



BLACK NOISE

Daniel Lanois & Mark Howard: Recording Neil Young's *Le Noise*

Neil Young has made his share of experimental albums, but his latest might be the most extreme, thanks to Daniel Lanois' revolutionary approach to live dub mixing.

PAUL TINGEN

“Without a doubt,” said Daniel Lanois, “I like things more stripped down these days. As long as the music is good enough for a skinny display, I’m OK with that. I came up during a time when I was very excited about ambient music, and that’s what I made for a while. As things have evolved I now really have a great admiration for records that have good riffs. And one could safely say that the Neil Young record has good riffs, and that the Black Dub record has some really great bass lines. Finally, I got it right!”

Lanois was speaking about his two most recent projects: Neil Young’s *Le Noise* and the eponymously titled first album by Lanois’ own band Black Dub. He’s clearly very enthusiastic about these, but for the 59-year-old, seven-times Grammy-winning Canadian to say that he’s finally got it right initially comes across as a bit rich. Over

the course of four decades, he has been co-responsible for some of the greatest albums in the history of rock & roll, including classics such as U2’s *Unforgettable Fire*, *The Joshua Tree* and *Achtung Baby*, So by Peter Gabriel, *Oh Mercy* and *Time Out Of Mind* by Bob Dylan, *Wrecking Ball* by Emmylou Harris, *Yellow Moon* by the Neville Brothers, *Teatro* by Willie Nelson, and many, many more. Parallel to this, Lanois has pursued a widely acclaimed solo career, releasing works such as *Acadie* (1989), *For The Beauty of Wynona* (1993), *Shine* (2003), and the *Omni Series*, a three-CD boxed set (2008).

With such an eminent track record, it seems odd for Lanois to say that he only now has managed to “get it right”, but there’s no mistaking the unusual vigour and spontaneity that characterise both the Neil Young and Black Dub albums. One very noticeable feature that unites both *Le Noise* and *Black Dub* is that they appear to be painted with fairly broad brush-strokes, using raw, free performances. In the past, Lanois

For the two acoustic tracks on *Le Noise*, Young’s guitar was tracked with an AKG C24 stereo mic, as well as its built-in DI facility.

has been responsible for his fair share of layered, very detailed, almost perfectionist records, works that seem to embody his one-time adage that an image of beauty is greatly enhanced by the introduction of a piece of grit. On *Le Noise* and *Black Dub* Lanois appears to have reversed his maxim: they sound more like grit greatly enhanced by pieces of beauty.

“Thank you for noticing the qualities of grit and freedom in these new albums,” replies Lanois. “I like the broad brush-stroke analogy. It’s a very painterly way of looking at things, and I love for music to have pictures. That part of my work has never changed: I like things to be cinematic. I also think that the detail is always there in my work. The first impression of the Neil Young record is perhaps that it is raw, with not much done to it, but on close inspection some beautiful work has been done to details. Also, trying to recreate the excitement that one felt in one’s youth is always there with every record that I work on, and I think it’s safe to say that Black Dub is a wonderful arena for me to apply my sonic skills to. I apply whatever I want, whatever I bump into, whatever I’m excited about. It’s very encouraging to work with this entourage.”

Black Dub consists of long-standing Lanois collaborators drummer Brian Blade (Wayne Shorter, Joni Mitchell, Norah Jones),

bassist Daryl Johnson, and the spectacular young Belgian-American singer Trixie Whitley, daughter of the late blues singer Chris Whitley. The “cinematic” aspect of Lanois’ work has been rapidly expanding in recent years, and plays a crucial part in both *Le Noise* and *Black Dub*. Lanois and film-maker Adam CK Vollick collaborated on a mostly black & white, and in places psychedelic, movie documenting Neil Young performing the entire *Le Noise* album, which was released by Young on YouTube.

