Tom Elmhirst

Tom Elmhirst is making a name for himself in sculpting the sound for some of the UK's coolest new bands. He talks to NIGEL JOPSON about Neves, playing on the songs he mixes and the politics of stems.

TOM ELMHIRST IS A LEADING exemplar of the current crop of top engineers — old enough to have learnt the trade in an era of tape reels but young enough to be at the top of the game. He's a specialist mix engineer, busy working on albums for hot new signings such as Paolo Nutini, Diefenbach, Hot Chip and Lady Sovereign. Tom mixed the Royksopp single Only This Moment as well as singles for Sugababes and Hard Fi.

He started his career working for production Svengali Trevor Horn at Sarm Studios, for whom he recorded Wendy and Lisa, The Art Of Noise and Seal. He experienced the dramatic escalation in recording workflow as Sony DASH PCM recorders were replaced by early Digidesign systems at Horn's studio, and made the move to freelancing under the stewardship of Sarm's in-house management team (he is currently managed by Osohso Music Management). A stint assisting Steve Albini recording Bush hatched a good working relationship with the band, which landed Tom a breakthrough job recording and mixing their album The Science Of Things. Working with programmer Johnny Rockstar on this session led to a meeting with All Saint's producer Cameron McVey, which in turn led to work with Sugababes, for whom Tom recorded and mixed the album One Touch and several singles.

Three years later, Elmhirst was mixing the critically acclaimed Black Cherry album for Goldfrapp, and working on signature albums for major label artists such as the Manic Street Preachers' Lifeblood. *Resolution* spoke to Tom as he prepared to push up some faders on the Neve VR in Room C at London's Metropolis Studios.

Was it your call to mix here on the Neve VR72?
Yes, I like the connection I have with it, it's very immediate, nothing's happening that I can't see and it's fairly limited in what it can do. The VR is quite a purist mixer, essentially you're dealing with balance, there aren't endless pages of menus. I grew up working on SSLs at Sarm, the very first time I worked on a Neve was when I went freelance. I would never dream of mixing out of two outputs in Pro Tools, I like the physical bit of mixing ... I like pushing it, which you can't really do in a computer, I find you run out of headroom quite quickly! The Neve has a fantastic amount of headroom, I'm quite ill-disciplined, I know that if I was mixing on an SSL things would be going red here and there. I just don't get that with this board, and if I do get it I rather like it. People have this misconception that SSLs sound hard and Neve is soft and warm and cuddly — I can make it plenty hard if you want! I would mix on an SSL, but I like the simplicity and the headroom of the Neve.

Have you got a system for setting up your mix?
I throw it all up really quickly, I have an extremely short attention span so I won't spend two hours on the drums. I know what I want to do, it's just finding how I get there. I use the A and B bus on the VR console a lot: I set up the A bus to cut all the vocals and the B bus to cut the music. Then I can switch between the two really quickly without altering any automation I've written. I'm quite lazy by nature so I just want the quickest, easiest, fastest route to what I want to do. I don't want to start by picking up a pen to change modes, to save a mix, to undo a mix ... here [on the VR] even while the mix is running I can turn the automation off, undo and

go back ... and it will be running again. There's no pen or menu and just a very limited PC file system, it's kind of idiot-proof in that sense. I'm not a very technical engineer, I don't use a massive amount of outboard, and I'm not hugely bothered if it's 96k or 8k, if the song feels right and what's coming out of the speakers is good then I'm happy.

Looking across the console, you haven't got many EQs punched in ...
I don't really use a lot of EQ — it's all done on faders — there's a lot of automation and rides. A lot of my EQs are getting rid of things, cutting frequencies. We'd all like to have the space in our tracks that Hip-Hop and R&B has, where the bass is usually extremely syncopated, not sustaining with lengthy notes, so nothing is getting in the way.

Have you got a favourite piece of outboard you can't do without?
I find I use less and less outboard gear as I've gone on. When I first started engineering I probably plugged every single bit in! The Manley (Variable Mu) compressor over the mix, I'd struggle without that. Manleys make a mix sound like those old records — when the vocal goes away — back comes the music, and I love that. You can tuck the vocal in the track a bit more. All my drums mostly go through a Neve compressor on a separate bus. Today I'm using a GML 8200 parametric EQ to give a little bit of a smiley face curve on the stereo bus. I used the Avalon EQ for a while and I also like the Manley Massive Passive, it's lovely but quite coloured. The GML is fairly hard, it sharpens tracks up and makes everything sound more 'like a record.'

I've noticed you don't use a lot of reverb in your mixes. For example, the Manic Street Preacher's Lifeblood is very full sounding, but there's hardly any room on the instruments.
I do use reverb, but I don't want to hear an 's' going off into a long reverb. The Manic's album was quite complicated because they made a point, well before I got involved, of not doing a lot of guitar on the record. That presented quite a challenge ... a guitar band without guitars! When I got the tracks they were very bare, I did quite a lot of extra work drum-wise and I played several synth and electronic string parts — they loved it and were almost pushing me to do more. I suppose like most people behind the glass, there's a part of me that's a frustrated artist.

Do you often program extra drums or play keyboards on your mixes?
I do have one bass drum I particularly like, it's on a lot of records. You don't hear it because there are other things going on in the track, but it just fulfils a certain requirement. Other times I might use loops ... if I was given a track to mix by a label and mixed exactly what they had given me ... I don't think they'd be satisfied. I've done that and had the reaction — they expect more — The Manic's album is definitely one where I went to town a bit. The song For the love of Richard Nixon was much more organic originally, I put a lot of drums in and some mad synth sections after the chorus. I liked the track because it was about the Vietnam era, and I thought it was a really bold statement to have that song as the first single.

