



At The Theatre

Elbow: Recording *Flying Dream 1*

Elbow reacted against lockdown and their own tried and tested methods by hiring Brighton's Theatre Royal as an improvised studio space.

PHIL WARD

When lockdown began, Manchester band Elbow found themselves with a tour cancelled and a big hole in the diary. Guy Garvey (vocals), Craig Potter (keyboards and production), Mark Potter (guitars) and Pete Turner (basses) collectively began to fill this gap by working together remotely on new song ideas, Garvey at his home in London and the other three members of the band in Manchester. The four used FaceTime and WeTransfer alongside network audio collaboration tools such as the Audiomovers Listento plug-in to swap musical ideas and begin to build a set of new songs. Garvey has described the songs as having

a quieter and more reflective quality than usual, perhaps echoing the isolation of lockdown and the unfolding tragedy of the Covid pandemic.

The last few Elbow albums have been tracked either at their own studio in the Blueprint complex in Manchester, or at Peter Gabriel's Real World Studios near Bath, working initially with relatively sketchy song ideas. A significant amount of writing and arrangement would typically take place during the tracking sessions. For the new album, *Flying Dream 1*, however, the band decided to take a different approach and hire an unconventional 'pop-up' location to track the album. Because this would almost certainly bring with it some time constraints, the songs would need to be fully formed and rehearsed.

"Our normal recording process is very much in the studio, so we go in and we write alongside recording," says Elbow's keyboard player and producer Craig Potter. "We've always been very much studio-bound, so it was so exciting for us to do it the way normal people do! They book a place for a couple of weeks or a month in a studio and have to get it done. So for us, that pressure was a really welcome change. So we went in with parts learnt; the album wasn't pieced together like sometimes they are. It's all actual parts learned and played on the day. And so it was a really interesting, exciting way for us to do it."

Elbow Room

The next problem was to find a suitable space for the project. It quickly became apparent that theatres would not be reopening immediately after the end of full lockdown, so the band began to wonder if they might be able to hire one. "It was Guy's thought that no one



Photo: Mark Thomas @supaco

Elbow at the Theatre Royal, Brighton. From left: singer Guy Garvey, bassist Pete Turner, keyboard player and producer Craig Potter and guitarist Mark Potter.

was using theatres, and it just felt a real shame,” recalls Craig. “And also we thought to do it in a theatre, because then we could pitch a film of the whole thing. We didn’t know which theatre when we had the original idea, but we were given a list and we knew it had to be a certain size... I think we felt we were a bit mad in a way, ’cause we didn’t visit the Brighton theatre before the session, but as soon as I walked through the door, down a little loading ramp and on to the stage, and could hear myself and other people talking, I knew it was going to be all right. It was a bit of a risk, but it worked out really well.”

Elbow’s long-serving front-of-house and recording sound engineer Danny Evans concurs. “Yes, we got lucky with that. We had no opportunity to recce the theatre in advance, because of the Covid restrictions etc, so I was very relieved

Covid Care

When Elbow upped sticks from their Blueprint ‘home studio’ to track the new album in Brighton’s Theatre Royal, the spectre of Covid still loomed large, and could easily have derailed the project entirely. Elbow’s Band Assistant Athena Caramitsos was designated Covid Officer for the Brighton session and tour that followed.

“Once we knew the tracking session was to take place, I began to research the appropriate protocols and procedures. I have friends and colleagues who work in film and TV production, and those sectors, because they started working again earlier than music production, had developed things we could borrow. But also there was material available through the NHS [UK National Health Service] and WHO [World Health Organisation]. Along with that I prepared by doing courses run by First Option Group, a media and entertainment industry safety consultancy.

