# Darcy Proper

**She has left the US to set up shop in Europe and has largely left classical work in favour of other genres in stereo and multichannel formats. NIGEL JOPSON talks to one of the very few women to have cut it at the leading edge of mastering.**

**G**RAMMY AWARD-WINNING mastering engineer Darcy Proper recently left Sony Mastering in New York to take up residence at Galaxy Studio's cutting edge mastering suite in Mol, Belgium. Darcy spent six years as a senior mastering engineer at Sony, where she worked on an impressive gamut of music spanning re-issues of early recordings, such as Lady Day: The Complete Billie Holiday on Columbia 1933-1944 (for which she won a Grammy in 2002), through productions from Missy Elliot (So Addictive), REM (Around The Sun, Automatic For The People, Green) and Phish (Live In Brooklyn). She has become known as a go-to mastering guru for surround work, including high-profile releases from the likes of Steely Dan (Everything Must Go 5.1 DVD-A and stereo) and Bob Dylan (Blood On The Tracks 5.1 for SACD).

**What prompted your move from NY to Mol ... is the mastering business not booming in the USA?**
It's true that business for mastering studios in the US is not quite what it used to be, a lot of that has to do with the larger labels doing less. The independents are doing more, but the people co-ordinating smaller projects for independents aren't necessarily aware of the need for mastering, or aren't aware of what can be done with professional mastering. When they do actually try mastering with a professional, almost all of them are amazed by what can be achieved with higher-end equipment and an experienced mastering engineer. The trick is to get them in there in the first place! I liked the sound of my room very much in NY at Sony, and I loved my colleagues there, but then this opportunity arose to work in a world-class studio located right in the middle of Europe. I've never had the opportunity in my life to travel around Europe, so it seemed like too good an opportunity to miss!

**Your new mastering suite is extremely well-equipped ...**
Galaxy has an amazing room, they have really done it well, the room is well tuned, and it looks nice too. I like the way the speakers work in there, the console is great — there weren't a whole lot of things I needed to request in order to work here — just a few CEDAR plug-ins for the workstation, that's all.

**Is that something you really depend on?**
For all of the reissue work I've done, (Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and various compilations) I could not live without the CEDAR DeClick plug-ins for my Pyramix. I worked recently on a Charlie Poole three-CD set for Legacy, You Ain't Talkin' To Me: The Roots of Country Music, which included recordings from the very early 1900s (circa 1904 in some cases). It's a real trick in that type of work to remove the distracting noises and yet not 'throw out the baby with the bath water', so to speak. For that collection, it was quite a tedious process, but I think it worked out well. The material is still quite noisy by modern listening standards, but once your ear adapts to the sound, there are no longer any big

pops or clicks to distract from the programme. In my opinion, the sound itself lends a certain charm of the era to the music, so I don't feel the noise that remains is a problem. CEDAR also works well on new releases for removing the occasional distracting lip smack or static tick. It's very effective and time efficient for that type of thing.

**Do you always work in Pyramix, or do you sometimes take digital productions back to analogue for processing? Galaxy certainly has a good range of analogue outboard — you've got six of the SPL PQ parametric mastering EQs in the rack.**

It's an embarrassment of riches! It depends on the project, once I'm working with analogue I don't feel that a session goes any slower, other than the actual winding time if there is tape. I really like the sound of analogue EQs, when I was in NY I had a Sontec, and for surround I had the Sontec on the front and a Maselec on the rear, because they are very compatible and Sontecs are so difficult to get. I loved the Sontec and I also love the SPL EQs. If I'm going for broader adjustments I prefer analogue EQ, I think analogue sounds a bit smoother, particularly at the top end. Analogue EQs can be a little less precise, if there's something I'm really trying to enhance or notch or filter then I would use digital. Digital equalisers don't seem to affect quite so much of what's going on around the frequency range that I'm working on.

**Which equipment typically comprises your analogue processing chain?**

The gain stage of the console — the incredible SPL MMC1 — then the PQ parametrics, followed by three Millennia TCL-2s — it wasn't a compressor I was familiar with until I got here but I like it very much. It has an FET mode and a tube mode, I find that it works very well in both. Then there's a Maselec MPL-2 Limiter/De-esser, any combination of those might be in depending on what's needed. I might hit digital then and use either the Weiss or Z-Systems EQs. A DualDisk 5.1 and stereo album I just did here for Dutch rock band Kane needed a bit of band limited compression to get control of the low end, so after going through the analogue gear I put the Weiss DS1-Mk2 compressor in and used that to just work on the bottom end from 180Hz only. It was a project that came in as digital, but I thought the sound would benefit from the analogue tools.

**How does your workflow proceed if you take a digital project analogue, do you assemble the album first in your workstation for play-out or do you first process each track on load-in?**

If I'm working from analogue tapes, it remains analogue through the entire mastering process until it goes into Pyramix, which is the platform I'm using these days, and which I like very much. If the project is a Pro Tools session or something like that, the process is pretty much the same, for each tune I master into the Pyramix, so I have the finished sound going into my workstation. Typically I'll do some EQing first, then I'll insert my compressor post-EQ. Of course the compressor can affect the sound but you can always go back and adjust the EQ a little to compensate. Then I assemble the album and in the process of assembly if I find the first tune didn't have quite the same feel as the others, then I'll go back and revisit it if

necessary. I'm usually A-Bing all the time — when I've worked on one tune and loaded it into Pyramix I compare that to the next tune I'm working on so I can make sure that when we are done the album will sound like an album rather than just a collection of singles. I think that's one of the most important functions of mastering.

