

# MUSIC

SHOVELS AND ROPE

By Barbara Schultz **13**

NEWS AND NOTES

By the Mix Editors **16**

CLASSIC TRACK:

JAMES TAYLOR

By Robyn Flans **20**



Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst

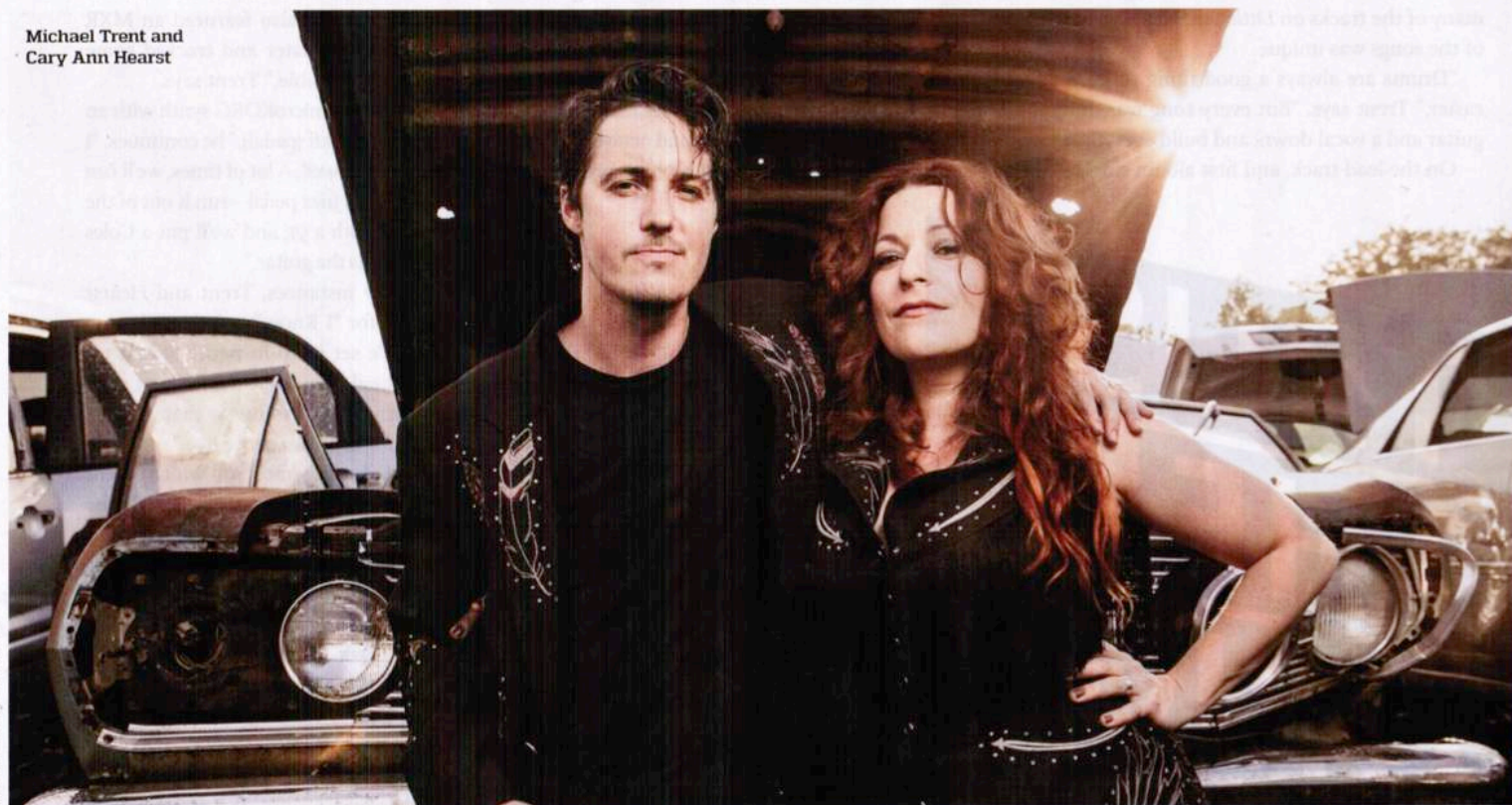


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## SHOVELS AND ROPE

Growing *Little Seeds* at Home Is a Family Affair

By Barbara Schultz

**I** don't know how they made this record, to be honest. I was on call, basically on Louie's schedule," says engineer Andy Dixon, marveling at Michael Trent and Cary Ann Hearst's time-management skills, as well as their artistry. "Mike and Cary are superheroes. Their talent is mind-blowing. I'm wildly fortunate to have anything to do with their music."

