

## Recording the Band “Slept” in the Cold Room Studio

by Darron Burke, © 2000

From 1992 to 1997 Darron Burke’s Cold Room Studio was a haven for young Boston bands. Many singles came out of his 8-track room like Cardinal featuring Richard Davies and Eric Matthews; Gigolo Aunts; Sugar Plant (from Japan); Lou Barlow, and Kudgel (purveyors of “chimp rock.”) A collector of weirder recording equipment, Darron owns an original Studer J-37 half-inch four track from the Beatles Sgt. Pepper’s era and the Troisi mixing board that recorded George Thorogood’s “Bad to the Bone” LP. Darron is currently constructing a 1960s style studio just outside of Boston and plays drums for Ultrabreakfast.

Dave Ackerman’s history includes recording and mixing the Lyres, The Allstonians, African pop star Tabu-Ley Rochereau, Derrick Morgan (1960s Jamaican singer) and The Diary of Anne Frank String Quartet from Minneapolis. Dave works at Harvard Universities Music Library as an audio preservation engineer where he restores old recordings using Sonic Solutions No Noise processing. Over the last few years Dave has been providing mastering services for clients in his home studio, which is based around a TDM Pro Tools system.

What follows is an informal self-interview between Dave and Darron about the recording and subsequent mastering of a full length CD by the Boston band Slept.

**Darron:** Rolling? I'm shy, can you turn this off?

**Dave:** Darron Burke doesn't like being on the mic. Huh? That's not true, right?

**Darron:** Yeah—but only in falsetto aaaahhhhhhh. [in a heavy metal shriek]

**Dave:** Who is Slept?

**Darron:** Slept is a 3 piece band, bass drums and guitar originally from Little Rock, Arkansas. The guitarist, Aaron Sarlo, used to be in a band called Technosquid Eats Parliament, the drummer is Phil Ouellette and the bass player is known as “The Chris” Schutte. They're a young band, they don't have that much money but they had a friend named Terry who is a fan of the band and she gave them five thousand dollars. They actually had planned to do the record before they had the money but she really got things going. I had done stuff with Slept on 8 track a couple of times in my old studio [The Cold Room] before it closed down. We did a session in the middle of winter once and we were heating the studio with a Coleman stove.

**Dave:** And how did that work out?

**Darron:** The room was full of fumes but we could make tea all day. There were a lot of jokes about marshmallows and hot dogs.

**Dave:** Now, isn't Slept the fire-starting band?

**Darron:** Yeah. Every time I record Slept, something catches on fire. I had a tube mic pre that I built and I hooked up the power supply wrong. It just started smoking and going crazy. It turned out only to be a resistor so I easily got it working again. Another time we used a weird mic pre-thing I got at the MIT flea market and smoke was seen on that occasion as well. While tracking this record, we were trying out some Event 20/20 powered monitors; I was blasting them pretty loud to see what they could do and one of them started smoking and burning.

**Dave:** Event was pretty cool and shipped us out another pair.

So were you excited to make a full length record with Slept?

**Darron:** I always saw them as a creative band, but I wasn't completely happy with the stuff we had done in the past. I thought Phil's drums were kinda sloppy, Chris was playing too many bass chords, and Aaron didn't always have the lyrics ready and was writing them in the studio. I saw this as a chance to make it up. I always wanted just a little more refinement out of them. When they said lets make a record, I explained to them that I was going to kick their asses! We were going to work really hard—I wanted to get some really good drums down on tape, to get tight bass parts—I just wanted everything to be in place and thought out.

I decided to take a free day at Supersonic Studio (where I worked for a year and a half), to do a pre-production tape. We recorded live-to 2-track so we could to listen to the songs and also they could get a sense of the new studio since we were going to be spending a lot of time there. When they heard the playback they were like... "why do we need to do anything more? This could be our record!" And I was like no no no no! [laughs] Because I knew they were capable of so much more. There were 3 songs that I really liked ["Radio Death Gear", "I H8 The Dead" and "Apollo"], and there were other songs that were good, but honestly they sounded like filler at the time.

**Dave:** It certainly didn't come out sounding like filler. It really stands up and holds its own in my opinion. Do you have any stories to tell about tracking the album?

