



Trevor Horn

Trevor Horn defined what it was to be a record producer in the 80s, and pioneered the production methods in use today. **NIGEL JOPSON** talks to a legend for whom he once moved a fader a very small distance.

Trevor Horn demonstrated how the new wave of electronic musical instruments could be used, not just for electronic bleeps and sweeps, but to fashion mainstream pop hits. Horn's Sarm Studios modelled the next generation of recording facility, where the control rooms hosted as much — if not more — of the recording process as the rooms in which microphones and pianos stood. With his innovative use of drum machines, synths, samplers and synchronisers he

reassembled songs as pop classics, and provided a template for the cut-and-paste DAW production techniques used today. Having played bass in a dance-band and backed 70s disco star Tina Charles, Horn formed The Buggles in 1977 with keyboard player Geoffrey Downes. In 1979 they had a UK No.1 with the single Video Killed The Radio Star, the video for which became famous when it was the first (and later millionth) to be played on the seminal entertainment channel MTV.

Horn and Downes briefly joined legendary prog-rock band Yes, before Trevor quit to pursue his career as a producer. Dollar and ABC won him chart success, with ABC's *The Lexicon Of Love* giving the producer his first UK No.1 album. He produced Malcolm McLaren and introduced the hitherto-underground world of scratching and rapping to a wider audience, then went on to produce Yes' biggest chart success ever with the classic *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* from the album 90125 — No.1 in the US Hot 100. Horn and his production team of arranger Anne Dudley, engineer Gary Langan and programmer JJ Jeczalik morphed into electronic group Art Of Noise, recording startlingly unusual-sounding songs like *Beat Box* and *Close To The Edit*.

In 1984 Trevor pulled all these elements together when he produced the epic album *Welcome To The Pleasuredome* for Liverpoolian bad-boys Frankie Goes To Hollywood. When Trevor met his wife, Jill Sinclair, her brother John ran a studio called Sarm. Horn worked there for several years, the couple later bought the Island Records-owned Basing Street Studios complex and renamed it Sarm West. They started the ZTT imprint, to which many of his artists such as FGTH were signed, and the pair eventually owned the whole gamut of production process: four recording facilities, rehearsal and rental companies, a publisher (Perfect Songs), engineer and producer management and record label.

A complete Horn discography would fill the pages of *Resolution* dedicated to this interview, but other artists Trevor has produced include Grace Jones, Propaganda, Pet Shop Boys, Band Aid, Cher, Godley and Creme, Paul McCartney, Tina Turner, Tom Jones, Rod Stewart, David Coverdale, Simple Minds, Spandau Ballet, Eros Ramazzotti, Mike Oldfield, Marc Almond, Charlotte Church, t.A.T.u, LeAnn Rimes, Lisa Stansfield, Belle & Sebastian and Seal. Horn received a Grammy Award in 1996 for Seal's second album.

(photos www.recordproduction.com)

When you came to record Malcolm McLaren at the studio where I worked as a house engineer in 1982, I was completely riveted to see how you worked with the (then new) Fairlight II. Playing your bass into it — finding just the notes you liked and then sequencing them to make a track.

Did we have the World's Famous Supreme Team there with Malcolm?

Malcolm had a huge box of tapes you had recorded of the US rappers and scratch artists. I was fascinated to watch you sample snippets of this audio and build a song from it.

In the early 80s a lot of people didn't really know what was going on. If you tried to explain a Fairlight to them — 'it's a digital Melotron' — they didn't know what you meant. That was a wonderful period ... technology was so expensive you had to be successful to get it! I tried to explain it to the World's Famous Supreme Team: 'You guys scratch records, but we've got this Fairlight, look at the amazing things it can do' — I saw their eyes glaze over — they weren't really interested! There was something new every week, the first time we ever locked a Fairlight to a drum machine was when we did *Relax*. There was a device called a Conductor which was made by Syco Systems, God knows what it was, but that was a totally new thing, being able to lock sequencers together.

Peter Vogel and Kim Ryrie of Fairlight didn't think of their machine as a sampler, they built that feature in for waveform modelling, it

was really you who turned the Fairlight into a 'sampler' by using it. I worked with other early owners of the Fairlight II and they just played it like another keyboard.

