



Steve Mac

Adopting a methodical approach to writing, tracking and mixing that pays particular attention to detail, Steve Mac clearly has a system – and a track record to prove that it works.

GEORGE SHILLING

STEVE MAC TOOK piano lessons for four days a week at the age of eight and this nearly put him off music for life. When he left school he was aiming for a career as an architect but fell into work experience at his father's recording studio. His father was in publishing and managed 1980s jazz-funk-soul combo Shakatak, and Steve was so opinionated that the people for whom he was making tea sent him off to a programming room to see what he could do on his own. His first two records went top 3, and there was then no looking back.

What were those first two hits?

'Hear The Drummer Get Wicked' by Chad Jackson, and 'I Wanna Give You Devotion' by Nomad. If you listen to that record, I didn't really know what I was doing,

the programming is all over the place, I try and analyse it now because people say 'You should do a record like that again', but I know too much now.

Do you think it is better to work by instinct?

Definitely. With that, I didn't have a clue what I was doing. At the time, I was sequencing on the Fairlight, I have two Series IIIs here for my samples, and I used to use the sequencer before I got into Macs, Logic, Cubase and stuff, and you could just point spots in. It was a weird sequencer, you'd throw in hihats here and there with a couple of loops and it just came out like that.

I then spent about six months trying to understand what I'd done on that record. Four hours to do the first

one but then you spend four months trying to do the follow-up. With the ballads and the boy band stuff you can hit a formula and that works every time as long as you've got a good song, but with dance stuff there really is a magic that you just capture, I think, by accident.

I met a singer and DJ called John Matthews who had a great voice and he had ideas for doing more covers. We started with Baker Street and called the band Undercover. The first three records used the same drums and just put a different song over. I think the whole album used the same drum loop, but we had a lot of success and that album funded a proper studio. I've never used commercial studios, I don't like having a lot of people around me when I'm working. And also I don't like the time constraints of working in a

commercial studio, when you only have a day or two days before you have to pull the whole thing down and someone else has to walk in there. You don't make the best records that way – some people do, but I don't. I like to have time and come back to things, live with it over a weekend, come in on Monday and make the adjustments that I need to make.

Don't you need to set yourself a deadline?

No. I try not to have deadlines on any records I do. As long as I start early enough, you start to get a feel. I take two to three weeks to mix. I'm kind of producing as I'm going along, we'll have a very basic thing when I start, then I'll do overdubs as I'm mixing, just so I can get a feel of how it's sounding. You can throw faders up and put guitars on or whatever, but you don't really know how the track is sounding until you get into the mix, that's where the real magic for me starts. That's why I'll take however long it needs. That might be two weeks, even three weeks mixing on one track. But then I'll come back and maybe do two recalls on it where I'll listen in the car and go, 'The hihat was never meant to be that loud, was it', all that kind of thing. And I really care about every record I'm making, it's not about the money.

How did you move from cover versions into writing hits?

After the Undercover thing I took a year out to develop and really learn my craft. I was just listening to records, a lot of things David Foster was producing. I decided that I wanted to write some ballads. I met Wayne Hector, and the first song we wrote was 'Forever' which we gave to Damage and it went to number three. I started working with a band called Caught In The Act who were Dutch but did really well in Germany. They were a boy band. I got a taste of working with five guys that weren't necessarily the best singers in the world.

I learnt a lot from how you work with bands like that! You hear them on a record and think, these guys are great singers. You don't realise sometimes that it's not necessarily them doing the backing vocals, and there's maybe one guy who has a great voice. Boyzone's record company wanted them to do a duet with a boy band in France called Alliage, a cover version of 'Working My Way Back To You' which didn't really float my boat. Luckily it sold 1.2 million in France, so when it came to the next Boyzone album we wrote four tracks which made it on there. Louis Walsh called me up and said 'I'm starting a new band [Westlife], we're doing auditions at the moment, I'd love you to be involved.' And Westlife now are on a Greatest Hits, which I'm just starting to record for. Because of that, doors have been opening everywhere. Last year I worked with Kate Winslet, she was a really nervous girl, when she came in she was like a fish out of water, she really didn't know what to expect.

How do you put someone at ease in a situation like that?

