

Tracking and mixing Lucette's New Album: *Deluxe Hotel Room*

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SEAN SULLIVAN

Where was *Deluxe Hotel Room* recorded and how did you become involved?

It was recorded at The Butcher Shoppe in Nashville. I had worked with Sturgill Simpson on his album *A Sailor's Guide To Earth*, so I have a previous relationship with him. He and Lauren are old friends, and they came in to track the album with Sturgill's band: Miles Miller on drums, Bobby Emmett on keyboards and synths, and Chuck Bartels on bass. Then Brad Walker came in for a day on sax—he's toured with Sturgill in his horn section.

Lauren would play the songs on piano by herself to the band and then they would figure out how to make each one unique. It's easy when you're making a singer-songwriter record to play piano and then put soft drums, bass and guitars on it, but Sturgill and Lauren made a conscious choice to make it more of a unique pop record, and part of that decision was to not put any guitars on it.

Did you track and mix the album?

I tracked it and David Ferguson mixed it, but I was there for the mixing as well.

Diving right in, the songs that open and close the album: 'Deluxe Hotel Room' and 'Lover Don't Give up on Me' are predominantly Lauren singing and playing piano. How did you get that piano sound?

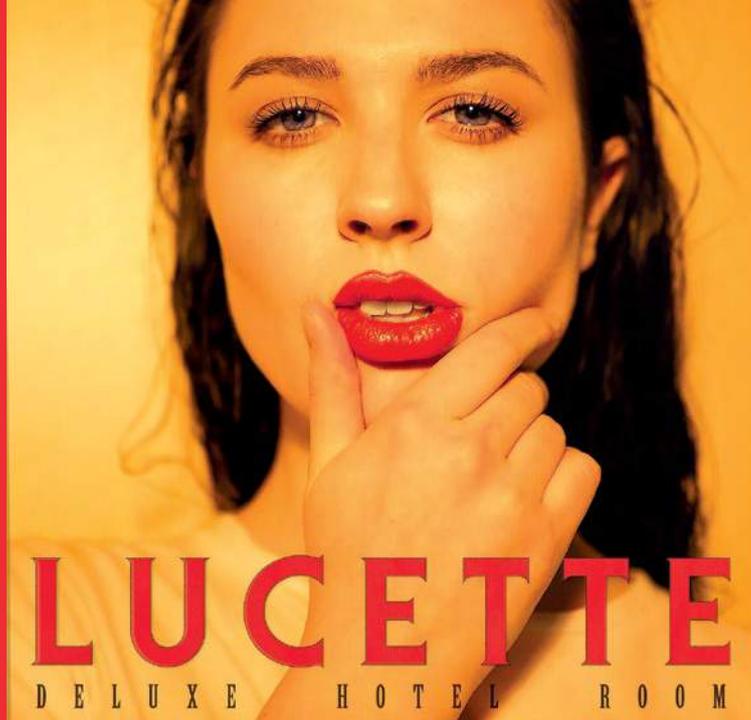
The piano is a Hamilton upright with really hardened hammers that make it super bright. To mellow it out, I went behind it and stuffed a stereo L/R pair of AKG C414 mics right on the soundboard. The piano itself was placed up against a wall, which helps with bleed when tracking live, and this also adds a bit of bass. I ran those mics through a Universal Audio 2-610 preamp, boosting the 200Hz shelf around 6dB, and to cut the brightness I dialed down the high shelf at 10kHz a touch.

Did Lauren sing and play at the same time?

Yes, we used a Shure SM7B for her vocals on those two. She did two or three takes of the whole song playing and singing, and we edited the best takes together, maybe the intro from one, a chorus from another, all with no click.

How about her vocals on the rest of the album?

For the vocals on the other songs we used a Brauner Velvet—a very bright microphone. It worked really well when she was singing softly, adding a nice airy quality to the sound.



DELUXE HOTEL ROOM

is the sophomore effort from Lucette, aka Lauren Gillis. This album finds Canadian singer/songwriter/keyboardist Lauren deep in the eclectic production world of metamodern country artist Sturgill Simpson. I heard the album on NPR's First Listen and I was immediately struck by its minimalist approach and the beautiful sense of space on display across its nine tracks. *Deluxe Hotel Room* is not your typical genre fare—on the contrary. Its lush, open landscapes are dotted with organic electronic instrumentation and textures alongside tastefully effected bass, drums and saxophone, all with Lauren's beautiful vocals front and center.

