Peter Baldock

Post is a personal process, especially when it involves using equipment that you have bought yourself. ROB JAMES talks to a man who has made his own choices.

CHOOSING HEADLINE EQUIPMENT for film tracklaying used to be simple. An Acmade Compeditor or Pic Sync, a Hollywood Moviola or maybe a Steenbeck editing table and that was more or less it. As the DAW has become the norm in film tracklaying two very distinct approaches emerged, and the range of choice can be bewildering. The first approach is to use a dedicated hardware workstation, such as the AMS-Neve Audiofile or Fairlight. The alternatives use a PC or Mac as the primary user interface. There are far more of these to choose from. Digidesign, Mackie, Merging Technologies, SADiE, SeK'D, WaveFrame and, more recently, Steinberg are some of the better known examples.

The operator's background plays a part in determining which of the two basic approaches is followed. People with a technical bent who have grown up in a predominantly audio environment tend to appreciate the clear vision, speed and consistency of 'hardware' DAWs. Others prefer the more extensive creative possibilities and superficially shallower learning curve of the PC/Mac variety. The range of options in this category is wide so it is not surprising many people decide to go for a 'safe' option and follow the herd. Greater rewards may

come from looking a little wider.

Peter Baldock has credits spanning over 20 years of feature films. These range from assistant dialogue editor on Blade Runner to supervising sound editor on many recent films including The Musketeer, Extreme Ops, The Bone-Snatcher and the S-Club movie. With this experience, Peter is well qualified to make an informed choice when it came to buying his own kit. I asked Peter why he had decided to invest in his own workstation.

'I bought a system last July knowing that I would be doing a low-budget horror movie for Focus Films entitled Bone Snatcher. The movie is set in the Namib Desert in South Africa. The plot involves flesh-eating ants, controlled by a hive queen who uses the bones to walk! Lots of opportunity for sound design! Very early on I was in contact with the composers, Paul Heard and Mike Pickering from M people. They recorded some great music out in South Africa, with lots of ethnic instruments. We liased throughout the whole project, discussing where we had music and FX and where the two could work together and which would take prominence in certain scenes. The result is, through the entire movie sound design and music meld together beautifully.

What platform did you go for?

My system of choice is Mac and I have been a dedicated Mac user since the Classic days. So, at the time I got the top of the range dual 1Hhz G4 to run Steinberg Nuendo. I also specified two Nuendo DD8s plus two Nuendo Analogue 8 I-Os, plus a Steinberg Midex8 MIDI interface and Nuendo's Timelock Pro. Internal Storage was two 7200rpm IDE 80Gb drives and I added four external Firewire drives.

How did you do Bone Snatcher?

For the actual project I tracklayed effects in Nuendo and imported my Foley recordings from an Avid AudioVision into the same sequence. Then we mixed from Nuendo for the FX-premix combining the Foley spot effects with my effects tracklay and left the Foley footsteps and moves separate to play in the final mix. While tracklaying I used a combination of software tools to create the creature sound effects and the desert ambiences. Among others, I used Spektral Delay, Reaktor, my own EMU 6400, and the standard plug-ins available within Nuendo. Both the premixes and final mix were done here at Lipsync on the AMS Neve DFC with my tracks played down lines to the dubbing theatre. We used Nuendo in timecode chase with the Time-lock Pro. The premixes were recorded onto a Tascam MX2424. Once completed we did an open TL export into Nuendo and for the final mix played out the FX premix and music tracklay from Nuendo. This gave us the opportunity to be able to make adjustments to the FX and the music while finalling. Then we followed the same procedure with the final mix stems, copying them back into Nuendo for the Dolby mastering.

So, why Nuendo?

It's easy to use, versatile and that's what hooked me. Somebody gave me use of a different system. I had it in the morning and he said, 'here you are, play with it for a day and see if you like it.' By 2 o'clock I decided not to come back from lunch.

I looked at other systems long and hard but all I ever heard from friends with these systems was, 'No'. By comparison Nuendo was a lot easier to get into, it's immediately accessible. It took me a couple of weeks to learn the basics and a month to be up and running and able to start track-laying in a professional way. Really it was incredibly easy system for me to learn to use having come off AudioVision. I kind of feel there's still no system that matches the user friendliness of AudioVision. It is one of a kind. I was so used to working with it so it may be that. This is not to say I am unhappy with Nuendo, in fact it's certainly the best thing that's happened to me since I discovered AudioVision in the sense of the things I can do with it creatively. Because it's host-based I can just add so much stuff to it to make it even more powerful. That's the thing that knocks me out. You can just plug-in to anything, the synths, the samplers and the external connections.

Since I'm buying the system out of my own pocket, I wanted something that wasn't going to be a continual drain on my finances and didn't need a hardware upgrade every five minutes. I also wanted to be sure I was going to get a lot of help and support because I'm not the most technical of people. I was also convinced Steinberg is really serious about wanting to make Nuendo something special.

