

About recording and mixing Hale's Pleasure Railway:

There was a whole lot of thought about how to make the first Southpaw Steel 'n' Twang record. We ended up in a 19th century society house in Helsinki which had a big, wooden hall. All musicians were in the same room with their instruments and amps, everything leaked everywhere. Berryhill Studio man Jukka Haikonen worked with us as the engineer and mixer, carrying in his mobile recording equipment.

All the stuff was set up in the main hall; I remember having tried to pass the exams for studying at the Oulunkylä Pop Jazz conservatory right there... I failed, went on a long tour and got that musician's exam many years later in the conservatory's new place but that's another story!

In the hall there were long tables, which were turned on their sides as sound barriers between drums and amps. Maybe that helped a little with handling the sound later. Amps, drums and instruments were in a wide semi-circle with the recording equipment on the open side, that way we could see each other and react to all tempo-free parts in the tunes. Lap steel tunes were recorded first, then pedal steels. Strat and tele stuff came along at the end of the session.

It was winter; luckily we succeeded in avoiding the coldest days. An additional warming battery brought a cozy temperature and we could begin the session. There were 12 tunes and two and a half days kindly arranged by Katri Laaksonen, leader of the house, to get them done; this we did, quite tightly.

The music I've composed for Southpaw is very much based on improvisation: theme, jamming, theme. Few tunes are completely arranged; they always come out a little bit different. Live playing was therefore a fruitful but also a grueling experience; you had to try to be precise and creative all the time. A take was a take, almost no fixing at all in the mix! Some songs were played once and that was it, some took a bit more time and takes to find the right feeling and groove; It made me humble to see how cool and patient my band mates and the engineer were with my improvisational rolling and tumbling!

We had a very subtle tune "Still" which needed upright bass. The tune was recorded as a steel guitar-drums duet in order to add the bass later, other songs were played as a trio.

The mixing sessions started in Kellokoski, a little village near Järvenpää where the biggest annual Finnish summer blues festival, "PuistoBlues" is held. Early in the mornings I drove to the Berryhill studio. We drank some coffee, talked about good guitars, books, movies, Haikonen's route 66 trip etc., and set to work. We both threw artistic ideas and visions on the table while Jukka took care of engineering.

Before mixing the tracks we still needed to add some string instruments. The steel was off-pitch on one of the tunes, everything else except bass was wiped away. I played a background with acoustic guitar and ukulele. A new steel part was then added, "Secret sunset" is therefore the first studio creation on the cd! More about the other one a little later...

I played my parts and Jukka provided organ harmonies in two tunes. It was time for our drummer Tero Mikkonen to enter the scene. Tero is a fine, skillful, creative musician always trying to find new sounds and ways of playing, ready to sacrifice his techniques to obtain a fresh sounding result. In the Society house session he had already done great work, the same continued at Kellokoski: Pacific Ocean waves came rolling under the churning steel, sweaty steel mill screeching and hum

tightened the overdriven mass of guitar and bass, a 1800's slave Sunday jam in Congo Square grooved hope-givingly! A little body drumming was also added.

We had tried Bob Wills & Texas Playboys' "Brain cloudy blues" and a fast 12-bar boogie called "Mach 3", both regular SST gig numbers, in the live recording session. They sounded okay but somehow didn't fit the context this time. A little a cappella stuff would soothe the instrumental surrounding; I had a tune which was done: I first played a bass part with a click, and then sang it. Jukka and I both sang other harmonies, and then I did the main vocal. The take on the record is the only one I sang, In fact I didn't have any clear idea how to sing it, and so it's almost totally improvised. In my opinion it's quite refreshing!

The actual mixing was mainly about adjusting the levels, instruments and the overall room sound. This was a big job; it was very interesting to take part in that! I've worked with Jukka Haikonen before as a session man; it was again a pleasure to co-operate with this great, positively inventive guy...

The aforementioned tune, "Still", caused a problem: It's a steel number and because it was played without any harmonic background it tended to be a bit over-pitched throughout. Modern technology saved us; the pitch could be lowered because the upright bass parts had been done later. The tune now sounded acceptable with Jp's solid bass which works on this and other tunes marvelously!

Gear used during the sessions: I played a '57 RI strat. I got it from a lefty who had been starring in the musical "Buddy Holly story" in Turku. Telecaster, my first good guitar, was custom-made from ESP-parts in '82 to match the looks and feel of a 50's Broadcaster.

Lap steel is a Fender Stringmaster D-8 from 1957; a 22, 5 inches scale model being perfect for slant playing. I auctioned it from an estate in Arkansas. Via internet I found a small pedal steel workshop in a little village near Baton Rouge, Louisiana which had an option for lefties. From there I got a custom-made Pedalmaster Ranger. I also used a Gibson ES-335 and a Mosrite replica baritone guitar made by Eastwood. Acoustic guitar is a Lowden; the uke is a cheapo Mahalo.

I used two Peavey amps: my Delta Blues and a Session 500 loaned from Popp Gustafsson, a great pedal steel player. A Fender Vibrolux Silverface was also used, as well as a tiny Fender Blues Junior. Jukka's Fender Champ had a great, peculiar tin can sound; the ES-335 was this time a matching pair...

Kari Huovinen, "Crazy Chester", is our old friend. Tero and Jp have been the rhythm section in his Commotion Band for many years. I've also played quite a few gigs in the band, honing my chops as a steel player. Big thanks for that, Kari! He loaned a Silverface Fender Twin, a great amp too but I preferred those Peaveys with single 15" speakers this time. I got my few effects mainly from a Boss ME-70. Haikonen's organ heard in "Bayou" and "Feather weather" is a '62 Lowrey.

Jp Mönkkönen played two electric basses: Fender Precision Sting and Gibson Jack Casady signature models. His amp was a Mark Bass as well as the cabinet. Jp's stomp boxes were a MXR overdrive, EBS Multidrive and Electro-Harmonix Freeze.

Tero Mikkonen 's sets were '68 Ludwig Psychedelic Red and KUMU Custom , also a Little Black Monster Cocktail Custom set was in use when the tune "Dark C" was recorded. He used Paiste- and Zildjian cymbals and various percussion.

Cover art is designed by the writer of this; it was carried out by Aija Lehtonen, a creative professional. The guitar on the cover is a Fender Stringmaster T-8 from December 1953, country legend Hank Williams' dying month. This guitar is not used on the record although the one I usually play-the D-8- is almost the same machine! As John Ely (Asleep at the wheel) has mentioned, T-8's super long 26,5" scale is a bit hairy on the lower register with slants.

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Ville "Lefty" Leppänen