Lanois seems keener to answer artistic than technical questions, so for more detail on the making of the Neil Young and Black Dub albums, I turn to Mark Howard, who recorded the former album and engineered and co-mixed (with Lanois) the latter. Howard has worked off and on with Lanois since joining him at Grant Avenue Studios in 1987 and helping him record *Acadie*. While having engineered Lanois-produced albums by Gabriel, Dylan, Nelson, The Neville Brothers and so on, the British-born Canadian has also gone on to make a big name for himself as an independent engineer, mixer, and producer, having worked in the latter capacity with Lucinda Williams, Marianne Faithful, Chris Whitley, and many more. *Le Noise* and *Black Dub* mark the first time Lanois and Howard have worked together again since U2’s *All That You Can’t Leave Behind* (2000).

Silverlake Sessions

Neil Young’s *Le Noise* was almost entirely recorded live, albeit in a very unusual fashion. In two video interviews posted on Neil Young’s YouTube channel, Lanois speaks at length about the importance of his house in Silverlake, Los Angeles, in the making of this album. But when speaking to me from New York, he relates that the Silverlake studio has since been dismantled and that he currently spends much time in Jamaica, and also lives out of a suitcase rather a lot. He elaborates about its contents, “I have a Radar 24-track digital machine and the home-made preamps that I worked on with Mark Howard and my brother Bob, and that’s it. I don’t use EQ or anything, I go straight from the preamps to the Radar. I will listen back to a mixer of some kind, like the Midas 4000 in Canada, which is a very big front-of-house console. Sometimes I’ll monitor on a small Mackie mixer. That’s OK too. I don’t care. I can make records on anything! Or anywhere. I did some of the work on Neil’s record in a hotel room. In that case I’ll work with two DAT recorders. It allows me to work on an already

existing mix, do treatments, record them on another DAT, and I’ll later spin that back into the Radar. What other tools do I use? I’m not telling!”

Thankfully, Mark Howard is less reticent. “For each project I work on, I do an installation with my own gear. When I recorded and mixed Tom Waits’ *Real Gone* (2004), I set up in an old schoolhouse close to where he lived; when I did Lucinda Williams’ *World Without Tears* (2003) I put up all my gear in a room in the Paramour Estate building in Silver Lake. It was the same with Neil Young’s record. I set up, I do the record, and I tear the installation down. It’s a great way to make records, because there are no budgets anymore these days, and like this I don’t have any overheads. You also don’t fall into the same routines with always the same drum setup in the same place. I’ve been making records like this for 23 years. It allows for a lot of creative accidents to happen, and as a result I’m always discovering new sounds.

“Dan and I each have our rigs, and when I make records I bring my own rig. Like him, I have an IZ Radar 24 and my preamps are the GP2 BL990s, which were designed by Dan’s brother Bob. He made them 20 years ago, and there’s finally a company manufacturing them. These two pieces of gear are my main rig, and then I have a Tascam DM3200 digital desk when I travel abroad, which is an amazing piece of kit. It’s totally automated and it sounds punchy and warm. If I’m in Los Angeles I’ll, strap a bunch of Neve BCM10 sidecars together. I’ll also have some outboard and mics, like the RCA44 ribbon mic. It’s one of the best microphones ever made for recording drums or vocals. I used it a lot on the Tom Waits record. Nowadays, with everything being digital, a lot of things sound very harsh and are hard to listen to, so my routine is to record a bright-sounding instrument with a dark mic, which gives a creamier, warmer sound. Other than Neve desks, we don’t use too much vintage stuff, though. It sounds great, but it can drive you crazy. You spend half your time getting vintage gear to



work. That’s why I have this solid-state system with the preamps, Radar and Tascam.

“Another reason for using the Radar is that I don’t like the sound of Pro Tools, and I also don’t think it’s a reliable platform: it crashes too often. You also end up doing things inside of it with plug-ins, and you end up dealing with the issue of latency. Plus people using Pro Tools are listening with their eyes instead of their ears. I like the Radar because I grew up using tape recorders, and it is like using a tape recorder. You record something, you play it back. You don’t have to think about anything else, or spend hours studying how to use the software or get something to work again when it crashes or doesn’t open. With the Radar, you can spend these hours on dealing with the music. Recording with Radar is much quicker than with tape or Pro Tools. Rewind and playback is instantaneous, and »



For the Silverlake sessions, Mark Howard hired three Neve BCM10 consoles to complement his IZ Radar recorder. These and other gear were relocated to different rooms within the house.