I never spoke to anyone from Fairlight ever, and they never spoke to me. I just paid full whack for it — in fact, I've generally been like that with manufacturers — you can get too side-tracked if you get into those kind of things. I do remember just before I got the Fairlight, I received a phone call from a guy called Brad Naples, who ran Synclavier at the time, and who gave this whole sales pitch to me saying: 'If you're looking for gimmicks, then the Fairlight is the thing for you, but if you're looking for a serious scientific instrument then you should buy the Synclavier.' So I said to him: 'Actually I'm looking for gimmicks, I'm a record producer! So I'm going to buy the Fairlight.' I subsequently bought a Synclavier as well, but I must say this was the single biggest waste of money in my whole career, \$260,000. We did use it, but once the audio quality became 'normal', sampling lost its fun aspect for me. If you put something in the Fairlight, it came out sounding slightly different, it was romanticised in some sort of way. The Synclavier was perfect quality, so it felt more like a recording, it was no fun anymore. Somebody asked me about six months ago what I thought of sampling, it's a stupid question now because everything is a sample these days!

Was the guitar solo on Owner Of A Lonely Heart sampled and played from the Fairlight?

No, Trevor Rabin played that on guitar, it was one take apart from the last two notes.

...and one pan pot I believe!

Yeah, he was annoyed with me about that, because every time we used to play it back I would pan it and crank the reverb up. When he heard the final mix he was really upset, because he thought I had only been doing that as a joke. I said: 'No, of course I was going to do it on the record, I used to do it every time we played the bloody thing back!' When he played that solo, Chris Squire [Yes' bass player] wasn't there. We got a harmonizer and put a fifth on the guitar, we rolled the tape and he played the solo and said: 'I think we should do something like that, we should work on it.' I said: 'That's it, you've just played it, it's brilliant!' We argued for a bit, then I gave him another go, but kept the original. It wasn't like nowadays, we probably only had one other track. The new solo was crap, I didn't like it. In the end, I agreed to let him replace the last two notes in the solo, so we had to erase the original last two notes to punch the new notes in. Just after we'd done that, Chris Squire arrived and I said: 'Check this guitar solo out, you'll love it'. He said: 'It's good, but I don't like the last two notes!' I said: 'No one's touching it, it's staying just like that!'

Trevor Rabin said about you: 'There's always a Trevor Horn stamp on his productions.' Is that because you have a vision in your mind of what you want a piece of music to communicate to listeners?

I have an idea, but I can be convinced otherwise. People will try and persuade me, so I will listen to something again and try and like it. Sometimes if you try and like something you will, and you'll realise that before you were prejudiced against it. I do have certain things I can't tolerate. I wouldn't say I have any great vision, I think sometimes having a vision in music can be a damn nuisance, you're much better off taking what comes along. If the guys play a different way and it's better, then go with that. I like

things to be clear, I think pop music is a great form of communication, and whatever the artist is trying to communicate, I'd like to try and get that across. I come from the background of being a dance band musician, rather than a rock musician. I've always found rock music rather simple harmonically, and quite tedious most of the time — except for bands like Yes or Steely Dan — they would be much more to my liking than Black Sabbath, who I can respect and appreciate, but who I wouldn't listen to by choice. I didn't really even like Led Zeppelin until they split up ...

The Grace Jones album Slave To The Rhythm, which followed your 'Fairlight II era', seemed like a bit of a departure sound-wise. At the time it was speculated how much of the groove might be programmed in the Synclavier, or played by Luis Jardim.

The interesting thing about Slave To The Rhythm is that it was really engineer Steve Lipson [*Resolution* V6.8], he made up a drum loop using two Sony DASH recorders. We had a Go-Go band in, they were all the top stars from the Go-Go world. The percussion players were from EU (Experience Unlimited) and the drummer was a guy called Ju Ju, they were all great but they just couldn't remember arrangements. They didn't get the idea of start here and stop there, they just played. We were trying to record the song with them playing, but it was hopeless. We did have a recording of this little bit of a jam they had done, before we started trying to show them the arrangement. The feel of this jam was really good, Steve took a few bars and made up five minutes of playing. At the time Steve was pretty hot with the two Sonys [DASH PCM-3324 multitracks & IF-3310 edit controller] he could do just about anything with them, it was all done with SMPTE

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offsets. We slotted all the drum fills into the loop, then we slotted eight bars of the guy actually playing freely into the middle of it. It was a bit of a departure, because it was arranged as if it was programmed, but it had the sound quality of a beautiful recording. It was quite tough to play to afterwards. Luis Jardim didn't play the drums on it, but he played a great bass part. I remember Luis saying 'it'll take me 20 minutes, Trevor' — it took him eight hours, in fact — because the drum loop was just slightly out of time, you couldn't lay back on it in the way that Luis was used to. *Slave To The Rhythm* had its problems, but it's a great sounding record, and to this day it's one of my favourite productions. It had some elements of 'hi-fi' to it which previously I possibly hadn't used. Frankie didn't have much of that.

