

BEAU SORENSONby Andy Brawner ©2012
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- DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE, GARBAGE, SMART STUDIOS -

**BEAU SORENSON
CARES ABOUT COFFEE.**

ONE OF MY CLEARER, EARLIEST PICTURES OF HIM IS IN THE TINY UPSTAIRS KITCHEN OF SMART STUDIOS, MADISON, WI, CIRCA 2006. HE USED THE POUR-OVER METHOD AND WAS EXACTING IN HIS MOVEMENTS. NOT SURPRISINGLY, BEAU MAKES A GOOD CUP OF COFFEE. AT AGE 30, BEAU HAS ALREADY MOVED THROUGH ONE MUSICAL LIFETIME AND NOW FINDS HIMSELF LIVING ANOTHER. A NATIVE OF WISCONSIN'S NORTH WOODS, HE CUT HIS TEETH AT THE AFOREMENTIONED, TRAGICALLY DEFUNCT SMART STUDIOS. WHEN SMART CLOSED ITS DOORS IN 2009, BEAU HEADED TO PORTLAND, OR, A TOWN HE KNEW THROUGH HIS WORK WITH DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE AND HIS FRIENDSHIP WITH THAT BAND'S GUITARIST, CHRIS WALLA [TAPE OP #19]. HAVING RECENTLY COMPLETED THAT BAND'S FORTHCOMING RECORD, BEAU FINDS HIMSELF BETWEEN PROJECTS. IT'S A GOOD TIME FOR A CUP OF COFFEE.

You worked on the new Death Cab for Cutie album, *Codes and Keys*. Guitarist/producer Chris Walla is an accomplished engineer in his own right. Why did he want you on the project?

Codes and Keys was to be a much less guitar-centric record - it relies on synthesizers and vintage keyboards more than any of their previous albums. I've got a pretty strong background in modular synthesis and sequencing. As producer, Chris also wanted someone to help with what we called the "construction project" songs on the album, and wanted an extra brain to handle recording and troubleshooting duties if he was playing guitar on the floor. Also, this was the first record that was tracked in Logic, and I've spent a lot of time working in a DAW format, dealing with file management, that sort of thing.

This isn't the first thing you've done with the band. How did you start working with them?

Chris and I first worked together at Smart, on the mix of *Plans*. He had tracked the album on a (Trident) A Range (at Long View Farm Studio), and sought out Smart because of our A Range and control room. For some reason, we ended up working together well, and can be productive without stepping on each other's toes. We have different backgrounds, but we're on the same page with a lot of things. We both prefer **weird, half broken junk** like the Eventide H949 instead of modern gear or plug-ins. And we're big believers in the process, systems and workflow of making a record (and how these ultimately influence the resulting music). For example, there's a million different ways to make a delay, but the (Lexicon) PCM 41 is a specific delay we both love - partially for sonic reasons, but also for the layout and interface of working with it. It's a beautiful device, perfectly designed, that inspires creativity and experimentation every time you use it.

***Codes and Keys* was tracked in a number of different studios. Why?**

I think the band wanted to break the recording process up a bit, find rooms that were inspiring for different processes, and keep things fresh and interesting. Studios are like instruments: they lend themselves to particular things nicely, but can make certain parts more difficult. Also, by working in different cities, it meant at least one person wasn't on the road for that stretch. So, we ended up at six studios in four cities: Sound City in L.A.; Tiny Telephone in San Francisco; Avast!, Two Sticks and London Bridge in Seattle; and the Warehouse in Vancouver, BC.

How does this record differ from their previous albums?

Sonically, there are fewer guitars. It's not a synth-pop record or anything like that - the guitar simply has a different presence and intent on this record than their previous albums. Many of the parts that were originally written on guitar got moved to other instruments, and a lot of the guitar that remains does decidedly un-guitar like things. Also, I believe a lot of the last record was tracked live, while this one was a little more multitracked and assembled. The performances and takes have all remained intact. Chris is a real stickler about preserving performances, especially when it comes to vocals. But a lot of the supporting information was constructed over a number of days in a number of studios. So it's not really fair to say that this is a Lego brick computer record, either, because there are a lot of complete live takes on it, too. It ended up being a mix of techniques and approaches, which is part of what we set out to do: chase the songs wherever they went, explore different avenues, follow the music where it led us. A studio has so much to do with workflow and how a record comes together and how you work - we tried to be really sensitive to what was working, and what wasn't. Sound City has such an amazing drum room - it was so fast and exciting to do a lot of the drum tracking there, and The Warehouse has a really big, beautiful two-story live room that we could stretch out and take advantage of. When we needed strings, we went to Tiny Telephone to work with the incredible Minna Choi and Magik Magik Orchestra. When we needed to do some smaller 'checklist' recording and plug in a bunch of synthesizers, we went to (drummer) Jason McGerr's studio, Two Sticks.

