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The Tragica



Gord Sinclair



Johnny Fay

Gord Downie

"We tried things a bunch of different ways this time," says The Tragically Hip's Gord Sinclair, explaining the Kingston band's process on their eighth album, *Phantom Power*. "That's the beauty of having our own facility to make our records in, and – this time out, anyway – having the time to try things a few different ways, to yield the best results." Their studio, the Bathhouse, is an old farmhouse in Bath (hence the name) and is co-owned by all five members. In conjunction with producer Steve Berlin and live sound engineer Mark Vreeken, the band recorded *Phantom Power* over several months in the fall and winter of 1997-98.



Robby Baker

Tragically Hip

by Sarah Chauncey

Chances are, if you're Canadian, you don't need a history of The Hip. After more than a decade together, they're probably better known than Mackenzie King, and certainly a lot more popular. So let's get to the good stuff.

Over the past 13 years, the band has naturally matured. In the case of record production, that means allowing them to take some risks. "When we first started making records," Sinclair recalls, "We were fiercely loyal to what the band's sound was on stage and really insisted that we not deviate from that sonic range of the instruments at all." The band would do take after take after take trying to re-create their live energy. This time, they decided "to use the studio and use the environment for what it is." With the help of veteran producer Steve Berlin, allowed them to "approach each song as its own entity, and make each song the best that it possibly could be, in terms of its sonic possibilities," without worrying about how it compared to their live performance. On the flip side, Sinclair points out that The Hip has never "felt constrained

where his bandmates take his idea than impose his will on the song. The whole, all agree, is greater than the sum of its parts. "We've gotten to the point where we know each other's styles so well and play so well together that - having it represent what we are as a band is more important than having it represent [me] as a songwriter."

When it comes to ideas, anything goes. "We place no restrictions on ourselves when we're trying to write songs. As soon as you start putting rules in things, then you're not - I think you're limiting what you could otherwise achieve, you know?" The only other guideline, really, is that nothing be rushed. "Gord [Downie], lyrically, will build a song up over time. He won't sit down and go, 'okay, I need three verses by the end of the day.' He'll compile it slowly. I think that's how we all sort of write."

Perhaps because they're always jamming, always creating, the band has not got into a creative rut, churning out the same material over and over. Each man experiments in different ways at



Paul Langlois

what we're looking for." For his part, Berlin was stunned that The Tragically Hip would ask him to produce their album. "They could have picked anybody in the world to do their record; the fact that they picked me - I was amazed."

Sinclair points out that, in addition to being a renowned producer, Berlin is "also a great musician in a great band that, based on what Los Lobos is, you can hear the ensemble approach that they take, to what it is that they do." Both agree that the similarities in the two bands' philosophies - they put friendship first and follow

"You get a little glimmer of an idea, be it wherever - sitting on the toilet, or driving your car, or wherever - you try to get it down."

- Gord Sinclair, The Tragically Hip

to duplicate what we've done on record when we're on stage," so once the record was finished, the songs were "remarkably easy to interpret live."

Writing/Creative Process

Because the band has spent 13 years together - all with the same members - they know and trust each other on an intimate level, one unknown to younger creative partnerships.

Over the years, Sinclair points out, "We've all gotten not only better as songwriters, but a little more confidence, in terms of what ideas we bring into the group." Additionally, each man's reliance on the band's ensemble approach has blossomed. "I'm much more comfortable bringing in an unfinished, un-flushed-out idea to show to the guys," says Sinclair, "because I'm confident that one of the other guys will have something that will be complementary to it, if not have something that will actually finish the song."

