



Donal Hodgson

From mixing on Trident desks to operating Pro Tools, from The La's to Sting, Donal Hodgson has had a long and varied career so far. **NIGEL JOPSON** talks to him about The Police reunion, Sting's own studio Steerpike, and an SSL that folds into a suitcase.

DONAL HODGSON STARTED his career in Trident Studios at a seminal moment for the studio — 1985 — when many of the current great and good were cutting their teeth there as house engineers. Sadly for the young Donal, the costs of travelling to fulfil his duties on the Trident night watch rendered him prematurely bankrupt, but he made some useful contacts, and subsequently secured a post as assistant at Jacobs Studio (at a less wallet-busting distance). Hodgson progressed to The Music Room, where one of the few Trident Di-An consoles ever made had recently been installed, freelanced at residential retreat Ridge Farm, and then spent five years as a house engineer at London's famous Eden Studios. Having seen a client at Eden using an early Digidesign Sound Designer editing system, Donal saw

the writing on the wall and bought his own Pro Tools III rig. Being well ahead of the technical curve, he enjoyed a spell of gigs as a Pro Tools specialist, and this led to his first meeting with Sting, for whom he got a gig as a Pro Tools operator. Hodgson has engineered for a wide-ranging selection of artists, from Baaba Maal to Primal Scream, with a healthy sprinkling of landmark acts like The La's, Tina Turner, Jeff Beck and Ocean Colour Scene. He has produced tracks for Apartment, Feed and Subcircus, and he has a long association, as engineer and latterly co-producer, with Canadian electronica act Euphoria. He now manages Sting's Steerpike Studio, and has worked on Sting's last three solo albums. When *Resolution* spoke to Donal, he was busy setting up recording systems for The Police's reunion tour.

Give us an overview of the rig being used to record The Police live.

Originally we had Pro Tools HD fed with Yamaha AD8HRs [8-channel mic preamps which output an AES-EBU signal]; we took the digital output straight into three Digidesign 192s. This gave us broadcast quality, but it wasn't anything to write home about. I decided that if we were going to record every show, we should really up our game a bit, so I swapped the convertors for Apogees and installed Millennia mic amps. Now we're using six Millennia HV-38s for 48 channels, the quality is fantastic. As it's purely a recording rig, I decided there wasn't any point spending extra money and using up flightcase space for multiple D-A convertors, so we just have three Apogee AD-16Xs plus a two channel Rosetta 200 for monitoring. I set all the levels just before the tour in Vancouver, and they haven't really changed much since. We are going to do a recording for a DVD in South America at the end of November, and for that I will add another eight or 16 channels. We do have some audience mics, but it would be good to have several more. There are also a few instruments where it would be nice to be able to choose between different microphones.

Drum overheads spring to mind...

Actually the cymbal mics are fairly ambient, and the way the stage is set up Stewart Copeland's percussion riser is right behind him; there's a set of microphones quite high up on that which are always being recorded. I went through the live shows in August with Sting in Tuscany, looking at the possibilities for a live album. I'm not at all unhappy with the sound, especially with the mic amp quality. The ideal would be to record a show as a definitive live document, but the beauty of Pro Tools is that you can go back and nick a vocal from a previous concert where the performance was stunning, and just pop it in! I wouldn't want to do that too much, because of the purity of a performance... but on the flip side, if you make it that little bit better... it's a balancing act.

So, are the Police playing to a click?

There is an element of that. A lot of their songs are based on Sting's harmonies and stacked vocals, which is a little bit tricky when it's just him on his own! So there's a bit of sample playback involved.

Is someone playing them in from a keyboard, or are they coming from your Pro Tools system?

There's a Logic rig which I built for the previous Sting tours. When [former Sting producer] Kipper was producing Sting, he was playing keyboards onstage and was in charge of making sure that sounds from the albums, which they couldn't play live, were playing back from a sequence. I designed a couple of Logic laptop systems with a switching unit so they were both always playing, running in sync, but if one crashed you could flip a switch and you've got all your channels back immediately. They were both started with a MIDI trigger, and then run in sync. Pete Cornish built us a switching box — in theory you can't hear a click when the channels switch over, although it depends a little on the earthing systems at different venues. I think it's only happened twice, maybe three times in five years. With The Police, this system gets started by Sting's tech. I'm recording a mix of the backing into Pro Tools, because of course I already have all the individual Logic tracks.

Are the recording levels on the Pro Tools rig unattended?

Aaron [the support band engineer] is there to check on them, and the soft limit on the Apogeess is switched on. I started out thinking I would be careful with the peaks, as there's plenty of headroom in the system to get a reasonable level. It sounds great, very fat and warm through our line up. It's a combination of both the Millennias and the convertors. I have Apogeess at home, but it doesn't sound like that when I use my input chain! I love the sound of my Manley mic amps, but the Millennia and the Apogee have a different texture, it's like recording the whole band through a Millennia desk.

When you listen through quality kit like Millennia Media's, which is probably over-engineered in the style of manufacturers like Studer, you realise that operating headroom is being tested a lot more than it should be these days...

Oh, sure. I think people misunderstand what headroom is for nowadays: I believe they think it's gain structure which they can nip in there and use to make it a little louder. But it's all about having a bit of space for peaks through the system. It's the same as mixing in Pro Tools, unless you redo your mix in a certain way



there isn't ever enough headroom in the system, you are always pushing digital zero and the whole thing sounds horrible.

So how much headroom do you leave?

