



Ben Hillier

Blur's latest album *Think Tank* has enjoyed critical acclaim yet its creation did not follow a traditional course. ZENON SCHOEPE talks to the man who took it from London, to Marrakech, to Devon.

BEN ALMOST BECAME a professional classical percussionist until sessions for Virgin Classics with Floating Earth recording led to him assisting on a handful of sessions. In his own words he'd 'caught the bug'. He was advised to do the Tonmeister course at Surrey University – 'they had great facilities' – and did lots of recording. His industrial year was spent at Eden Studios in London, where he got into the 'pop thing' and within four months he was assisting and engineering. Producer/mixer Steve Osborne (New Order, Placebo, Suede, U2, Happy Mondays) took him on as a programming engineer for five years. He'd gone from heavy duty classical to dance music and people were just beginning to use Sound Tools (later to become Pro Tools) and his classical background had taught

him to edit. This combined with a good knowledge of sequencing got him working and then his clients realised he could engineer as well.

His move in to production started with Elbow's first album and he's gone on to work with Tom McRae and Clinic. Writing and remixing with Blur bassist Alex James and two solo albums with now former Blur guitarist Graham Coxson established a connection with the band. This led to an involvement with the Greatest Hits album (including *Music is my Radar*) at Damon Albarn's 13 studio in Ladbroke Grove, London, which Ben describes as a bigger version of his own room at The Dairy in Brixton, where the front-cover photo was taken.

He got involved at the beginning of the latest Blur *Think Tank* album and stayed as producer.

How do you feel about the distinction between producer and engineer?

You get asked to produce and then you have to take control of the project in a practical sense. Every album I do is different but the thing I always do the same when I produce is finish it and get it done. That is your job.

It is funny when you go in to a project not as the producer but end up as the producer, which is effectively how it happened with this Blur album.

Where did you start working on the project?

We started working in 13 and the majority of the tracking was done there in two weeks at the end of 2001. Blur are great to work with because they do regular and sensible hours. We had nine songs at the end of that, some of which were finished, and then another two weeks in January-February by which point we had 16 tracks in a very good state and no guitarist!

When we started we allocated hours and days and said that these are the times we'll be working on the Blur album, if you are there then you're on it, if you're not you miss out. It instilled a great work ethic.

We all had other commitments then and we resumed again at 13 in June and did more tracking. Damon writes all the time and wants to get them down quickly so as a group they can work extremely fast and we got to the point where we had 28 songs, all in a state of almost finished.

We had the drum kit set up in the kitchen and most



other things were Dled because of the noise. We Dled a Les Paul bass that (producer) Flood has through a Trace Elliot box and most of the guitars went through a Tube Tech voice channel. Speed was everything because they were writing while we were recording and I had to have everything set so if they walked in and wanted to play, they could within about 30 seconds. Music is my Radar was done like that, entirely Dled.

I had an engineer in Jason Cox, he's the engineer at 13 and interacts with the band really well and works with them all the time. He knows how to get good sounds from Damon and he knows all their equipment inside out.

Damon had always talked about getting other producers involved so we got the Dust Brothers in for a week. We'd sent tunes out to them and Norman Cook and William Orbit. The Dust Brothers understood what we were trying to do but unfortunately it was a little too similar to what we were doing, so we didn't end up using any of their stuff.

Norman came in a month after the Dust Brothers and to my surprise acted much more like an old-school producer and reworked tunes that we'd already put a lot of work in to. It was good and it was something we hadn't done because we were too busy creating. He worked on one tune and that didn't end up on the record in the end.

William chose some tunes that he wanted to work



on and we sent him the Pro Tools files. He layers stuff hugely and he sent me stuff back with 140 tracks. We recorded some songs on nine tracks! William ended up on one tune on the album.

I tend to record effects as I'm doing it so if I get a mad drum sound on a record it would have been recorded like that and they would have played to that because it changes the way they play and changes what the instrument is.