The minute I finished my first listen, I knew I had to find out more about how it was conceived, recorded and mixed. Below we speak with engineer Sean Sullivan and the artist herself. Come along and spend some time in the *Deluxe Hotel Room*.

Interviews by Paul Vnuk Jr.

We also used the SM7B on the song 'Angel' which is kind of Phil Spectorish. The Velvet gets too in-your-face and harsh with louder, more pushy vocal.

What preamps did you use for the vocals?

That would have been a Mercury M72 which is a Telefunken V72 clone. We pretty much always use a Cloud Microphones Cloudlifter Mic Activator, or occasionally a clean GML preamp with the SM7B, to get that level up. Since Lauren was singing so close to the SM7B, the proximity effect closed off the sound a bit, so we just added a bit of top-end EQ to open it back up again.

This album has a lot of electronic textures and instrumentation. Did you use outboard synths or softsynths or both?

Sturgill has a pretty nice collection of synths, so they were all outboard. We had a Prophet 5 and a Minimoog. The bells, the strings, and the choirs were played on one of the new M4000D Digital Mellotrons. There was also one newer Dave Smith synth around, I can't remember which model, but we used it for some stereo arpeggiated sounds. We didn't do anything with MIDI or sequencing—there wasn't even a click track on most of the songs, unless we knew that Miles was going to do percussion or drum overdubs.

I love the lush reverb textures on the synths and the whole album really, what effects did you use?

We used a real EMT 140 plate reverb which has about a second and a half of decay time, and an AKG BX10 Spring Reverb. The BX10 indicates a four-second decay time on the panel, but I think it's actually a bit longer. Since the songs were slower and so open, it allowed us to get away with longer reverbs.

'Crazy Bird' has a long, single electric piano note through a panning phaser, was that a stomp box?

We used a Rhodes a lot on the album and also a bit of Wurlitzer, and yes, the phaser was an Electro-Harmonix Small Stone stomp box. Our Rhodes has a stereo speaker and a built-in tremolo that ping-pongs between the speakers, as well as an effects loop. We had the phaser swirling in the effects loop and the tremolo giving it the left and right movement in the speakers; we used a pair of Shure SM57 mics to record that. Some of the keyboards were recorded direct, but a lot of them were tracked through guitar amps with tremolos and spring reverbs. We also used a Roland Space Echo to add delay on a few things, and then to add some texture on the vocals when mixing.

Did you mic the keyboard and guitar amps with 57s also?

Yes, or more often a Royer R-121.

How was the bass tracked?

Chuck's signal went through an ACME Audio DI and an Ampeg B-15 amp miked with an Electro-Voice RE20. We also did some reamping of the bass DI tracks through a fuzz pedal on some songs, and blended that in with the clean signal.

The ACME DIs are awesome! We reviewed the tube version two months ago in our May issue.

Sturgill uses them live. When the band loaded in for Lauren's project, it was pretty much like loading in for a Sturgill Simpson concert, so that's what we used.

How was the saxophone initially tracked?

The sax was captured with an old RCA MI-6203-B ribbon mic into a GML preamp because that mic needs a lot of gain. Then on 'Angel', we reamped the sax back through a Fender Champ turned up to ten, to give it a distorted, freak out sort of sound.

What about the drum machines on the album?

The only drum machine was a Korg Volca Beats Analog Drum Machine. One of those \$150, cassette-sized things. Miles sat with it in the control room and played the beat live.

Wow, live?

None of the drum machine stuff is programmed. It's all Miles playing the Volca Beats with his index fingers through a DI. It really helps with the organic feel of the record—nothing is programmed.

This album nicely blurs the line between obvious electronic beats and real drums that have a nice, round, vintage, nostalgic character. How did you mic the kit? What effects did you run the drums through?