It's clear you're a big fan of synthesizers. What do you use them for, and which ones do you like?

Synthesizers have never been scary or weird or fake or complicated for me. They've always felt more like Legos for sound, or logic problems or something. The promise of synthesizers as a completely open palette for making sounds has always been exciting and optimistic for me - I was born **just after** the time that **they were abused and despised**. The idea of doubling a part with a synthesizer, or triggering a sub-bass part beneath the kick, or filtering a guitar with one is a very natural part of the mixing process for me. I mixed a record at Soma Studios last year, and they've got tie lines that integrate an entire wall of synthesizers into their patchbay. I was so excited to see it, because I had literally dreamed of a studio like this for years - complete integration of synthesizers as outboard equipment. I grew up staring at pictures of the studios of (Karlheinz) Stockhausen and Raymond Scott, and have always loved the way electronic music studios of the 1940s and 1950s had a technical, scientific edge to them. All of the home studios I've ever had have been closer to this: oscillators and white noise generators and lab filters all live in the patchbay with reverbs and delays and compressors. Tape machines should be always ready for use as a recording device or a delay or a processing tool or as a compositional tool - the medium is the instrument. Going back to the Death Cab record, Chris is a huge fan of playing with tape machines, and we spent several afternoons making tape loops out of bits of songs. These would get put in a shoebox, shaken up, and put together in random order, and ended up as the ambient bed underneath a couple songs. Chris plays the (Ampex) ATR-102 like an instrument. It's really spectacular.

Describe how you like to use synthesizers in a mix.

A lot of times I'm emulating other effects: building a tremolo with an LFO and a VCA is more unique (and offers more control) than using a plug-in or a guitar pedal. I recorded a band that was obsessed with the Boss SG-1 (the 'Slow Gear' pedal), but couldn't afford one, so I rigged up a patch using the MS-50 that would do the essentially same thing with more control. It made me a hero for the rest of the session! Or, triggering an envelope that opens a filter on the way to reverb send, so the reverb opens up and gets brighter on cue. Because you can get a synthesizer to track and respond to changes in volume, you can get a lot of motion in a mix that feels a little stagnant by using different parts to modulate external processing. Enhancing existing parts is another thing I love synthesizers for: doubling a guitar part, or thickening a vocal harmony, or making a piano stronger - synths are great for all of this. The **external in jack** on my (Korg) MS-20 gets a ton of use, because once something is in there you can twist it into all sorts of crazy territory really easily. A lot of the applications I use synthesizers for are fairly subtle, like triggering a low sine wave to reinforce a kick or some white noise to thicken a snare. It depends on the goal, and whether the outcome should be realistic or fantastic. It's way too easy for synthesizers to get cloying, so you have to have a lot of self-control and always ask yourself, "Is this cooler, or less cool? Am I helping the song, or hurting it?" Objectivity is the key.

You worked at Smart Studios (Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Garbage) before it closed last year.

It was amazing! The first record I assisted on was the Garbage album, *Bleed Like Me*. I was running around, getting coffee, cleaning toilets - all the classic studio intern duties. I was so nervous and scared, but really excited at the same time. And I really loved that place, too: I'd find any excuse to stay late, to hang out, whatever I could just to be there. Smart had an

BEAU'S ESSENTIAL SYNTHS



- Korg MS Series -

I've been in love with the Korg MS series (MS-20, MS-50) my entire life. I brought mine along for *Codes and Keys* and it was part of most of our "construction projects" - running drums through it, triggering it (or other instruments) through it, etc. The cool thing about the MS-20 is it's all 1/4" jacks, so you can plug a guitar or keyboard or drum machine right into it, or insert something like the PCM 41 in the signal path, or use it to modulate parameters on the PCM 41 (which is also all 1/4"). It's really user-friendly in that way.