You're also fond of quite radical panning, like on the Diefenbach's Set And Drift.
Trevor Horn was a great one for either left, right or in the middle. I much prefer records that highlight four great parts rather than 14 mediocre ones. A record

I've just done from Hot Chip has incredible panning. Panning can be a dynamic thing, although I haven't quite got to the Beatles stage yet. I have another mixing rule about Pro Tools sessions: it has all got to fit on one screen. Even if I receive a session with 96 tracks, I will bounce until it is on one screen. It's a mental thing, I need to see it on one screen, and mixing down the tracks is a great way of learning the song. I might get sessions with hundreds of tracks — the first five hours of the mix is on the Auratones — just figuring it all out. On an album project like Set & Drift with Diefenbach, I will often bring in my own Pro Tools rig, I'll be mixing a track and an assistant can have the next track up, I'll go over to listen for a few minutes and have them bounce the tracks.

I heard the Goldfrapp album involved rather an abundance of tracks ...

That record was very constructed. There are a lot of noises that are musical, but not a lot of music. It was put together painstakingly by Will Gregory and Alison Goldfrapp over a long period of time, almost jigsaw style. When you have eight basses, what do you do, pan two left, two right and four in the middle?! They had had the chance to live with it ... the final mixed album was a composite of some of my mixes, some of their stems, some of Dave Bascombe's stems ... it was incredibly laborious. It wasn't perhaps the best technical approach to completely deconstruct it to give to me in Pro Tools, because they use Logic. But it worked out fine, the end result was a brilliant record, although there was indeed a certain amount of arithmetic involved.

It's always hard to jump into a project that's benefited from a very slow bake at the recording stage, isn't it?

Before I stepped into the control room on that project, what they had already was brilliant. It's that situation where you are being asked to do a job and you are trying to validate your contribution ... if I had never been involved it would still have been a very good record, just in certain places it just needed a little more width. I remember with Train I was pretty much left alone to go to town.

Do you prefer to mix without the artist or producer in the control room?

Quite often I will do a couple of mixes for an artist and they will say – great, do the album. Then they get involved ... and then it starts to become more complex. I'm quite militant when I'm mixing. To me a mix takes a day and a bit — for example on this session, people are coming in at one o'clock — I did most of the mix last night. I don't want anyone around on the first day of my mix: to me, mixing is not a spectator sport, I don't like someone sitting there watching me do what I do. I've had to explain that quite carefully to a few people ... it's not me being rude, it's just that I need to do my thing and it won't make a lot of sense to you or me until quite close to the end, when it all comes together!

You mentioned working from stems — do you find that's an increasing trend nowadays?

Sometimes I've heard my own stems on other people's mixes. I've heard my vocal delays — it's quite quick to get a track going around a stereo vocal acapella — all the effects and rides are done. But it's not your own mix if you've only done that. I try to be reasonably ethical about that, if I'm sent a multitrack that has been mixed already and there are stems on disk, I won't use them in my mix. I just feel that if someone has spent five hours going through vocals comping and de-essing it's a bit unfair to take kudos

for their hard work — unless they are going to be credited, obviously. Some people I know don't give their stems back on the disk, there's rather a grey area at the moment relating to stems. Similarly if I do a lot of sound replacement and play several extra musical parts for a mix, do I give back the disk I was given, or the session that I've done with my work? I do give my own work and instrument tracks back, otherwise I would have gigabytes of music that doesn't belong to me: there's a legal title to be considered as well, I don't know what the copyright implications might be.

Another *Resolution* interviewee, Joe Chiccarelli, commented that the increasing proliferation of sessions across disks means the true whereabouts of multitrack masters for many newer hit albums is probably completely unknown.

I think this is going to come back to haunt record labels in 10 to 15 years. It is quite resonant with the way we live now ... a sort of bullshit lifestyle. Once it's been released and it's in the shops and the label have made their money, nobody gives a shit about it anymore. It's gone. We spent years being trained to archive properly at Sarm: look at the track sheet ... work of art, a good track sheet! But that's not my job now, I give the record company back what I'm commissioned to do — the mix — but you figure as the music is their catalogue, their asset, labels would perhaps be looking a bit deeper into how to protect it.

A specialist mix engineer is generally thought of as several notches up from a plain recording engineer. Is this a step towards production for you, or is it an end in itself?

That's a good question ... there is a part of me that is wary of going into full-on production because of the time demands involved. I don't really do any recording any more, in fact I don't even work with many producers anymore, I find that record companies book me when they need a fresh angle on a track. I don't miss sitting around recording 85 tracks of vocals — it's much easier for me now to complain about the state of the multitrack if I haven't bothered to go and record it myself! Because of the

quick turnaround on a mix, you can give me a song and in two days I can add production on it — I can get musicians in or do it myself. I don't know if I would want to spend three months in a residential studio going through bass parts. I do like the high turnover and spontaneous nature of mixing.

So you've no ambition to be the next Rick Rubin?

I think there's a place for all of us, for every type of recording professional. I get to do a bit of production on tracks, so I get to satisfy that side of me, but I absolutely adore finishing records. However, if the right project came along ... it would be difficult to turn it down! ■