The quintet has no specific methodology for developing their songs, except for one: "Literally, we stand around in a circle and throw the ideas in," explains Sinclair. All five carry around dictaphones, so when "you get a little glimmer of an idea, be it wherever - sitting on the toilet, or driving your car, or wherever - you try to get it down. Once I get an idea, I'll work on it from there, see if I can't add something or whatnot. But the only rule that I go by as a songwriter now is that I never set anything too firmly in stone before I show something to the guys." Sinclair would rather hear

different times, so the process - and the music - is always dynamic. "Robby's been in a phase for the last while where he loves working on oddball tunings, different guitar tunings, and he's got a whole pile of guitars at home, and each one seemingly tuned to a different key." Sinclair wryly notes, "When I'm over at his place, I can never pick up a guitar and play it, because I don't know how he's got it tuned." Baker's research goes beyond tunings. "He'll goof around at different points on the neck, or different tunings or throw an E-Bow on things, just to see what it'll yield." Sinclair points out that the band's last album, *Trouble at the Henhouse*, featured songs in A, E, and F-sharp, among other keys.

Finding Steve Berlin

Around January of 1997, The Hip began working on a few songs, "writing and compiling what turned out to be - in some cases, beds, in some cases, masters," at the Bathouse. By the time they did *Another Roadside Attraction* that summer, "we had a ton of really cool ideas, but nothing that we really had deemed master-worthy." Although they'd self-produced their last two albums, the band realized they would need an outside ear to help them sort through the many, many, many... many ideas they had on tape.

When the band met Los Lobos' Steve Berlin, who is also an acclaimed producer (Crash Test Dummies, Faith No More), on the first day of ARA, they realized "this guy would be perfect for

a democratic process - made their working relationship remarkably easy. "He really jumped into our environment really, really naturally," says Sinclair, "to the point where it was totally about the music, totally about the track."

The band found Berlin's enthusiasm contagious, and they appreciated his openness with ideas. "Being on equal footing, the five of us, a lot of times, you may be a little reticent to say, 'well, I was going to try a keyboard part on this or whatnot.'" By contrast, Berlin "is one of these guys who never seems to stop thinking about different tracks and always excited - 'let's try this,' or 'let's do this.'"

Berlin was thrilled with The Hip's raw materials and skills. "You have these amazing lyrics, incredibly beautiful images, you can go as deep into the songs as you want to. At the same time, the music has got great power and spirit." But because much of their material comes from jams, he points out, "A little idea turns into a big idea turns into a song like 'Poets'. My role was to say, well, you've got this fabulous idea, you've got these great lyrics - let's build it back and put details and textures and contrast and stuff like that."

Not every song needed extensive treatment. "I was knocked out by a lot of the stuff they'd done," Berlin recalls. "I wouldn't even call them roughs. They're in their studio; they're recording - what makes it a rough? They were just great performances." "Escape", "Bobcaygeon", "Chagrin Falls" and "Vapour Trails" were barely tinkered with at all.

Fireworks • intro

Moderately fast ♩ = 156

Intro:

Gtr. 1

Verse:

Gtr. 1

F/C Rhy. Fig. 1 Cxvii F Cxvii F/C C F/C C Cxvii

1. If there's a goal... that ev-'ry-one re-mem-bers, it was back... in ol'
 hung out to- geth-er ev-'ry sin-gle mo-ment 'cause that's what we thought mar-ried

Cxvii F/C C F/C Cxvii

sev-en-ty-two... We all squeezed the stick and we all... pulled the trig-ger and
 peo-ple do... Com-plete with the grip of ar-ti-fi-cial cha-os and be-

w/Rhy. Fig. 1 (Gtr. 1) simile

F Cxvii F C end Rhy. Fig. 1 Gtr. 2 F C F

all I re-mem-ber is sit-tin' be-side you... You said you did-n't give a
 liev-ing in the coun-try of me and you... Cri-sis of faith... and cri-

C F C F C

fuck a-bout hock-ey and I nev-er saw some-one say-ing that be-fore... You
 - sis in the Krem-lin and yeah, we'd heard all that be-fore... It's

F C F C F C

held my hand... and we walked home the long way, you were loos-en-ing my grip on
 win-ter-time, the house is soli-tude with op-tions and loos-en-ing the grip on a

F D C A C

Bob-by Orr.
 fake cold war.

