



## Nick Cage

**He combines engineering, production and managerial skills in his repertoire and has helped to carve success and acceptance for Brit hip-hop. NIGEL JOPSON talks to him about his new desk, stepping up the gear a notch, breaking an act and maintaining creative control.**

**N**ICK CAGE ENTERED the spotlight when his protégé, Dylan 'Dizze Rascal' Mills, burst onto the scene with his Mercury prize-winning 2003 debut album, *Boy In Da Corner*. Produced by Cage on a shoestring budget, the album fused hip-hop with UK-garage, and expressed the 18-year-old lyric-spitter's personality without retelling a story already done to death by other garage acts like *So Solid* or *Heartless Crew*. Cage's guidance saw Dizze stay true to his Hackney heritage and avoid the veneer of American hip-hop for his 2004 Brits-nominated *Showtime*, which nevertheless garnered recognition from US taste-makers for its sped up grime. *Resolution* tracked down Cage shortly after he'd taken delivery of a TL Audio VTC console for his Whitechapel studio. He was busy working on tracks for Taz and Class A, but the Blackberry buzzing on the console armrest hinted he's more than an engineer/producer — he's a manager and entrepreneur as well.

### How are you finding the VTC fits in with your productions?

It really freaked me out when I got it, because at first everything sounded really woody. I hate SSLs because they are woody and boxy sounding to me. Certainly whatever I've managed to get from an SSL via an engineer has never been to my taste. After a couple of weeks with the VTC I got the feel for what to do. I don't know the technical term for it is — but there's

space now — I can get the sound hard right at the bottom end. A lot depends on the gain, the EQ, how much you drive it, it all makes a huge difference on this mixer. I found you can load it up nicely — that's the best thing — if you get a bit of red going.

When we got a deal with XL one of the things I was bargaining for was a Pro Tools system. Richard Russell, the label boss, made the mistake of saying to me — 'we've got one of those lying around somewhere'. So I just locked onto that like a Pitbull every day: Pro Tools - Pro Tools ...! It was actually a Mac and rig they had given a band to use for a while, the band hadn't worked out and the system was in limbo — so it was a repo Pro Tools rig!

### I see you are using LAP 4 on the Mac...

It's all down to economics, this system came to me with OS 9.2 and Logic 4.81 ... it's stable and I'm not upgrading. The next move would be a step up to an HD system. This Mac is a G4, I'd need more horsepower for a newer system. I've got Logic 6 on my Laptop, but I tend to just muck about with Reason on the laptop. I've only used computers for five years. My real preference would be for an MPC60 MkII with the 3000 software. You couldn't make jungle on the MPC, which is why I switched to computers. But for anything like hip-hop or house that requires a nice groove, it's fantastic. I've been into hip-hop and electro since the 1980s. I think hip-hop is at the cutting edge of modern music

production just because of what it does with sampling technology and that alone. It's got quite a conservative form and quite a pop form as well just at the moment, in terms of the clarity of the sonics.

### When those elements are added to hip-hop tracks it must be difficult to make the vocal stand out.

The biggest challenge is always getting the vocal heard on top of the track — the curse of the underground is an ill-defined vocal. When I went to bigger studios and used 1176s and LA2s it was a revelation, chucking one of them on gets the vocal up a bit. That's how we were able to blag our way through Dizze's first album.

### What do you use in Dizze's vocal chain?

With the budget we were on when I did *Boy In Da Corner* I used a Neumann TLM103B. When I bought it, £500 seemed a hell of a lot of money for a microphone. Then it goes to my Drawmer 1960 — I exchanged a couple of my keyboards for that. Certainly with *Showtime*, the new desk improved the vocal sound. It would be interesting to just step the gear up a notch, now we have the deal with XL, and see what happens.

### Do you have a label deal for Dirty Stank records with XL?

*I Love You* came out first on Dirty Stank on the underground, plus other tunes like *Ho* and some beats. XL has licensed the albums from Dirty Stank so it's not a true label deal in that sense, although with our first signings, it's starting to move in that direction. I went to XL because Dizze has never been restricted by genre. *I Love You* didn't fit neatly into anything, although we used the garage scene for marketing. I've had brushes with majors before and I knew that wasn't necessarily the best way. Creative control is the most important aspect, particularly as Dizze is so young and very focused. We had A&R people coming to us and saying: 'Your record is great and if you can just change this, this, and this, then we can do a deal with you,' and I was thinking ... we had just sold 8,000 in two weeks ourselves!