It was a pretty standard drum mic set up. Miles plays a small Gretsch kit with a 20" kick, 14" floor tom, and a 12" rack tom. We put the kit in a tight, unique-sounding 7' x 12' drum booth with high ceilings. It's an odd-shaped room that used to be a safe room with cork walls, built to keep documents safe in case of fire. For mics, it was a pair of 57s on the top and bottom of the snare, a Sennheiser 421 on each of the two toms, and a Sennheiser 602 on the kick drum. Then an AEA R88 stereo ribbon mic for overheads. We also used an AKG C 460 B, which is a 1980s pencil mic, as a spot mic on the hi-hat. And that's it—no outside kick mic, no room mics—even the overheads didn't get used much because cymbals really weren't used a lot on this album—pretty much just hi-hat.

For the kick, did you put the mic on the outside, or right up by the beater head?

I put it just inside the sound hole, just to the point where the diaphragm was inside.



Photo: Shane Leonard

DELUXE HOTEL ROOM

SEAN SULLIVAN & LAUREN GILLIS

What was the flanger effect on the hi-hat on 'Full Moon Town'?

On that song the hi-hat went through a Waves MetaFlanger plugin to give it a left and right stereo sweep.

You mentioned the UA 2-610 earlier. What other microphone preamps did you use on the album?

We have a Sony 3036 console, but we don't track through it—everything is tracked through outboard preamps. The close mics on the drums went through a vintage custom six-channel rack of old API 312-style preamps—*not* 500 Series modules though. The overheads went through an AEA RPQ ribbon pre-amp. The bass and Lauren's vocal went through the Mercury M72, and all the direct synths went through an Avalon U5.

Did you compress on the way in?

Just the vocal, a little bit, with a Highland Dynamics BG2 vari-mu compressor, to help roll off the highs of the Brauner mic. We didn't need to compress the bass because Chuck uses flat-wound strings, and his playing on this album was very even. I don't print compression on bass very often.

What about drums? Any compression on the way in?

No.

How about the mixes, how many tracks did you end up with?

Most songs were 16 tracks or less after we stripped away all the tracks that we weren't going to use. On some songs, we had the whole kit miked, but we only used the floor tom and the hi-hat. The only song that had more tracks than the others was 'Angel' because it had two drum kits on it, played by Miles in separate passes.

How much processing happened in the mix?

Lauren was back in Canada by the time David set about mixing the album. We needed instant recall to facilitate the revision process, so we did most of the compression and EQ in Pro Tools. We used the Sony console as a summing mixer for stereo pairs—I use an oscillator to set up and balance the faders left and right, so they're really even.

EQ and compression plugins?

We use the FabFilter Pro-Q a ton for EQ, and the UAD API 560 quite a bit. Compression was mostly the UAD 1176 and LA-2A emulations, and then the Waves Kramer PIE compressor plugin too.

For vocal effects, we used our outboard plate and spring systems, and a Roland Space Echo. We used a Radial reamping box to impedance-match the Space Echo, which is actually an instrument-level device. You come out of Pro Tools at line level into the Radial, then from the Radial into the Space Echo at instrument level, then out of the Space Echo to a DI to get back to line level, then finally into a preamp to gain it up—all this, just so that the Space Echo sees the proper impedance.



Photo: Todd Wellons

How about the other vocal effects such as double tracking?

Some of that is real with Lauren singing over herself. Sometimes we just took two different takes and made a double track that way. There are a few songs where we used the Waves Reel ADT plugin or the Soundtoys MicroShift plugin.

How about the drum effects?

Outboard plate and spring again, but sometimes we used the Avid AIR spring reverb on the snare drum when we needed a shorter spring sound than the AKG could provide.

We seem to be talking a lot about 'Angel', but that song has some of the coolest drum effects. The snare almost has a pseudo gate to it, where the 'verb is really big but it goes away very fast.

We recorded two drum sets on that song, so I did a lot of snare and tom gating to clean it up and cut out the bleed and clutter. That, and the reverbs help give it kind of a drum machine-like sound.

You only have one hardware plate and one spring unit, but you can hear these on the vocals, the drums and some of the other instruments too. Did you add it to each source individually and render it, or was everything sent all at once at mixdown?

Everything was mixed live and shares the reverbs. We sent aux sends out of ProTools and into the console, where the effects are set up on physical aux sends. Those came back to channels on the console and then we captured the total stereo mix out of the console back into Pro Tools.

