



Pic: Fran Dowsett

# Heaven is a recording studio

The advent of digital technology has had a paradigm-shifting effect on the professional recording industry. Recording artists' access to cheap digital equipment means they can now record their music themselves, instead of paying to record in a professional studio. Paul Agar recently shifted his recording studio from a room at his former Ashby home to a sound-proofed studio located at Yamba Business Park. He tells **Geoff Helisma** how he arrived at this point, investing considerable time and money into building the new Heaven Recording Studios, despite a shrinking market.

“**E**certainly, this is the thing with recording studios: it's probably not really a sensible career move, running your own recording studio,” says Paul Agar, surrounded by analogue recording equipment, which interfaces with his digital recording system. “In many respects it's like a musician's life: it can be up and down, but we all hope to get solid work and income – but often it's not like that.”

The origin of Agar's musical odyssey can be traced back to 1982, in his country of birth New Zealand, where he first enjoyed some commercial success with a series of singles; the fourth of which, *You Fascinate*, peaked in the NZ Top 40 in 1984. That year, Agar uprooted and moved to Melbourne, seeking to make his mark on the Australian music industry.

“I spent the first six months or so networking and meeting other musicians. I had some contacts in the industry and within six months I had a band, record deal and a publishing deal.” He laughs when asked how his group of the time, *Marginal Era*, went success-wise during its

four-year lifespan. *Marginal Era*, Agar says, was a synth-pop band with similar influences to *Pseudo Echo* – a group exposed to the Australian public by Countdown's Molly Meldrum. “Yeah, we had some big name producers working with the band, but we certainly didn't achieve the success we'd hoped for.”

He was busy, too, composing, recording and performing with the likes of the Daryl Braithwaite Band, *The Badloves*, *Mondo Rock* and *Things of Stone and Wood*, so Agar spent plenty of time in recording studios. “While I enjoyed my career as a performer and writer, I was fascinated by the studio environment. And I was fortunate enough to work in some of the biggest studios in Australia as a muso: I remember *Platinum*, *301* and *Paradise*; I just loved that environment. I would always observe what the engineers were doing and always asked a lot of questions.”

Soon enough, Agar, who had some basic recording equipment he used to compose his music, was doing demos in his flat for other musicians, and in the early 1990s he began “running a number of music-based projects for different

community organisations that had state funding. Things like taking music workshops into juvenile justice centres around Victoria. There were always a lot of jokes about having captive audiences.”

Some of these programs involved obtaining day release for “certain young offenders. One of the big successes was a program I ran for Ausmusic, which involved a project called *Work Exposure*, whereby I would take them out into the industry. One guy got a job doing rigging at one of the early Grand Prixes at Albert Park. He ended up getting a job with a rigging company that did all the staging for the big concerts in Melbourne.”

After 12 years haunting the traps around Melbourne, Agar and his partner, Diane, took the sea change route to an acreage at Ashby. “I got to a point where I thought, ‘Well I've kind of done what I wanted to do here; it's time for a move.’ As luck would have it, I had toured up here a few times so I knew the north coast was a beautiful area. I didn't have any particular idea in mind to move to the Clarence Valley; it could have been anywhere between Coffs Harbour and Byron

Bay – it just happened to end up being Ashby.”

The shed the couple lived in while they were building their house ended up housing the first version of Heaven Recording Studios.

“I was still performing around the coast and I needed to set up a little facility for myself: somewhere I could write and demo my own stuff. I bought some cheap gear, and then someone asked: ‘Could I come in and demo some songs?’ It just grew from there. I used that money for microphones and kept building it up. Every cent that came in I put back into the studio. I built an extra room – it was just a process of evolution.”

With his studio work steadily increasing, Agar was starting to feel the strain of travelling all over the countryside playing shows. “I'd spent a good 10 years performing in pubs and I was getting really jaded with the whole scene. I was doing a lot of solo work; driving two or three hours to a gig, three or four nights a week – playing by yourself is really hard work. I started to think if I could get more work in the studio I wouldn't have to drive anywhere.”



Agar at work in his studio

Agar garnered some local music industry recognition when he won Best Male Vocal and Best Production/Engineering, respectively, at the 2001 Dolphin Awards, which is an annual event put on by the North Coast Entertainment Industry Association in Lismore. But it was his involvement in the production of *Dirtgirlworld* that provided some real impetus. The brainchild of Whiporie couple, Cate McQuillen and Hewey Eustace, *Dirtgirlworld* is a 52-episode 3D CGI animation (combined with photomontage) that has aired around the world, notably on the ABC in Australia and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's network. *Dirtgirl* is also the Clarence Valley Council's waste management mascot. Agar is credited as the series' audio engineer and co-composer.

