

SWEAR & SHAKE AT MAPLE RIDGE

By David Weiss



When it comes to music, half the trick is simply finding something that's genuine. For New York producer/engineer Ben Goldstein (BenGoldsteinMusic.com), that elusive discovery occurred on his first sighting of the Brooklyn band Swear & Shake (swearandshake.com).

"I really loved what they brought to their live show," Goldstein recalls. "I saw real musicianship and a true sense of fun between them and the audience. Immediately after that concert, I knew I wanted to work with them."

He soon got a call from the band. It turns out Goldstein and Swear & Shake vocalist/guitarist Adam McHeffey had both attended SUNY-Purchase. The band headed upstate to Cambridge, N.Y., to a property called Maple Ridge. It was the first step in what would be an unusual hybrid of on-location and studio recording, leading to what would become one of 2012's most ear-catching indie records.

Owned by a devoted fan of the band and overall patron of the arts, a 132-year-old barn at Maple Ridge was a natural headquarters for the creation of Swear & Shake's new album, which would eventually also be called *Maple Ridge*. "Between this barn, and my love for mobile recording, the pieces came together," says Goldstein, whose credits also include Louis Weeks' *Long Gone* EP, the outdoor performance series *The Leaf Sessions*, and Patt Eagan's forthcoming record, *Interstate Lines*. "The barn at Maple Ridge was a massive, aged space that sounds really beautiful and different. It was a very conducive environment to making music and being uninhibited."

In these utopian surroundings, Goldstein went to work connecting his mobile setup. A relatively compact rig that emphasizes simplicity and streamlined operation, it consists of an API 3124 4-channel mic/line preamp and a PreSonus Digimax 8-channel preamp, feeding a 4-input Digi 002 for a total of 16 channels. A 4-channel headphone amp and Dynaudio BM5A monitors enable audio out from the MacBook Pro running Pro Tools 9.

Next, Goldstein set the band up in a circle on the barn's ground floor, allowing McHeffey, drummer Tom Elefante, vocalist/guitarist Kari Spieler

and bassist Shaun Savage to stay in mutual visual contact as they recorded. "I really love to capture a live sound—I don't mean sonically, but in terms of performance," Goldstein emphasizes. "We spent a lot of time getting set up the first day, so we wouldn't have to think about it the next three or four days. The acoustic guitars were recorded with a Radial DI, and the bass was plugged directly into the API 3124. Meanwhile, the electric guitar amplifiers were miked downstairs, completely isolated from the barn space."

To capture the drums, Goldstein eschewed tom mics while positioning a Shure SM57 on the snare, a Sennheiser MD 421 18 inches away from the resonant kick drum head, plus a more unorthodox Shure SM7 on that drum's beater side. "I was taught not to do that, but it really works for me," Goldstein says, who is a professional drummer himself. "When I hear the bass drum at a gig, I'm experiencing it from the beater side—it's a big part of what I'm used to hearing." Finally, drum overheads came courtesy of two modded MK-o12s.

Goldstein depended on a single Shure KSM27 for the vast majority of the all-important room-miking duties in the barn, which consisted of two stories measuring 2,800 square feet per floor. "From an engineering standpoint, I like to let the playing do the work, and not my miking," Goldstein notes. "With that one Shure KSM27 alone you can do so much, depending on how you're compressing it and using it in the mix. The instruments really resonated so beautifully, and sung in that space—and of course I had a lot of fun squashing them in the mix!"

After several days at Maple Ridge, Swear & Shake came away with drum, bass, guitar tracks and a smattering of overdubs. As Goldstein expected, however, final vocals, additional guitars, horns, percussion and additional overdubs would need to be achieved in the controlled conditions of Brooklyn apartments, a Baltimore basement studio and even the band's touring van.

"Going to the barn, the plan was just to capture the live energy of the four of them together," he explains, "then bring it back home and build. By the end of the album, we had brought on about 10 other musicians. I also like to incorporate 'nonmusical' and environmental sounds in the recordings and arrangements. The goal was to get the album to give me the same feeling of excitement that I felt at their live shows."

With his love of field recording, Goldstein was happy to hit the NYC streets with a Roland field recorder and his stereo pair of Oktavas. The result of those efforts are clearly heard in the song "The Light," where the sounds of footsteps inside the NY Public Library, a bocce ball game in Bryant Park, and a street vendor introduce the music with an airy city sound. Additional nonmusical sounds that Goldstein recorded for the record include a frying egg, a clothes dryer door, and a percussion setup comprising a dust pan, a Café Bustelo can and a baking pan.

As Goldstein observes, deftly merging ambience with music—as happens throughout the 10 tracks of *Maple Ridge*—has little to do with fader magic and everything to do with what happens on the front end. "A lot of the melding happens in the tracking," he says. "Both in appropriate miking and in performances that equal the energy and attitude of the material that's already there. Once you match all of that, mixing it all together is not difficult."