For the Police recording, I'm leaving at least 6dB; there are enough tools to make the whole session 'Mark Stent loud' if I want to later. When the live record gets made it needs to sound current, but at the same time it is a legacy band playing, it doesn't need to be brittle and hard and pushed. I thought I would just go for quality. With a live recording you have to set a compromise between the one track that is played loud and aggressively, and the song which is really mellow.

Do you prefer an analogue console for mixing or do you mix 'in the box'?

I started to think the idea of only being able to mix on

an analogue desk was rubbish when Kipper insisted he preferred a mix of a Sting single I had done in Logic to a mix that was done on an old Neve in the US. Mixing 'in the box' is a whole different game. It took me a while to get my head around it, but I'm completely committed now; I think it's the future and I wouldn't want to go back. The difference is a bit like listening to 96kHz recordings. I did a test earlier in the year with two Pro Tools/Prism systems, but the market doesn't want that!

What listening tests did you do?

Because I'm lucky enough to have spare Prism converters hanging around in the studio, I thought I'd make the comparison. I had some Police multitracks which we'd backed up to Pro Tools and I also recorded some material in the studio. I had a 44.1kHz system and a 96kHz system both playing back through

Prisms, I could A/B through the desk, and I could hear the subtle difference. But then I got a couple of the tech guys who have worked for Sting for years, I didn't tell them what I was doing, I just hit play and said: switch between those two and tell me if you hear something different. They couldn't hear anything. It really is better... but we're in such a changing industry, the market doesn't want it. The market doesn't appear to be saying, 'Yes! 96k is a product we want to buy!' I don't think we, as production people, should be going down that road. I've tested DSD as well; I have a DSD-equipped Prism at the studio. DSD also sounds better than 44.1kHz 24-bit, but I think it's another dead end. We need to make a huge improvement, a really massive quality leap, for the consumer to really get behind us.

As a charter member of the Pro Tools Guild, you must have some favourite plug-ins.

Stylus RMX — I live by that. The V-series Neve emulators from Waves are good, and I like Trillium Lane Labs' TL Space reverb. I've just put everything else in TL, because it takes the Impulse Responses from Logic and Altiverb reverb. And now Logic 8 has an impulse building feature, it's only a matter of time before I take it further and record some of Sting's spaces. We have places that we always record in, so I may as well sample them! The Ultramaximizer L3 from Waves does tend to appear on the rough mix... everyone expects the roughs to sound loud and pumping. And the Melodyne TDM plug-in — it really is the best tuning and stretching plug-in of all.

The first thing I did with Melodyne to try it out was to put the Pro Tools multitrack of Desert Rose through it. I showed it to Sting while I was typing in new tempos in real time: you could hardly hear the quality changing. I was going up and down nearly 20bpm in real time. Sting, who is not particularly technically minded, looked at me and said: 'It's



changing tempo, what's the big deal? I know you can do all that with your computer.' Well, now I can! There was another classic Melodyne moment when I was working with Sting on a Police song they had re-recorded for a potential release. They hadn't all been in the studio at the same time, and somehow Andy's solo had not been recorded. I said I could pop the original solo in from 25 years ago, Sting doubted it because it was completely the wrong key and a different tempo, but Melodyne was able to do it perfectly. That was a 'Pro Tools' moment. I don't need to use Melodyne to tune Sting's vocal, but I once tuned seven or eight different versions of a multitrack so that he could try singing a song in different keys. That's what digital workstations were invented for...

Sting famously owns a big SSL that fits into flightcases; is it really that easy to do?

His Steerpike studio, which is commercially available, is totally portable: the G-series SSL breaks into three pieces and pops in flightcases, everything else is racked and built into cases. You unplug it all, stick the cables in a big trunk, and you're off. For some reason it always seems quicker to put up than it is to break down... we do keep buying extra equipment and adding things! You could probably go from an empty room to being in record mode in two comfortable days. There's always going to be a fairly restricted client-base of acts who are interested in using it: U2 had it for the latter part of their last album, and recently it has been Sting himself and The Police using the studio. You need a bit of space to create a machine room and so forth. We have our own air-conditioning systems and the studio requires a 64 amp power connection, then it's all clean-fed power through Pete Cornish custom-built AC systems. You'd want to hire it for at least a month, I would have thought, to make it worth the effort of moving and installing.

Working with a 'big name' can be a bit of a double-edged sword; everyone else assumes you will be constantly busy on the high-profile commission, so the calls stop coming after a while. Has that been your experience?

Totally. When I started with Sting, everyone used to call... now the phone doesn't ring so much, and I was dropped by my previous management. I sort of knew it was going to happen, there was a chap before me called Simon Osbourne who had worked with Hugh Padgham for years, the same thing happened with him. I think it's just an unfortunate side effect, but I've learnt that there's really no such thing as 'the grass is greener.' I've talked to so many people about management over the years, now I have a relationship with a really good guy called Paul Adams who works for Magus in New York. Certain engineers or producers do need someone to organise their lives for them, but when you actually talk to some of them you discover their mega-managers haven't really got them a job with a new client for five years, they get work because of who they are and because of their own contacts. New ways of communicating are coming in; just having my own little website I've already had some unexpected contacts. If people are interested in something, nowadays the first step for many is to sit down and Google it. If you've made the effort to list yourself you will turn up in the search results. I've made records using DigiDelivery or iDisk, and that's an amazing way of working with friends or talent who are outside of your budget just because they live in another country. Ultimately, though, even if you meet across the Internet you have to meet physically to gain a bit more trust, become better friends and take things further. It sounds like we're talking about blind-dating! But there is nothing better than two people sitting face-to-face for communication. ■