**Darron:** The first day was devoted to getting sounds. I didn't want to proceed until we got the drums right. I just couldn't get a bass drum sound. We had brand new heads and it was a 20" bass drum, but it wasn't happening. I'd get a sound and on loud hits it would totally glitch out and sound like this clicky smack. It was awful, with no tone and no thump. We tried everything: combinations of mics near the head, away from the head, we moved it across the room, cement floor, wood floor—nothing. So, we went down the hall to the Gigolo Aunts space to borrow Fred's bass drum, but we ended up taking the whole kit. It's an old Ludwig swirly-look. I've seen pictures of Ringo using them. That was the magic bass drum! It sounded great with one AKG D-112 just outside of the hole. The rest of the drums were mic'd with 57's and Peavey (PVR-1) Omni cardioid mics for overheads. They are cool. They capture the room in addition to the direct sound. I got frustrated trying to get a good room mic set up that day, but the bleed through the scratch vocal mic sounded pretty cool, so I used that in a couple of final mixes.

We recorded bass, guitar, drums and scratch vocals live. I had the bass amp isolated in a small room. We used an Ampeg B-12 Flip-top tube amp and a Precision bass. We tracked "Apollo" at the end of the first day and it was slow going and nervy. We were starting with...to me...the most important song on the record—maybe that was a mistake. It was a 12 hour day. AHHH, day one!

We spent 4 full days tracking, took a break, and then spent 4 more days for overdubs. From this point it all becomes a blur, but recording and mixing took at least 16 full days.

There’s one song where I suggested a kick drum pattern because I thought it fit more with the bass. Phil used it in the first part of the song and it worked. Later, when we were overdubbing the guitars, I was saying to Aaron, “hey you’re not playing it the same way you did in the first chorus.” We’d go through the part and punch the guitar, and then I realized it wasn’t him, it was the kick drum. Phil had forgot to play that pattern in the second part of the song and it really made a difference in the feel.

**Dave:** Which song was that?

**Darron:** [sings a bit trying to remember] “Bring Back GKW.” [The song title refers to the episode of “The Simpsons” when Groundskeeper Willie got deported as an illegal alien.]

**Dave:** Did you guys go back and fix the kick drum?

**Darron:** Nope. its still there.

**Dave:** So guitar sounds, what did you do for that?

**Darron:** We didn’t keep the basics. For overdubs we used a Marshal Bluesbreaker re-issue, the Ampeg bass amp and the Vibrochamp. For some stuff, we used your idea and took ceramic floor tiles that are on mesh. They are like 1' x 2' or so and are flexible, so we could make little channels coming away from the guitar amp [See drawing]. We'd have it sitting on its edge in an “s” shape coming from the speaker and another one about 4 or 5 inches away in the same shape with a microphone at the end so that the sound is bending and bouncing through this channel of ceramic tile. We were able to squeeze the sound and get a really interesting squeaky midrange—we were inspired by engineer Tchad Blake from an article in which he spoke of *acoustic filtering*.

We took the Vibrochamp and just put it on 10 with no distortion box. We used an EQ pedal before the amp to bump up the signal to hit that first tube a little hotter. Vibrochamps use one 6V6 tube and have a lot of harmonic distortion so we just used the natural amp distortion. We mic’d it with a 57, a borrowed Neuman 149 ,and an old Shure ribbon mic model #300.

**Dave:** Did Aaron play a bunch of different guitars on the record?

**Darron:** Yeah. There was a 70’s telecaster that we used, and your Gibson L6, his Rickenbacker another Gibson thing, a Yamaha 12-string and an acoustic. We did a lot of effects to tape and sculpted the sound to fit the idea of the song. We had a Roland tape delay that we would plug the guitar into and then that into the amp and sometimes it would distort a little bit in itself. We used it mostly for the clear and clean sounds. They’re kinda sparkly and a little bent sounding because of the tape. And the Bluesbreaker amp was really good for that. A lot of clean power. We did a lot of doubling with the idea of panning them left and right just to see if we could kinda widen up the field. We'd do all the verses and we wouldn't play in the choruses at all. Then we'd get a different sound and play the choruses, then do stereo verses, then stereo choruses, so then we'd have four tracks. And then we'd have another idea, say to do a little build-up thing before the chorus. Then double that so then we have six tracks, then we'd add a couple more parts and we might end up with 12 guitar tracks. When I hear about someone using 12 guitar tracks, I always imagine them all blaring away at once but in our case they were just a bunch of little parts taking over where the other left off.