At what stage did you all decide to get on a plane and go to Marrakech?

Damon had been out there for a music festival and really liked it. We were also worried about the world political situation and wanted to go out there too (September 2002).

We wanted to get away from London so we could focus and to give Damon the headspace to write lyrics for the songs that needed them. It gave me the chance to really focus on the tunes and get them from a sketchbook stage to finished songs. The idea was also to mix out there but we only did four of the mixes that finished up on the album there.

But you needed to find a studio.

There are no music studios in Marrakech – lots of film studios though. Then some stupid person – me – suggested that we hire a studio and take it out there. Tickle came up with the best package. We specified a studio basically and Tad (Barker, Tickle MD) found a 40-channel Amek Mozart with Rupert Neve channels and started renovating it. He had four weeks to get it all together. We ordered a pair of Genelec 1034 main monitors, 32 outputs of Pro Tools because I always mix in analogue, we built a Pro Tools rig out of my rig, all the outboard from 13, my outboard, a few extra bits and bobs, and a 1/2-inch machine. Plus a band's worth of gear, headphones distribution, all my mics and a load of other mics.

We also needed a building and we went out to have a look and thought we'd found a place but it was just wrong. It was all very glitzy and nicely done up – a great place to go on holiday but not to record an album. Luckily we found a fabulous building that had a derelict farm



out the back. Moroccan buildings are built around a courtyard and this one was covered and about the size of a tennis court. Marbled floor, tiled walls, really high concrete ceiling, rooms off the side. I was a little worried about the acoustic because it was a big space but we found a room full of sofas and I realised that we could probably control it enough.

The owner knocked through a wall for us, cleaned it all up, decorated it and put in carpets and sofas. It looked really nice and it was only 200m from the villa where we were staying. We could walk to work.

Everything seemed to be going really well and we were looking forward to our five weeks out there. We got there and then it took six days to get the equipment out of customs and it turned into a bit of a nightmare.

When it finally arrived, Tad and the support team that he had brought out got it all installed and ready and we were working in the farmhouse studio within two days. The set up was great and very professional. We had cable runs everywhere, we'd taken our own electricity substation with a UPS, and the mains was coming directly off the overhead wires!

It didn't quite sound like a proper studio – it had the resonance of an 808 bass drum – but I had lots of pairs of speakers and as long as you mixed quietly it was alright.

The acoustic in the main hall was really loud and vibrant – we did some drums in there and it sounded like John Bonham – and if we wanted a controlled

sound then we recorded outside. We were in the middle of the countryside with insects, dogs barking and the occasional plane but still nothing like 13 [in London] where we had people ringing the bell all the time and coming in mid drum take.

We ended up working non-stop. It had gone from this very easy 10 'til 6 arrangement in London to 17-hour days in 40-degree heat. And nothing broke down. We had the desert blowing in through holes in the control room – the cover on the half-inch had sand all over it in the morning, lizards crawling over the outboard, and insects living in the back.

It all started falling into place. We got a Moroccan string section into the hall. Norman Cook came out for five days and helped us focus because we were all knackered and had sickness. Damon had brought his bike out so every 20 minutes somebody had to leap on the bike and head for the loo. We were all brown but very skinny.

We recorded a lot of the vocals outside often using a Russian MKM101 [Ben is a collector of Russian mics] and Lomo 19A19. On one tune I used an SM57 on a walkie-talkie with Damon walking out in the dust singing. We used the big hall for guitar overdubs and backing vocals.

Recording vocals outdoors gives them the most amazing quality because it's not like a dead room but it adds a clarity to the top and no sibilance. The singer can be as loud as he possibly can and he still can't be loud enough. And when you start compressing it's



almost like a perfect signal. The esoteric mics I've got really came in to their own. There was such integrity to the sound.

We started to edit things down and I mixed ten songs although we didn't use all of them. There were another 16 that were getting there ready to mix.

