



James F. Reynolds

The mixer collaborated with K-Pop's biggest act and US #1 BTS. **GEORGE SHILLING** visits his West London mix room to find out more about sound for the East

album. "I've always got a kick out of artist development," says Reynolds. He has been in the building in Parsons Green for about 15 years, and moved into his current room about 8 years ago. When *Resolution* visited, Reynolds was finishing mixes for self-recording multi-instrumentalist Youngr and had recently mixed new material by James Smith, Oh Wonder, Swedish soul singer Sabrina Ddumba and also London-born artist Sinéad Harnett for her shortly to be released album and single.

As a teenager, James F. Reynolds was an avid blues harmonica player, and following a leg injury he spent a year at his parents' home in Jersey, writing music with their grand piano. After buying a couple of mics to record himself he studied at Gateway School to learn how to do it properly, then landed a job writing and producing dance music at Hit House Studio in Hammersmith. Previously part of duo Public Symphony ("Floyd meets Coldplay") who performed live supporting Jason Mraz, Reynolds is now mainly known for his mixing work.

Notable clients have included Paloma Faith, Calvin Harris, Ellie Goulding, Years And Years, Sigrid, Emeli Sandé, The Vamps, The Saturdays and BTS. Recently he has also started managing artists including Marcus McCoan and Arcades. Reynolds put the two members of Arcades together and now co-manages them with Nick Gatfield; both acts are signed to Gatfield's Twin label and Reynolds has written material for both. McCoan and Arcades co-wrote two of the songs on the latest BTS



/ Reynolds in his Parsons Green studio

Why do you use PreSonus Studio One?

I love Studio One. A lot of mixers in America are moving away from Pro Tools. I moved from Logic because couldn't deal with the automation problems you get in Logic. Some people frowned on it, because as a mixer you 'should' be in Pro Tools, and when I tried Studio One I thought there were a few shortfalls, but the developers were more than happy to hear what I had to say, and I've been working with them ever since. They'd made it to encourage Pro Tools users to switch, but I suggested they needed to get Logic users to join too, so I started talking about my workflow, and they were very receptive. The workflow now is incredibly quick. Having built-in Melodyne integrated is brilliantly handy — that's what I use, and ReVoice Pro for tightening up vocals. They've implemented clever things like a tape saturation that you can put on the master buss, and it instantiates this behind the scene in every channel in your DAW, with a slight variation on each one, like on a real mixing desk.

That session for Korean boy band BTS looks massive. How do you sort out all the tracks?

This is quite a small one for them — 180-odd channels! When I'm doing it I disappear into a musical coma for a couple of days and zone everything other than the track I'm mixing. There's so much to focus on, especially vocally. It's always quite strange; because there's seven of them, you're always trying to determine which one of them is going to take the front at each point. I've got three assistants because the back-end of mixing takes a lot of time — printing all the stems. And prep for me is really essential, because as long as it's done well

I can just step-in and see clearly what I have to do, instead of spending hours — by the time I've done that I'm not as sharp as I would be. It's ordering it how I like it, grouping where necessary — everyone has their own unique way of mixing. Stripping silence, making sure everything's in time, setting up triggers for stuff — usually snares, kicks... And where necessary track consolidation, if there's a group of BVs.

I used to mix records how I thought they should sound: I thought I had a good opinion, but experience has taught me that that's the wrong approach. The wise approach is to really establish what the label, artist, producer, or

whoever is calling the shots, what they want out of the mix. Otherwise you're shooting blind. You might do what you think is an amazing mix, but it's not to their taste. They might love the demo, and really don't want it mixed, and you've got to know when you're in one of those situations, treat it with kid gloves, maybe a bit of bottom end management, maybe a bit of tidying up — getting rid of clicks but not doing too much. In other scenarios they might have been going round the houses, and you might think this needs triggering, kick replacement, whatever it is that's not quite making the track gel.

My most valuable piece of advice to anyone ▶



/ Before carving out a career as a mixer, Reynolds was a harmonica star



/ Mixing a track by Manchester one-man musical dynamo Youngr

beginning their career would be to understand what the client wants before starting. That translates into the prep, so if they love the demo, I'll tell my assistant to consolidate the files so the BVs are printed into groups and you're not dealing with individual BVs. It's more of a stem mix. If they were consolidating BVs, they would usually go through and cut out all the breaths because they just make a bit of a mess in the track. Having said all of that, there are times when the label want my opinion on how the track should be mixed and then I will mix it using my own musical radar.