**Dave:** It's funny that you mention that. One of the things that really struck me was the amount of attention to arrangement. It is clearly a record that you spent a lot of time thinking about. Maybe not preplanned, maybe it all came together as it went. But, so many records end up sounding like expensive demos. I think that part of that is somebody just plays their guitar part that they always play, and someone plays the bass part they always play, and the singer sings it just like he or she always does in the rehearsal space. That's fine, if you just need a demo that will get you local gigs or whatever. But this is something that sounded like a record, somebody really put some thought into what they could do to make it interesting. It was obvious to me that those guys listened to a lot of Pink Floyd. [Lots of laughter]

**Darron:** I don't know if they did or not. But I was thinking, "oh my god this sounds a lot like Pink Floyd. I feel like I'm making "Dark Side Of The Moon!" One of the things about this record is that these are three guys that haven't been approached by a record company, don't play live all that much, and by today's standards and money constraints, they shouldn't be able to make a record this good. And that's why we did it. It was really fun—we came out with something that like a once in a lifetime thing.

**Dave:** You went for it.

**Darron:** Yeah, we went for it. We recorded this as if we the world was waiting to hear it. We put all of our energy into it, and we're really happy with the result. We didn't want to record it if it was going to be another demo, so we worked hard.

**Dave:** Its hard to find people you can do that with, and it sounds great, and it really shows.

**Darron:** There were times when it seemed like we were never going to finish. I think they all wanted to have a really fun, creative, exciting studio experience, but we were working really hard, day in and day out. I was really tapped and all three of them were looking at me going "what next, what next?". It started to get fun around the time of the mastering because we could see the finished product emerging.

You know, I've read a lot of those interviews in *MIX* magazine and the producers are always saying things like "you just have to cheer the band on and inspire them and tell them they're great." I always wonder if they are lying because sometimes I just run out steam and get so frustrated and I cant pretend that I'm the most positive, happy guy on the globe. But it's usually when the band is getting antsy, so if I admit my frustration to them it often puts us back on the path. Hey, what's so bad about honest human emotion? It's part of the creative process, right?

For tracking and recording we used a 2" 16 track Studer A80 MKII at 15 Ips, a Neotek Elan console, my Peavey omnidirectional mics, SM57's (of course), AKG D-12 and D-112, Shure ribbon mic, the API mic preamps I got in a milk crate from a radio station (thanks to Andy Hong at WMBR), and Old Ampex tube mic pres model#601—(we put keyboards and bass through these top get a highly sustained fuzz sound.) The mic pres come from old suitcase tape recorders. A Distressor compressor was used on the bass drum while tracking. Later it was used for mixing top and bottom snare mics and bouncing to another track. (I did this on the Sleepyhead record too). It was also used on guitars and vocals while overdubbing. I now confess...I went totally crazy using the Distressor. I bought an old syndrum in New Jersey which we used that for super-low frequency sweeps in "Tip Of The Style." We also used a Hewlett Packard (tube) tone generator through a delay with square wave oscillator—kinda like a homemade analog tube synth! [drooling]

**Dave:** And you had 2 DA-88's locked up to the 16-track, right?

**Darron:** Yeah. It was kinda like an afterthought, really. We were going to make the record on 2" 16 track, and they had a lot of ideas for overdubs. I thought we should try synching up the DA-88's the studio had sitting there. I forgot what I was doing and got all excited and started splicing up the tape and the DA-88 couldn't sync up to it.

**Dave:** Oh because you had timecode on the tape and you lost continuity and the DA-88 would freak out?

**Darron:** Right, it would hiccup, stop and go off-line. For some reason the vocals were actually coming before the song, they were pre-delayed. So I had to run a lot of vocals through delays. When there were backup vocals I had to figure out schemes for delaying 4 or 5 vocals—do I want to go through 3 delays or have just one delay and have one bus for all vocals?

