

Animal Collective

Recording *Merriweather Post Pavilion*

Tom Doyle

Over nine years and eight albums of head-spinning music, Baltimore-born group Animal Collective have perfected their individual meld of psychedelia and

Live performance and spontaneity are everything for Animal Collective, so capturing the magic of their unique electronic psychedelia on CD was a huge test for engineer and producer Ben Allen.



electronica. Their latest and best offering to date, *Merriweather Post Pavilion*, is a dense, otherworldly record on which Beach Boys harmonies meet heavily treated instrumentation to produce an *avant-garde* pop. The roots of its unique sonic character lie in the fact that the foursome were reduced to three in the wake of guitarist Josh Dibb aka Deakin's hiatus from the band.

Unusual in the sense that they write new material for tours, primarily, rather than for recording, the remaining trio — Dave Portner aka Avey Tare (vocals, keyboards, guitar), Noah Lennox aka Panda Bear (vocals, samples, percussion) and Brian Weitz aka Geologist (electronics) — were forced to rethink their methods when going back out on the road

without Dibb, after the release of their previous album, 2007's *Strawberry Jam*.

"It made us have to write a lot, I guess," says Portner. "We needed to find a new way of approaching having three people do as much, so we tried to do something different and use the samplers more."

"There aren't a lot of rules in our songs," Weitz points out. "We have effects processors on stage, and some nights if you're bored of doing the same thing you did the night before, you can try and play around with a different effect. Or trigger a loop differently to see how it works with timing. And occasionally those experiments on stage work and they make their way into the song."

A Fresh Approach

In approaching *Merriweather Post Pavilion*, the trio decided to hook up with co-producer Ben Allen (Gnarls Barkley, Puff Daddy, Christina Aguilera), specifically for his low-end expertise. "That was the original attraction," Weitz says. "But also he had a more eclectic taste in music. Growing up he'd been surrounded by music that wasn't just urban hip-hop. He seemed to be somebody that technically knew how to work in that area, but was open-minded to other styles as well. We heard the Gnarls Barkley record, but knowing that he'd been involved in a lot of the Bad Boy Records stuff from the '90s was exciting to us."

Allen remembers his initial conversations with the band. "We did a couple of conference calls via Skype over the course of a week, talking about music," he says. "I was really excited. This came at a time when I was getting a little disillusioned with the mainstream music business. So for me it was real treat. But it was also a huge technical challenge on a lot of levels. I was constantly on my toes."

Tea For Three

The first task for Allen was to find a suitable studio. Alongside the usual equipment considerations, Allen had to factor in the fact that Animal Collective employ a strict no distractions/privacy rule when recording. "We just lock ourselves in the studio," Portner explains. "We don't let anybody come in. We just like to be in our own world and not have any strangers around."

Allen suggested Sweet Tea, a facility

housed in an old gas-station-cum-woodshop in the small town of Oxford, Mississippi. "Sweet Tea is amazing," he enthuses. "It's the vibiest studio I've ever been in. It feels like you're making music in a living room that just happens to have a Neve 8038 desk in it. It was excellent. Just the crunchiness that you could get going with the preamp gains. So we had the Neve, and also this guy from Oxford, Mississippi, who runs a company called JFL Audio, has custom-made a bunch of preamps and compressors and limiters that are based on classic models. Those were the two flavours we had."

Portner and Weitz are equally enthusiastic about Sweet Tea. According to the latter, "From the very start we were looking for a studio with a big control room, 'cause we wanted to do most of the tracking in the same room as the engineer. So once we saw a picture of Sweet Tea, and the control room was almost as large if not larger than the live room, we decided that would be the right one to use. We wanted a room with a lot of interesting outboard gear to play with. We just wanted to all set up in there and hook up the outboard gear to our gear."

Live In The Studio

The band decided to set up their QSC PA (which they normally use for on-stage monitoring) at the back of Sweet Tea's control room, to give them something resembling their live environment for laying down takes. "I was taking a direct input from the samplers," Allen explains. "Getting sounds and watching my levels. Then once they were ready to do a take, they would crank up the PA speakers and I would turn down my monitors. We got into a system where I got what I needed and then they were able to rock out."