Any final bus EQ or compression on the master mix?

No, most mixes that David or I work on do not have anything on the stereo bus. In the past ten years I can't think of any mix where we used a compressor on the stereo bus.

That probably contributes to the spacious, open feel of this album.

The idea of compression on the master bus is actually a very modern one that came into fashion when SSL added bus compression to its consoles. It picked up even more when people stopped

DELUXE HOTEL ROOM

SEAN SULLIVAN & LAUREN GILLIS

working to tape. It's valid for a lot of music and it can sound great, but really, it's just not a part of our workflow. Many of our clients are OK with having more dynamic range, and leaving the master bus empty gives the mastering engineer a lot more to work with. My feeling is, there's nothing that I could put on a stereo bus that would be near as good as what a real mastering engineer would use.

Another thing that makes this record so open-sounding is that we worked from the standpoint of first adding things, but then seeing how much we could strip back later, so that each element has a very specific purpose which gives each song its own identity.

You guys really captured a great organic vibe.

Things like having the saxophone as pretty much the lead instrument was a cool creative choice by Lauren and Sturgill because it's not what most people expect on a record these days. Or making Miles play all of the analog drum beats live and not sequenced or synced with MIDI was another cool choice that helped make things feel live. We never synced him to the grid or anything. Picking the right band that knows how to communicate was also an important decision.

You mentioned not cutting things to the grid. What about the other, often touchy subject of vocal tuning?

Well in Nashville, tuning is of course still a thing [laughs], but for Lauren we just tracked the vocal until it was right. Usually if you have three good takes you can put together a great master vocal and maybe fix one word here or there if you have to. I think that works better than just doing one take and throwing a tuner on it. When we do use it it's always for spot tuning a note in an already great performance. I know it's weird to hear your voice in headphones or through the speakers coming back at you without any of the gizmos or fluff on it, but if you can train yourself to work that way and give a really good raw performance, it's only going to get better when you do add any sweetening later.

My last question is, you have worked with Sturgill as a musician, and now Sturgill as the producer—was there a difference?

I think a wise choice Sturgill made was to *not* be a musician on this record. It can make it harder to focus on what's going on in the room if you're also trying to focus on playing the right notes on your instrument. So, for this he was definitely a sit-in-the-control-room, listen-and-direct kind of producer. Plus, he also played a role in helping Lauren pick the songs and arrange them to be as compact and effective as they can, with the focus on her vocal.

There *is* one song, 'Full Moon Town' that has two long guitar strums with lots of delay on them, that Lauren got Sturgill to play, but it's just *one chord*—so, she *did* talk him into playing something on it!

Sean, thanks so much and great work on the record!

Yeah man! Good talking to you.

LAUREN GILLIS

I'm curious about your workflow—how do you write songs?

I'm a piano player and I'm always writing, especially when I'm on the road.

Do you have a portable recording set up?

Just my good old iPhone. If a melody pops into my head, I record it on my phone. Even more important though is that I allot time for myself to sit and write—that's when I revisit all those ideas.

I also like to get a song down in one sitting if I can, even when I'm cowriting with someone. I have a group of really close friends and I like to get together, drink wine, make food, hang out, and try to write songs. It's not even important that they're all good songs, or if one of us will ever use them. It's just really important to make the time to do it, especially because we all lead such busy lives. It's really important to allow for that time to be creative and to write.

You've worked with two really great producers. On your first album you worked with Dave Cobb on a more traditional country folk-flavored kind of album, and then with Sturgill on this album, which is harder to categorize. How do you go about choosing a producer?

On my first record I was 19 years old. Prior to that my only recording experience was doing a demo in Edmonton. I was really lucky that Dave gave me the opportunity to do my first album, and he co-wrote a lot of the songs with me. I really needed that guidance at the time. On this record though I feel like I've grown more as a writer. These songs are far more personal to me—I had a clear vision of what I wanted. Sturgill knew what kind of sound I was after, and he helped me get it.

How did you land on the instrumentation and arrangements for this album?

It was two things really. My first record was heavily guitar based, and being a keyboard player, it was hard to reproduce its sound on the road. For this album we wanted something that was easier for me to play live on tour. We also wanted to have an album that really focused on my voice and not layers and layers of other competing things in the mix. I wanted it to be very open sounding.