**Dave:** So, what happened with "Apollo"?

**Darron:** After we finished basics we tried to get a better version of "Apollo." It seemed to be the best yet, but I was still a little leery about it. We put guitars and vocals on it anyway. Then after mixing the whole album except for "Apollo", I told the band I was unhappy with it and I just couldn't see putting it on the record. There were lots of drum lags and rushes that we couldn't hide with guitars and other noises. I suggested that we re-record it but they were out of money so we waited until they were ready, then recorded the song on a Tascam 388 quarter inch machine down the hall in my friend Greg's practice space.

The day before the recording Aaron told me that they were having a piano delivered. I was kinda unnerved a bit because my vision was to make a more home-spun version of the song and the piano implied something more grandiose. We couldn't fit the piano into the space, so we left it in the hall and stretched headphones out there. The drums were recorded before piano with scratch guitar (no cymbals) with a D112 on kick, a 57 on snare and one Peavey Omni through the Distressor at 20:1 for tom and ambiance. A guy named Sid did the main piano part then Aaron did some random tinklings on top. We kept the first take and mixed it in. You can hear some giggling and other sounds on that track. For piano I used 2 Omni mics, one looking at the strings a foot from the top opening (upright piano) and one behind the piano (the soundboard). The tapedeck was a little shoddy so you can hear the piano track dropping-out, especially in the beginning. I compressed with the Distressor and a DBX 160a and mixed them together on one channel. The vocals were through an Equitec E-100 and Distressor. Guitar was same mic, same comp and the Vibrochamp and a Daddy-o distortion pedal. We love the way the song came out, so different from the other songs.

**Dave:** How about mixing? You mixed a lot of songs in little pieces?

**Darron:** Yeah. I guess I mixed with the mastering process in mind. Some of the songs were up to 30 tracks. There was no automation, so when I got overwhelmed, missed a fader move or couldn't mute something in time, I would just stop the DAT and start over again with a little overlap and say—ha ha ha! We'll piece it together in the mastering. I knew we were going to be throwing a lot of stuff at you and I assumed you might get mad or irritated, but I figured in the end we would all be pretty happy.

**Dave:** Yeah right! As I recall most of the songs on the record, you hadn't heard as complete mixes until we got into the mastering sessions.

**Darron:** Some songs were like three to five parts that needed to be edited together. There was one song with tracks that I missed while mixing and the band said "hey where's that warbley tone thing" and I'd go oops...I know, mastering! So we took those sounds and laid them down on the DAT and had you load them into Pro Tools, sync them up and mix them in. We didn't know how it was going to come out.

**Dave:** Pretty wild—were there any songs that you had heard complete?

**Darron:** Yeah there were 2 songs, "Radio Deth Gear" and "I H8 The Dead" I mixed them before we were even done tracking other songs. We immediately mastered them and burned CD's so we could listen at home to see if we liked them. We needed to feel like we could complete something. After months of work it seemed like we were never going to finish and we all wanted to know if it was worth it.

**Dave:** It's funny. I stopped by the studio a couple of times when you guys were mixing, knowing that I was going to be mastering the record. One time, you were working on "321 Contact" and you were mixing it in LOTS of little pieces. You laid down this chorus or something and I was hearing a little bleed from a click track, I think, and I asked you guys, "what's up with that?" Aaron, [the guitar player] looked at me, totally straight faced and said, "we're going to overdub another guitar to cover that." And I thought to myself, "you're mixing the fucking song! What the hell are you talking about?" And he was like "we're going to do that in mastering"—that's when I knew I was in for it. Right at that moment.

**Darron:** I wanted to say SHHH don't tell him. Don't tell him.

**Dave:** So, suddenly a big red light started flashing in my mind like a warning siren. I was like wow, this is crazy. You know, like oh shit, I wonder what else we're going to do. You know, we actually didn't do as much as I was afraid of. Probably because I just psyched myself out. I thought that I was going to spend the rest of my life mastering the Slept record.

**Darron:** I'm happy that I did leave so much to be done in the mastering, cause it proved to me how important mastering is. I feel like we were re- recording the record or like we were recreating it. The record was supposedly done and mixed. I don't know how to describe that.

