

# Sugargang meets Mackie

Take some high-profile end users, put them in a room with some product designers and record the ensuing conversation. What results is a peek in to real-life problems and product development directions and issues.

**SUGARGANG PRODUCTION TEAM** represents working methods that are now typical in modern music. Harking from traditional engineering and production backgrounds, Avril Mackintosh and Wayne Wilkins pooled equipment resources and set up in their own room at Olympic Studios in London. The pairing is a good one as it plays to combined strengths and makes the most of the complementary differences in the working relationship.

'Wayne does all the drum programming and keyboards in Logic and I do vocal work, vocal production and my programming in audio in Pro Tools,' explains Avril. 'Because we specialise in different things it works really well. We both do mixing and have a writing partner/third member of the team, Steve Lee, who we work with.'

They set up in the room at the middle of last year after a fortuitous break, brought about by penning the song Colour Blind for Hearsay, which made it on to the album and moved things along briskly.

'It was quick,' says Avril. 'We wrote the song on the Tuesday and it got accepted on the Thursday, which for unknown writers is unheard of. We were booked in to the studio the following week and it all went from there. It was very lucky for us.'

Both have classic studio engineering backgrounds, but both have also carved supplementary niches for themselves through expertise with digital systems.

'I go out as a Pro Tools programmer so I have my rig here and all the keyboards and stuff is Wayne's and he's the Logic user.'

The two work with their separate stations on either side of the room and, while they generally use one of the main control rooms downstairs at Olympic for the mix, all the gear and experience to process a project from conception to completion is in the room. Between the two stations sits a Mackie D8B, ostensibly as the meeting point of the two separate rigs but it's not used anywhere near its full potential serving predominantly for monitoring duties. As it happens, Greg Mackie and VP of engineering Peter Watts were in town to talk with users.

'On my side of things, where most of it's coming out on line inputs, I do actually balance through the desk but the way it works is we get balances up, put the vocals on, and print a mix like that,' explains Wayne. Avril adds that having affordable recall is a real bonus and productions are a combination of all the systems.

'The thing that would do it for me on the D8B is some better sounding compressors and EQs,' says Wayne who is unashamedly pro-Logic in plug-in terms. 'Something that's a bit more analogue and characterful would make me use the Mackie more.'

'The solution is 3.0. It's a huge difference,' says Greg who doesn't seem that surprised that the production team is still running V2.0 software on the desk. It seems that a lot of D8B users are too busy to investigate this significant software update despite the fact that it's been available as a download on the Mackie website for some time.



Greg, Avril, Peter and Wayne

## What's new with D8B V3.0

- Third-party plug-ins via the Mackie UFX card
- Enhanced dynamics
- Input keying and EQ filter
- Soft-knee compression toggle
- Linear and exponential option
- 48-channel overview screen
- 200 levels of undo
- 24-bit Alt I/O
- Advanced Mix Editor features including: new view-sizing arrows; auto-loop SMPTE time code boxes; contextual right mouse click for track parameters and time bars
- Event Automation Track
- Enhanced surround mixing environment with: depth of centre control; surround LFE gain control for each channel; surround-corrected bus/track assignment; surround front-to-rear pan control via control surface or MIDI; surround GUI update - new 72-channel overview.

- Drag and drop file management between File windows
- Enhanced, flexible MIDI I-O mapping for all channel strip and master parameters
- Assignable MIDI commands on transport and on the D8B master control section
- Insert and patch point feature on channels
- 24-bit plug-in inserts across main LR bus
- Time offset (delay) on channels 1-48
- Cross-patching assigns channel strip in various orders
- Non-destructive ungrouping
- Optional fader control of level to tape - direct out signal follows the source fader channel
- Multiple direct outs per channel
- Snapshot library
- Paste Repeat for automation level looping
- Pre/post of aux sends on channels
- Improved BBT resolution and clocking accuracy
- Virtual group control extended to buses and MIDI faders

[www.mackie.com](http://www.mackie.com)

## meet your maker

'For the D8B there are more plug-ins and you need to get the latest software because there's a lot of stuff in there that you won't have seen,' adds Peter. 'It's almost a different mixer.'

Greg asks at what point Avril would look at tracking, overdubbing, mixing and editing on one system, all the way through, and Avril replies that she already does on Pro Tools, all the time.

Greg's suggestion of a large control surface with proper control and a decent number of faders is greeted with enthusiasm. However, the fact is that most existing control surfaces tend to be tied in to a particular system brand. The D8B is the dedicated approach to interfacing Pro Tools and Emagic, developing a worksurface that would work with both is a different matter particularly as Digidesign has not published its system for others to use.