"When a contract like *Dirtgirl* comes along, something like that was fantastic because it was a solid nine months of work." However, that contract didn't just arrive out of the blue. "They initially approached me in the early days with the concept and asked if I would be interested. I said, 'Yeah sure.' It was many years later when full production started."

Agar has also been instrumental in producing the *Eyes Wide* radio project for Clarence Valley Council, a series of 20 three to four minute radio segments, which was one part of a valley-wide program that targeted excessive alcohol consumption in young people aged from 12 to 18, by providing them with positive recreational activities, events and projects.

"I've also run a number of other successful programs over recent years, particularly with indigenous youth groups in the Lower Clarence, as well as some health

organisations. I always enjoy working with young people, because they'll often open my eyes to different kinds of music. For example, with *Eyes Wide* we took a group of young people out into the community to interview other young people. We compiled all of those interviews into short radio programs."

More recently, Auntie Hu Hu and the Big Lazy, a group that featured in ABC's *Exhumed* band competition for older musicians, was filmed and recorded at the studio for last year's reality TV series.

"Other recent projects include a number of video clips played on NITV," says Agar. "Although my passion is recording bands; that kind of work probably makes up a quarter of the time I spend in the studio. The majority of the work I do here is music production. Either individuals or small groups of people approach me – they might be singer songwriters and they either don't have other musicians or a band to support their songs; or they are composers with limited musical skills who ask me to create the music for their compositions."

"For example, just recently I had a couple of bush poets in the studio: as part of their show, they also perform music and write songs – they came in and laid down vocal tracks to a guide piano and click track. They went back on tour and left me to do everything else – guitars, keys, drums, bass, you name it. My mission was to do all the music myself – and if there's something I couldn't do, say trumpet, I'd hire a session musician."

So Agar pretty much has most of the bases covered when it comes to production for music, and he's aiming to



Chocolate Starfish took part in a project Agar [far right] was coordinating for Ausmusic at the Melbourne Juvenile Justice Centre in 1996. The group rose to national significance when its debut self-titled album peaked at No. 2 on the ARIA albums chart in April 1994, following their 1993 cover of Carly Simon's *You're so vain*.



Ngaiire Joseph made one of her early recordings at Heaven Recording Studios in 2004; the year before she made the top 30 in *Australian Idol*.

## Pedal to the metal

The main room at Heaven Recording Studios features a large tropical island mural, which lends some 'real world' ambience to the soundproofed environment. Paul Agar spends time there most days playing his beloved pedal steel.

The pedal steel guitar is a complex instrument that has between 10 and 14 strings and foot pedals and levers that alter the pitch of the strings. As it happens, a series of serendipitous events led Agar towards playing the instrument. "When I was working on the *Dirtgirl* series, I was given a brief that they wanted some kind of slide guitar on some of the material," says Agar.

"I borrowed a lap steel [a fretless guitar that rests on a person's lap, which is played with a metal or glass bar or tube, slid along the strings as they are plucked] and started recording these pieces with this beautiful, old [borrowed] Maton Silvertone lap steel. I really dug playing it, because prior to that I'd just played a bit of slide on electric guitar."

"I decided I needed to get myself a lap steel and I came across a cheap, beginner's model pedal steel on e-Bay and thought, 'That's about the same price as a lap steel, and if I can never work out how to use the pedals, I'll play it as a lap steel.' The rest is history; I'm addicted to pedal steel."

incorporate film post editing, too. "Radio and TV work is an area I'm always trying to promote; it's good work and pays well. I've done a number of commercials and jingles for which I've composed the music; and often people just come in and do voiceovers."

When asked to pinpoint a particular success when it comes to capturing the performances of recording artists, Agar takes some time to find an answer. "There has been a lot of work and a lot of different artists who have come through. I'd like to think there are a number of artists I've worked with at grass roots level, who have gone on to achieve some degree of success – it's always exciting to see those artists go on and kick some goals."

"I remember Ngaiire Joseph, who toured with Blue King Brown [backing vocals] and worked with electronica icon Paul Mac; her manager approached me back in the early days of her career and asked me to play some guitar as she sang, to see if I was interested in working with her. I was totally blown away by her voice."

Now performing as Ngaiire, she first came into the public's eye as a top 30 contestant in *Australian Idol* in 2006. She recently toured and played stadium-sized shows with American soul superstars John Legend and Alicia Keys and, in March, she was a headlining artist at the world music festival in Adelaide, WOMADelaide 2014.

Agar has created his own little piece of heaven, albeit within a sound-proofed cocoon. "I love working in the studio," he says. "When it's good, it's creative, but it's not always like that – sometimes it's meat and potato stuff – but it can be an exciting and creative place to work."

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