Home Studios

Each of the five members has a home studio, so he can work on song ideas independently. Explains Sinclair, "The idea behind them is that the hardware is all compatible with each other, so we can exchange tapes fairly freely." The gear, however, varies, depending on each man's taste. A sampling of Sinclair's setup includes a 12-channel Mackie console, a Tascam DA-88, an Avalon compressor and an Earthworks mic for acoustic guitars. Drummer Johnny Fay, on the other hand, is "a real collector of gnarly old analog effects," his bandmate explains. The cover art on *Phantom Power* is a 1970s Air Force line tester that he found at an antique store. Unfortunately, it turned out not to be terribly functional music-wise. On the more practical end, Fay recently acquired an old Echoplex. On "Escape Is At Hand For The Travellin' Man", there's an odd washing-machine kind of sound, which is Fay "playing an old radio with a scrub brush, run through his Echoplex."

Where Berlin thought he could help was in "sorting out the guitar stuff." Robby Baker (lead guitar) and Paul Langlois (rhythm guitar) "both like a similar sound, they both use the same amplifier," he explains. "Sometimes, they use the same guitar pick-up, and that's what they like."

The producer sat down with the two guitarists and told them, "I think you should work on guitar sounds, make sure that you don't sound the same - even remotely - and then work on the parts, so the parts are clear, and you can really hear what Robby's doing over Paul and vice-versa." He spent a great deal of time working out intricate arrangements with Baker and Langlois, so that their parts would complement and add texture to each other. The "massive guitar sound" has always been a Hip trademark, but Berlin points out, "you can

Continued on page 38

Fireworks

Many times during the recording process, Berlin admits, he would make Langlois try several different options, only to wind up back with the part that Langlois had originally played. "A good example of that is "Fireworks", he says. Berlin wanted it "to be like a Who song, where there's a really powerful acoustic guitar part - the rhythm is an acoustic part - and a great lead over the top." To that end, they did numerous takes "with this rigged-up acoustic with a pickup and a mic, and we tried five different amplifiers. [Nothing worked], so we plugged in a 335, which had exactly what we were looking for, although its not acoustic, and that was their take. That performance is on the record." The oddly roomy quality of the sound comes from "two or three different amplifiers. We miked one in back, and one in front. There's a Matchless, and then - there's a friend of theirs in Ontario who makes amplifiers out of old film projectors - we used that one a lot." Langlois' performance on the 335 "was so cool," Berlin says, "that everything else had to go around it." Although normally it would be Baker's guitar part at the centre, the producer didn't want anything getting in the way of the kick-ass guitar track, and he arranged the rest accordingly. The quality of the drum tones comes from another strange location: the kitchen. "Linoleum certainly is not an acoustic surface," Berlin admits, "but in this case, it sounded really good. We used Johnny's Ayotte travelling kit, which is this little folding drum kit, where the drums all fit into one another. They're really small, but they sound amazing." Additionally, "We added a second drum kit on the choruses, so it gets a little bit bigger." Berlin was looking for a "sloppy, Grateful Dead-type" performance, but Fay "played it pretty dead on. He just plays so good, it wasn't like the second drum kit was going to change that much." At the end of the last chorus, though, "when it stops, you get the sense of the track expanding and contracting."

Something On

The album's second single, "Something On", grew out of some "goofing around" in the studio. "Paul played the opening riff," Sinclair recalls, "and I fell in love with the idea." Downie began working on the lyrics, but the band "just had more pressing concerns, to finish overdubbing and stuff." At the end of November, with most of the tracks in the can, the band took a Christmas hiatus. Although they had planned to reconvene in early January for fine-tuning, the weather had other plans: the massive ice storm that hit Eastern Canada left four out of five Hip families power-less, in the Ontario Hydro sense. When they did gather back in Bath, Sinclair says, "I think that circumstance, and the whole idea of blackout and what-not really affected Gord in a lyrical kind of way. By the time the power came back on, we'd reconvened in the studio, and he'd finished the song. He'd found the missing verse, the missing piece of the puzzle, the whole concept of the 'phantom power,' where that energy and electricity comes from."