» you don't have to constantly wait for things to load, unlike with Pro Tools. It's such a frustrating tool for me. If I ever have to use it, I get a guy to do it for me, so I don't have to look at it."

The Wow Factor

The gestation of *Le Noise* began in early 2010, when Neil Young called Lanois with the request to help him make an acoustic album. Lanois and Howard were then finishing *Black Dub*, having set up a studio installation at Lanois' Silverlake house. Vollick's videos of the recordings, posted on the Internet, attracted Young, as did the stunning visual quality of the house. "We looked at the acoustics of each room," explains Howard, "and at what the best combinations of acoustic guitars and microphones were, and what looked the best when we filmed there. So when Neil walked into the door, we were prepared, and he'd play and he'd be like 'Wow!' The best thing you can do for a musician is to get them excited. As soon as you win their confidence with a great sound, and they know they don't have to worry about anything technical, you are going to get great performances out of them. They are just going to nail it.

"I set up my Radar and GP2 preamps, and we got three Neve BCM10 consoles and a Neve Melbourne desk. I ended up using the Melbourne the most. I installed

the others because I initially thought that we were going to need a larger rig. I started by setting up in the hallway, where I had also set up for the *Black Dub* project, and where the song 'Surely' was recorded. On the front cover of the album, you see Neil standing in the front door of the house, and I am right at the other side of the cable that's in the middle of the picture. The picture on the back of the *Black Dub* album was taken in the same hallway.

"We didn't stay in the hallway, but instead I moved the studio three times during the time that we recorded with Neil! The thing with Neil is that he only works on the three days before the full moon. He says that you are at your most creative during this time. So if anything was going to happen, it was during these times. In total he only came in for 11 days, so four times over four months. During the breaks from recording with Neil, we worked mostly on finishing the *Black Dub* album, apart from a break of a few weeks after Dan had his motorcycle accident [on June 5]. I moved the recording installation for each of the three days of sessions with Neil, because we wanted to use the opportunities of different locations in the house, both acoustically and from a visual point of view."

Apparently it was the song 'Hitchhiker', which dates from 1974 and which Young finished during the recordings, that prompted the change in direction to

an electric album. Young has said in an interview that it felt right to play it on an electric guitar. This sounded so good that the song sparked a totally new approach, with Young playing one electric guitar and singing live in the studio, and Howard and Lanois continuing the dub techniques they'd applied to the *Black Dub* album.

