



by Curtis Settino

In just a few short years, Scott Colburn's Gravelvoice Productions has been involved with a wonderfully diverse collection of artists and recordings. His **Seattle, Washington** studio offers an analog 16-track, digital editing, and plenty of charm. Scott engineers, produces, and contributes musically when needed. He's also an avid record collector and for years was known as Shaggy (a la **Scooby Doo**) because he looked exactly like him. To start off the interview, Scott agreed to answer some silly profile questions.

#### **What are some of your current projects?**

I've been creating audio montages of each album for the Residents' web site. I'm also compiling material for a Captain Beefheart box set.

#### **Who are some other artists you've worked with?**

I've worked with Sun City Girls, Amy Denio, Bali Girls, Climax Golden Twins, John Fahey, Miss Murgatroid, Ed Pias

#### **How many years have you been an audio engineer, producer, musician?**

I started playing piano in 1970, saxophone in 1973, then guitar in 1976. My first live show was in 1979. My first "pro" recording was in 1981 (reel to reel four track). I realized I should be a producer in 1990. I opened my studio in 1993.

# **Scott Colburn**

#### **What is your audio education?**

I have a bachelor's degree in sound engineering from Columbia College, Chicago, 1989.

#### **How many projects have you been involved with?**

That's hard to really pinpoint; approximately 37 CDs, 22 cassettes, 30 books on tape, 10 singles, three 78 rpms, 19 LPs.

#### **What has been your biggest disaster?**

Moving to Los Angeles.

#### **What has been your biggest success?**

If success is measured by record sales, I project the Beefheart will beat all. If we're talking about record sales, then any Sun City Girls or Climax Golden Twins. If we are talking about personal accomplishments... *Pint Sized Spartacus*. My best sounding experimental project is Climax Golden Twins *Imperial Household Orchestra*. My best sounding rock record is the *Leatherboy* CD which isn't out yet.

#### **Who was the nicest celebrity when you were doing books on tape?**

The most professional was Adrienne Barbeau. She was also the nicest. Gary Owens was super professional.

#### **Who was the scariest?**

Michael York. He was a perfectionist to the degree that he ruined the recording. Lukas Haas couldn't read a line without a mistake. I also want to add that Kirk Douglas was the

only person I worked with that star struck me. All of a sudden I was looking through the glass at him and said to myself, "my god that's Kirk Douglas!"

#### **So is Gravelvoice a full-time thing yet?**

No, not yet.

#### **Is that your intention?**

Yeah, definitely. I just moved the studio into a commercial space last month. That's the first step: take it out of the basement. I'm also considering doing some advertising. So we'll see what happens. It's kind of nice to not have to rely on it to pay the bills. That way you can really choose what you work on. That's the way I've been working for the last five years. I really want to make a living at it. But I don't want to compromise. And that's hard to do. That's probably why it's taken so long to take this first step.

#### **Well it sounds exciting.**

Yeah it is! The space is big enough. It's about 23 feet by 23 feet with a control room inside of that. I built it to be, firstly a control room, secondly a tracking room. I felt that if I wanted something to sound really good I could go to a different studio and track it; then bring it back to my studio to do overdubs and mix.

#### **So how big is the control room?**

It's 12' x 15'. The ceilings vary from 9 feet to 10 feet throughout the space. It's hard to describe how the ceiling is. It sort of dips down with these pyramids, like wedge foam, made out of reinforced concrete. It's actually really sound. There's a parking garage on top of it. I have cement walls on two sides as well. So you can make the loudest sound you want to make at any time of the night and not have to worry about it. I hired a contractor to help me build the control room walls. They're not sound proof by any means and there's no window. I chose to not put a window in because I didn't have one in the studio in my basement. And I got more comments like, "We really like it that you don't have a window," than, "Why don't you have a window?"

#### **Just because people didn't feel like they were under a microscope as much?**

Yeah. Also, when I closed the door they felt like they were practicing. They kind of forgot that they were recording. I think I got better performances that way. Ultimately, I'd like to hire someone to engineer for me. That way I could concentrate on the performance part more. But I'm so far away from that.

## But you've got tons of experience doing both.

Yeah. But here's the thing: I know my studio really well, because I wired it myself. But if I go to a different studio, one that I'm not familiar with, I'd really need an engineer there, or at least a super competent second (engineer). One of the things that's fun about the new space though is that it is new. So I don't know where the drums sound the best, or where to put the guitar so that it doesn't bleed as much. And it's kind of exciting. I was in my last studio for three years, and toward the end of the time there it became almost a science. I knew exactly where to put everything. That's good. But at the same time it gets a little boring because it's hard to break out of that mold.

## How long do you think it'll take for you to figure out the new space?

Well, far less time than before. But it depends on how quickly I can get the people in there who'll allow me to experiment. I'm always working with Climax Golden Twins. I work with them twice a week. And they're super experimental. So I can try all kinds of different things with them. But as far as rock music is concerned, I need someone with a really nice kit to come in so I can try some things out. I've got a pretty good relationship with The Bali Girls now. And they want to come in and record a couple of songs. So that will be good because their drummer, Randy, is one of the most pounding players I know, and he's always very concerned about the way his kit sounds. He wants them to sound really big. So he'll scrutinize every drum sound and make comments, and I like that. He's great to work with. So they'll be good for the rock sound. Then I just got to throw a jazz combo in there and try that out.

