

MAKING OF DEAD ROBOTS

ORIGINS OF THE ROBOTS

On January 13th, 2021 I began recording a new song I called *Dead Robots* — It was a reference to an idea that sprung up after fixing my wife's floor cleaners. She owned a very smart Roomba vacuum, but also used cheaper Velda models whose intelligence amounted to changing direction when hitting something. All the collisions caused the plastic gears to eventually break so it was my job to cannibalize the gears from other non-operating models. Once, I soldered in a new motor and it got me thinking about the level of intelligence of all these new household devices. Some learn, like the Roomba, others just bounced off furniture, but what if the experiences of all these devices were combined into a hive mind. A picture formed in my mind of a landfill with thousands of circuits connecting via some conductive goo running along the ground and they started communicating.



“If I was able to show my studio to my 14-year-old self, that kid would have had a heart attack.”

THE SOUND OF STEEL AND SOUL

To turn all these ideas into songs, I use Steinberg Cubase because I find it free flowing in terms of quickly getting ideas down, but it's also incredibly deep when needed. 90% of my writing is by intuition, and because of this, I've learned that ideas can be fleeting so I have to be ready to hit record or it could be lost. I love working with rhythmic loops and during the making of Dead Robots, I discovered Damage 2 by Heavyocity.

I already owned Damage 1, but it never excited me but Damage 2 is heard all over the Dead Robots album; it's those clanky, smacking, banging sounds running underneath many



of the tracks. The designers were hitting crowbars, plastic pails and even a full on dumpster! It also includes tons of real drums like Taikos and a Gran Casa (massive orchestral bass drum). The song *Not One Of Them* is a perfect example of the Damage 2 sound.



Watch the amazing content video here [Damage 2 - Content Overview | Heavyocity](#)

I also want to make every loop my own so I used the Kit Designer where I could choose from 40,000 samples, make my own kit, then trigger the sounds on my V-Drums. Again, using intuition, I'll sit and play the sounds for 10 to 15 minutes waiting for that magic 2 or 4

bar section to appear.

Rick Rubin claims that musicians who create this way are experiencing the culmination of all creativity channeling through their bodies. I'm not 100% sold on this, but it sure sounds like what happens.

Damage 2 can also be intimate and focused

as the song *Tears of Oil* shows. That loop is Damage 2 natural instruments like frame drums.

Any other loops were created the same manual way but using Native Instruments Battery 4.

I also found original samples from the Roland CR-78 made famous by Phil Collins in the song *In The Air*.

You'll hear those sounds in my song *Powerline*



Prayers.

The real drum kit sounds are from Steven Slate drums 5.5. I spent a huge amount of time building a kit that sounded great and had 6 toms in the style of, once again, Phil Collins.

You'll hear various room levels of the booming toms as I routed just the toms to Room B and added Soundtoys Devil-Loc Deluxe to crush the room tone with just the right mix.

I love Soundtoys and their effects are used throughout the album to make synths move, add vintage vocal delays and add otherworldly character.

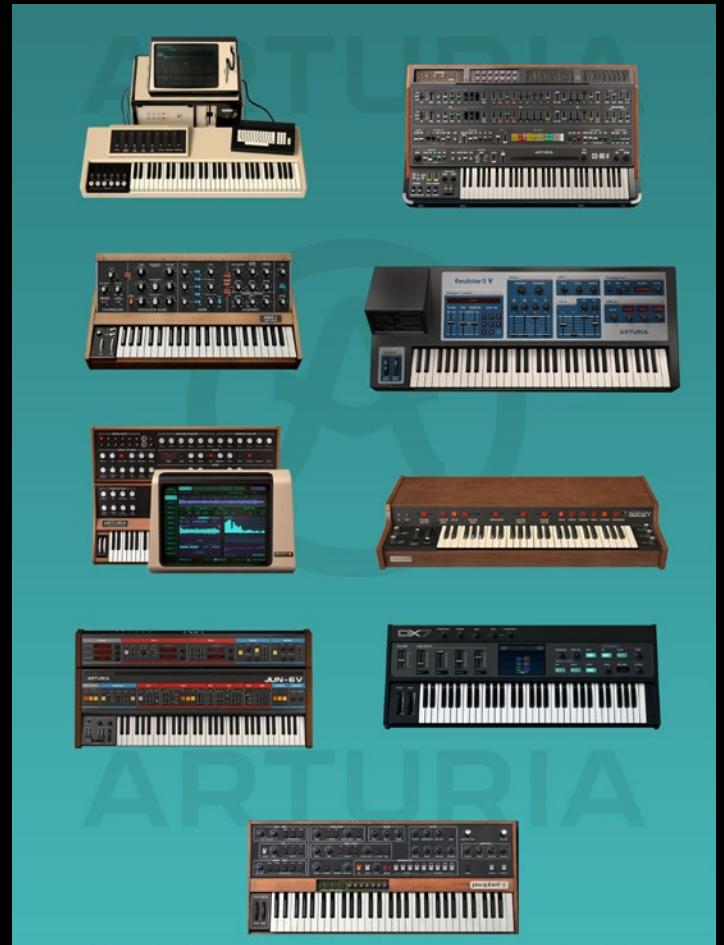
[Listen to SoundToys](#)

VINTAGE KEYS TO INFINITELY SUSTAINING GUITARS

Speaking of synths, Dead Robots would be absolutely nothing without the vintage synths of Arturia. Much of my early music life was listening to the progressive rock bands of the 70's like Genesis, Yes, ELP, Moody Blues and more. They all used the synths of the day including Mellotrons, Prophets and Moogs. But the 80's also saw incredible sounds from bands like Peter Gabriel, Tears for Fears and Trevor Horn using hugely expensive gear like the Fairlight, Emulator, Prophet and Synclavier. Arturia has created identical virtual versions of every synth of these eras and they sound amazing and truly inspired me every time I wrote something.