I prefer the Mac because I'm used to it and comfortable, but the nice thing with is I can use PC-formatted Firewire drives and move them straight into a studio with a PC-based Nuendo.

Our machines are networked together, locally and on the Lipsync network, so we move files around this way. Another good thing is you only have to point it at the root directory and it finds everything it needs. What I tend to do is work with everything in a project on a mixture of drives then do a conform onto a single drive.

What's the best thing about it?
The main thing about Nuendo is its versatility. I've got 32 digital outs and 8 analogue ins and outs. With the two 9652s (interface cards) I can play out a huge number of tracks when I need to. Being able to do internal audio mixdowns with such great ease is also a big advantage. Now Pinnacle has taken over Steinberg I'm hoping to see developments on the video front. I used to digitise into I-movie via an external analogue to DV convertor and make MPEGs in Quicktime Pro for my working picture. Recently I have been working with a Miro DC30 but this is obsolete and won't work with current Macs for some reason. In the time I've used it the only problems I've had have been beyond the scope of the manual. Most of the time, any problems I've had I've been able to work around. You never have a problem-free project, but if you did it wouldn't be interesting any more.

What about the plug-ins?
The standard plug-ins are OK, not earth shattering but I've used them quite a lot. The basic processing ones are pretty good, the pitch change and the acoustic stamp (convolution tool). It's very similar to Altiverb but free and a bit simpler to use. I think, of the ones I used on S-Club and Bone Snatcher, I probably used reverse and the pitch-changing tool the most. I've added Spektral delay and Reaktor and recently Kontakt, which is very much like an EMU i.e. a sampling synth and it seems very powerful. I've also added the Steinberg De-clicker, De-noiser and De-esser.

I used these to great effect on some tricky dialogue lines in S-Club which really should have been ADRed, but they slipped through the net and I was able to do a lot more with these than the Orange Box (Dolby cat43a) we were using. I was able to get more of the nasty noises out using these and the EQ and compression. The pitch change is pretty damn good for effects too. You can draw the pitch change as much as you want. I use it a lot for slowing things down or running back up to speed.

I should have a look at more third-party VST plug-ins really.

What are you working on at the moment?
Elaine Stritch At Leisure. Two nights of her Old Vic show. The sound is a conform for me. I bring in an OMF from the Avid and use the information on a printed out ESL to conform everything manually. I'm copying the audio to a Firewire drive at the moment from DA-88 tapes. It's over 24 tracks. Each tape has the same timecode as the mixdown in the OMF.

With this show it's relatively easy since they only shot two nights. If the timecode doesn't work, it must be the other show. Then I can use the OMF audio as a guide to check the sync. In Nuendo Version 2 there will be autoconform and EDL tools to simplify the whole process. But with most jobs, all you need to do is import an OMF complete with the media and use that. When I was doing S-Club recently there was no multitrack mixdown, just the original audio. So I could just use the audio from the OMF directly. Once At Leisure is completed we intend to follow the same route as before feeding the tracks down to the theatre for the mix.

There are some digital clicks in the original recording so we're going through writing them out with the pencil tool. You never hear them again and it's not to the detriment of the track either.

Now you're really familiar with Nuendo, what's on the 'wish list'?
As with any workstation there is obvious room for improvement. The thing that really convinced me to go with Nuendo was future development and I saw evidence Steinberg's developers were listening to the users. Getting in early gives you a better chance of being heard.

With the upcoming Version 2, lots of things we've asked for should be there. My one real complaint when I first got Nuendo was scrubbing. I managed to get it sounding better by increasing buffer sizes and all that but, when I'm scrubbing something, the cursor lags by a frame or so, so your eyes tell you something different to your ears. I managed to get it to the point where I can use it as a production tool but it's not perfect. In Version 2 the scrubbing is much improved especially the synchronisation between the on-screen cursor and what you're hearing.

It's really useful being able to open two projects and to be able to just pick up a group of clips from one and drop it into the other. I've got two monitors so I can open each project in it's own screen and drag between the two. The snap key gives some very powerful options to help make sure things go where you want them, hot spots for sync points, and so on. But, in the current version only the first clip in a group snaps. This can make keeping accurate sync a problem when, for example, you are moving a bunch of clips due to a picture recut and the effects need to start before the edit point. But I think if you put a hot-spot across the whole lot it works. What would be nice is if, when you move a group across, each clip temporarily stuck so you could quickly decide which one you want to sync to.

I like to think I'm pretty open to developments in anything I'm working with but I'm never going to be happy because, if a day comes when I can see that a piece of software is doing everything I want it to then I must be running out of ideas! As long as I can keep finding things I'd like to see and passing that information on and people are hopefully doing something about it, I'm happy. Happy, being unhappy. ■