## What other surfaces do you have in the tracking area?

Well, like I said, it's concrete on two walls and wood for the control room wall. The other wall is a Japanese-type screen that slides open. It opens into another space which is where the Young Composers Collective rehearse. It's a huge space for an orchestra to play in. Technically, it's their space, but it can be used for isolating instruments, for a bass trap, or things like that. It can also be used to change the acoustics of my room just by opening up the screen.

## So how is scheduling work with the Young Composers Collective?

It goes really well, actually. They have permanent rehearsals Wednesday night and Sunday night. So I have all the other evenings, plus some day time slots. So that's pretty good for right now. And realistically, most of the people that want to record have day jobs and aren't going to want to record during the day.

## Are you still doing your own stuff as well?

Not really. I did do a live show a couple months ago though. That was the first live show I'd done in about ten years. I've done about ten albums worth of material. But they've always been released on cassette, and in very few numbers. I like doing it. And I'm excited about doing it. But what I really want to do is work with other people and record other people's music that I like. Because I feel that they can do it better than I can. But the live show was a lot of fun. And it kind of whet my appetite for doing music again. One thing is that Climax Golden Twins consider me a part of the group. So I get to play and create with them. And that's what I've always wanted to do. It's really fun!

## That's great.

Yeah. There's two kind of people that I work with: One is somebody who approaches me and I check out what they're doing, and if I like it, I'll decide to record the album; the other, I guess I would call career investments. For the Climax Golden Twins, especially, I see a progression in what they're doing, and I'm willing to put the time into it, and be a major participant in helping them achieve what they're trying to do artistically. Because I see that as a way to go onto bigger and better things with them. I don't see them becoming stagnant. They're always progressing. There's always a lot of different projects coming up. We've done CDs that are straight music. We've done installations in art galleries. We've done live shows. And that's really interesting to me. I like that better than doing one-off records for people.

## The thing that's nice about that is that you both get to grow in your own areas.

Absolutely. I have a similar relationship with The Bali Girls. I did a demo for them and then we did a CD. And they're already talking about the next record they want to record and I'm developing that too. But most rock groups don't experiment that much. Climax Golden Twins are working on a CD for a Japanese label right now. And the concept is to make it all electronic. And we're doing it

all on the computer, which we haven't done before. The other stuff we've done has been analog recordings heavily edited in the computer. But this one is being created totally in the computer. It's exciting, but it takes a lot of time, even more, I think, than recording analog. Well it's easy to get sucked into the micro-tweezing, just because you can. Yeah. That's my big job; saying, "Let's get the basics down first, we can go back and nit-pick at things later." We've got about twenty minutes of the CD done. We did that in about eight sessions, which is pretty good. But we got another twenty to go!

## So what's the process?

All three of us have supplied different sounds. They may be sounds that were recorded separate from the group, or stuff Jeff and Rob have done together, or samples from other records, sometimes 78s. We're big on 78s right now.

## Do you have a 78 player?

Yeah, Jeff got a Victrola Low Boy. They've actually released a series of cassettes called Victrola Favorites. We record them right off of the Low Boy straight to DAT. There's five volumes so far. One is all Japanese. One is things we like. And I just finished my set, which is a companion to The New Session People CD (*Famous Songs From Days Gone By - Amarillo*). That CD was inspired by the 78s in my collection. So my set is the actual songs we covered on that CD. Sometimes people come over for the recording of the 78s. It's kind of an event. The mic's live so everyone just keeps quiet. Every once in a while a chair creaks, or something like that. But that stays in there, because that was the moment. My mind's just reeling thinking about all the 78s I've passed by, especially at estate sales. Oh yeah. You know it's amazing to hear a 78 played on the Victrola. It just sounds so much different than on a modern phonograph. It sounds so good. We change the needle every other disc to keep it fresh sounding. Setting up to record the 78s I discovered that, oddly enough, the low-end comes out of the veins at the bottom (of the Victrola's horn) and the high-end comes out of the veins at the top, even though it's just one little horn. But there is a difference in sonic quality as you go up and down the veins. I took two mics over there one time and put one up high and one down low. The other times I've taken a stereo mic and positioned it mid-way. For me it's great to hear my collection this way. It's always, "Wow! I didn't

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think that sounded like that," or, "I never heard that before!" Actually, there's some later 78s, not the vinyl ones but the shellac ones, that are amazingly hi-fi. You can really hear depth in these full band recordings that you don't hear on a regular turntable. It's amazing what they were doing with just a single mic. They were spending a lot of time sliding chairs around, adjusting players positions. Which I like and wish more people would get back into.

