

Goldfrapp

Will Gregory: Recording *Black Cherry*

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It seems that almost everyone who's heard Goldfrapp's debut album *Felt Mountain* has fallen under their spell. Now the duo have returned with a second, *Black Cherry*, and a harder, synth-based sound.

Nigel Humberstone

Taking inspiration from classical music, movie soundtracks, '60s French pop and decadent Weimar Republic cabaret, Alison Goldfrapp and Will Gregory, as Goldfrapp, fashioned a mesmerising debut album *Felt Mountain* in 2000. Pooling together their eclectic visions, the album was composed using a range of instrumentation, including cello, violin, viola, double bass, French horn, baritone ukulele and melodica, all intertwined with edgy leftfield electronica — not forgetting a certain amount of whistling, at which Alison is particularly adept, and which helped produce one of those unforgettable melodies utilised in the equally memorable Orange TV commercial featuring Gary Oldman. It became Goldfrapp's calling card.



Will Gregory and Alison Goldfrapp.



Will Gregory, the man behind Goldfrapp's unique sound, is in many ways a musician with split personalities. With a background steeped in music composition for TV and films (*ID*, *Rabbit-proof Fence*), he is a string arranger and saxophonist of merit: but juxtaposed with all this is an underlying passion for all types of electronica. Close friend Adrian Utley of Portishead started him off on the vintage synth-collecting bug, which hasn't diminished. The difference between the two collectors is that Utley knows when to stop!

"We had a bit of a race at one time, but he's more sensible than me and gets rid of stuff," concedes Gregory. "But now I've got a room which is stacked full to the ceiling with all this stuff, which is a bit alarming."

"The way that I look at it is that if you get a synth and get a song from it, or it inspires something or gives character to something, then it's valid and justifies itself. A lot of them may only make one or two sounds that I really love, but for that reason I can't bring myself to get rid of them."

These characteristic instruments are undoubtedly the driving force behind Goldfrapp's latest album *Black Cherry*. Synths set the tone and define the agenda — having too many is not an option. "When you making an album it's somehow justified and I walk willingly into that danger," admits Gregory. "I get freaked out when I think about us all sitting down at 10 in the morning in front of *Logic* set at 120bpm, 4/4. I think we all need something that's our own, that you feel is special, and I think finding these old things, probably quite erroneously, makes me feel like that."

The String Orchestra

Despite *Black Cherry*'s heavy reliance on analogue sounds, a number of tracks, including 'Black Cherry', 'Tiptoe', 'Forever' and 'Deep Honey', feature live strings recorded with a 27-piece orchestra at AIR Studios by Steve Orchard and orchestrated and conducted by Nick Ingman. As an experienced arranger, Gregory himself had made the initial efforts. "We'd worked them out and Alison listened to them on MIDI strings, and then I'd go away and try to turn it into something that people could play. I had help from Nick Ingman, orchestrator and conductor, just to dot the i's and cross the t's. Then he would conduct the session so that I could be sitting in the studio relaxing — no, listening really hard. Total megalomania time! You know you can keep running in and out saying 'More vibrato!'"

"With five titles to record and only four being allowed within any one three-hour session we had to resort to some 'creative' scheduling. But string players nowadays are not like they were in the '60s and '70s when they were slipper-wearing 50-year-olds. Now they're all young, vibey and into pop music — and they know how to play in time as well."

Agenda

Black Cherry started taking shape as an album at the beginning of 2002, after Gregory's 'accumulated' home studio had been moved to purpose-built premises in Bath. Based around a Mac G3 and *Logic*, the initial demos and pre-production were controlled through a Yamaha 02R digital desk, used more as a neutral router and automated mixer than for its effects or EQ. For these purposes, Gregory relies on outboard devices like old Audic channels for mic pres, and a valve compressor built by his girlfriend's enthusiast brother. Augmenting these is Gregory's collection of synths, including an ARP 2600, EMS VCS3, Korg 700 and MS20, and Moog Minimoog as well as three Farfisas, Hammond, Casio and Philips Philicorda organs.

Gregory distinctly remembers the start of the album following the 2001 Christmas break: "On 7th January we sat down in a cold room looking across a few synths at each other, contemplating what we would do. When we started *Black Cherry* we made this big list on a huge bit of paper, listing what we wanted to do. Like we wanted to do a disco track with just strings, we wanted to do a track with a lot of white-blouse-wearing dulcimer players. And we didn't actually do any of these things!

"We do love to make little dogmas for ourselves. Like saying 'We're not using any guitars' — but in fact we did use guitar. Adrian [*Utley*] played guitar on 'Train'; he's the fuzz noise that comes in every once in a while. But generally I think with guitars that we find they come with a lot of baggage that just moves things into a recognisable zone that we can't quite handle.