**Dave:** I know what you mean. And this was definitely an exceptional mastering session in that the record really wasn't complete when it came in, we did guitars, we did vocals, we did some crazy stuff with the syndrum, and overdubbing cymbal crashes. It's one of the only mastering sessions I've done where we have gotten so involved in adding parts. It was cool to have that flexibility.

**Darron:** We were able to hold to the original concept of the record. So often bands have ideas about funny little sounds and wicky-wicky tweaky things that they could put on their record and something happens. You know, "we didn't have time" or "we ran out of money." We pushed ourselves to make sure we got them on there and the mastering was one of the places where we could do it. If Phil forgot a cymbal in one of the songs we added it later and it sounds like it was always there.

**Dave:** Yep.

**Darron:** When we were recording we did this thing on the first song where we slowed the tape down really slow, played the drums and then sped back up to normal. So it would sound like a hyperactive drum machine. And it doesn't really fit all that well. It felt like the song dropped out there. We asked you to center it a little more so that it had more body and you did it.

**Dave:** Right. I edited out a little in the beginning which seemed to make it feel better and then used the automation in Pro Tools to pan those tracks to the center and then back out, just for those two seconds. It's really neat; you can hear the stereo field expanding as that drum riff ends, its kinda crazy sounding...

Sometimes we would use the computer to time-stretch parts without changing the pitch and drag-out a vocal. On one song, "Radio Deth Gear", Aaron did some backing vocals and then without changing the timing we changed the pitch on him and added a pseudo female vocal harmony.

**Darron:** So, all the overdubbing and stuff aside, when you sit down to master a project like this, what are you trying to achieve?

**Dave:** Well first off, I listened to the songs and try to get a sense of what you guys were going for. I also keep an ear out for any problems that might have made it past the mixing, and look for ways to correct them. I guess I try to take the project as far to the next level as I can while retaining the artists' and producer's vision. To make it sound like a record and not just a collection of songs. To create continuity while emphasizing what is great about each individual track.

**Darron:** Maybe we should talk a little about the equipment that was used.

**Dave:** Well, this is one of the first records where I experimented with mixing analog and digital signal processing in the mastering. You know, a lot of people say that once it's digital you should keep it digital, and while there is some truth to that, I've found that sometimes things can start to sound kinda glassy. So this time we went through Distressors, from the Dat master, on the way into Pro Tools and it really made a huge difference.

**Darron:** The Distressor compressor is microprocessor controlled with a totally analog signal path and incredible flexibility. You have the choice to dial in either 2nd order harmonic distortion, which is what tubes do, or 3rd order harmonic distortion, which is what tape does when you drive it hard. It's like a fuzz box, but a lot more subtle. It's really hard to drive it so hard that it sounds like a Rat, but I think it is possible [laughs]. It helped to mush-up our sound a little.

**Dave:** It definitely adds a whole new flavor to the sound. We also used a TC Finalizer, which is cool because it's a multiband compressor. It lets you split the mix into 3 different frequency bands, process each differently, and rebalance them. So if a track is a little too dark or bright, you can pick two crossover points and bring up or down whichever of the 3 frequency bands that needs adjusting.

**Darron:** In closing...something I learned recording this record is that those who wait for permission from some magical record label to make an album may be cheating themselves out of a valuable life experience. By skimping on your recording and making just a demo, you may end up looking back years later to a pile of embarrassing cassettes or singles. But committing yourself to making the record of your dreams right in your own area, not fantasizing about being whisked off to the Bahamas, takes a lot of guts (and work).

Recording is not magic, it's not a mystery held only in the vaults of Jimmy Page and George Martin. These guys are still alive! There's still time to ask them questions! Start recording seriously now! If all you have is a 4 track, exploit it for what it is. Load those songs in hot with gusto and ferocity and stop making excuses. People are launching careers on 4 tracks these days. Hook up with a cool engineer and stay with them as you both learn your craft. That type of loyalty goes a long way. I've seen people make their move to the great-major-label-in-the-sky and find they wished they had spent more time recording and defining their music before they made that move.