**I'm into that in a way too. I'm not a big isolation fanatic. It's like, there's really no reason to eat your peas separate from your mashed potatoes. They just get mixed up in your stomach anyway. So you might as well eat them together and enjoy the complex flavor. (Laughter)**

Oh, I had a recording technique I wanted to tell you about. It's not actually one that I developed, but one I read about and tried. The name of the book is *Practical Techniques for the Recording Engineer* I think. And the guy's name is Sherman Keene. He's got a flying microphone technique too\*. This technique requires sending a signal through an amplifier. You then swing two microphones in front of the amp: one in a clockwise direction, and the other counter-clockwise but in a bigger diameter, and record what's coming out of the speaker onto two tracks.

**So this is concentric circles parallel to the floor in front of the amp?**

Yes. So the microphone comes close to the amp then further away repeatedly. I used this technique on a Sun City Girls track. We played a harmonium part through the amp. Then I laid on the floor with my head up by the speaker and my arm straight up and swung the microphone around my arm. And then Alan (of Sun City Girls) took a microphone on a pole and swung it around my circle in the opposite direction, and it really worked! You take the two channels and pan them hard left and right and what you get is a sound that flies around in your head and in the stereo spectrum haphazardly. It's so much better than trying to create the effect by panning.

**I can see some cool choreographed swinging being used too. Maybe it's haphazard in the verses but then the two microphones sync-up in some way during the choruses.**

Oh yeah! But it was really hard to do it. It was a five minute song and my arm got really tired. (Laughter) I guess you could probably rig up something that was automated. But I think that the human interaction was the key thing. Because my arm would get tired and I couldn't keep the same speed going all the time. This other thing I wanted to tell you about was this Indian music I recorded. I got to record this guy named Vishal Nagar. He and his mother come to the University of Washington every year or so. She teaches a dance there. When I met him he was 16 or 17 years old; and he was already considered a master on the tabla. He'd already made guest appearances on a couple of releases in India. But he'd never had his own solo recording. So my friend, Ed Pias brought him and his mother into the studio. While I was setting up I found out that a tabla sounds better when you place the mic in between the two drums, pointing down at the floor, rather than trying to mic the two heads. So I'm using that technique and he's listening to it and says, "No. I don't like that." So we moved it around, tried a few different things, then all of a sudden he liked it. But then he says, "There's no echo on it." I sat down and explained to him, "We're not in New Delhi. We're in Seattle, Washington, and this is an American technique. I'll put plenty of echo on here if you want. But what is our goal on this?" And the goal was to make it sound good on cassette! And that's why they put so much echo on their recordings. So I put some on. Actually, I used a reverb with a slight echo on it. Then he said, "You got to put more on." So I put a little more on. And he said, "I want more still." So I said, "Hey Vishal, why don't you go in there and play a little bit? I'll record it and we'll throw it on a cassette and see if you like it." He did and he really liked it! So we were ready to go. They had an electronic tambura going, and his mother played harmonium. She was playing this one melody line over and over and over again. The run was about 45 to 60 seconds long. He performed his premiere tabla solo over that; and it was an hour long! It was simply amazing! And when I walked out from the control room after it was over you could feel the humidity in the air because he was sweating so much! (Laughter)

**Did you use much compression?**

Yeah. I actually compressed it quite a bit. Plus I had some ambient mics around as well. When you listen to the DAT of it you think,

"That's pretty good." But when you hear it off of a cassette you go, "Wow!" I was really glad to get to do that recording.

**So that was it, one take straight to DAT?**

Yeah. There's a couple imperfections in it though. He would play these incredibly fast runs and at the end of them he'd raise his hands up really fast. And a couple of times he hit the mic. I was talking to Ed about it. Ed has a doctorate degree in ethnomusicology. And I said, "I'd really like to take those mic hits out of there. But I'm afraid I'm going to mess up the music." And he said, "Ohh, you don't want to take those out! You don't know how many tapes and CDs I have from India where people start hacking up lung in the middle of the performance and they leave it in because that's just what happened. That's what they're into." (Laughter) So I didn't bother with it. But it bugs me to this day. (Laughter)

Here's another technique I wanted to tell you about. It's called the "Schizophrenic Microphone Technique". We used this in two places. One was *Dante's Disneyland Inferno*, which is a Sun City Girls record, and the other was on Charlie's (of Sun City Girls) solo record, *Pint Sized Spartacus*. The technique involves two microphones. I have this old AKG mic. I don't even know what the model number is. It's not a great mic by any means. It's all crackly and trebly and the top of the windscreens are missing. I put that on a mic stand and then taped a Shure SM 57 on top of it. The 57 was set back a bit behind the remaining half of the AKG's windscreens. I ran the 57 straight to one track. The AKG I ran into this small tube amplifier and miked it with a PZM hung from a stand. So Charlie would sing into the AKG for this crackly personality, and then move to the side a bit to get a cleaner sound from the 57. He just played with it as he did his vocals. It produced the effect he was looking for and was really fun for him to do.

**\*See the Recording Recipes column in *TAPE* OP #10 for other flying microphone techniques.**