

## When Worlds Collide

TIM GOODYER talks unheard-of studio activities with Cookie Marenco.

It is telling that The Valence Project chose the California Audio Show to launch its new recording project. The San Francisco show's agenda of assembling "exhibitors showing budget-priced equipment that scream value, and others with price tags that make your jaw drop" neatly reflects the project's diversity of talent and output.

Held at the tail-end of July, the show also offered a platform for producers and artists to discuss recording techniques and answer questions. Among them, were The Valence Project's violin improvisation virtuoso Emily Palen and Valence Records label founder, Gregory James – who both recorded live to the Internet during the show.

The Valence Project has its roots with Grammy-nominated producer Cookie Marenco and drummer/beatmaster looper Brain, who took their studio collaboration with a strong cast of 'extraordinary artists' to Valence Records in search of release. Initially, they proposed remixing of some of James' material, but he suggested an entire album of multi-cultural artists for the musical extravaganza.

### Mix N' Match

Currently the sticks man for Guns N' Roses, Bryan 'Brain' Mantia looks after the project's drums and rhythms, while Cookie adds more than 20 years of audio experience experience of recording some of jazz's finest, as well as having worked A&R for Windham Hill. In addition, Marenco's work with Liquid Audio positioned her to be the first engineer to record the first paid live performance download. Her recently launched Blue Coast Records label (founded with Jean Claude Reynaud), meanwhile, has become a standard in acoustic music recording using a proprietary recording technique called ESE (Extended Sound Environment).

Then there is a cast of musicians that includes Garaj Mahal bassist Kai Eckhardt, sax/flautist Baron Shul, Irish blues Hammond organist/keys player Eamonn Flynn, composer/producer/performer Melissa Reese and many other talented performers including James on guitar. The result suggests elements of Prince, Radiohead, Zero Seven, and Jeff Beck in a melée that spans everything from electronica and pop to meditative freeform dance.

"It's trip-hop meets funk pop with a twist of

performance art," Cookie counters. "Gregory James is a long-time associate that I've produced many records with over the past decade, though mostly in contemporary jazz. Greg's willingness to expand his label's sound opened up a unique opportunity for me to work with another long-time associate, Bryan Mantia.

"I recorded Brain's first demo as a drummer with the Limbomaniacs back in the 1980s," she continues. "Since then, he's gone on to be drummer for Primus and the latest incarnation of Guns N' Roses. In between, he's worked with Tom Waits, Bernie Worell, Chris Isaacs, Godflesh, and many of my acoustic projects ranging from bluegrass to children's music, and a women's A Capella choir. He's also brought me in on some very special projects with Buckethead and Bill Laswell, in a band called Praxis. The breadth of Brain's musical understanding is amazing. That, combined with an extraordinary gift as a drummer make collaboration heaven."

The project's press calls Cookie and Brain's use of analogue and digital media in one project 'unlikely'. "We thought it would be a fun challenge," Cookie says, easily. "Brain was going on a G n' R tour, so we had to lay the grooves down before the songs were written."

### Studio Surgery

"As Brain was getting ready to tour we had limited time, so we came up with some unusual methods of working," she explains. "Because I prefer working on tape, it added to the complexity, but we more than made up for that in sound and ease of recording live instruments. We worked at my OTR Studios set-up in San Francisco, which is now the oldest original owner operated studio within the San Francisco area. There is an OTR Studios in England, also, not to confuse the two..."

OTR specialises in recording acoustic instruments to the highest quality. This calls on vintage microphones and Millennia Media, Neve and Manley preamps, recording to two-inch analogue tape and DSD (direct stream digital/1-bit recording) systems using home-grown silver/copper cable. "While we have Pro Tools and Samplitude, people frequently come to us to record their bands live using our 1885 Steinway piano, mixing using analogue outboard


gear or dynamic mastering," Cookie explains.

Using tape saturation, destructive plug-ins, vintage effects, and spontaneous jamming – the equivalent of an audio blender – Brain and Cookie were in their element, with Brain putting hours of drum beats onto analogue tape. "Nothing beats the sound of tape and analogue effects," Cookie says. "After that, we moved it onto the digital systems, and cut it up and looped it into musical compositions."

With the song forms in place, the music was transferred back to tape for bassist Eckhardt to record the chord foundation. Melissa Reese, Gregory James, and new vocalist/composer/performance artist Deborah Charles added lyrics, and recorded their performances to tape. Further refinements of the music brought Brain in for Pro Tools and Logic editing, and then it went back to tape for keyboardist Eamonn Flynn, bassist Jonathan Herrera, woodwind player Baron Shul, and violin sensation, Emily Palen (a YouTube star with 1.2 million views). The final touches were provided by Gregory James' guitar, and mixing was done to Direct Stream Digital (DSD), a format that Marenco feels surpasses the usual PCM digital and most resembles analogue tape.

"We were doing things in the studio I would have fired anyone on the spot for otherwise!" Cookie says. "To Valence Records credit, we were allowed maximum creativity – unheard of, if you're a hired gun engineer, producer, or session player."

Presently available as both CD Quality and 96kHz high-resolution downloads, the results have been well received by the dance community. DJs have started to remix the grooves for clubs (Valence Records encourages it), and you can find remixes of the first single, *Who Do You Love*, by several artists from the band and well-known DJs.

The CD release is set for later in the year, along with DSD downloads. 

### INFORMATION

[www.thevalenceproject.com](http://www.thevalenceproject.com)  
[www.bluecoastrecords.com](http://www.bluecoastrecords.com)  
[www.otrstudios.com](http://www.otrstudios.com)

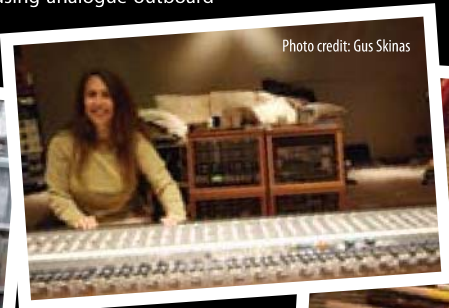


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