### You sold 8,000 by yourself, with no distributor?

We had it for 6-7 months before we could sell it. We gave Dizze's tracks to some pirate DJs to play for quite a long time, people couldn't get their heads round it for a while, but when it clicked then we released it. Most of the labels came up and said their piece after that, we had some offers, but Richard from XL really got the music and came forward with an interesting proposition. Getting creative control over three albums is great, majors are trying to sign artists up for five or seven albums. We're building a good relationship with XL — they took *The Prodigy* to 7 million albums from playing raves. We've come up a similar way, albeit with a different kind of music.

### Do you think that big UK labels have perhaps only paid lip-service to urban music? In the US, rap star Jay-Z heads the Def Jam label for Island, and Lyor Cohen is now head of Warner's entire North American operations.

We met Lyor a couple of months ago in Puerto Rico at a conference with all these American hip-hop DJs and I realised that, at heart, he's just a big music fan. That's how he got into it, and now he's taken

it to the max. We don't have people like that in the industry here in the UK. The urban industry is really in its infancy here. All you ever have is little cycles of a trend — garage, jungle or whatever — and the majors dip their toe in half-heartedly every time, and generally sign the wrong things! Most of the people at labels don't understand, they're just chasing a buzz, they ring up their six key people and get the same name back, but they don't really know how to take it forward from there. In America you've got two or three development entities between the artist and the label. Maybe a production and a management company and a smaller label: it will already be selling independently before they get a national deal. In the UK none of that's in place, there's no buffer zones. It's what I'm trying to do on a ground level, work with kids who have some talent and try to develop it further, but I'm doing it all on my own.

#### **There's a lack of TV — terrestrial or cable/satellite — and radio shows for urban music in the UK, isn't there?**

There's a total lack! MTV Base, which is the urban channel here, has very little programming from England, most of it is from the US. I actually think we should do what they do in France, try and have a quota system for radio and TV to protect the integrity of home-grown music. That's always been a problem with hip-hop in the UK, just because we speak the same language as they do in the USA. Every other country can have their own-tongue hip-hop ... and does! France and Germany have always had a thriving local scene. Kids in the UK can listen to and understand American urban music, but they don't get the cultural identifier, that's why the scene has been lagging and why UK urban artists try to copy Americans. Radio 1Xtra on DAB is a Godsend nationally — Class A are from Leicester — they don't get pirate radio up there. It's the only station where people nation-wide get a true representation of what is happening currently on the underground. The downside of having 1Xtra is that the BBC FM channels can turn round and say: 'we're not playing it, because 1Xtra have got it covered.' Which is a bastard of an excuse!

#### **How did you come to work with Class A?**

Class A were actually signed to XL for three years, they've struggled because they don't live in London, basically. If they'd been from London they would have been putting out their own white labels and done it that way. A label on its own cannot make an artist hot. They can market it and cross it over to the general media, they can put it in boxes and sell it for you, but they can't make you hot, not in this kind of game. With the sort of music I work on, the heat has to be self-generated or be done at this level down here. Dizzee was asked if he'd have Class A on as support when he took Showtime on tour. They had some good songs and they were really talented — but the recordings I heard sounded like absolute rubbish. The job that was done on it was so terrible it hurt my ears, but I thought I could sort it out. A lot of the tracks were done on a Playstation.

#### **Do you mean ... recorded on a Sony PS2?**

Yeah, that's all the band had to write the songs with — all 8 bit sounds — although it ended up being mixed at Miloco Studios on a Neve desk. Of course



it didn't come out very well. We are going to re-produce some of their tunes, do some new stuff and it will be released under Dizzee's label. They've got a phenomenal work rate, they're really hungry. I'm going to get it out to the pirates, I'm doing a lot of dub plate specials that I'll pass out to all the pirate DJs. Then I'll get them on a mix CD — in fact with DJ Semtex from 1Xtra — then put another mix CD out on the street. Then we'll get them shows on pirate radio. We recorded a tune the other day, I know we've got one absolute, immediate, club smasher. Once people know them a bit, then we'll give DJs some specials of this tune.

#### **Is that the process the development entities you mentioned earlier would be doing in the US?**

I tend to approach it a bit differently from most Americans, but that ethos is one I definitely subscribe to. In the UK, labels take projects, they take a hot single and then rush an album, they get cold feet and lose sight of why they signed the artist in the first place. Then they try and tailor the artist into some sort of template, and nine times out of ten it doesn't work because the artist is being moulded into making records ... everyone said Dizzee Rascal wouldn't happen, but people are quite short sighted in this country. ■