**You are well known for your 5.1 work, which surround format do you find yourself mastering for recently?**

I haven't done that much work in SACD for the last 2 years, it is still popular for classical releases, but I'm not doing classical any longer. Most of the projects I have done recently have either been for DVD-A or DVD video release. SACD is a fantastic sounding format, but it seems almost as if it has ceased to be a consumer product, although DSD technology is still being used in the recording process. Sony is doing DualDiscs right now where everything ends up as DVD-Vs. Most of the work I have done in the last year is for DVD video, which is a shame because by the time you have AC3 encoded a project 48k is as high as it goes. While it is serviceable, it is certainly not the same as having a high resolution discrete format, or even having a 48k discrete. I've been working a lot for Elliot Scheiner, he does a lot of productions for Warners, and they are supporting the DVD-A format.

**Elliot is on record as saying you are the very best for surround mastering.**

I have to say it's a pleasure working on his stuff, as a mastering engineer it's always nicer to polish something that's really good to begin with rather than to do a complete reworking, Elliot's work is always so good. Surround is a format that's really fun to work with. The Kane 5.1 DualDisk that I mastered here at Galaxy was a Ronald Prent surround mix, and he does amazing work as well. When I was at Sony, Elliot sent me some 2-inch 8-track surround mixes

— it sounded absolutely fantastic! It's the equivalent of 1/2-inch for surround mixes. He sent me a project at 15ips with Dolby SR and it was marvellous. My ATR 100 analogue machine has a great sound of its own that works well for a lot of the material I work on. After auditioning several tape machines, it was the model that was chosen unanimously for the Steely Dan album Everything Must Go in 2003, and it won again when we began work on Donald Fagen's upcoming solo album.

**How do you feel about projects that have been recorded and mixed 'In The Box' completely within Pro Tools?**

I have a bit of a problem with Pro Tools in that I think what you hear when you are recording in is not necessarily what you hear when you are playing back. I think Pro Tools is a great workstation — if you have a project that needs 147 tracks there's nothing that can compete with it. Sometimes I have had to record my material into Pro Tools, perhaps because the project will be going to an audio post engineer for a live concert DVD or something along those lines. I'm often very frustrated when I play the music back, and no matter which convertor I use, it just doesn't end up sounding the same. So I wonder sometimes …

**I suppose no client ever comes in nowadays and says: please make this quiet and really dynamic …**

I do kind of miss that about classical, because level is not really a part of that world, the programme material is so dynamic, and of course they want to preserve it. Coming from that background, I am definitely not the mastering engineer who will, by choice, aim for making the very loudest record. I personally prefer to preserve some of the transients and dynamic range and all of that. However, I'm a service provider so of course I will do whatever the client demands — but I would voice my opinion if I thought sound quality was being sacrificed for just level.

**If you receive a digital project and see the waveform profile resembling a block of cheese because of aggressive 2-bus processing, do you feel you've been backed into a corner?**

It's exactly that, it doesn't really leave you many options. In the same way that in the reissue field we would love to be able to develop the anti-reverb tool to get rid of some of the poor or very dated-sounding reverbs on otherwise beautiful sounding albums — there were recordings made in stairwells and all sorts of strange places — and on 3-track recordings, of course, they ended up printing them with the vocal track ... it's kind of the same thing now with these over-squashed mixes. Sometimes I will try to build some dynamics back into the song itself, maybe by dropping the level of the verses to give the chorus a little boost, or I'll make the beginning of the song a little quieter and we'll build to a louder ending. But once it's been squashed, it's squashed — even if we build in some faux-dynamics. Usually the tunes that come in that are squashed were digital projects from the beginning, so very often just passing through analogue equipment helps the sound overall, even if it does not necessarily bring back all of the dynamics. If it's something that has been done on a workstation and it's just a matter of re-rendering the bounce to disk, very often if I explain why I would like the mix engineer to back off their master bus plug-in, and that I can find better ways to make up that level — and it's usually the level that they are looking for, not the compression — then a lot of times they are happy to do that.

**So how do you make up the level?**

A combination of compressors, limiters and gain stages. Multiband helps in situations where just one band is out of control, I sometimes use the Weiss DS1 for that. I think the biggest tool that mastering engineers have is that we all remain in our rooms: unlike mix engineers and recording engineers, our environment doesn't really change, so when we are working, we can make these little half dB adjustments in EQ, or adjust compressors very meticulously. I'd like to reassure the mix engineers of the world that mastering engineers are not out to critique anyone's work — the same way the mix engineer doesn't hold it against the singer when he hears the vocal soloed with no reverb — that's kind of the same way I'm thinking when I'm mastering. I think a relationship develops between mix engineers and mastering engineers because the mix engineer feels that they can trust the mastering engineer not to mess up their mixes and not to hold anything in its raw state against them.

**You've changed reference monitors as well as continents, so the biggest tool in the box is different for you now.**

I previously had Dunlavy SC-IVs with Krell 300C amplifiers, which was a combination I liked very much in my room in NY. It certainly did not look as elegant as what I have here, but it was a good sounding room. The Eggleston Savoys and Perreaux amplifiers at Galaxy balance very much the same way, I was expecting it to be much more difficult to adjust. When I listened to some albums I had done in NY, I felt very comfortable, it struck my ears as a similar balance. The bass is very extended, but it doesn't get in the way. That's something that actually made me choose the Dunlavy SC-IVs in the first place, every other speaker I tried in NY sort of took over the room at the bottom end. It was present, but nicely in control with the SC-IVs. I think the Egglestons have a little more extension, but you only have to listen to a couple of tunes you've worked on and are familiar with to recognise what the differences are. It hasn't been a difficult transition — I think ... I haven't had any complaints yet! ■