“Even though restrictions began to relax on July 21st, just after the session started, we planned for the strictest scenario and were set up for that. We had to have everything in place, and then maybe be in a position where we could begin to relax things, rather than starting off relaxed and then having to tighten up. A big part of it all was staying in a tight bubble with the core, and using AirBnBs rather than hotels. Hotels are risky ’cause of the shared areas — lobbies and bars. So we had three AirBnBs, very close to each other, split across the core of eight people; four in the band, the drummer Alex, Mark the film-maker, Danny the sound engineer and myself. Right at the end of the session we brought in the backing vocalists and Sarah, the woodwind player, to add their parts, but by leaving that to the end, we mitigated the risk to the whole project of bringing people into the theatre — although we still observed proper social distancing. And we didn’t go out anywhere in the town other than for dinner on the last evening. We didn’t even go to the beach apart from a band photo shoot on the last day. We effectively put ourselves under house arrest either in the AirBnBs or in the theatre. It was a very limiting way to be in beautiful,

when I first heard what the room sounded like. The stage space had a great acoustic character, not too ‘live’.

“The Brighton session originally was supposed to be March 2021, but with the way the pandemic and the restrictions went, we decided that it probably wasn’t going to be sensible to do that, so we had to delay it. So there were a couple of months after full lockdown where Mark, Craig and Pete were working in Blueprint, and Guy would be working in his studio in London. They’d be constantly connected over FaceTime and also with the Audiomovers Pro Tools plug-in, trying to make it feel as much as



Athena Caramitsos.

creative, fun Brighton. But it also meant we got the work done.

“A further element of it all was regular testing. We all tested five days before we left home, again three days before, one day before and finally on the day before departure. Then we repeated that same kind of procedure, so three days after we arrived and then regularly during the session. We also did temperature tests daily. The biggest risk we felt was transit, so we had everybody using PPE and hand sanitiser in the cars between the AirBnBs and the theatre. And the transport companies we used had to be able to meet the standards that we set. And on the trip down to Brighton everybody was asked to avoid hot-spots like service stations and to keep cars ventilated.

“We really did take the duty of care very seriously, but that’s inextricable with the success of the session really. We want to keep everybody safe and healthy, but also we wouldn’t get another shot at the album if things went wrong. You know, God forbid, somebody had tested positive five days in, it would have been a real worry. It made the stakes really high in every respect.”

possible like they were all in the same room together.”

Brighton Rocks

The Brighton session eventually took place in late June and early July 2021. In total, Elbow had two weeks to track 11 songs and, at the same time, produce filmed performances of them all. The core team comprised the four members of the band plus session drummer Alex Reeves, sound engineer Danny Evans, film-maker Mark Thomas and Band Assistant Athena Caramitsos (see box). The in-house technical staff at the theatre were on hand if needed, but the Covid protocols >>



— Craig Potter is the band's keyboard player and also the main producer.

» in place meant that they could only help at a distance. Further session musicians were brought in to contribute their parts towards the end of the session, so that any risk of introducing the Covid virus wasn't taken until the bulk of the work was done. Danny continues the story.

"The song arrangements were fixed as much as possible. But there were a few things that changed, and one song in particular was completely revised. But things like that always, always crop up. You can plan to the nth degree, but if



something's not working in the cold light of day, then you have to change your plans. We tried to stick to 12-hour days, roughly 10 till 10, apart from a couple of days that clashed with England matches in the Euros. So there were a couple of evenings where we stopped early and watched the football together.

"I'd worked out a channel list beforehand that would hopefully cover all eventualities, or at least most eventualities. So if the band decided that they wanted to do something different, the channels were all there in place ready, rather than having to take a big break while I reset for something different. The channel list was around 40 altogether. But I guess there probably wasn't a song where we used more than 24 inputs. The 40 was just to give us different options plus channels for timecode, talkback/comms and extra mics required for the camera feeds."

Basically Live

The videos of the Brighton Theatre Royal sessions show the band set up on the stage and the songs being performed substantially live. But was that the reality of the album tracking? "It varied from

one song to another", explains Danny. "There was a large element of the session that was about the filming, and Mark Thomas the film-maker wanted to get live footage of the band performing the songs together. So we did live takes of pretty much all of the songs. But, realistically, live takes have technical limitations in terms of spill and separation, and also it is inevitable that mine and Craig's focus is divided during a fully live take, so to enable us to focus more on specific sounds and individual performances, we often used those initial takes as guide tracks to ensure that the overall vibe, things like tempo etc, were right and then we went back over in the course of the day and replaced elements one by one if required.

