



Ken Thomas

His background includes time in sound reinforcement, desk manufacturing, and studio build ups. As an engineer, producer and mixer he's spanned prog rock, New Wave and the current crop of interesting and innovative bands.

GEORGE SHILLING

KEN THOMAS STARTED as a PA engineer for RJ Jones, doing sound reinforcement for the BBC, working at the Eurovision Song Contest, Usher Hall, Edinburgh, and arriving at cricket matches in a van with valve Vortexion amps and a pair of horns on top. Gerry Kitchingham was the firmly established studio engineer at RG Jones, so the ambitious Thomas wrote to Trident and landed a job there. Having recently converted to 24-track they appreciated Ken's technical experience. He had learnt electronics, assuming that the engineer should know how things worked, and this worked in tandem with his love of music and sound. At Trident he was simultaneously a tea-boy, tape-op, tape librarian and also helped out in the cutting room and spent time at the desk manufacturing facility. Thomas learnt engineering skills working with Ken Scott and Robin Geoffrey Cable.

Following this spell he moved to Advision, which had the reputation for the best engineers. He recorded string sections, jingles, and worked on War Of The Worlds. When punk came along he worked with Martin Rushent, who had started producing, on sessions with The Buzzcocks and The Stranglers, and he also engineered with Martin Hannett and with Steve Brown on a Rush album. When he left Advision

he started producing a lot of New Wave bands and helped build up Andy Fernbach's Jacobs Studios (roping in the gardener to help out, a youngster called Mark Stent) and later helped Tom Astor set up Orinoco Studios.

As an engineer, producer and mixer, Ken has an astonishing CV that includes a variety of fascinating and engaging recordings including three Sigur Ros albums, Psychic TV, Sugar Cubes, and recent projects that include Clinic, Dave Gahan and Hope Of The States, whose new album Ken was mixing when *Resolution* quizzed him at Olympic Studios. (Photos www.recordproduction.com)

What keeps you motivated?

I still find it incredibly interesting. I still get jobs, I still enjoy it, and I still feel there's so much more, to break rules and so on, it's like painting a picture. If I can help someone make a good record it's fantastic.

How have things changed?

It's totally different because you've got Pro Tools and loads of tracks, but I think it's just as good, I think it's even more interesting now. I've been enjoying the bands I've been working with, so I'm just gauging it on that.

How do plug-ins compare with analogue effects?

I don't know, I'm never too hung up if it's a plug-in or not a plug-in. It's got a different character, but sometimes that digital character is great, and sometimes the analogue character is good, but until you plug it in you never know. I've got no set rules of how something should be.

What guides you in effects choice?

It's all to do with feel, if it sounds good and you react to it, that's fine. You've also got to talk about the whole picture. If you use a lot of valve gear it's going to be quite warm and quite thick, so it's going to be quite hard to gel together if you've got a lot of instruments, but if you haven't, it's easy. If you've got Elvis Presley it's fine — or even The Beatles, it's quite simple.

Where did you track the Hope Of The States album?

We started at Earth Terminal where the engineer there helped me track drums and bass, then various studios before going to Prague where we recorded strings, brass and vocals, and drank a lot. Then we went to finish bits and pieces at Strongroom, where the psychedelic colours inspired us, and the bar downstairs as well, that was very good. And then we came here to mix.

Do you usually work with an engineer these days?

On this project I've got James Loughrey, he's been great, doing all the Pro Tools. Sometimes with Sigur Ros a guy called Biggie helped us on the new album, but on the first two I did everything myself, engineering, teas, cooking, built the studio, psychotherapist, the whole caboodle.

Do you contribute arrangement ideas?

Sometimes you have to. If you've got a band who are maybe trying to be too ambitious, they just need to calm down, if the drummer's doing fills all the way through and he can't get them, you might say, halve them.

What about with an experimental band like Sigur Ros where the structures are less conventional?

I've been with them right from the beginning, we don't really have to talk about it. We all go, yeah that's right, or that's wrong. We just do it, and sometimes, like on one of the songs, I just thought I'd put everything through distortion, (drums) and Jónsi came in and said it's great, and I said alright we'll just put it in. Then Jónsi will push it up more than I thought it would be, and I'd go, alright that's fine, maybe I shouldn't have done that. They're just fun, people think they're just sitting around with incense around them, but we're having a laugh really.

Is there an overriding philosophy?

The first album, I remember we decided we should have a lot of bass. I overdid it, but I'd heard some Enya song and it just had a good feeling of bass end.

Do you think records generally sound better these days?

When Pro Tools first came out a lot of records sounded thin, but it was just because it was the character of new technology, and ADATs too, but if the song's good I think you can get away with it.

Do you enjoy the styles of music you are known for, or do you have a secret desire to do hip-hop?

Not really. One of the things I've always gone for is I do like working with nice people. That's the crux of it. And I'm a bit arty-farty, so I like something that is breaking the rules a little bit. I know you've got to sell records, but it's great, it doesn't matter what age, but someone going, yeah, I wanna do this, and I don't care a shit. Fantastic! I just want one note all the way through — fantastic! I just think that's a breath of fresh air. I've always been interested in The Getty or reading about John Cage. I like everything, I'm not just into one thing. It all helps.

Does the band's increasing technical knowledge threaten the role of the producer?

Not really, I think the producer's there to help the band make the best record they can in the easiest way possible. You're born, you get from A to B the easiest way possible, then you die!

Presumably in the days of punk the band would barely go into the control room...?

Punk was amazing because you'd just put a pair of headphones on a new band, and that was the first time they'd ever heard themselves, and they'd just be beaming, like, Bloody hell, this is amazing! I think something is going to happen with all this Pro Tools stuff, if someone could use it like Jimi Hendrix, then it would be amazing.