"We also said 'We're not using any samples.' We don't use sampled loops anyway — they come with a little bit of borrowed vibe, but you pay that back later on because you're not completely in control of the character of what you're doing. And we don't use bits of records — we've figured that it's more entertaining to go and make your own loops."

These organic loops and textures, which formed the basis for the majority of the new tracks, were created from improvised jamming sessions involving Gregory, Alison Goldfrapp, Mark Linkous from Sparklehorse, and Adrian Utley.



Gregory's Yamaha 01V digital desk is used mainly as a router; preamp duties are handled by a range of outboard units.

"Basically we did a 10-minute jam, and two weeks later that was 'Train'. That was one of the jamming days that we had," recalls Gregory, "where there were four of us twiddling knobs or guitars or whatever we were doing, all at once — which made the editing side of it rather complicated.

"I think we did more jamming on synths with this album. On *Felt Mountain* we would tend to set up pads with a few other sounds and improvise over that. This time we'd set up a basic beat for a couple of them and improvise with the synths wildly over it, and then go back to find things we liked rather than go for a purposeful melody over a chord. There was improvisation on *Felt Mountain*, but this time it was improvising at a much more basic level — just making noises, really, or events or accidents or things that we liked the sound of that we could loop up. So there was a more fundamental approach, building from sound events. But apart from that I think we just wanted to turn everything up and get a bit more raucous and dirty — have a bit more fun."

Commercial Interest

A number of tracks from *Felt Mountain* have been used for commercials and in films, and Goldfrapp were even commissioned to write music for a new commercial (the Renault Clio 'Va Va Voom' campaign). So were they conscious when making it that tracks from *Black Cherry* might be used in that context? "No," insists Gregory. "It's a weird thing that when you're writing music you get a phone call saying they want to do a mobile phone ad using your music... The other side was that we weren't getting any radio play for *Felt Mountain*, so we thought it might be a good way for people to get to hear the music. So we did end up licensing one or two things, for that reason more than anything else."

This, according to Gregory, did not influence the way in which *Black Cherry* was conceived as an album. "I think we followed our intuition more this time. We needed to write something that wasn't like *Felt Mountain*, so that was a mission, and we had some ideas about the vocals. Alison's very versatile and has a lot of other voices in her than we got out on *Felt Mountain* — so we really wanted to explore how we could develop that. We wanted to do vocal harmonies, use layers and different vocal effects. For example, on 'Train' all the harmony is in the vocals, there's no harmony in the track. So we kind of slipped that round a bit."

Whereas *Felt Mountain* had been sporadic in its construction, *Black Cherry* was an intense affair, with Alison Goldfrapp relocating to Bath in order to be involved from the beginning. Lyrics were often pre-written, as she keeps a book of ideas, but they also developed along with the tracks. "A lot of the time she's doing guides or improvising over stuff," explains Gregory, "making sounds rather than words, and then sometimes they crystallise into words. So she writes almost by making a weird translation of the sounds she's made."

Vocals were almost exclusively recorded using a 1970s AKG C12 microphone, routed through an Audic channel and via a MOTU interface into *Logic*. Gregory came across this particular model of microphone via producer David Lord, who had a mic called a Percy Bear: "Essentially it's a mono C12, which really suits Alison's voice, and it's got a really lovely glassy top end. I found one and that's what the album was done on."

Attempting to describe the music on *Black Cherry*, especially tracks like 'Train' and 'Strict Machine', is no simple task — but try to imagine David Bowie's 'Jean Genie' merged with the double drums of the Glitter Band, topped with a little Donna Summer (Giorgio Moroder and Pete Bellotte era) and you're halfway there. It's like a mutant disco stomp propelled by surging analogue bass sounds.

"A lot of the bass lines were put together from chance jams," recalls Gregory, "they're not even melodic lines. But if you loop them they have a rhythmic groove to them that we liked and it's kind of like that 'concrete' principle of Steve Reich, where he was taking loops and music would appear out of them through sheer repetition. You know you could probably dance to the sound of someone coughing if you looped it up — you'd find some element of music in it.

"Last time [on *Felt Mountain*] I was using more orchestral sounds, and this time we went for naked synths a lot more — and organs. For example, at the start of 'Hairy Trees' there's a little Farfisa organ that I've got. It's got this weird knob that says 'Slalom', with a picture of someone skiing down a hill, and basically it gives you pitch-bend, which is quite unusual for an organ. And also you can think about skiing whilst you do it, which is quite entertaining!"

Upfront Drums

The move to more analogue textures and sounds also necessitated a different approach to drums. Rowan Oliver, Goldfrapp's drummer for their live shows, played on some tracks, as did Damon Reece from Spiritualized, but the majority of drum parts were programmed. "I think we quite like and favour electro drums," explains Gregory, "rather than going for a rock-out real kit. It's difficult — we're new to drums and we find that if you go with too much reality it starts to sound like a pub gig. We had this really nice machine called a Machine Drum [*Elektron SPS1*] — a Swedish thing, and we used some of that. It's a lovely analogue thing with knobs everywhere, a bit like a Simmons meets a 909 because you can filter and sweep and edit the synthetic parts so the drums sound really well. We also wanted to get the drums more present — I think we felt we needed to learn how to do that. Whereas before we'd gone for this very background '60s big-band approach to drums, where they're just supporting things in the background, this time we tried to move them to the front and see how that worked. So that was another mission."