To the desired drum sound, "We moved the drums into the amp room," recalls Berlin, "which is probably the loudest, most ambient room in the house." The 'amp room' was actually the mudroom, mostly made of windows, with lots of large surfaces. "We put some mics down the hall - the drums are a lot more ambient on that track than on any other track."

Poets

"Poets," the first single off *Phantom Power*, "owes the greatest debt to Steve," according to Sinclair. Lyrically, the idea grew out of Downie's rants during "Hundredth Meridian" jams. Then "Robby brought in that main guitar riff," Sinclair recalls, "but it wasn't something that we were able to take anywhere [alone] in the studio."

When the band made a demo tape for Berlin, the producer's reaction was strong and immediate. "The demo was pretty rough," he recalls, "but it had great lyrics, and I thought, 'this is just so cool.' But it was almost like the vocals were superimposed over the track. The track wasn't really cohesive, but it had the three elements: what became the verse, what became the bridge and what became the solo."

On a whim one day, Berlin turned to Sinclair and said, "How about if we just used this part for a verse, this part for a chorus, and we'll call this part the solo and see where it goes. And it was just like BOOM, instantly, and they said "let's track it," and it was done." What you hear on the album is the second take. "Usually, with arrangement stuff," the producer explains, "for anybody, not just the Hip - it takes a while to sink in, for whatever reason. On that one, it was sort of instantaneous."

Berlin's favourite aspect of the song is the "drum sticks that are like shaker sticks. I love the way that the shakers got into everything - the amps - they're so loud, and Johnny plays so good and strong that it's just undeniable." Enthused, he adds, "Robby's lick, that Stones-y thing, you can't go wrong - that's what rock and roll's all about!"

For those who may be wondering, Sinclair admits, "I don't know what tuning Robby's in for that; I know he changes guitars live for it, so I'm assuming he's in some sort of oddball open tuning kind of thing." The song, for the record, is in C, "not one of our big keys," Sinclair chuckles.

Something On - intro

Moderately $\text{♩} = 124$
Intro:

Gtr. 1 D5 C5 F

Gtr. 2 D5 C5 F

f hold throughout

T
A
B

Gtr. 1 D5 C5 A Bb5 G F FS D5 C5

Gtr. 2 D5 C5 F FS D5 C5

T
A
B

Gtr. 3 mf hold throughout

T
A
B

Verse:

Gtr. 1 F

1. Your i - mag - i - na - tion's hav - ing pup - pies. It could be a vid - e -
2. Pic - ture a cen - tu - ry of wa - ter. But - y - know, there's
3. I know you're stand - ing at the sta - tion. I know, there's

*Gtr. 2

T
A
B

*Gtr. 3

T
A
B

*Verses 2 & 3 ad lib. simile.

o - line for new re - cruits. Just stare in - to - the cam - era
noth - ing on. Kill the dream of pos - si - ble va - ca - tions
I know that a - lien - a - tion.

Gtr. 2

T
A
B

Gtr. 3

T
A
B

Notation from the *Phantom Power* Tab Book published by Warner Chappell, courtesy of Wiener Art, Arte Humane, Dirty Shorts, Bhaji Maker and Ching Music, copyright 1998.