[Listen to Arturia](#)

The orchestral strings are almost always the Native Instruments *Orchestral Ensemble*. They never overpower the mix and have a silky smooth way of adding emotion just below the surface or even when I'm playing in the high register, they can also make you cry.



I also ended up using so many other Native Instruments virtual instruments, including the Electric Sunburst guitar, Session Horns, Analog Dreams, Cloud Supply, 40's Very Own Keys (Drakes Producer) and Glaze 2.

The other synth that has been a staple for me is Zebra 2 by u-he.

[Listen to Zebra 2](#)

Zebra 2 is Hans Zimmer's favourite synth (It was designed for and by him!) and you hear a ton of his presets all over my music. The sounds range from arpeggiated rhythms to pads and many of the iconic sounding fanfare



flourishes in songs like Cosmic Touch. Plus, some presets are directly from the movie The Dark Knight.

Speaking of keyboards, I use the Yamaha CP-88 stage piano as my piano controller. All the actual piano sounds are virtual Arturia pianos, but the CP-88 does an amazing job of sounding identical to the original CP-70 Electric Grand, which was a favourite of Peter Gabriel. Here is Peter playing the CP-70 and me playing the much smaller CP-88.

For guitars, I use a Variax 705 and a Fernandes Revolver Elite sustainer guitar. The Variax gives me the sounds of many famous guitars like Les Pauls, Telecasters, a Stratocaster and about 10 other guitars plus a Coral Sitar.

The Fernandes is incredible and you can hear



it in many of the lead guitar parts especially in the song *Beware the Scrapppers*. It has a sustainer pickup that acts like an E-Bow so you can sustain as a string forever. The Fernandes is a favourite of Steve Hackett.

All the guitar amps and effects were virtual. For clean sounds I love the PRS (Paul Reed Smith) Supermodels. I run all the guitar sims through a second computer with the BB N105 on the output that sounds like I'm playing through Blackbird Studio's iconic Neve 8078.





Guitar effects are mostly SoundToys but if I needed a ton of effects then I turned to Native Instruments Guitar Rig. Guitar Rig contains thousands of amps, pedals, effects and has tons of ready to go presets. Those ripping solo sounds are all Guitar Rig.

For vocals I use the Slate Digital VMS ML1 Modeling Microphone. I love being able to emulate tons of mics and for this album I'm using the FG-251 which is an emulation of the very famous Telefunken ELA M 251. Today this mic would cost around \$20,000 so it's nice that I can get that sound with a flick of a button!



Bass guitar parts were all played by Drew Birston and I have to say that I am extremely lucky to have Drew's talent on all my albums. He is just a brilliant and dynamic musician that "gets" my music. Drew used many of the his amazing collection of incredible basses like MusicMan Stingray 4 and 5 string basses, a Guild bass and multiple Fender Precision and Jazz basses. There's also a bowed upright at the end of the song *Factory Floor*. Drew recorded everything in his home studio using a JDI Direct Box and I added the Ampeg virtual bass amps plus some more Slate processing.



This is my vocal chain that consists of the 251 going into a Neve preamp, then an API console, an SSL EQ for removing what I don't want and a Neve EQ for what I do want. It finishes with an 1176 emulated compressor then Slate's own Revival for some sparkle. I think it's cool to note that apart from the mic and preamp (which weren't available at that time) this chain was created by Brent Bodrug for my second album and I just keep dropping it on my vocal tracks 'cause it sounds amazing.



The last thing on the bass channel was the awesome Black Box Analog Design HG-2 from Plugin Alliance that makes Drew's badass bass sound even badder.

MIXING IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Speaking of Plugin Alliance, Brent suggested that I add the Brainworx bx_townhouse Buss Compressor and the Maor Appelbaum THE OVEN on the 2-mix. This adds glue to make all the instruments and songs more cohesive and adds much needed analog warmth in a digital world.

My songs were mixed using KRK Systems V8 Series-2 speakers and I also counted on Steven Slate VSX modeling headphones. VSX headphones emulate everything from top flight studios, to several different car stereos, live clubs, a boombox and even a pair of Apple AirPods or just the speaker on an iPhone. Here's how they explain it: *"VSX uses a technology called binaural psychoacoustics. It presents the same auditory cues to your ears that they would typically hear in a room with real speakers. Finally, the software is precisely tuned to an Ultra HD pair of beryllium driver headphones."* The idea is you bounce around all these environments and if something doesn't sound right, you fix it. VSX completely changed my mixes, making them sound so much better.

[More about Slate VSX Here](#)

So there ya go, that's my journey in putting this album together. There was a ton of technology involved, but none of it was used to replace a human. Every drum hit, string pluck and key hit was me (plus Drew of course) If I was able to show my studio to my 14-year-old self, that kid would have had a heart attack. I distinctly remember how amazing it was to hear digital reverb when I was a teen, that technology was only found in studios and cost thousands of dollars. Or the first time I plugged my guitar into a Tom Scholz Rockman (He was an MIT-trained engineer and guitarist of the band "Boston") and it sounded like I was in a freakin' stadium. Not only can I get all of those same sounds, I can get absolutely every one of my most cherished instruments and gear and they sound mind-blowing.

So what's next? I'm already working on the next album called, "COLOURS". It's going to be full of inspirational songs about the diversity of the world around us. The subject was ignited as a backlash from all the darkness in this world today. I'd rather live in a world of love and happiness, hope you like it.

Colin Smith

From my studio in Rockwood

Oct. 2025