Husband and wife Trent and Hearst comprise the two-person band Shovels and Rope, and they have just released their third album, *Little Seeds*, a dynamite collection of

post-punk rock 'n' roll songs, with occasional folk leanings. And Louie? That's Trent and Hearst's baby girl, Louisiana, who was born just before tracking commenced.

Anyone who's tried to do pretty much anything with an infant in tow would be impressed: Not only do Trent and Hearst write all of their own tunes, and play and sing all of the parts, but Trent also does most of the recording, in their Charleston, S.C., home studio, Studio Bees.

"We just go right from songwriting into recording," says Trent. "We're very much a team

in the writing department, and when we get a nice pile of songs together, and we come home, we flesh them out in the studio."

"Michael goes mad-scientist in there, and he and Cary build the track up as it's written," Dixon adds. "He would have me come over and help track drums, for example, but that wouldn't necessarily be the first thing to get cut. My involvement was piecemeal, whenever he wanted help."

Trent's recording platform is Logic, which he says he appreciates particularly for its editing capabilities. "Almost everything is inside the

box," he says, "but I do have a Retro Powerstrip that we run a lot of vocals and overheads through, as well as some decent preamps."

Over the past few years, Trent and Dixon have acquired many of the same pieces of gear, partly because of similar sensibilities, and partly because it helps them join forces. Both use the Universal Audio Apollo Quad interface, and both make frequent use of Peluso mics (a P12 for Trent, and a 2247SE for Dixon). So there are common sonic touches on many of the tracks on *Little Seeds*. However, the process for building each of the songs was unique.

"Drums are always a good thing to have down first; it makes things easier," Trent says. "But every song was different. Sometimes we'll get a guitar and a vocal down, and build everything around that."

On the lead track, and first album single, "I Know," guitars came first.

"On that song, I was specifically inspired by the Jesus and Mary Chain recordings, and also by this Tom Waits song, 'Goin' Out West,'" Trent recalls. "We started that one with an acoustic guitar and both of us singing at the same time, just to get the structure and the vibe, and then I put down some of the heaviest guitars that I could dial up."

For all of the guitars on *Little Seeds*, Trent played a Loar 301T thin-body archtop through a Fender Blues Jr. amp, close-miked with a Shure SM57 and a Coles 4038 in the room. This track also featured an MXR Octave fuzz pedal. "And I think we went back later and tracked some additional feedback, just to get it as hairy as possible," Trent says.

"The other main instrument on the track is a microKORG synth with an organ sound octaved down, run through a Big Muff [pedal]," he continues. "I actually run that keyboard through a Blues Jr. as well. A lot of times, we'll run the microKORG through a fuzz pedal—run it out of the amp and close-mike it with a 57, and we'll put a Coles 4038 in the room, same as the guitar."

As they do in many instances, Trent and Hearst recorded their vocals for "I Know" together, sharing a Peluso P12 mic. "We set it up in figure-8, and we can get a lot of our final takes that way," Trent says. "There's a lot of push and pull in the way that we sing, so it works out well for us to cut those live."