Processing is another important part of the Goldfrapp sound. Gregory employs the usual tricks of feeding signals (including Alison's vocals) through old amplifiers as well as via synths such as his VCS3 and ARP 2600. "It processes beautifully so we shoved drums through it, voice, anything really. It's an instant '60s vibe machine because of the spring in it and the filter and the little bits of distortion that you get from it. Very often you can put stuff through it to give you a kind of sepia effect on everything.



Will Gregory's much-used EMS VCS3 and Roland SH09 synths, with a Wurlitzer EP200 electric piano.

"Funnily enough, I've got a Minimoog and I didn't use it. I can't get my head around the Minimoog at the moment. I find it hard to make it sit in the track, but I love my [*Korg*] MS20 a lot, and I've got this weird Russian thing that I found in East Germany called a Polyvox, and that is a bit of a beast. On the front panel everything's in Russian Cyrillic script, so I don't know what anything does. I've just about worked out where the pitch-bend is! But also, things don't do the same thing twice. There's a knob on there that says Ron and one below called 2 Ron, and as far as I can tell, if you touch those everything goes mental. It's out of control but lovely."

The Polyvox is a duophonic analogue synthesizer, with a 49-note keyboard, which was made and sold in Russia during the 1980s by the military. In this instance it added the distinctive, submarine bass sound to 'Black Cherry' and a throbbing, metallic growl to the aggressive, retro-tinged 'Train'. But whilst analogue synths are ever-present on *Black Cherry*, they are carefully, and very cleverly, controlled so that every texture and nuance has its own place in the overall mix.

"It was achieved through taking time," admits Gregory. "It's a very slow process when you're building music out of sound events as opposed to a guitar, bass and drums. So it's very much like a collage or mosaic — very finicky, you're piecing it all together, little elements, dotting them in there. For example, on 'Hairy Trees' there are something like 12 bass parts that make up 'the' bass part from different elements. I wish we could find a quicker way, because sometimes it gets a little bit crazy, especially when we come to mix it. Tom Elmhirst's eyebrows would go up when I'd give him the track sheet and there would be 12 basses! I usually had to do a comp so that I could get his eyebrows back down again!"

Demo Vibes

"I don't know what the ideal mixing route is, but we had this tortuous route where we demo-mixed everything and then went to 'properly' mix it with Tom Elmhirst, who's very good. But he got a little bogged down, because a lot of the time the guide mixes would have a vibe that was kind of irretrievable and so sometimes he'd be scratching his head to figure out how to approach it. In the end we did this bizarre stem mixing between the demos and what he'd done — which I actually thought was really good, because you got something that was better than either mixes on their own. Sometimes you could build them by crossing over from one set of stems to another and you'd get this bigger sound as a result. It was very painstaking but that's just how we are. The mixing wasn't any different from the writing in that tortured and anal kind of way.

"Pro Tools is really good for stem stuff. When I did my guide mixes I did stems from them, and then Tom did the same from his mixes so that we could compile stems from both mixes and you could cross over element by element as you went along if you so wished. It was quite tortuous but as a result we got something better than either of us would have done without each other."

Yet flexibility at the mixing stage is not without its drawbacks. Without imposing arbitrary deadlines, just when is a track deemed to be complete? It's a question that Gregory ponders thoughtfully. "To really know when a track is finished you need to have the luxury of time. You have to be able to listen to it a week or month later and not feel differently about it from the first time you listened to it. So the only way is to give yourself some distance from it. But the good thing about giving them some distance is that they tend to develop a rosy glow — they're more likely to survive if you've left them alone.

"Nick Batt helped a lot when we were writing and helped us to develop some of the percussion parts. Having Nick around was also handy when we were doing the demo mixes. It's funny how when you play something to somebody, even if they don't say anything or move a muscle — just the fact that you're hearing it in the room with somebody else makes you feel differently about it. And that can be very useful."

Another useful collaborator was Dave Bascombe, brought in to mix a number of tracks on *Black Cherry*. "Dave's great. We got a bit stumped with a couple of tracks, 'Hairy Trees' and 'Strict Machine', and he kind of clarified them a little bit. 'Hairy Trees' didn't seem to have enough richness to it at the time and he made a few crucial changes, like turning the vocals up in places where they'd always been too quiet. He also added some overall compression, which tightened it all up so that everything was more inside the mix rather than all over the place. But that's what mixers do, isn't it!" 

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