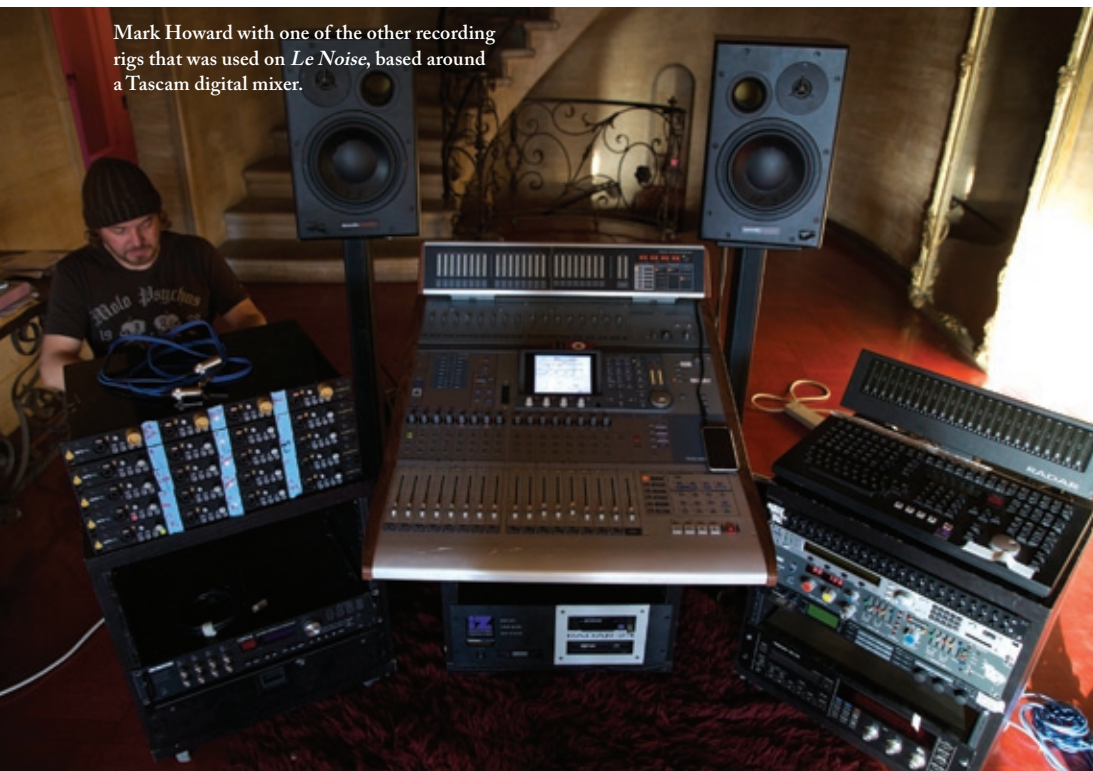
"The other thing that was very important for the sound of the album," added Lanois, "was the white Gretsch Falcon that Neil was playing, which had two pickups, one for the bass and the other for the treble strings, each of them going through one of the two Fender Deluxe amplifiers that we had put in the sweet spot in the room. The Falcon was our secret weapon. It was used on all the tracks, apart from 'Hitchhiker', on which Neil played his black Les Paul, and the two acoustic songs, 'Love And War' and 'Peaceful Valley Boulevard,' on which he played my Guild acoustic, which has an LR Baggs magnetic pickup, so we could mic the guitar and also have an isolated source of sound from the pickup."

Dubbed Out Rock God

Mark Howard continues the narrative of *Le Noise*, lifting the lid on many of the recording and treatment details, "We really felt like we'd hit on a sound with 'Hitchhiker', and then 'Walk With Me'. We got a killer sound on those songs. I recorded the two Fender amps with a Sennheiser

MD409 on each and a Shure Beta 58 for Neil's vocals, all going through the GP2 preamps. I put a subharmonic [generator] on the electric guitar with the Eventide H3500 to get a big-bottomy sound. Neil lit up from that, he got so excited! I had done some work in Jamaica with Rocco DeLuca [Lanois had previously produced DeLuca's 2009 album *Mercy*], and worked with dub techniques, which I also applied with *Black Dub*, and on Neil's voice and guitar. I put effects on, like trails of his guitar taking off and swirling around, and dubbing his vocal by trapping it and then adding repeat delays. These effects came from the Lexicon Prime Time and the TC Electronics Fireworks. Together with the H3500, these were pretty much the only effect boxes we used on the album. There's no reverb anywhere on it."

Mark Howard with one of the other recording rigs that was used on *Le Noise*, based around a Tascam digital mixer.



While this all sounds fairly straightforward, the most striking thing about Howard and Lanois' approach was that most of these effects were applied while Young was playing. "As Neil plugged in his guitar, I dialled up these sounds to see how he would react to them. You can see it happening in the video. There were no overdubs, I had just three tracks — two guitar [amps] and vocals — and we added the effects, and that was it. Neil could react to what I was doing while he was playing, because he was listening to my monitoring system. I always work in quadrasonic sound, and I had four 18-inch Clair Brothers PA subs going on, with a pair of Klipsch speakers in the rear and 15-inch Tannoy Golds in front. When you stood in the centre of the room, it was the best sound you've ever heard, it was incredible. We had those speakers going at full tilt, and when you put your hand on the walls, they were shaking. It was almost earthquake material!