"Especially with the vocals, you need to be able to really focus on the performance. There might be subtle changes that Guy might want to develop performance-wise. And just drum spill onto the vocal mic compromises the audio quality. It would have limited what we could do with both the drums and the vocal production."

"Most of the songs are basically live," adds Craig. "And I think the theatre

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Session drummer Alex Reeves has worked with the band for the last five years. Visible in this shot are coincident pairs of AKG C414 (overhead) and Coles 4038 (front of kit) microphones.

» definitely influenced the quieter numbers. We were playing to the room probably more than we ever have when recording. And as a result, for instance, a lot of the live drum parts are quiet, because of the room and because you just can't record a loud drum kit if there's a piano playing nearby, and that definitely influenced the way some of the songs went. And then if we needed more dynamics we'd overdub more drums.

"Most of it was played to a click, although not initially, just to see how it would feel. There were also some clarinet arrangements in the background and we wanted to play them in to make sure the arrangements were bang on. We needed some of that stuff playing with us. And we got Sarah Field to overdub sax and some brass and clarinets and stuff after. So most of it was played to a click."

Along with his production and arranging role, Craig is responsible for keyboards in the band. "Apart from the pianos, most of the keys are instrument plug-ins. I mostly used the Arturia synth package but there's other software synths too – some of the Kontakt stuff for example. But Arturia was pretty much the go-to for synth sounds for this album. Some of the synths we reamped into the room.

"And while we risked not seeing the theatre in advance, I wasn't going to risk the house piano! So, we asked a local hire firm, Brighton Pianos. They had a few options, like a Yamaha U3, but we

just asked them for their softest-sounding upright, 'cause a lot of the stuff I play doesn't suit anything bright. Also, we had multiple mics set up every time we recorded the piano so we had options. We had the room mics, we had Coles pretty close on the back, and we also had a couple of Royer ribbons, AKG C414s, and the Neumann KM184 pencil mics."

Sound On Stage

The theatre is clearly a space full of character; all red velvet, thick but well-worn carpet, and intriguing nooks and crannies. Were any of those nooks and crannies found to work as interesting spaces for recording? "There wasn't really time for much of that," says Danny. "At one point Guy had been talking about moving the band downstairs to set up in the orchestra pit. But, well, it probably would take more than half a day to clear the room, move all of the stage boxes down there, repatch, move all the backline down, headphone monitoring etc, mic everything up, line check. And then moving it all back up onto the stage again for the next day, we were talking about probably the best part of a day of down time. It's like moving house!

"Also, I was very pleased with the ambience of the room setup we had — it already offered plenty of options. We set up some mics back in the auditorium that were useful depending on the song. Some songs didn't use any at all, and mostly used just the close mics on the drums and maybe the pair of Coles ribbons on stage.

For some songs, though, we used a lot more of the more distant ambient mics. It was handy to have that ambience on the guitars as well, to make them sound like they're in the same space as the drum kit. And we used AudioEase Altiverb to make an impulse response of the room through the various different ambient mic options, in case we wanted to add any of the ambience in post-production."

The hazards of working in a space not designed for the purpose also include noise, and Brighton isn't the quietest city that the band could have chosen. Danny says: "There were lots of seagulls, and the theatre is not particularly acoustically isolated or anything. So, you know, the odd truck or motorbike passing by. I think you'd probably hear a lot of gulls on the unedited audio, but I'd be surprised if you could hear them on the final mix. I thought it was going to be a lot more of a problem than it actually was. When there was a gull perched on the window ledge right above centre stage we just had to stop recording for a bit until it left."

Flying Mix

Like day follows cliché, after any tracking session comes a mix. But did the way the album was tracked have consequences for the mix? "In some ways it didn't seem much of a different approach," says Craig, "but I suppose because we knew how it felt there in the theatre maybe it was. Making some decisions at the mix stage that we didn't have to necessarily question because we knew how we wanted it to feel. So sometimes it's not like, 'Right, what feel, what sounds does



— To make the theatre recording possible, Danny Evans (at the console) had to break down, transport and reassemble almost the entire contents of the band's studio.