So you ran out of time.

We took the whole studio back because we hadn't finished. We knew that if we didn't do the work on the songs that needed it they would never be finished. It wasn't good enough to just do an album's worth of songs because we liked all the songs and we refused to choose an album.

We decamped to a 200-year-old barn at Damon's farm in Devon and set the studio up there.

It was about as different and far away from Marrakech as you can get but it was absolutely ideal and one of the best studios I've ever worked in. The Genelecs sounded amazing in there and we put them on a concrete plinth at the end of the room.

We did the remainder of the vocals there and the rest of the mixing. It was like going into a mixing environment with extra overdubs and it sounded very clean and precise after Marrakech.

What was your timescale at this point?

We were all enjoying it so much but I had to put an end date on it, otherwise we would still be there with 99 songs that all sounded great but nobody would ever hear them. The cut off date was the beginning of December.

So you mixed all 24 songs?

Yes, and the only part of the album that was difficult was choosing what went on it. We were happy for any of the songs to go on the record and then we could shape the record we wanted.

I mastered at Masterdisc in New York, which was the only commercial studio we used.

Not a bad way to work but intensive, right?

No more intensive than being stuck in a commercial studio. It felt intensive but I didn't feel in the state that I feel in now with the workload I have!

In terms of cost of the project, was it commensurate with what a Blur studio album might cost?

It probably cost a bit more but bearing in mind that we effectively delivered 24 songs – all of which could be used – it's probably really cheap. We weren't tracking in a studio that cost £1000 a day. The real outlay was going to Marrakech but it was still not a lot in the scheme of things – the cost of maybe one video?

And I would do it again, and I'd take that studio out again because it's a great studio, but I might sort out my shipping a bit more carefully! ■

Tickle's Tad Barker on the studio

At what stage did you decide that you could put the package together?

As soon as I heard about it. It sounded fun and I like a bit of a challenge. Our brief was to go back into the middle-ages and recreate Sarm West.

What were the biggest problems you had from Tickle's side?

We had 2 weeks to get it ready before shipping. We flew to Paris and bought a beautiful 40-channel Amek Mozart RN. However, it had to be completely stripped down, rebuilt and flight-cased.

An excellent set of cases were manufactured by Quentor in under a week. The second week involved getting four techs to rebuild the console. They were Chris Myring, Peter Higgs, Nick Clark and John Robinson.

At the same time, Gavin Marrable wired-up the multitude of outboard racks and built an additional external patchbay for the band's gear. We built the whole system in a big room at Phoenix Sound for Ben to come round and check it out.

We took pretty much everything we thought we would ever need: multicores, stage boxes, tannoy systems, stage monitors. Sixteen 6-foot x 3-foot sound-proofing panels were used to build recording rooms, extra reverb chambers and even a studio 2. We built studio 2 first, to get them up and running while we built the main room over a 3-day period. It all amounted to 9.5 tonnes.

Three of us went out to Morocco and Devon to build the studio: me, Chris Myring and Peter Higgs.

Is this a financially viable way to make a record?

I think the bigger bands and artists who know how to make their own products sometimes get bored with going into the same old places and as they get older and have families it makes sense to go somewhere hot, or at least different.

Others go on a kind of creative safari that gets recorded on the hoof. To these, it's about being inspired by their surroundings and always moving on. The location is relevant to the work.

For Blur I would say it was a healthy mix of both these points. Local musicians were recorded and they really didn't want to be in London.

Having said all that, one of the guys from Blur's management company commented that whatever the extra cost of the equipment/crew/logistics it was easily countered by the savings made in other areas: 'Send them into the desert...what can they spend money on?...Do you know how much it costs to keep them entertained in London 7 days a week for 3 months at a time?'

For my part, I will never forget the image of Chris Myring in his shorts standing on a rubber mat holding a live 415v overhead power line in a pair of yellow Marigolds.