I sing to her, because once she hears me singing she knows it can't be any worse than that! Honestly, it's the way, and we've seen it in the studio when I work with Westlife, and Wayne the co-writer, he's got an incredible voice, he always does all the guide vocals on the songs. If he comes down, you can see when a singer's out there they know they're in the presence of a great singer, they're a little nervous. When I push the talkback button down and I sing the idea I try and get them to stop laughing afterwards, and they just kind



of know that they're the best person at that job in the studio. With Kate, she was really good; because she came from acting, I could say, 'Have a listen to the lyrics, this is really what it's about,' and she could really get the feeling out of the track. And really, that's all I can ask for, that they just believe the words that they're singing.

How honest are you with singers about AutoTune?

They know. Well, most of them want to get the tuning right, but they understand nowadays that there are computers that can make you perfect. So all I really ask of them is that they give me the feeling. I say, 'I can't give you feeling afterwards, just give me the

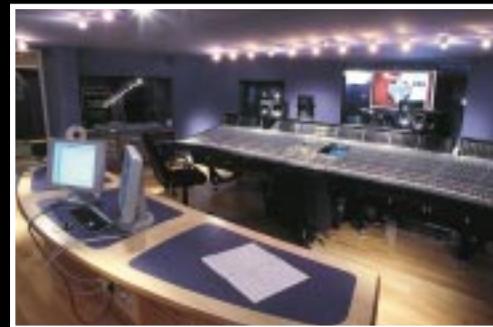
Studios and monitoring

Steve has recently completed tracks with Samantha Mumba and is currently working with Nick Carter from the Backstreet Boys, and on tracks for Westlife's Greatest Hits. There was Gareth Gates' Christmas single, a duet with Faye and Russell Watson, and writing for the next Backstreet Boys album. He's also preparing to work with N'Sync and is considering commissions for film music. His production company develops new artists.

He has recently moved into a new purpose-built room alongside his old studio, which was home for six years, and is using it for writing when a mix is set up in the main room. The new room's centrepiece is an SSL 2000J Series desk. The two studios feature the same cool blue coloured fabric wall-covering, 'The reason I got the colour the same in the new studio was because it felt good, and everyone who came in was really comfortable, it's a calm colour.'

The old studio features large Boxer main monitors but there are no large monitors in the new studio.

'We've been here six years and I think I've listened through them once. With a room this size, unless it's set up properly, it makes no difference. I'm here most of the time. And I think once you get to know your speakers, and I know Genelecs so well, you know what bottom end's needed, even if you can't hear it all. I tried speakers with subwoofers and I found I was making it really bass-light, because I wasn't used to it. We've got two different sets



Laus and Mac

of Genelecs (1031As and 1030As) and if you switch between the two and it's sounding right on both of them then you know you're close. Sometimes I'll set up a mix and it sounds good on the bigger Genelecs, and you go to the mid-sized ones and it sounds completely different, you know you're not quite right. And everything gets listened to in the car, at home, and upstairs in my manager's office.'

drama, sell me the song.' And the thing is, if they give so much drama and I'm loving it so much, I probably won't have to autotune it because you don't care, it's the imperfections that make it perfect. If you listen to some of those old classic records – and I listen back to Sinead O'Connor 'Nothing Compares 2 U' – I listen to the vocal and think, 'She's out on some of those lines,' but she had so much feeling, and she sounded as though she was hurting so badly on the record, and that's why she was out of tune.

Do you compress much on the way in?

No, Chris (Laws) will sit here and Dan (Purse) will work the Pro Tools, and I'll just ride the preamp, which is good if you've got a vocal that's going in line-by-line, then we'll adjust.

Do you use plug-ins for compression?