- Buchla 200 Series -

The other synthesizer I've been in love with lately is the Buchla 200e - the modern incarnation of Don Buchla's 200 series (as used by Morton Subotnik and Susan Ciani). Buchla had a completely different take on how to accomplish synthesis than Moog, and it leads you to a completely different way of working and making sound. I lose myself for hours in there every time, and always find something incredible. The 200e offers some really nifty updates like patch storage and MIDI control, so it's a little more efficient in a recording situation. Also, all audio signals are at line level, so it's easy to insert effects, or pull signals in and out of it.

incredibly welcoming vibe and presence – mainly due to Mike Zirkel, the studio manager. I pretty much owe my whole career and life to Mike for giving me the chance to work there. I feel like I grew up there, and I certainly got my education there. Eventually, I started working on my own projects, but I'd still assist on bigger projects that came through. This was a great way to learn how to (and how not to) make a record, and I avoided a lot of pitfalls by watching and helping other people struggle through them. I've always felt that recording is paralleled by the service industry, in a lot of ways: running a studio has always felt a little like running a hotel or something to me. You have to always remember how to make clients feel happy and comfortable, show them that you're on their team, and that you're going to do everything in your power to make their music awesome. This could be as simple as not forgetting to restock the toilet paper, or staying up all night looking for drum loops, or not freaking out when the tape machine breaks down.

What made Smart a unique place to make music?

Part of the Smart thing was always being creative with recording techniques and equipment – it had a real tradition of "if it sounds cool, it is cool." I heard all these stories about **people setting off cherry bombs to record explosion sounds** and stuff like that from the early days, and it really got my head into this place where you should always try things, and not be afraid of failure. If I spent the weekend working with a band, it was a goal to have something fun and exciting to report on Monday morning. Like, "Yeah, so we put the drums on the sidewalk, and hung a mic out the window..." Mike and I built a ton of crazy things together, most of which were his ideas: our take on a UREI Cooper Time Cube, a binaural head, a refurbished plate reverb and we modified the console. We also tried a ton of other ideas that didn't quite work out so well, but we learned a lot in the process. There was plenty of nice gear, but there was also a lot of weird junk: old lab equipment, broadcast gear and broken digital delay units. I was lucky enough to be able to walk into a professional recording studio every day, at any hour, for almost a decade. Who gets to do that anymore? I got to work with a ton of cool bands on an incredible console, and make some really great records. I feel so incredibly fortunate for all of it. It kills me everyday that it closed.

What are some other notable projects you worked on while at Smart?

There are a lot of records I'm really proud of that came out of my time at Smart: *Let it Sway* by Someone Still Loves You Boris Yeltsin, both of the Pale Young Gentlemen albums, my work with Go Motion and Mr. Gnome, and of course, *Plans*. Working with Mark Linkous (Sparklehorse) was one of the greatest musical experiences I've ever had. He would spend hours fiddling with something, making little weird noises that seemed to be completely useless. Days later, we'd return to them, and he'd orchestrate how they all fit together musically, and it would make sense (and be beautiful). It was incredible. Mark was so soft-spoken and endearing, and eager to share and talk about music – he turned me on to so many great ideas and so much cool music. He loved to share and learn and talk about music. I miss him a lot.

It seems like you've worked on a pretty wide scope of projects - how do you manage the difference in time and budget?

Every one is different, with different goals and needs. Whether you've got a day or a week or a month, the process is the same: you set a bunch of things up, make noises, capture said noises, and try to get them to come back out in a pleasant fashion. Working on a couple of bigger records taught me lots of little things that were applicable in any recording situation: the importance of taking enough time, of getting things right, and how to stay present, engaged, and focused. Conversely, injecting some of the speed and thrill of making a record on the cheap is something that can make a longer project feel a little less dreary: trying to track an entire song in a day, for instance, or cutting the vocal live off the floor. My job is to adjust, and try to help people make the best music within the limitations we've been given.



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In addition to your recording work, you also record your own music and do some collaborating.

