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“When it comes to writing and recording tracks, GarageBand is the easiest thing you could possibly use.”



Greg Laswell: Sonic Soul

by Dustin Driver

Greg Laswell's soulful acoustic sound is laced with bright guitar riffs and stirring, natural vocals. It's easy to picture Laswell perched on a worn chair with an old Martin guitar, scrawling verses, chord progressions, and solos onto a yellow legal pad. But you're more likely to find Laswell hunched over his MacBook, strumming and singing into GarageBand, which the musician uses to scribble aural ideas, flesh out full songs, and even record demos for record label execs.

“When it comes to writing and recording tracks, GarageBand is the easiest thing you could possibly use,” he says. “I own my own studio, but I still use GarageBand to write with. I'm in a constant state of writing and recording and I always have my MacBook and GarageBand with me. It's allowed me to get more done in less time and my creativity and productivity have just taken off.”

Laswell uses his MacBook and GarageBand on the road and in the studio, recording vocals and guitar tracks with the notebook's built-in mic. In fact, almost all of the demo tracks for his upcoming EP, “How the Day Sounds,” were laid down using this simple setup. “I record a lot of vocals and guitars using the pinhole mic on my MacBook,” he says. “It gives the tracks a quirky quality that I actually plan to use as a production tool. Some of the stuff I record on the MacBook will end up being used in the final productions of my tracks. It's pretty amazing, considering it's just the built-in mic and GarageBand, which comes with every Mac.”

Breaking Free

Laswell seems like a natural-born soloist, a stage-savvy singer/songwriter who rarely seeks electronic backup. But the artist was, and still is to a certain extent, a full-time studio rat. His record label, 20 Inch Records, has produced Anya Marina, Ingrid Michaelson, Minnie Driver, and others. His studio is crammed with state-of-the-art synthesizers, samplers, and recording gear. He's a seasoned

Laswell has a complete audio suite at his fingertips and he uses it to catch a torrent of musical ideas. “I write all the time, everywhere I go,” he says. “Before GarageBand I would call myself and sing into my phone, record myself that way. But now my computer's always with me, which means that GarageBand is always with me.”

Even when the songwriter is in his studio, he uses GarageBand to hash out ideas. “I still use it to write with,” he says. “It's much easier than using the studio setup, actually. You have to power up the studio and set up mics and channels. When I'm writing, it's so much easier to record a track with GarageBand.”

Homegrown Studio

Having a complete audio setup on a laptop has let Laswell break away from his studio. In fact, he wrote and recorded the demos for “How the Day Sounds” within the walls of a friend's house. “We went from room to room trying to get the best sound,” says Laswell. “We would just move the laptop around, record some vocals and see how they sound.” Laswell used the MacBook mic and the unique acoustic signatures of each room to create curious effects. “We ended up with a really fresh, raw sound,” he says. “I would've spent hours in the studio trying to get a sound like that, but we were able to get it with the MacBook and GarageBand.”

There are some technical tricks to recording with the MacBook built-in mic. Laswell gets as close as possible to the mic and uses a pop filter when recording vocals. “It's funny to use a pro pop filter with that little mic, but it makes a big difference,” he says. Proximity is also key when it comes to recording guitar chords and riffs. “I put the laptop on a chair and get the guitar as close to it as I can,” he says. “I use a Mini Martin acoustic, basically put the mic up to the bridge of the guitar and record.”

The makeshift studio works well, so well that many

Gallery



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iMovie

producer who knows his way around complex consoles and studio equipment. He also knows his way around a stage. Laswell was the front man for a popular San Diego band, Shillglen, before he went solo.

When the band took a break, it didn't take long for Laswell to realize that he could move faster on his own. So he wrote, sang, and performed his own songs and toured Southern California clubs. Then he dove into his studio to make "Through Toledo," his first solo release for Vanguard. The soulful, sorrowful album solidified Laswell's career and inspired a nationwide tour.

When the tour ended, Laswell returned to his studio to churn out another album. Then disaster struck—the heart of his studio recording system went kaput. "I still had to get demos to the label, I still needed to be writing and recording," he says. "I remembered that I had GarageBand and I thought I'd give it a try. I opened up my MacBook, powered up GarageBand for the first time and was writing and recording within minutes. It really saved me. I could keep working while my studio was down and I actually got more done with GarageBand."