We're sitting here in one of your studios, Sarm West, tell us how you came to own it.

Twenty-six years ago when I made *Buffalo Girls* with Malcolm McLaren, Chris Blackwell [Island's founder] bought the album for the world outside of the UK, just because he liked that track so much. Chris said he'd like to meet me for dinner, so I went along with my wife Jill, who was managing me at the time. Half



way through dinner I asked him what he was doing at Basing Street, and he said: 'Oh, I'm selling it to Richard Branson, why? Do you want it?' To which I said: 'Yeah!' and Jill kicked me under the table. Chris said: 'I'll let you have it if you'll start a record label for me there.' I said OK. It's amazing how quickly you can do a big deal with someone if you both want the same thing, I think we wrapped it up in two weeks. Sarm [East] had an old Trident mixer, Geoffrey [Downes] and I had been working on a Buggles track at the Townhouse — they had an SSL which we loved — although it didn't have automation yet. The Trident was a good desk although a bit noisy, while recording you monitored through this sort of jukebox section, then you had to switch over to the main board when it came time to mix: the difference in the sound was terrible, it was always an awful moment. I had had a really bad experience elsewhere with the Neve Necam automation system, losing all my mixes. I was really into top end as well, I had been to America and worked on MCIs, the engineers out there put more top end on the tracks than I'd ever heard in my life, it really was a cool thing because in the days of analogue tape, all the top end would be knocked off later.

With the current 'analogue myth', it's hard to explain to people who didn't experience it how terribly frustrating it was to lose all that presence on recordings.

It certainly is an analogue myth. We checked out some modules and eventually bought the SSL because it had the most top end. I was dead against computers, I can remember Gary Langan [*Resolution V4.5*] and Julian Mendelsohn kicking me out of the control room, because I was saying 'it'll break down, we should mix it by hand' ... but it didn't. The first song we mixed on the SSL computer was ABC's *The Look Of Love*. But once I'd had a couple of hits, everybody else wanted to book Sarm [East]. So I was constantly traipsing around the studios of London, sometimes it was alright, but a lot of the time it was crap ... going to places with awful old Neve boards that everyone raves on about now, but I could never get enough top end, I had the knobs flat out. So when Blackwell suggested this place I was very interested and we did a deal. My wife, who is an astute businesswoman, made an arrangement to buy the building off him as well. I think the first record we did here was Frankie Goes To Hollywood's *Relax*. It was an extremely tense moment, because it took a few months to become a hit, and Jill and I had borrowed £1 million from the bank to do Basing Street up.

It was the Top Of The Pops TV appearance that really broke Frankie, wasn't it?

Yes, I can remember the TOTP people made the band promise they wouldn't misbehave. That was wonderful — not that they had to promise to behave — what was wonderful was that people were a little scared of them, it gave them an air of excitement.

Now that it's possible to Autotune every Holly Johnson ad-lib, has music technology lost a bit of its appeal for you?

You can put people in tune, but you can't give them a great voice: there's a huge difference between singing in tune and having a great voice. Music is really still about the same sort of things as it was before. Everybody expects you to tune them up these days, sometimes you can be a little bit sad ... but I would never tune someone up when their natural pitch helps the sound of their voice. Sometimes I get stuff to work on, I look at the waveforms and they are these little, awful, crummy recordings. I think 'project studio' recordings are generally mediocre. How could they possibly not be, because unless you have really accurate monitoring, how can you take any chances? It's the room the equipment is in and what you can hear. Everyone seems to think that if they've bought some sort of Neve mic pre — probably made in China, now — that that's going to make the quality of their recording good. Bunk! It's not bad recording that's the enemy, in fact it's an achievement if you can make something sound terrible these days, everything sounds blandly mediocre to me most of the time.

You've produced so many talented performers, is there a particular artist you haven't worked with who you'd like to produce?

With me it's more to do with material, I'd rather work with good material, whichever artist I don't mind. I'd also prefer to work on someone's first album rather than their twentieth. I still like making records ... I love making records. However long I've done it, I still feel like a complete novice when I start a new record. It's a good feeling, I've been doing it a long time but everyone starts from the same place on a new recording. ■

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