. There's no mix of early reflections with a floor mic either... some coupling through the floor though.

I use the floor mic a lot in conjunction with an SM58, put in a guide vocal position. I think everyone's done sessions where they've said to themselves, 'Gee, that guide vocal mic sounds good on the drums, I might record it'. Well, I did that so many times that now I always just put one up and track it, facing it away from the kit about where a vocalist might have stood. ►►



Above: A Neumann M49 and U47FET make up this stereo pair of drum room mics, despite their sonic mismatch. Note the height of the mics and their inclination towards the floor. A rug placed in front of them also softens the early reflections off the floor.



“A fresh perspective is everything really, and even if you haven’t got it, you at least have to have a *recent memory* of a having a fresh perspective!”

And I’ll have that in the same area as the floor mic so I can blend those together. You’re getting reflections and direct signal in equal amounts at that distance from the kit, so phase is not as crucial to those mics. I found, in combination, these two mics work really well. When you put the floor mic and the splashy treble of the 58 together you get a pretty 3D sound. They’re usually panned mono. And I never manipulate them in the time domain later with the computer, either. I’ve made a rule never to do that. Every time I’ve tried to do it, it’s been one of the most dissatisfying things ever! I like to use a pair of [Neumann] M49s in the room as well (if I can get them), but it doesn’t really matter if they don’t match – I’m not that big on matching stereo mics – however, the phase of those is important... I’ve spent many years moving those in and out, trying to find the ideal spot.

AS: The drums on *Vision Valley* seem to sound very true to the kit, with very little apparent production between the kit and the listener. To me that’s a good expression of correct phase... I hear that in your recordings a lot.

WC: Yeah, it really is, that’s true. You usually find if your kit’s disappearing into the mix that something needs to be flipped... (that’s why I’ve never understood why Tools doesn’t have a phase button on its channel strips). I spend a lot of time with overheads getting them equidistant from the top skin of the snare, simple things like that. There are many aspects of a kit that can be manipulated but it’s pretty vital that you get the snare sound right, and phase coherence is vital to achieving that.

And despite so many people trotting out the old adage that ‘there are no rules to recording’ there are *definitely* physical rules and aspects of phase that you’ve always got to take into account. It’s called physics, I think!

AS: I noticed that during some of the Vines Sessions at Electric Avenue you put up a lot of fabric on the walls and ceiling. Was that to make the room sound smaller or duller?

WC: I generally like a pretty dead ambience, so I put a lot of fabric up around the room to tame the reflections. I’m not a big fan of bright reflections or the sound of polished wood and glass. It’s just a taste thing, I think I associate bright ambience with ’80s sounds... which are obviously way out of fashion at the moment. [laughs] To me a drumkit sounds more authentic and natural if it’s not reflecting off bright surfaces.

The more I record, the more I’m convinced that you don’t have to have a marble and polished wood ‘Taj Mahal’ to get a great sound. Having said that, Electric Avenue is a brilliant studio and all the gear there is second to none. It’s the finest collection of gear in the country just about.

AS: Room ambience is also a quantitative thing, though, isn’t it? When the room mics are capturing ambience that’s too bright you can’t use enough of it...

WC: That’s exactly right. That’s why I don’t like bright room ambience. If it’s more subdued you can use a lot more of the ambient mics... maybe as much as 80% room mics, with the kick and snare punching through them. The same goes with vocals; if you’ve got a bright room then you have to have the vocalist standing really close to the mic and then you’re not really hearing any life at all. I like to have a medium ambience, not too dead nor too bright... just right.

AS: Is that how you approached recording Craig? Was he close up on the mic?

WC: No, you don’t get him very close to a mic, he tends to run around and be fairly unscientific in his placement with respect to the microphone. [laughs] I tried to coach him a little bit but he likes to move around a lot, which means you’ve really got to record in a reasonably dead room that’s not too brightly ambient. That way the singer can be off the mic a bit.

MIXING THE VISION

AS: How did the mixing unfold?

The songs took a fair while to mix because I was comparing a lot of rough mixes I’d done as we went. But generally I averaged a song a day. The slower songs were generally larger files so some of them took longer. But because I hadn’t fallen for the temptation of leaving everything to the mix, things fell into place fairly well.

I always try and keep mixes moving fairly quickly, otherwise you get pulverised and lose perspective... and the magic. A fresh perspective is everything really, and even if you haven’t got it, you at least have to have a *recent memory* of a having a fresh perspective! ■