"I had Neil's amps with me in the room, and with all this big reverberation going on, the house became a speaker cabinet. It was jaw-dropping, and Neil felt like a rock

god! The sound of 'Hitchhiker' that you hear on the album was pretty much the one that I dialled up while he was playing. Dan would be there with me, and over my shoulder would also dub vocals and trip them out. It was like a tag-team situation, where I'd have the vocal, and he'd echo, and he'd trap it and spin it. It's the whole dub thing, and very Jamaican. The Black Dub approach leaked into Neil's record, it's why it's dubbed out the way it is.

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"Neil was pushing us, saying, 'Hey guys, that's great, just take it to the next level. Give me more of that!' So after recording, we went in there again with most songs and caught certain words and phrases and

dubbed them — when you're dubbing live, sometimes you hit it and sometimes you don't. It was a process of extraction and insertion. Dan gets up early and would do some of these things in the morning before I got in, and I would then review them. Some of the songs, like 'Rumblin' and 'Angry World', ended up being heavily processed. What you're hearing on 'Sign Of Love' that sounds like a keyboard is the TC Electronic with a setting that I created;



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» I made my own algorithm, which makes the guitar sound like something completely different. But once again, there are no overdubs; all the information came from the vocal and two guitar tracks. Everything came from Neil's performance."

"There's a difference between overdubbing and me doing sonics," remarks Lanois, "though doing treatments is also a musical process, not an engineering process. In 'Rumblin', I took some samples of Neil's guitar, and built those sounds, and then I removed the guitar in the opening of the song. That section repeats later in the song. It's a way of presenting the work in a different light. What tools did I use? I use

a bunch of different boxes. I use an AMS harmoniser, but any box that samples will work. They all do it in slightly different ways. Roland makes them, Korg makes them, Boomerang makes them, Zoom, every box samples these days. Samples are falling out of trees. The question is, once you have a sample, what are you going to do with it?"

The Heart Is The Barometer

Le Noise contains two acoustic songs, 'Love And War' and 'Peaceful Valley Boulevard' which, explains Lanois, involved "a different set of parameters. 'Love And War' is fairly un-effected, but 'Peaceful Valley Boulevard' has a lot of treatments."

Many of the techniques used on *Le Noise* were developed by Lanois and Howard during the recording of the *Black Dub* album. This photo shows Lanois (left), Howard and singer Trixie Whitley, with their travelling studio.

Howard elaborates: "I recorded the acoustic guitar with an AKG C24, which is the stereo version of the C12. The C24 is a really special microphone and I think it sounds better than the mono version. I also recorded the pickup, and added a little bit of sub on the acoustic, which is why it sounds so big and rich and full-bodied. When Neil does that little Spanish-like solo in the low strings, if you listen on big speakers it'll shake you. I had a Sony C37a on the vocals in the acoustic songs. It's a tube mic

Studio Art Installation

Mark Howard and Daniel Lanois's guerrilla-like studio 'installations' began with a studio the duo built in Mexico in the early '90s, where Lanois recorded, among other things, his solo albums *Shine* and parts of *Belladonna*. Howard explains: "In 1994, we set up in Todos Santos in the Baja peninsula in Mexico. I still remember loading the transport trailer with the gear and taking it to Mexico, where we installed it in a house cut in natural rock, with a grass roof over an open front section, and no windows. It was like living outside, and birds and scorpions and centipedes would come in. We called it 'The Bird Nest'. We recorded a lot of material there that wasn't used at the time, and when Dan and I decided to do the *Black Dub* record two years ago, we wondered what else we could put on, and I started bringing out archive stuff that we had recorded in Mexico. We were listening to it, and went: "Wow, this is great! It sounds incredible!" So we built on top of that. The basic tracks for songs like 'Canaan,' 'Silverado,' 'Slow Baby,' and 'I Believe In You,' were recorded in Mexico."

As Lanois mentions above, overdubs on the Mexico material, laying down new tracks, and treatments were done in Toronto, Jamaica, France, Los Angeles, and wherever else Lanois found himself. One noteworthy track is 'Last Time', which features a heavily distorted vocal recorded and framed in an unusual way. Lanois: "That's Brian Blade's father Brady singing. We didn't have any recording equipment, just a camera, so that's what we worked with. I didn't add the distortion, it came from the camera. I started with that vocal, and then built around it. I let that fragment decide the tempo and the pitch of everything and also let it be governor of the groove that I created. So yeah, there are quite a few overdubs on *Black Dub*. In a lot of cases there's a rhythm box, like on 'Silverado' I'm mixing a rhythm box with real drums, which I love to do. I also did that on 'Slow Baby'. I love referencing Sly & The Family Stone's song 'In Time', from his album *Fresh*, which is a beautiful mixture of beatbox and templates. It's a dream of mine to reach that level of excellence."