The Bathouse Dimensions

Main room: 500 square feet with 12-foot ceiling
Control room: 540 square feet with 12-foot ceiling
2 additional isolated rooms 200 square feet each
1 stairwell 140 square feet
1 isolation booth, All rooms with natural light and good sightlines, with windows that open

Consoles

16 x 8 x 24 API console with 24 channels of Uptown moving fader automation
12 x 4 Neve Melbourne sidecar console
Neve BCM 10 with 1073 modules available on request

Tape Machines

Studer A80 24-track with Dolby SR PURC cards (gapless)
Ampex ATR 102 1/2" 2-track mastering desk
24 tracks of Tascam DA-88
Akai DR4 4-track hard disk recorder
2 Tascam DA-30 MkII DAT machines

Signal Processors

Apogee AD500 converter
Eventide H3000, 949

EMT 250 2 stereo plate reverbs with EMT electronics

Yamaha SPX 90
Roland SDE-3000 DDL
Roland Space echo
Echoplex
Sansamp
Klark-Teknik RTA, GML 8200 parametric equalizer, Drawmer DS201 noise gates LA2A, 1176, 2 x LA3, Tubetech, Cranesong STC8, 2 x DBX 160x, Fairchild 663, Distressor, 2 x Neve 2254A compressors/limiters, CCA AGC

Monitors

Genelec 1031A nearfield monitors
Tannoy Gold large monitors
Auratone reference monitors

Microphones

AKG C12VR, D12E, D112, Sony C37A, Neumann U47, 2 x FET47, 2 x U87, Coles 4038, Altec 201 condensers, RCA BK1ribbon, MicrotechUM70, Earthworks TC30 omnis, Reslribbon mic, Sennheiser 421s, Shure SM7, 56, 57, 58, 81, 91

Instruments

Hammond B3, upright piano, Fender Bassman,

Ampeg portaflex, Filmsound photo amp, Theremin, Moog Taurus pedals and lots of effects pedals

Headphones

Sony V6, Sony V900, 75600 5 separate 12-channel mixers for the players 2 bi-amped floor wedges, 2 x 12", 2" horn with BSS crossover, QSC power

Road Gear Manifest

Mackie micro mixer 1202
Elite Micron 400 (2)
Ashly EQ 131
QSC MX1500a
Shure SM58 (3)
Photo Amp (2)
Ampeg Portoflex Bass Amp
Ayotte Drum Kit (14" Bass, 10" Snare, 10" Rack Tom, Paiste Cymbals (4))
Gibson Les Paul (black)
Epiphone Acoustic Bass
Takamine Guitar
Takamine FP3175 Acoustic
Patch Cables (20)
Gibson Blues King
Fender Blond USA Telecaster
PRS Custom Guitar

accomplish that and still build in detail if you listen closely to it and then think about it."

"The job was more challenging for Paul, because he had a little more weight to carry than Robby did." Although Berlin didn't want to hamper either man's "spirit," he was more concerned about keeping Baker's style intact, "so basically, Robby was - probably unfairly in some cases - just allowed to be Robby, and then Paul had to fit into that." Berlin's respect for Langlois is never-ending. "He's truly one of the most amazing rhythm guitar players I've ever worked with. He's got such an incredibly deep knowledge of how rhythm parts work." That didn't keep him from making Langlois "play guitars I know he didn't want to play," he recalls, laughing. "He'd give me this look like, are you sure this is worthwhile? But then it would sound great."

Berlin aimed to get everything "as live as possible," only doing overdubs when absolutely necessary. As a band, you want that [energy], of those guys playing together." The most common overdubs were vocals, including "Something On" and "Escape". "When the vocals were done in time to do it live, that was great," he recalls, "but Gord Downie - he is the hardest-working guy I have ever seen. Down to apostrophes and everything, the grammatic spaces have to be perfect for him to be happy. A lot of times, it would be a work in progress lyrically until later on. But the times when we'd get it live, it was amazing to watch and to hear."

Triple-Threat Mixing

"Mixing was definitely a challenge for this record," Sinclair admits. "The [recording] environment was one that, if you had any kind of idea or wanted to try something, we were always encouraging each other - and Steve, for that matter - to throw it on, and we figured, well, when it comes time to mix, we'll figure it out." And then, inevitably, it came time to mix ... and to figure everything out. Yikes. "You'd put the different mixes up and realize that, depending on who's interpreting the song, it can go in any one or two or ten different directions."