So, who's idea was the 'no guitars' rule?

It was both of ours—I honestly thought that we would put more guitar on it [laughs]! Neither of us wanted it to sound like a traditional Americana record. I had so many pop and R&B influences that I wanted to focus on. I originally wanted horns, but in more of a horn section way, and in the end Sturgill really knocked it out of the park with the solo saxophone decision. I couldn't hear it, but *he* could, and the sax totally makes those songs. In some ways it makes the record. I also really love playing with a sax player live now because it feels so soulful

and rich. I am forever indebted to Sturgill for flying in his sax player from New Orleans, because it changed the course of my musical career [laughs].

When you showed up at the studio did you have demos, or did you sit down and play the songs?

There were three songs that I had demoed: 'Talk to Myself', 'Full Moon Town' and 'Out of the Rain'. On those I had a pretty clear vision of what I wanted them to sound like. On 'Full Moon Town' I wanted heavy bass. Then Sean and Sturgill added the fuzz to the bass and flange on the cymbals—techie stuff that I never would have thought of, but that's the point of having a producer, right?

For the other songs I sat down at the piano and played through them, and workshopped them. We did the record in like five days. It was very organic.

One thing I was grateful for was that Sturgill had a rule that no one was allowed to be on their phones, so we were pretty immersed in the process. It was definitely a work environment, but a creative one.

That should be a rule at every studio, although I don't know if I could do it [laughs].

Seriously! It was so nice to just put my phone away. Otherwise you focus on things like how your dog is at home, and I'm sure that my mom was constantly sending me pictures [laughs]. It was nice to not worry about anything other than what the record was going to sound like.

How did you and Sturgill get a good creative balance going?

It was a team effort. I never felt like I didn't have a voice, and I was fine with speaking up, but I really did trust Sturgill as the producer and Sean as the engineer because their knowledge of sounds and equipment and everything far surpasses mine. I also trusted them with creative liberties, again like Sturgill bringing Brad in to play sax.

Since your voice is the focal point of the record, let's talk about that. Did you track vocals with the band, or add them later in the process?

A bit of both. Much of the record was played live on the floor. 'Deluxe Hotel Room' and 'Lover Don't Give up on Me' were tracked live with me at the piano and singing. But some songs were overdubs, as well as my backing vocals and doubles. If I recut a vocal it was because I wanted to nail a feel or sensitivity that you can't always get when you're focused on playing at the same time.

I am definitely not precious about how vocals are done. Sturgill would often say, "We want the little mistakes and imperfections," but it's also important to me that people hear how I'm feeling and hear the emotion in the song. Sometimes I would go back and do another take to capture that, rather than just doing it once and putting a tuner on every song.

As a singer, what is your opinion of vocal comping and vocal tuning in modern music?

I don't really care. I think a lot of modern songs sound totally fine with tuned vocals, but I hate the way my voice sounds through a tuner. I'm sure Sean went through and tuned some



things here and there, but I think it sounds super nasally if you just throw a tuner on my voice. I can hear it a mile away, but again like I said, I'm not a precious person when it comes to how vocals are done—if something needs to be fixed cuz I messed up then by all means fix it, but I do prefer an organic feel. When I recorded the first album, I had a sinus infection during my first week in the studio, and they had to use a tuner on my voice because I sounded like a nasally squirrel...

So, your name is Lauren Gillis—where does the name Lucette come from?

It's my grandmother's name—very French Canadian. I like the idea of someday having a band of the same musicians to play and tour with, and maybe someday having Lucette be a group effort.

What is your touring band?

On the road right now it's drums, bass, and keys, with saxophone at a few of the bigger shows like Nashville and Atlanta.

Last question: what advice would you give to a singer-songwriter going into the studio for the first time?

Honestly, know what you want your record to sound like *before* going into the studio. Listen to what your producer and your engineer have to say, but still know what *you* want and how to accomplish it.

Thank you Lauren, I really love this album and I keep telling everyone I can about it.

Awesome, thanks so much! 🍷

Lucette: *Deluxe Hotel Room*, produced by Sturgill Simpson. Visit Lucette at www.lucettemusic.net.

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