

# ICEHOUSE

The technology involved in modern record production is familiar to most people who have more than a passing interest in music. Also, more than a few outside the industry are aware of the advances made in synthesiser technology and the use of the computer in the recording process. Electronics have even advanced into the songwriting field and no better example of these advances is currently available than Icehouse's *Primitive Man*. It takes music in this hemisphere another reluctant step ahead, not fearing new methods, but mastering them for positive results and hopefully encouraging others to follow. *Primitive Man* never gets hung up on the processes used in its making, therefore it avoids the sterility that plagues too much music which depends largely on the synthesiser.

Iva Davies, the nucleus of Icehouse, would be the first to chuckle at the traditional image of the composer hunched over his piano, head in hands, occasionally scribbling notes on manuscript. Davies himself is classically trained and played in a symphony orchestra before being seduced by rock'n'roll via T-Rex. He is one of the few rock musicians who can read music and sheets of semiquavers played a part in the making of *Primitive Man*. Just how it came together is worth noting, so I asked the man himself, via the telephone to Sydney, to explain:

"It's always been necessary for me, when writing, to use some kind of portable studio. I used a Fostex eight-track (the latest in home recording studios), which is designed basically for a musician. The whole thing has a set of remote controls, using a foot pedal, so you can work it yourself while you're playing something.

"But the most important thing was the Linn drum computer. I bought one of those things because they're so amazing for people like me who need some kind of rhythm box or machine to work with. I coupled that with a Prophet 5 synthesiser, which is not especially new, but it's good because, like the Linn, it has a mini-computer and you can run all the information you feed into these things on to cassettes. I did that generally with the use of a Walkman, which meant that anywhere I went in the world, as long as I could get hold of a Linn or a Prophet 5, I could reprogramme all my sounds into them by just carrying around a Walkman and playing the cassettes into them."

In the review of *Primitive Man* in last month's *RIU* I noted that the album sounded ideal for a Walkman. I concluded that it was the first genuine Walkman album and while that conjecture may not be strictly accurate, the coincidence is still interesting.

"That's really accidental, because I didn't mix anything with headphones. I've always had a rather strange approach to stereo, one which has given a lot of engineers nightmares, actually. There are all sorts of peculiar rules pertaining to what one should and shouldn't do on recordings. One thing you shouldn't do is split very heavy sounds too wide in the stereo spectrum, because when you get to cutting those on to vinyl they give the cutting stylus the heebie-jeebies. But because I'm really a lay consumer of music, I like to hear lots of wonderful stereo, so I generally mix regardless of the rules. I guess that's possibly why it turned out sounding like it was mixed on a Walkman."

Davies still considers himself a novice in the modern music field, having been playing rock for barely half a dozen years. *Primitive Man* was also his education in new technology. He put together the basic tracks in his own home, then took them to Sydney's Paradise Studios for further attention. The final steps were taken in the Westlake and Eldorado studios in LA. It was a case of technology meeting classical training head on and finding the two could work to each other's benefit.

"The interesting thing about the drum computer is that while you can sit down not knowing anything about music and play the thing, it's really becoming more necessary to know how to read music to get the best out of these new machines. The strange misconception about synthesisers is that they're destroying the human element. To really use a modern synthesiser to its full potential, you have to understand the mechanics of music. I have an advantage there, because I can read music really well. You can break musical notations down to numbers and translate that into computer terms quite easily."

Davies says this is where his sound differs from the likes of, say, Martin Rushent, producer of the Human League. Rushent simply uses the drum computer as a repetitive machine, not being a musician who can translate rhythm into the computer's language. Davies experimented with the drum computer on a *Primitive Man* track called 'Uniform', seeing just how much variety he could get into the beat. The machine can do anything a human drummer can, even playing out of time if you want it to.

Davies played most of the instruments himself, using session people in LA when he needed them. Work on the songs started back in February, with nine songs being written in his home studio in about six weeks. Fast for Davies, but the pace picked up later. He took his cassettes into Paradise studios, then just played them into the computers, which transferred the songs onto the 24-track mixer. The computers in the studio literally played the songs from Davies' Walkman cassettes.

The next step was to LA, to mix those songs. Davies had some time in hand, so he tried the same process he'd used on his home studio, this time using a 24-track recorder. He wrote four more songs in a week using this method. Without having to repeat the demos he simply wrote the songs as he recorded them. Assisting was Keith Forsey, Giorgio Moroder's percussionist and production assistant. Forsey is no stranger to this approach, having helped produce one of the first computer disco hits, Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love'.

The trend in the past, when working with the Linn, was to use it to write your drum tracks, then get a drummer to reproduce them for the actual recording. Davies did this for the debut *Icehouse* LP (when the band was known as Flowers), but retained the computer sound when recording *Primitive Man*, because the songs themselves had been written with the computer, and needed it to reproduce properly.

Canning the technical talk, we move on to the songs, which are fiercely melodic, sometimes very danceable and lyrically emotive, with plenty of ambiguities to keep you on your toes. I ask Davies about some of his favourites, starting with the single, 'Great Southern Land'.

"The whole album was sort of prepared backwards. I started with the album cover work. I named the album *Primitive Man*, then wrote 'Great Southern Land' to accommodate that idea. It was the first song I wrote for the album, I originally started not trying to write a song about Australia, insomuch as I wanted it to be a fairly general song. But as time when by while I was writing it, it appeared more and more to be specifically about Australia, I guess. The thing about Australia is that it's a really vulnerable place, being as isolated as it has been, and being still fairly unexploited, it leaves itself open for anybody to come and wreck it. That was what really inspired me to write the song.

"Uniform' is interesting because I had that piece of music for a while, we were using it as an instrumental introduction on the last New Zealand tour. I have a particular paranoia about

the media to do with the way the world has become increasingly vulnerable to manipulation. I guess one of the main examples of that is fashion. I've always had a bit of an aversion to that, even though I'm in a fashionable business. I've never been able to go along with that side of it; I see it as a product of media control and that's what 'Uniform' is about.

"There are a couple of songs on this album to do with the values that people place importance on and which I generally find insignificant. Fashion is one of them. 'Trojan Horse' is a song about vanity, I guess. I read some Homer when I was studying Latin and it always intrigued me that the woman who was reputedly the most beautiful in the world, namely Helen of Troy, was in fact reported to be so by a blind poet, who obviously never saw her. It struck me as being the perfect irony, that a woman's face could inspire ten years of war, when the whole thing was handed down by a blind poet. It seemed to be the comment on vanity that I was looking for.

"Goodnight Mr Matthews' is my attempt to write a really psychedelic song. The special thing about it is that Mr Matthews really did exist. I was a member of one of the orchestras in Sydney which was controlled by a really fascist conductor. He was such a maniac that a number of the players had nervous breakdowns and two of them had to be committed. This particular guy was a clarinet player. He was incredibly in love with one of the violinists in the orchestra, who didn't even know he existed. He'd go and sleep on her front lawn all night and send her letters. His friends had to commit him because he became schizophrenic. It's a story that really worried me because it had all been inspired by this conductor who had planted the seed in him of lack of confidence and caused this guy to totally crack up. I imagined him being in the institution and being in love with someone who

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