To get the most effective mix for each song, The Hip used three different people to mix. First up was Jim Rondinelli, who has worked with The Jayhawks and Odds, among others. His approach

"was a lot more lush, and his sensibility was to put everything up into the mix and sort of slowly subtract from there, to the point where his ear was sort of satisfied," explains Sinclair. "I think you can hear that in a track like 'Bobcaygeon', for example, which he mixed. I think the mixing on that is absolutely amazing." Rondinelli also mixed "Something On" and "Chagrin Falls".

Rondinelli worked out of Bryan Adams' The Warehouse in Vancouver, which boasts an enormous SSL console. "It has a tendency to be a little ... mechanical sounding, I think," Sinclair concludes. "A little top-heavy."

Then they went to Don Smith, who had produced *Up to Here* (1989) and *Road Apples* (1991). His influence can be heard on "Poets", "Escape Is At Hand For The Travellin' Man", "Save the Planet", "Emperor Penguin", "Vapour Trail" and "Membership". "Don's a minimalist, he's very old-school," Sinclair explains. "He works from the ground floor up; he builds and builds and adds instruments one at a time, until he thinks it represents what we sound like."

Smith's home studio includes an old Neve board, and his approach was more analog. "He uses old tube compression on everything, and sort of shies away from the digital stuff."

Whereas "Jim's stuff was done on an automated console, where all the moves were meticulously memorized by the computer and would work with a track-a-day kind of thing," Sinclair explains, "Don's approach is very, very organic. He kind of mixes by feel, and some days he'd blast off two songs; other tracks would take him three or four days until he felt comfortable with them."

There were three tracks, the bassist explains - "Fireworks", "Thompson Girl" and "The Rules" - on which "We felt that neither Jim nor Don had successfully interpreted what we were trying to achieve, and so the logical step was to have Mark [Vreeken], our live engineer, do it. Mark's been involved with the creation of all the records, really, since *Road Apples*. No one knows the band better."

Vreeken's approach was a "synthesis" of Rondinelli's and Smith's. Sinclair says, "The way we've got our studio set up, Mark has been able to watch some of the best guys in the business do their thing, and he's learned from them all."

Although the Bathouse has automated capability, "Mark's tendency is not to rely on that. He tries to go for a really strong performance mix, and he bases his final impression on what he considers his sort of optimum mix and then will adjust slightly, sort of only relying on automation if he absolutely has to."

Towards The Future

Although the band thoroughly enjoyed making *Phantom Power*, Sinclair sees it as "the record we had to make at this juncture in our career. We had the time to approach it with a "no stone unturned" sort of philosophy, and we had the time to work on things and bring the ideas to their fruition." However satisfying that may have been, "I think we learned that there is a pitfall to having unlimited time to make your record. I think there's a pitfall to having an unlimited number of tracks that you can work on things. It makes the mixing process a little difficult, when you're trying to layer things in and out like that."

Sinclair's wish for The Hip's next album is to "write it in advance, and rehearse it in advance of going into the studio; and to make a really fast record the next time, in the John Hyatt, 'bring the family' kind of thing, where everyone knows the song in and out, and it's just bang-bang-bang. Just for the sake of seeing what can come out of it." The advantage the band has is that, with its own studio, "we have the resources to work on things till the cows come home." With *Phantom Power*, they did, and they learned that sometimes, those cows are out real late. "Knowing when to stop is something that you have to learn, you have to learn it in the studio - this is done, this is finished, or in some cases, too finished, it's too polished for us, and we have to strip off some of the sheen."

After a pause, Sinclair adds, "I think the beauty of being in this band is that each situation, be it recording or live, is different or new, and we're able to take the situation, whatever it may be, and ultimately, turn it to our advantage and learn from it. I think we learned a lot from making this last record."



Sarah Chauncey is a Toronto-based freelance writer.