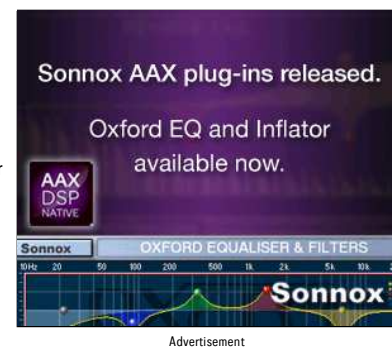
My own music is like the sandbox, the workshop where I get to practice and invent and explore (and, many times, fail spectacularly). It's like the testing ground for techniques and processes. I fell out of it for a while when I started working at a studio, but now I try to remember that working on little soundscapes and explorations is what led me to the world of recording other people, and I think it's important to keep in touch with the drive to create sound. It feeds a different part of your brain and soul. People always used to ask me about the music I recorded, and some of them really seemed to enjoy some of what I played them, so I've decided that releasing some of it (and collaborating with other people) might be a good way to connect with people that might like to work with me. I've got a couple of cassettes floating around, I just wrapped up collaboration with Andrew Fitzpatrick (of All Tiny Creatures), and I've got more releases on the horizon.

You're doing freelance work now, and not attached to a specific studio.

That's correct. After Smart announced it was closing I decided to move west, continue working doing freelance, and spend more time working on my own music. Right now, I'm excited about recording in places that aren't studios. Nothing against studios (there are many studios I love, and I love working in them), but a lot of artists I work with don't have the budget to spend a lot of time tracking in a studio - we'll track somewhere else, and return to a studio to mix. I've shifted most of my gear to smaller, more portable options in the last year, and I recently bought a Studer 169 to use as my primary console. I love the fact that I can throw this tiny console, an interface, my computer, and a case of cables in my car and go make a record in someone's house, or in a barn, or in an old church or whatever. I believe there's room for studios, home studios, remote recording, and self-recording in the music world. They're all different tools in the toolbox of making records, and they all have positives and negatives. It's up to artists (and engineers/producers/music people) to determine how to use the tools they have at their disposal to make the best records they can.

Did you play in bands growing up?

I think I have a slightly different perspective on making records because I didn't really go through that whole, "I'm in a band. We need to record ourselves" thing that a lot of engineers have. I had some music lessons growing up (piano and guitar), and played in my high school band. While I did play in some garage bands in high school (or tried to), I probably spent more time alone in my bedroom with a 4-track and a drum machine. We lived out in the country, and I grew up entertaining myself. I'd make little sound collages or go record sounds outside or make up radio programs. I eventually got really into pedals and heavily treated guitars before making the logical progression to synthesizers - I realized that all I was doing was setting the guitar on a table and fiddling with knobs instead of actually playing it, and that a simple tone generator might be easier to use. At the same time, I liked building electronics, and made a bunch of projects from kits: Theremins, synthesizers, guitar pedals. I liked to take apart old televisions and radios. When I started working at Smart, the transition to working in a studio felt really natural - a reel of tape in one hand, a soldering iron in the other.



Did you go to school for recording?

I did. Recording school is something I'm a little conflicted about, though. Obviously, I learned a lot there, and it helped me get to where I am today. But **recording schools are businesses**, and I think it's important for people that are thinking about getting started in recording to remember that. They don't really care if you find work in the field - they've already been paid by the time you graduate. And there are far more people graduating from recording school than there are opportunities. On the other hand, the old model of interning at a studio is becoming extinct, so there isn't a clear path to being a recording person. Has there ever been, though? It's always been a little strange and convoluted. When I worked at Smart, Mike always said, "You don't choose to make records - it chooses you."

Who are your recording heroes?

Like so many recording/synth people, Brian Eno (*Tape Op #85*) ranks pretty high for me - his first four solo records, his work with other bands, and his ideas in general. I've spent most of my life trying to make his *Discreet Music* in one form or another. Tony Visconti (*Tape Op #29*) has made a number of my favorite records, and probably belongs on a list of favorites. I'm also a huge fan of Phill Brown's (*Tape Op #12*) work: of course the Talk Talk records, but also Beth Gibbons' (of Portishead) Rustin Man album, *Out of Season*. I love John McEntire's (*Tape Op #23*) records, and I'm always blown away by the work that Tucker Martine (*Tape Op #29*) does. There are many, many others, too - hardly a day goes by that I don't hear something and just think, "Man, how did they do that?" or, "Wow, you can really get away with making music sound like that?" I love that feeling, and that's part of what I'm always striving for: making great-sounding records that people will hear and think, "Wow, I didn't know you could do that."