What's your policy with lead vocal breaths? Your mix of Laura Mvula's *Green Garden* has none audible, whereas on the *Prides* tracks they're quite loud.

Yes, but with *Prides* I really like his breaths, so I keep them loud to keep that intensity, it's a bit of a Keane thing, like on *Hopes And Fears*, you hear him drawing breath. Certain songs, I love that. And others I'll take them down.

Do you get a translation of the Korean lyrics?

Not really, but they tell me what it's about and I can guess from the way they're singing what they're trying to impart. I've done it for seven or eight years so I know what they like. Some people want things warm, and they like the tracks warm, but their vocals are always present and up-front rather than sounding analogue and old-school.

When you're fixing vocals sonically do you use dynamic EQ?

I think you have to do a little bit of multi-band dynamic EQ. You've got amazing EQs now like the FabFilter Pro-Q3 which allows you to notch harsh frequencies, and do amazing EQing at the same time. It has become a lot easier in that

respect. I don't like to over-compress vocals, so I quite like to let them breathe a bit and do automation — with a mouse. I draw it; I'm quite forensic.

Are you entirely in-the-box?

No, it depends what I'm doing. If I want a slightly warmer vibe I might mix it out through my Thermionic Culture Phoenix Mastering Plus. I just tried the SSL Fusion which will definitely

become part of my arsenal soon. Most of it is in the box; I have some nice reverbs I go out to like the Bricasti, which is lovely, amazing plates, and the Lexicon PCM91 — old school! I still use my TC Powercore all the time, I love the reverbs. The VSS3 and Non-linear are really great. For years the MD3 was on my mastering chain. And I've got UAD, love their stuff.

How do you organise your buses?

I have the individual busses for the various elements. There's a lot with BTS because you've got so many different vocal groups. They all then break down to sub-buses like BVs then that breaks down to a main bus which is the Vocal Bus. I have two main buses — instrumental and vocal, and all the other buses feed into those. Apart from one thing... the kick. The kick feeds straight to the main mix bus, because sometimes I put a multi-band on the instrumental bus and feed the kick to it, so I can get all the sonics out of the way on the mids, where I need the most energy for the kick.

And is there stuff across the final mix bus?

Yes. There's very little on the instrumental and vocal buses, maybe a little EQ-ing. I do a lot of automation with EQs. I particularly like the Slate Eosis Air EQ. You've got a nice button to dial it all up or have it neutral, and where needs be I give a little push in the chorus and it really helps bring choruses alive, so I automate that on the vocal bus. And I do a lot of Mid-Side EQ-ing. And the same with the instrumental bus. I don't squash the hell out of stuff. The final main bus will have an EQ, probably Equilibrium, it might have saturation but I generally do that earlier



/ A Thermionic Culture Phoenix Mastering Plus is used on the mix bus for a warmer vibe

on. Possibly with iZotope multi-band saturation. I sometimes use Ozone but with kid gloves. I might use Oxford Inflater; I sometimes mix into that very subtly. And sometimes Zynaptic Intensity, but my usual thing at the end is DMG Limitless very subtly. I usually have about -9 or -10 LUFS. I sometimes get demos in that are -4! This is a major issue that mix engineers have. I mix very low, generally to the K-scale, -14. I also have a plug in called Reference for being able to quickly A/B against the demo mix and other relevant mixes.

Do you set the bass drum to a certain level at the outset?

No, I play the whole track, and bring it down until it's -14, then I start mixing. Sometimes -16, it doesn't matter in the digital domain. The wise thing is to give yourself tons of headroom, because they're always going to say, can you turn the kick drum or something up. I do think the issue for mix engineers is how to put dynamics into a record when the producer or artist has smashed the hell out of it to get it past A&R. You go back and take that off, and they're like, "Ooh, what's happened to the energy?" And you go, well, you just need to turn the volume knob up a bit.

Tell me about the Kii Three monitors...

They are direct DSP, so there's no converting until it gets to the speaker. Everyone who hears them says, how the f*** does all that bass come out of that speaker?! It's got six subs on it. There's very little bass that goes backwards with those speakers; round the back, the bass disappears, so you don't have standing waves.

And you listen on other systems?

I just found out about a plug-in by Audreio, they have an app on your phone, and you add a plug-in on your mix and you can Bluetooth your



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mixes to your phone, which is relevant in this day and age — you need to know about those things because people will assess your mix on an iPhone or earbuds; you need to make sure it

translates — from my Kiis to my Avantones to my PC World speakers to my iPhone. And when you've been mixing for hours you need a fresh perspective! 📱