

SOFT LANDINGS

**Heartbreak, hard work
and hula hoops...
Add Elton John to the mix,
and it's a whole new world for**

PNAU

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"WE can't get too close," whispers Nick Littlemore, half of Aussie electronic duo Pnau, "or the director will see us. And then I'll never get away."

We're hunched beside the sound desk at New York's Radio City Music Hall, the lavish theatre built by the Rockefeller family at the height of the Great Depression. The venue is as opulent as you might expect from the pet project of America's richest family. Decked out in gold leaf and murals, the lobby feels like the audience hall of a middle-ranking medieval sultan; the stage is framed by cunningly lit concentric golden proscenium arches.

Almost as noteworthy as the theatre itself is the hive of activity on stage. Several performers are engaged in remarkable manoeuvres that involve rolling around in giant hula hoops, while above them a little Colombian guy is strolling back and forth about 15 feet in the air. He's doing so in such a nonchalant manner that *triple j mag* has to look twice to confirm that it is in fact a tightrope he's walking on.

What we're watching is a rehearsal for *Zarkana*, a new Cirque du Soleil show that describes itself as an "acrobatic rock opera". It opened in New York in June. The show's composer and musical director is one Nick Littlemore, who's snuck us a pass for an impromptu tour of the venue.

"It's the hardest thing I've ever done by a long way," Nick says of *Zarkana* once we sidle out of the theatre. He's been working on the show since 2009. "For the first year I was just pitching [ideas]. I just kept demo-ing — initially about 60 songs, and then more, and more... Eventually after a year they gave me a contract. It's been two-and-a-half years. [I've written] 180 songs for a 25-song show. They changed two more as of midnight last night. I have to go straight after this and rewrite them."

The idea of taking on a project like this is, Nick admits, a daunting one. "François [Girard, the director] told me about what in the film industry they call 'truck syndrome'. You arrive in the morning, and you're walking past 40 trucks... By the time you get to the set, you freak the fuck out. I mean, [*Zarkana*] is a 70 million dollar production. I'm still pretty much a punk at heart, so..."

"I'm sure they all rag on me all day: I'm the youngest by 20 years. All the other composers are in their 50s or 60s and have a full team and all that stuff. I have an arranger, who's amazing to work with. I have an assistant full-time. I treat him really well, and I make him work really long hours. I try to eat well. The days go to 16, 18, 20, 22 hours. Months of that. I lose it a lot."

WE head across the road to a café where we're meeting Nick's Pnau cohort, Peter Mayes, to discuss their fourth album, *Soft Universe*. The July release is a very different beast to its wildly successful self-titled predecessor. This is probably not surprising, since the latter is four years old now — and, clearly, a lot has happened between now and then.

"The colouring of [*Soft Universe*] is London," explains Nick. "Those dark heavy blues. The black sky. The light that you get, it shines very little at all. There's a great story about [18th

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Century British artist J.M.W. Turner: he learned to paint storms by tying himself to the mast and going out in the storm, and just sketching as much as he could. Our approach probably wasn't quite that dramatic (*laughs*), but London, it just weighs on your mind. Those colours were very important to us. It's beautiful, but it's a very different aesthetic to our flat sky and sea."

"I think, at first, London was quite inspirational because it was so different," Peter adds. "Because it was so dark, it was the opposite of where



we'd come from. It was really exciting. But it grinds you down a bit. It's a hard city."

Pnau moved from Sydney to London in 2008 at the urging of the man they refer to casually as "Elton" and we know as Sir Elton John. Peter is still based in London; Nick moved to New York City as *Zarkana's* grand opening approached. "I'm going to stay," he says. "I'm loving [New York] too much. You get sky here. Coming from Australia, we know this: the sun and the sky are so important."

At first listen, *Soft Universe* doesn't seem as downbeat as its creators make it out to be. Sure, the music isn't quite as slap-happy as Pnau favourites like 'Baby' or 'Wild Strawberries', but it's still dance music. It's not as if the songs are exercises in bedsit melancholy.

Once you start listening to the words, though, it's clear that this is a break-up record if there ever was one. First single 'The Truth' provides the album's conceptual centrepiece, cataloguing the end of a relationship with a tone that's alternately angry and despairing. *Soft Universe* is the product of a difficult time in the life of the man who wrote its lyrics and provides vocals on every song.

"Yeah," says Nick. "It's pretty dark." His voice trails off, and he laughs, a tad uncomfortably.

"But it's juxtaposed with the positivity of the music," Peter interjects.

"And it's as light as I could possibly write lyrically," Nick continues. "I've been through hell the last couple of years."

Nick feels that writing about his experiences has been a catharsis. "We certainly entered a state of clarity on this record, although emotionally it's been turbulent, to say the least. There've been a lot of moments... I've broken down a lot. Elton's been great with that, just mentoring us. We're far away from our family

and loved ones, and it's nice to have someone to lean on."

Pnau's unlikely Elton John hook-up has been one of the more surreal (and generally awesome) stories in Australian music over the last few years. Apparently Elton got hold of a copy of *Pnau* and loved it so much that he called up its creators and summoned them for tea. Nick was in the dentist's chair when the phone rang — although given the jaw-dropping that must have ensued, perhaps a dentist wasn't a bad place to be.

"The weird thing with Elton is that I've never felt nervous in front of him. He's so gracious," Nick says. "Very respectful," Peter adds.

"And just instantly cool," Nick continues. "He's a friend. And he's been instrumental in changing our lives. I can't even begin to thank someone like that. I don't know how you do. Getting us out of Australia — not that Australia is a bad place, but we needed to expose ourselves to a wider audience and check out the world, and all the things that go along with that. He just gave us a push. And beyond that he's helped in so many ways. Countless ways."

While there was talk that Elton had co-written some of the tracks on *Soft Universe*, no collabs have made it onto the final release. However, there is another fascinating-sounding Elton-related endeavour in the works, as Nick explains. "We have all his multi-tracks, and we've been basically doing an Avalanches-style thing with them."

An Elton John sample extravaganza? Really?

"Unlike the Avalanches, we don't just have stereo mixes. We have every single part, which is both incredible and mind-fucking," Nick says. "We're making new songs out of the songs people haven't heard so much. We're trying not to focus on the 'Tiny Dancer's and 'Rocket Man's, you know?

We've done half the record, and it's... it's cool."

"It's a dream," Peter agrees. "I mean, come on! And it's new music, not just remixes. [It's] like a collage. Obviously we put a lot of pressure on ourselves with it, because we want to give Elton something amazing."

"I wish we could play it to you," Nick says, "but of course, we can't play it to anyone yet. The restrictions are quite... intense (*laughs*). As you might imagine."

If there are shades of Elton John anywhere on *Soft Universe*, they're probably in closing track 'Waiting for You', an airy and decidedly theatrical piano ballad that's without precedent in the Pnau

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canon. "This is the first time we've ever written songs in that way," says Nick. "We've always started by experimenting with sound. I bought a beautiful piano, and we actually sat down and wrote for the first time ever. That song was the second song we wrote for the record."

Nick describes the song as "where we're heading, and where I'd like to head". Away from the dance floor, then?

"I'd like within three to five years to be playing more adult venues — not festivals and jumping around and breaking all my bones and all that crap," Nick says. "As fun as that's been, I see a career and longevity in playing with a 20-piece band and doing it in a very controlled, beautiful way: really singing, with a choir, playing piano, no electronics..."

"But," he concludes ruefully, "I say this now. Ask me again next week and I'll say something else." ■