"The performances on *Black Dub*, and also *Le Noise*, are not perfect," adds Howard. "Instead they have a vibe and they have soul. Some people think that the more times you play something, the better you get. Technically you may, but you move away from the song, you start to lose the soul of the song. Something that's perfectly played and perfectly in tune is not going to have the same kind of vibe as someone really going for it. It may be a little sloppy around the edges, but you can feel the soul of the person. The more you are doing something, the more you are stealing from the soul of it."

"In the end, perfect recordings won't stand the test of time. Bob Dylan's *Time Out Of Mind* isn't perfect. In fact it's pretty ragged. And with *Le Noise* and *Black Dub*, there definitely was a vibe and we went with it, and we didn't go in there and fix every note. For example, we recorded the vocals for each song on *Black Dub* pretty much in one take, with everybody singing together in the same room."

that not many people know about, and it's a secret weapon because the singer can get right onto the diaphragm without it crapping out. With most tube mics, if you get close and you put moisture on the capsule, they break up and start crapping out on you. But you can get onto a C37 as you can with a 58, and get the big, warm print without any problems. I also used it to record Bob Dylan on *Time Out Of Mind*."

Immediately after each recording session, Howard supplied a mix to Adam Vollick, who spliced it with the footage he'd taken. Howard: "In some cases, like with 'Love And War', we never touched the track again afterwards, and what you see in the film is that take. Neil only recorded each song one or two times, and we didn't edit between takes, so Adam was able to use the actual performance footage in many cases. There was an edit in 'Walk With Me' — we cut an instrumental verse before it starts, so that the song begins where we felt that Neil was really hitting his stride. In a few cases, we moved a word around from one section of a song to another. It was small stuff, nothing huge. Adam didn't have great footage for 'Rumblin'" and 'Angry World', which is why the footage that goes with those songs is slightly collaged and has time-lapse photography."

With Lanois and Howard working extensively on dubbing and treating the *Le Noise* tracks after Young's performances, and also working with a very limited number of tracks, there was no formal mixing stage. Lanois stresses that they went "meticulously through everything, optimising every sound. It's a technique that I would not recommend to anyone, because it's slow and painstaking." Howard explains that Lanois and he simply got the songs to the stage where they were happy with them. They then placed them in order, and for them, that was the record. The obligatory mastering stage was therefore a bit problematic.

"Mastering is weird for us. We deliver a record, and we like the way it sounds. So you give it to a mastering engineer and he or she automatically changes the sound, thinking they're doing the right thing. Dan and I would go into the car with our original mixes and A/B them with the mastered tracks, and we'd be like: 'That doesn't sound the same! We want it to sound exactly like we did it.' Of course, these days a lot of albums are made by several different producers, and a mastering engineer is needed to make it sound more cohesive. But in this case it took a long time to simply get it to sound exactly the way we'd done it."

This attention to sonic detail is an interesting admission from Howard, who admits that, in general, he's not concerned with perfect sounds and meticulous detail. "It's not my thing. I'm not the guy with a microscope. Everything I do is based on performance. A performance will always outweigh perfection. You can feel a performance in your heart, that's the barometer I work off. A lot of records coming out today, I have no feelings towards them. There may be cool sounds, but there's no emotion. They are machine music, robbed of humanity. I work with many great musicians, and [*legendary drummer*] Jim Keltner always thanks me when he works with me, for letting him play a whole track. He gets hired in these days to play one bar, which gets looped, and then he's out of the door again, and his name is just used for prestige. The musicians I play with always perform the whole song. That's the basis for the records that I make, and that's why I hope that they will stand the tests of time." **///**

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