'We've been trying a lot of people out, we obviously have a relationship with Emagic (Mackie designed the Logic Control interface) so that's not a problem,' explains Peter. 'The only way we can currently do it with Pro Tools is through the HUI controller, which runs MIDI. For a smaller controller that's fine, but once you start to talk about something much bigger, you need more bandwidth. I think we'd be happy to talk to Digidesign about doing that.'

Wayne adds that he believes such a 'generic' surface should be able to work with Logic, Pro Tools and Cubase to truly reach the greatest market.

Conversation turns to the differences and relative strengths of Logic and Pro Tools and Sugargang identifies Pro Tools' fast consolidation of regions and bulk track selection and processing as strong points. However, there's an element of 'you like what you like' in the Logic and Pro Tools camps, reinforced by the investment in time that a user makes in becoming fast and proficient with a system.

Peter comments on the breadth of skill-set required by the team to cover everything from songwriting and composition all the way through to tracking, mixing, and the finished product. 'It's the way that music is going, it's about production teams,' explains Wayne. 'Being able to make a record for someone in a style, in your style, or whatever. It's certainly a growing trend.'

The upshot is that Pro Tools is changing the way music sounds and the way it is made, which Avril says has resulted in some users being incredibly creative.

Greg believes that ultimately things will go native

— big digital control surfaces running native for the recording, editing, effects and mixing — all on one system. He wants to know what would cause them to look at another system as an alternative.

'When it gets to the stage where you can only get "that" sound by buying it,' replies Avril. 'There are certain things that you can only get out of Pro Tools and the same is true of Emagic. When you reach the point where people are asking how a sound was arrived at, you're there.'

Eventually someone asks where Sugargang goes after it's outgrown its white (or rather bright yellow) room. 'Both of us would like to work in a room like this (Studio 1) all the time,' says Wayne, 'or perhaps a room like Spike (Stent) has down stairs with an SSL and a big Pro Tools system.'

'When we did the Popstars thing we mixed on an SSL through the Pro Tools. That allows you to use the plug-ins and use the EQ on the SSL — that's the ideal,' adds Avril. 'It just sounds better. I can always tell if a record has been "analogued" along the way because it sounds bigger and fatter.'

## Conclusion

If one point is evident from this discussion, it is that busy and successful engineer-programmer-songwriting teams do not have a lot of time to learn new systems so they concentrate on what they know and how they can develop it. Bearing in mind the team nature of the Sugargang partnership, there is even less requirement to crossover between the different systems as each has their own area of expertise and gear preference and, fortunately, this is entirely complementary. What is interesting is that the two effectively 'meet' at the console and the mixing stage.

The Emagic/Pro Tools operational divide will persist as long as Pro Tools remains dominant in recording and manipulation, and programming remains Emagic territory.

There are a number of political reasons why this situation is likely to persist as both manufacturers have their own interests to protect. What emerges is a glaring requirement for a definitive cross-platform worksurface, and such platform independence is something that a company like Mackie could exploit. After all, it has a background in worksurfaces and the enthusiasm to take it on.

The next few years are going to be interesting. □



## The Mackoids

Greg Mackie requires no introduction as his name has become synonymous with 'peoples' pro audio. Among his many achievements is the legitimisation of affordable analogue as a quality medium — his analogue 8-bus console went a long way to reinstating faith in affordable analogue at a time when most lower end users believed they were destined to work on substandard product. A similar democratisation of technology approach has been carried through in to the company's digital products.

'We like to have a range that goes from the beginning bedroom/home studio all the way up to a studio like this,' says Greg.

Peter Watts is VP of engineering at Mackie and has been the man behind the technology in Mackie's drive in to digital, which includes its worksurface exploits. He's a Brit who moved to Woodinville in Mackie's early days yet his CV includes credit for the digital control in Trident's groundbreaking foray in to digitally controlled analogue with the Di-An console.

He doesn't deny the suggestion that Mackie is working on a whole new line of digital mixers that might be along later in the year. Whatever happens, the D8B will remain current as it's popular and selling steadily.

## Sugargang

Sugargang have just finishing two tracks that they produced for 19 Managements' new act - SClubJuniors - and the hot news is that SClub are covering one of the songs they wrote with Steve Lee and they are also producing it. Pretty good going for a partnership that has only been writing for just over a year.

The production team efforts are balanced against their own separate work. Wayne has his own projects, which have included co-producing The Corrs' last single, and Avril is busy going out as a Pro Tools programmer/engineer with her mobile rig and indulging her specialty of vocal recording/production - she's just finished the new Ronan Keating record with Gregg Alexander.

So, did they always want to be pop specialists?

Avril: 'I wanted to do rock music when I started in the business but the pop thing just happened. I actually love pop music.'

Wayne: 'There's very little that we record that we



haven't done something to. We like to mess things up with distortion, even when we do straight keyboards or

drums there's always some plug-in messing it up — but that's the sound of modern productions.'