Audio Notebook

Laswell's studio was down for about three months, but that didn't stop him from writing songs and producing demos for Vanguard. "I did those first GarageBand recordings with the mic on my MacBook, just singing and playing my guitar right into the pinhole," he says. "I plugged the laptop into my studio monitors and right away I was impressed. With a little work, the sound quality was good enough for demos and even production."

Audio quality is key, but so is flexibility. Laswell is a one-man band. He sings, strums and plays virtually every note on his albums. To do it all, he needs a multifaceted MIDI and digital recording system. He found it in GarageBand. "It has a ton of software instruments and there are really cool loops," he says. "I chop up the loops and use them in my songs and I use basic software instruments to round out my tracks. Everything is right there in my MacBook."

of the final tracks on "How the Day Sounds" include bits and pieces from the impromptu recording session. "I keep some parts from those original recordings, just bring them directly into the master track," he says. "There's also the idea of doing one whole song in GarageBand for the effect. It'll give the track a real vibe—y sound that I wouldn't be able to get any other way."

The Next Chapter

"How the Day Sounds" is primed for a March 11 release, but it's only a taste of what's to come. Laswell's second full-length album is due in July. "The first album was about going through a significant heartache in my life," he says. "This EP ("How the Day Sounds") is the next chapter, or the moment where you first start to realize you're okay. If you've been in pain for a certain amount of time, you kind of get used to it. Then one day you wake up and you're no longer sick. I try to write about that on this EP and I'll continue that feeling with the next album."

Laswell's new sound isn't exactly euphoric. "I don't really do cheerful," he says, "but my new stuff is definitely hopeful and I really enjoy where it's going." The artist plans to draw on his newfound optimism for inspiration. That, and a new set of sounds courtesy of Logic Studio. "I love GarageBand, but I'm going to try to do most of this next album with Logic," he says. "I'm inspired by all the new instruments and features. Sometimes you need a new arsenal of sounds to get you out of the pattern that you've been using. I'm looking forward to getting into Logic and seeing what happens."

That kind of musical exploration through technology is the cornerstone of Laswell's career. "I think it's becoming more important as a musician to interact with technology," he says. "And I don't think people have any idea how easy they have it if they're starting out right now. You can do so much with GarageBand, from recording to composing to effects. I would encourage people to really really push the limits of it. It's fun and it's part of being a musician today. Once you power GarageBand up for the first time, you'll get hooked."

Some musicians hire film crews to document their tours. Laswell has a more economical approach. "We use iMovie and the iSight camera in the MacBook," he says. "We just carry the laptop around and shoot everything for our video tour blogs. We edit the footage together with iMovie and upload the videos to MySpace. It's just about the easiest thing—we can edit the movies and even add soundtracks in minutes, right there in the back of the bus."

Apogee Duet

The built-in mic in Laswell's MacBook is great for capturing a funky homegrown sound, but sometimes the musician needs a super-clean input for his guitar or mic. When he's on the road, he turns to the Apogee Duet, a portable audio interface with two mic inputs, two instrument inputs, and two monitor outputs. "It's great because it's so small and you can plug a guitar straight into it and your gain is right there," he says. "It works with GarageBand or Logic and the interface couldn't be easier. It sounds really good and I can plug anything into it—a condenser mic, a bullet mic, a guitar, a bass—anything I want."

iChat Club

Musical collaboration usually involves jam sessions, but Laswell and fellow songwriters Anya Marina and Ingrid Michaelson share their melodies from the comfort of their own homes. "We had this kind of club for a while," says Laswell. "We would record stuff on GarageBand and send it to each other over iChat. It's super-easy to just export a song and drag it into an iChat window. It's a great way to collaborate and share ideas."

Equipment List

[MacBook](#)
[GarageBand](#)
[Logic Studio](#)
[iMovie](#)
[iChat](#)
[Apogee Duet](#)

Useful Links

<http://www.myspace.com/greglaswell>
<http://www.vanguardrecords.com/>

Resources

[Soundtrack Pro](#)

[MacBook Pro](#)

[Mac OS X Music and Audio Documentation](#)

[Logic Pro](#)

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