"When we were writing the record," Weitz goes on, "since so much of it was electronic and sample-based, we used those PA speakers to make the samples. And so we just saw them as a big part of the record. We originally brought them in case we were going to re-amp stuff, like play some electronics into a live room or something. But we brought three pairs of them and we only needed four of them for the re-amp, so we had these other two left and we just thought it would be fun to set them up at the back of the room. You don't want to kill the studio's monitors."

"It's not a very accurate representation of what most people are gonna be hearing," Portner laughs. "We do it mostly for our own enjoyment."



Photos: Jen Clark & Dasha Anderson

Animal Collective at Sweet Tea Studios with Ben Allen (centre, back to camera) and Sweet Tea's Liza Smith. From left: Dave Portner aka Avey Tare, Noah Lennox aka Panda Bear, Brian Weitz aka Geologist.

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► In another unorthodox move, Animal Collective eschew sequencing in favour of triggering their samples live, in an effort to lend their electronic elements a looser, more human feel. "That was the game plan from the get-go," says Allen. "For me, that was so challenging technically. They're all playing samples and sequences and recorded material with no synchronisation protocol between any of their machines whatsoever. They've created all these loops on their little samplers and they play them just like a guitar player would play in time with a drummer.

"So we would start by figuring out what was the most rhythmic layer of the song. Each guy would play their parts down once — and there might be seven minutes of this — so everything in that sense was recorded live. We wouldn't put a loop into the computer and then copy it in Pro Tools. However many samples were in each machine, that's how many passes we would have to do. And they're the synchronisers. It just happened to be that they're playing loops."

Ultimately, of course, this led to a natural messiness in the timings between sequences and samples, which the team chose not to tighten up. "Everything's not totally locked in and rigid... even though we try and play it as close to a locked-in way as possible," Weitz says. "I think even a casual listener's brain can maybe subconsciously pick up a little bit of a looseness there."

Roland All The Way

Sampler-wise, Weitz and Lennox favour the Roland SP404 and the more recent SP555. "The SP404 was just what we started using," Weitz says, "cause it was what we could

afford and it was the most simple thing. And now it's become an instrument that we know really well. It's really user-friendly. You can do things in real time on it. So we've gotten used to them. We almost may be approaching a point where we know them too well and it's time to try something else."

In terms of synthesizers, it's analogue all the way for Animal Collective: namely the Roland SH2 and Juno 60. "We've used them on almost every record for the last 10 years," says Weitz. "The Juno we use primarily for mid-range or high-end melodic lines and the SH2 we use more for the bass sounds."

"But we actually ended up overdubbing some other stuff," Allen points out. "We got to mixing and some of the low end on the bass stuff wasn't really doing what we wanted it to. So we used a Novation Bass Station, just 'cause that was at the studio. And actually some of the bass sounds in it were really amazing. In the same way, I would go in and use Drumagog and replace the kick sound once we got the performance in the computer."

Most of the distinctive arpeggio sequences on *Merriveather Post Pavilion* were created using the Juno's in-built arpeggiator, but Allen recalls that on occasion the band turned to Logic to create patterns from more abstract sounds.

"Daily Routine' starts with this little arpeggiated synth thing and the sound of a water drop. The guys had this really specific idea about what they wanted to do and so we cut up the [Juno] arpeggiation into individual notes and just put a mic up and recorded Dave making water drops happen in the sink. Then we cut those into individual samples and



Ben Allen co-produced, engineered and mixed *Merriveather Post Pavilion*.

I went into Logic and wrote a tempo map that just accelerated over the course of 30 to 60 seconds. So the song starts and you hear one little note of the arpeggiation and one little water drop and they slowly speed up until it goes into the song."

Similarly inventive is the washy, ethereal outro of 'Daily Routine', created, says Allen, by chaining the Roland samplers as effects units. "A lot of that is the samples that exist earlier in the song. But what they might do is actually trigger samples out of one and have it going through the effects in that unit, plus they're using another [404] in effect mode, just putting tons and tons of delay on it."

The Magic Of The Demo

Elsewhere, if a specific sound from an original demo sketch was considered too tricky to recreate, it would be spun into the master recording. "The acoustic guitar on 'In The Flowers' was the original recording that Dave did into his Roland [VS]1680 in New York," Allen recalls. "We imported it off of his machine. I tried to talk them out of that as much as possible, but sometimes they're really particular about the way things sound. They really like the sounds they've already gotten and getting them away from that could be difficult sometimes, for better or for worse."