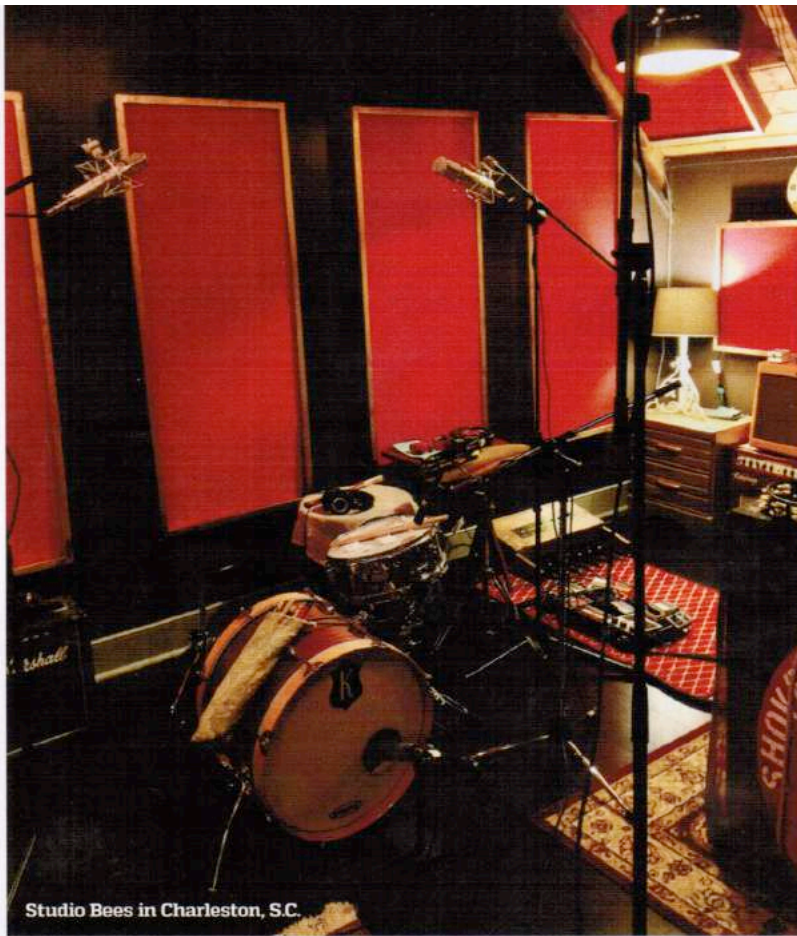
Trent recalls that drums—most of which Trent played on the album, though Hearst plays half the drums live—actually went last on this particular song, and Dixon was on hand to help. He used an Electro-Voice RE20 on kick, 57 on snare (top only), and his and Trent's Peluso mics as overheads. "That P12 gets all the air," Dixon says, pointing out as well that the room sound of Studio Bees, captured by a Coles 4038, is a big part of the mighty drum sounds on *Little Seeds*.

"When you're tracking in there, you definitely want to capture the room sound, it just sounds so great," Dixon says. "It has vaulted ceilings, and it's perfectly treated, in my opinion; it has just enough reflection but is really warm-sounding. It's just one big, open room, which is how Michael prefers to work, and I do, too."

Dixon mixed *Little Seeds* in his own home studio, also in Charleston. "This town has an amazing network and community of musicians and just all around great people," the engineer says. "The music community is really close-knit. It's a place where an artist can record an album they're happy with, affordably."

Dixon's home studio centers around Pro Tools 12 and his Universal Audio Apollo interface, as well as API and UA 6176 preamps, and Neumann KH120 monitors. He says that his UAD plug-in suite makes up more than 90 percent of what goes into his mixes, particularly when it comes to compression and EQ.

"I love their 1176s," he says. "The LA2 plug is probably somewhere on every song, and the Neve



Studio Bees in Charleston, S.C.

1081 EQ is really strong and works really well on guitars. For vocals, I use their Pultec; the air of that is so nice."

On drums, Dixon makes use of the UAD ATR-102 and Studer A800 plug-ins. "I use those things for color," he says. "I'm mostly trying to get harmonic content from the tape saturation, with an EQ after it to calm any weirdness that results. I will also turn on the Neve 1073; I think just the color it imparts is nice."

Dixon will also use some of the same plug-ins on Trent and Hearst's vocals, but he says most of their dynamic, sometimes distorted vocal sound is already developed before the tracks come to him.

"That's something I love about the way Michael works; he's not scared to print stuff," Dixon says. "I feel like people do that less now that we have such great-sounding plug-ins. But Michael will use that Retro Powerstrip—if he wants the vocal crunchy, he'll push it hard to that.

"It truly is amazing the way Michael is able to seamlessly slip in and out of different parts of the process, from writing to arranging to producing to recording the overwhelming majority of the song," Dixon concludes. "With most people, if they wrote the song, it's hard to have that much perspective, but he never seems to have that problem. It's a rare skill set. And all with a new baby at home. Scientists should study his brain." ■