Are you conscious of the budget and the deadline?

That's my job, I have to be. I did an album with Dave Gahan, and it was great working with Daniel Miller because he keeps it real, you've got to finish it by then, that's it!

Do you enjoy having a deadline?

Well we haven't with Sigur Ros, we break every deadline possible.

Do you prefer that, or do you like someone telling you you have to have it done by Friday?

We won't have it done by Friday! When it's ready, it's ready. Things sometimes take longer. I went through a stage of doing albums really quickly, 'Dreams Less Sweet' only took two or three weeks. Albums take a lot longer now.

Why is that?

It could be the bands I'm working with! I don't know,

Pro Tools does take time, it gives you a lot of options. If you hear something slightly out of time you could go along that route. With Sigur Ros I wasn't really bothered about time, there's lots of stuff that's all over the place. I don't know, it just seems to take longer. It's good for studios.

Are you concerned about the demise of so many good studios?

Not really, nothing really concerns me! There'll always be good studios, something new turns up. Sometimes it's good that everything gets cleared away and you start fresh. I think there's a new concept of studios. Some bands don't want to be where Led Zeppelin recorded, it's kind of boring.

Don't you think a bit of history is good?

I love it, I did Dave Gahan at Electric Lady in New York, and I was just buzzing. It was just a small room upstairs, but it was fantastic, a great atmosphere, and he was just great to be with, we just had a good hoot. Maybe with younger bands it's different. But some studios are just not good, maybe the people who own it are pissed off or something. But Olympic's on its own, Abbey Road too.

Do you think people get too hung up on perfection?

It's so open, there's such a new wave where everyone wants to make it rougher and 60s or singer-songwriter vibe, and then they shouldn't, but they clean it up. But then pop music to go on the radio has to be able to serve the standard. But I don't know, I'm hearing new bands like Bloc Party and it's not hi-fi to me. All these new bands sound like they've been processed a little bit, but maybe that's the new sound. Some of the heavy metal stuff to me is just brilliant, the hip-hop stuff with all the low end, I think Missy Elliott and all that stuff is genius.

Do you rehearse with bands?

On the first Sigur Ros album I did, I hung out with them in the rehearsal room, and then on the last one we did it as we went along. Hope Of The States came round to my house and we went through drums and bass and ideas, and get really drunk at night. I'd play them some Mussolini music or something! And Sam would wake up in the morning and say, I've got a headache! I think you have to, before you start something you have to get your head around it, otherwise you waste a lot of time. Tempos are incredibly important.

**What tricks and techniques are used on the new Sigur Ros album?**

I suppose I'm just looking for sounds to sound engaging, so whatever I do to them, sometimes I'll have one sound that I EQ really hard, and compress. If it's all getting a bit bland, it's like taking a picture it's just focusing, it might be on something that isn't the vocal, like the snare drum or something that needs to engage you, take you somewhere. That's about the only trick I have at the moment — over-EQ and compress something! We try and record everything through amps — a lot of the stuff on Sigur Ros I put back through amps, because it was sounding too bland. And Kjartan the keyboard player was great, we couldn't find a good amp so we stuck it through Georg's bass amp. So it would work like, Piano's not very good, haven't got much EQ, let's put it through the bass amp. I did a vocal with

Jónsi, and he said, The sound is shit. I found this old ribbon mic, and said, just give me an hour. The mic had that old 50s feeling about it, so I put it up and just put a speaker and re-recorded it. I couldn't do it on the EQ because it sounded cold, we'd used some Focusrite thing we tried out, so putting it back through something worked. You just try things, it's like being a sculptor. It's nice just to smell the room and smell amps going.

What's next?

I'm talking with Andrew McKenzie of the Hafler Trio about doing a conceptual piece, and we were talking about using the Zuccarelli head. Those little projects are great. He's been crunching up sounds for many years. He's one of the pioneer noise-makers, he just sits with seven computers around him all day. It's another field, which is nice to walk into. ■

Holophonics and Psychic TV

On Psychic TV's *Dreams Less Sweet* album, it says 'No microphones at all were used in the recording' presumably because it was done with Zuccarelli Holophonics, tell me about that...

'I was doing a filmscore with Rick Wakeman, and Zuccarelli turned up and said "I've invented this three-dimensional microphone head." And I said I've always been trying to get cymbals high using different midranges and sometimes have a bass drum sitting low beneath the cymbals, and I thought this guy is right on my wavelength. So he played a plane going over, and I rang up Gen [Genesis P. Orridge] and said, right, we're going to do this album holophonically. And I was always into photo-montage, and because they were quite poetic I could do what I wanted with them. I sat down with Gen and Sleazy and we came up with this idea of the Temple Ov PsychickYouth, and I said, alright, we'll make it, this whole world, by using this head. I never really understood it, we couldn't use it for more than twelve hours a day because it had to sleep, and it was fun. We made a hole and had Gen drive over it in a car, made loops, and went to the Hellfire Caves and did drums. We went to Caxton Hall and did the choir. We did oboes in a church and I was swinging it around. It was a skull that had chemicals in it, and it also gives out a frequency. He did a lot of research on bats and basically was always interested in intuition. Psychic TV were too, so I thought this was a good thing. Part of your brain is always beaming without you knowing it. Pink Floyd used it, but I think the drummer found it too hard to work with, he'd be hearing himself, like looking at himself. It never really got anywhere.'

Listening to that album there seems to be a lot of similarity with Sigur Ros, is that a sound you've lent to both projects?

'I just think you find your tribe. You just find people who are similar to yourself. I've never really thought of my influences on any of these people, I never look at it that way. You go in, you do it, but I've never thought, that's me. I think the attachment to me is boring anyway.'