If there's one item of outboard gear that all involved say in some ways defined the sound of the album, it's the Eventide H3000 Ultra-Harmonizer, a new discovery for Animal Collective.

"Those guys fell in love with the H3000," Allen remembers. "Once I showed them what you can do with it, you could just sit Dave down with the pitch knob and a lot of cool things happened. A lot of times, with the piano and acoustic guitar stuff, we would run ►

Vocals: Up Or Down?


If there was major difference of opinion between Ben Allen and the band during the mixing of *Merriveather Post Pavilion*, it was over the level of the vocals. The producer wanted them high in the mix, whereas the band members' preference was to mix them lower.

"[For] Ben, I think, coming from his background working in urban music," Brian Weitz reasons, "the vocals and the drums are always significantly louder than anything else. To Ben the vocal melody and the lyrics are the core of the song, along with the rhythm. We have a different view. We like everything to blend together. Even if we want everything to be defined, we want it to all have a lot of presence and personality. To us it's more about a psychedelic sonic listening experience than just a straight pop listening experience. So there was that discussion.

"Pretty early on in the mixing we realised we

were gonna have to find the middle ground, so we would do three mixes, where the vocals would be where we wanted them to be, then one louder where Ben wanted them to be and then one even lower than where we wanted them to be, just in case we changed our mind. It was very, very rare that we went with the loud vocal version. 'Summertime Clothes' is the biggest example of where we disagreed. Even after we finished the record we were still thinking maybe the vocals are too loud on that song. And Ben felt the opposite way."

"My instinct is to make the vocals as clear as possible," Allen states. "That's not really their style. So there was some healthy friction in the studio. That's the compromise there. I would push it and push it until someone would say, 'The vocals are too loud.' And the next thing you know, the vocals are covered in reverb and really low."

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Sweet Tea: "a living room that just happens to have a Neve 8038 desk in it".

► it through the H3000 and create a pitched-up and a pitched-down version and mix it back in so it'd have an otherworldly sort of feel."

Among the other distinctive features of *Merriweather Post Pavilion* are its loose, multi-layered rhythm tracks. "There's an old Gretsch kit at Sweet Tea that we used," Allen says. "A lot of the beats were constructed one part at a time, so maybe Noah would go in with just a tom and a snare and he'd hit the tom and the side of the snare and we might layer that eight times. A lot of the size of the percussion sounds is because there's a close mic and maybe two room mics on one instrument overdubbed eight times, so you might have 24 tracks representing that part."

"The electronic-sounding drums are still acoustic drum patterns, often that we made in our practice space," Weitz goes on. "Then we treated them with an effects processor in the sampler, just to give it more of an electronic texture.

"There's a lot of natural reverb too," he adds. "A lot of the reverb on the live percussion and a lot of the re-amps, it's all natural reverb within a space in Sweet Tea. It was just the hallway, basically — one side was wood and the other was metal and it was really narrow but it also had a high ceiling. We just listened to our footsteps in there and thought it had a really good sound and we wanted to put the mark of the place on the record."

A Bumpy Ride

The tracking for the album was completed at Sweet Tea in an intense month in February 2008. Some tracks were far simpler to record than others. 'No More Runnin', the most

laid-back track on the record, was recorded very quickly. "No More Runnin' was the one we started with," Weitz recalls. "That's a sparse song, but all the sounds and textures we use in it we were really happy with, so it didn't need that much else going on."

At the other end of the scale, the Beach Boys-go-rave atmosphere of 'My Girls' was comparatively difficult, since it took the team a while to work out how best to approach its central arpeggio figure.

"My Girls' was definitely the most difficult to record," Portner admits. "Just because we had one version of it and some of the instruments that we recorded were out of tune. It used to be more of a piano loop and not a synth loop, and tonally it was slightly off, so the first version we weren't happy with at all. We did an overhaul on it and built it up from scratch."

"It was the hardest to get to sound right," Weitz says. "It wasn't necessarily the hardest technically to record. Also it was the hardest song to fit on the record sonically because it's one of the sparsest songs, it's not nearly as dense as the others. Sometimes it sounded a bit empty or too straightforward. It didn't have an interesting sonic personality, until we got to mixing."