Tracking Equipment

Most of the gear used for the Elbow Brighton Theatre Royal tracking session was hauled down from Blueprint Studios in Manchester by Danny Evans and Paul Meardon, one of the band's backline crew. It sounds a relatively simple task but, as Danny explains, it brought its own challenges.

"The issue was partly the time it took to pack up the studio, and then making sure that we actually had absolutely everything that would be needed down in Brighton. Like most recording studios, it's not designed to be portable. So I had to completely take apart the studio, de-rack the preamps and interfaces and put them in shockmounted flight cases etc, recabling it entirely, as it had previously all been connected via a patchbay, which for various reasons was not going to be practical. It was quite a big job, a few days' work. And making lists and double-checking that I'd got everything that I'd need in terms of the recording setup and backline.

"I think the band were thinking we'd fit it all in a couple of car boots, but it amounted to over three tonnes of equipment altogether, including the backline, much of which had been mothballed for 18 months, so we had to test everything to make sure that it was all still working. For example, to DI the bass we use a Line 6 Bass Pod Pro. They are really good units but sadly they don't make them any more, and there's not really a current equivalent. And two of our Bass Pods had firmware error issues and a third one had a problem with the screen, so we had to try and source another one."

The main equipment used to track *Flying Dream 1* was as follows:

- Computer: Mac Pro running Pro Tools HDX
- Interfaces: 2 x Lynx Aurora 16 providing a total of 64 inputs (32 analogue and 32 AES digital)

- Mic preamps: Total of 40 channels from a mix of Audient 880s, API 3124s, True Systems Precision 8s, two Avalon VT737s and a couple of Focusrite units
- Band monitoring: Behringer PowerPlay system with Shure SRH840 and SR1540 headphones
- Playback monitoring: Genelec 8050, PMC IB1S-A

Microphones

- Kick drum: Audio Technica AE2500
- Snare top: Beyerdynamic M201
- Snare bottom: Shure KSM141
- Hi-hats: Shure KSM141
- Toms: various, but often AKG C414
- Drum overheads: AKG C414XLs, or Royer R122s in a Blumlein pair above the drummer's head
- Close stage ambience: Coles 4038 in a Blumlein pair, six to eight feet in front of the drum kit
- Double bass: Neumann U87
- Electric bass cab: Electro-Voice RE20 (where used; bass usually DI'ed using Bass Pod Pro)
- Electric guitar cab: Beyerdynamic M201 (again, guitar usually DI'ed, through Kemper preamp)
- Room ambience: pair of Neumann U89s in the stalls
- Piano: Coles 4038 and/or Neumann KM184
- Vocals: Neumann U87

this song need?" It was almost like, 'It's the theatre, so that decision is made already.' So I suppose in some ways it was simpler than usual. It's like recording orchestras or choirs. I've recorded quite a few big choirs and big orchestras, and people often think it's more difficult to record those sorts of things, but in some ways, it's a more simple job because if you get great musicians in a nice room, you don't have so much to do. You're not trying to fix things or impose a feel after the event.

"The other thing I was thinking about was when you write and record in the studio, as we do a lot, it can be quite frustrating when the part gets changed or cut and you've just spent two days on the sound. So I think it was, for me as producer, much more satisfying knowing that the songs were already there and working. It was the way bands used to have to do it. We were definitely making the final thing in Brighton rather than thinking, 'Are we making the final thing?' That was very satisfying.

"I think we absolutely are very much pleased with the result. I think, particularly on some of the really delicate quiet tracks, we really sort of nailed exactly what we wanted. Pete was playing double bass for the first time and that, plus the sort of jazz aesthetics from the drum kit in the room, it gave us something we've not had before. So we're very pleased with the feel of it. And I think we all enjoyed the process probably more than any album we've ever done. So I reckon we'll definitely do it again." ■■■

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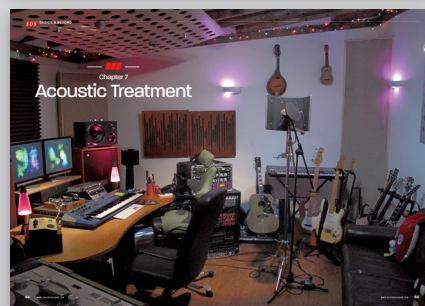
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