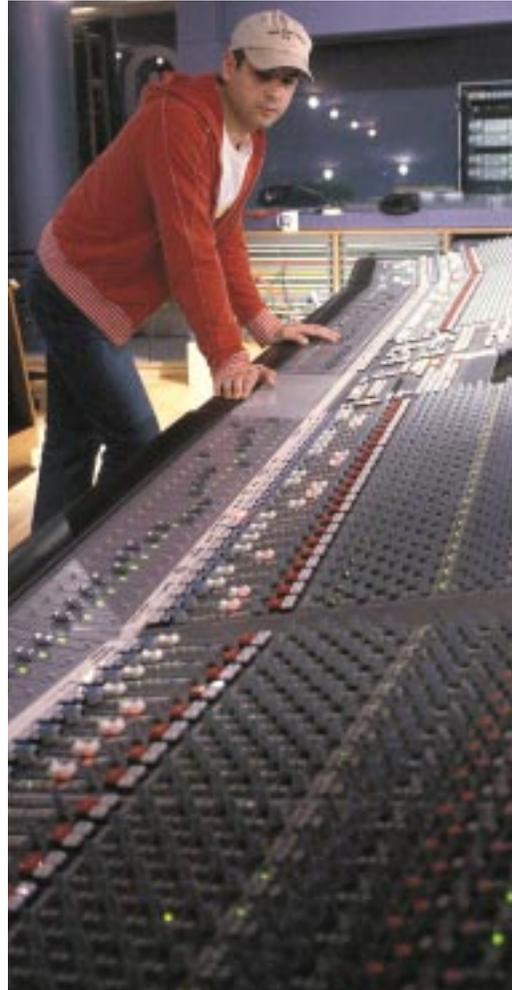
No, I don't really use the compressors in Pro Tools, really I just use the desk compressors, they are fantastic. You know you've got a compressor on it when you've got an SSL compressor on. It gives it a certain sound. And that's it – maybe compress it a couple of times on the mix, use the desk compressor, and maybe sometimes I'll use the TC Finalizer or the 6000, just for certain band limiting. I love to have a track where you've sent it to a cutting engineer and they didn't have to do too much, and I know I've achieved what I needed to. But I won't over-compress the record, because I know that some people like to add a compressor and feel as though they're doing something. And also, I think you need to leave something for the radio compressors to do.

How do you find time to do so many projects if you spend two weeks on each mix?

That's the great thing of having the other studio. The writing side takes maybe about a day. And while I'm writing I'll throw up a rough track. That's really the time we don't care what we're doing technically. We're just getting sounds up, 'Yeah that sounds great, get that loop up, no, what about this, let's try this guitar.' We get the guitarist and he's thrashing them out, doing loads and loads of ideas, and we go 'No, that doesn't work,' then we get him to come back in and really perfect it, and that takes another three or four

days. I think also it's selection, it sounds like I'm doing a lot of things, but I'm maybe only doing two or three tracks for each artist. If we do it right, two or three weeks for a mix – that normally is on a ballad because there is so much on there.

With Gareth's 'Unchained Melody', I know it's a cover version, but the whole thing is, if I did it, I wanted to do it with the real deal, so we recorded the strings at Abbey Road with the same size section, horns,



trombones, real tims, everything on that record is real. We played real drums over the top of the programmed stuff, and because there was so much on there, the real key to making it sound good is just making it so it sounds good on radio. I think you can mix within three or four days to get it to sound good on a stereo system, but nowadays it's so important on radio.

How can you tell it will sound good on radio?

I've got a great piece of kit, the TC dBMax, which is a five-band compressor. We listen to it through there, and there are different settings for different radio stations. Capital FM has very high compression, ridiculously high. I've found the rule is, the louder the snare, the quieter it's going to sound on radio, and the quieter the snare, the louder it sounds, just because of the way these five bands pull it up and down. So it's just little things like that, little tricks.

And I mix a lot of the stuff just on the Auratone, in mono. You can almost hear the record – I have it so that if someone talks, you can't hear the record in the background. I mix like that for maybe 40% of the mix. Everything sounds good when it's loud, you pump anything up and it sounds fantastic, so we can do that afterwards. And the last thing that I listen through is mono on the Auratone through the radio thing, because that is the worst it is ever going to sound. But it takes maybe a couple of weeks to get to that stage.

Don't you go bonkers listening to the same song for so long?

I always go through the highs and lows. The first two days, 'This record is sounding incredible!' Come in the third day, it's awful, it's not working at all! You just go through the doubts. And then someone will come in and go 'This sounds great,' and you're back again. The stuff I work on, it really doesn't matter whether you spend a week or five weeks on it, I think it would still be a hit with the artist. With Gareth Gates and this 'Unchained Melody' thing, I'm sure you could have just thrown a Bontempi piano on there with him singing and it would have sold a lot of copies. But that isn't an excuse to make a poor record. You need to make the best records possible. If you have a lot of people that you know are going to go out and buy it, at least give them value for money. ■