For epic closer 'Brother Sport', Allen found himself having to refer to the Collective's live version of the song to achieve exactly the right dynamic. "'Brother Sport' was the biggest challenge because the energy of that song they really had nailed down live. Matching that energy was really difficult."

When it came to approaching the opposing vocal styles of the two Animal Collective singers — Portner's restless and

gnarly performances, Lennox's more flutey, choirboy-like delivery — Allen created two different signal chains, though the specific details have been lost in the mists of time.

"We had a C12 and a U47, but to be honest I can't remember which one we used on which. Noah would generally want to go all the way down the song a couple of times, then we would listen back and see what we liked and what we didn't like. With Dave we were a little more methodical. We would do a section and go back and listen and recut little parts. But there's two to four doubles of everything. So we'd get an initial pass that we liked and then we'd go back and do doubles and triples and quads."

Fresh Feelings & Comfort Zones

Once tracking was completed, Allen and the band took a few months off to listen to the monitor mixes. "We recorded the album in February [2008]," the producer remembers, "but we didn't mix it until June or July and I was listening to the songs all the time. To me that's such a great sign, because I usually don't do that. Usually I do a record and I don't listen to it until I have to mix it."

When it came to choosing a studio for mixing, Animal Collective decided to follow Allen, who figured that Chase Park Transduction in his native Athens, Georgia would be the perfect location.

"When it comes to mixing, you want the engineer to be really comfortable around the studio," Weitz stresses. "You don't want to waste a lot of time trying to figure things out in a brand new place. For us, though, it's really important to go somewhere new. It kind of breaks us. It puts us in a mind set of

not focusing on anything but making the record, and it's a new experience being in a new town, so that gives the record a really fresh feeling. Working in studios or with engineers that we've worked with too many times over... just without thinking about it, you can slip into old habits."

"I'm familiar with the place and the rate was great," Allen explains. "They also have three EMT plates there and a couple of spring reverbs, and those were things that we were really keen to have. The low-end response in the rooms is really amazing, so I just knew that it was the right place for us to be. Plus, it's really private and really out of the way. Privacy was such a big thing for those guys that I felt it was the right place to be."

Studio A at Chase Park Transduction is centred around a Sony MXP3036 desk. "It's an interesting desk," says Allen. "The EQs are deceptively powerful, especially in the upper mids. They add a little clarity to a vocal extremely well. So we had those and a handful of [API] 550As that you could swap around. I had subs set up on the desk for stuff coming out of Pro Tools and we might hot-swap some of the API or Sony EQs around. Most of the mixing, at the end of the day, was done in the box, except for the reverbs and a little bit of top-end EQ in the desk."

Devil In The Details

"[The mixing] wasn't as hard as I thought it was gonna be," Portner states. "I was really worried because *Strawberry Jam* was really difficult and we actually had to mix it twice. But the mixing of this was done more by Ben — he'd take two or three hours to set up everything how he thought it should be and then we would come in and direct him from there."

"It was a little challenging because there's a lot going on," Allen says. "But for me it was more challenging because the band has such specific ideas about what they want. But those specific ideas are very, very abstract. So we might do a mix and someone might say, 'Y'know at three minutes and 42 seconds there's this one sound of a frog jumping in a pond and I really want it to sound like it's more wet.' Stuff like that."

For the band members, attention to detail, it seems, is paramount. "We kinda nit-pick a lot of stuff," says Portner. "Most people would think, 'Nobody is gonna care about that, you're crazy.' Brian is the king of putting on headphones and saying, 'There's a glitch at one minute in.'"

"Yeah, I seem to hear those things," Weitz laughs. "If I hear them once, I'll never be able to listen to the song again until we get them out of there. Because I always know they're coming and they almost become the loudest thing in the song to me. It drives me up the wall."

Art Not Pop

At the end of it all, Ben Allen agrees with the legion of music critics who have hailed *Merriweather Post Pavilion* as an early contender for record of the year, marking the pinnacle of Animal Collective's career to date.

"What they do is not like traditional songwriting, they're not pop music artists by any stretch," the producer stresses. "The experience of all these songs together in an album is more important than the experience of one particular moment in a song. They're looking at this as a piece of art they've made and it happens to have 11 songs on it. Modern music rarely does that any more and I think that's really cool." **503**



The live area at Sweet Tea.