Bob Kraushaar

His credit list goes back to the heady days of ZTT and SARM and his contribution has topped charts and established artists. A mixer by preference, Bob Kraushaar takes GEORGE SHILLING through the single day mix, the benefits of having your own place and not faffing around.

BOB KRAUSHAAR'S FIRST INDUSTRY appointment was as Trevor Horn's runner. He graduated to a proper tape-opping job at Marcus Studios but headed back to SARM when they expanded and equipped with SSLs — mixing was what he craved, and there were plenty of opportunities at SARM, especially when the associated ZTT label was outputting 12-inch singles requiring B-sides and alternative versions. His first chart success came with Johnny Hates Jazz and he was soon known as a mixing specialist having made his mark with ZTT artists such as Propaganda, Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Art Of Noise. He went on to work with Paul McCartney, Erasure and perhaps his most regular client, the Pet Shop Boys. More recently he has set up his own Pro Tools HD equipped mixing studio in West London, housed in a building owned by the Goldust Productions team who have three studios, with pop act Liberty X also occupying a writing room there. As well as recently mixing an album for Mediaeval Baebes, Kraushaar has used his room to mix some Magic Roundabout soundtrack material, a new Liberty X single (featuring Run DMC) and a single and album tracks for the first solo album by Erasure's Andy Bell. (photos by www.recordproduction.com)

Presumably SSLs were a big part of your learning and success?
Oh yeah, massive…

But here there's not even a console in your room. What happened?
Well, Pro Tools finally came of age. It's stable, it's easy to use, and above all, it sounds good.

When did you start using Pro Tools?
I resisted it for quite some time, but I was working at the Strongroom as a freelancer quite a lot, and they were very aggressive about getting involved in Pro Tools. They had their own rigs, and they were well-maintained, and they would work so there was no concern about wasting time waiting for a sub-standard rig to get set up. But what really got me involved with it was when I was working on an artist that the Strongroom had signed to a production deal called Alex Valentine. He had some great demos recorded on 16-track that had been done totally free, not to a click, and we wanted to overdub, add loops, tighten it up, and the only way I could see getting it to work was doing it in Pro Tools. So the Strongroom put us in one of their Pro Tools suites, we loaded Alex's stuff in and I got stuck in. I learnt on the job, there was no client breathing down my neck, and I thought we were able to do quite amazing things to his demos — I was shocked. Although we mixed on the Neve, when we got into the Neve room I was very impressed by how it sounded. EQing I'd done in Pro Tools was really worthwhile having done. So I thought, there's something to this!

Presumably you have taught yourself new skills using Pro Tools?
Yes that's what happens when you progress along a career path, there are less and less people to watch, so just messing around with it and wondering, I want to do this, so how can I do it? And nine times out of ten, you can, and it's pretty easy. It's just been a real eye-opener.

Would you ever revert to working on tape? Why?

Sonic reasons, decision-making reasons…?
I don't think so, no.

You have a good collection of analogue toys, how much are they employed?
It still gets used, it's stuff that I've accumulated over many years and carried with me from studio to studio. I like having it, my clients seem to like seeing and hearing a nice stack of analogue outboard, and I'm so familiar with it, it's very fast for me to get the sound I want from it. Having 24 I-O it's permanently available, I can just drop it in on the track as a hardware insert, I don't even have to pick up a patchcord.

Do you have any issues with the sound of the internal Pro Tools mix bus?
I think it sounds great, I really do. Mixing the Mediaeval Baebes in particular, I couldn't believe the clarity and space I was hearing. I think if we'd mixed that through an analogue board it would not sound so crystal clear, I really believe the voices would sound compromised.

For monitoring you have Mackie HR824s and NS-10s, what are the others?
The ones in between I have had for many years, they are Dynaudio PPM2s, and as with all good sounding speakers, they are discontinued!

These are all relatively small speakers, do you not miss having an enormous pair of studio monitors?
Not at all. It got to the stage where I was going into traditional studios with large boards and the big monitors wouldn't be on all day. They can be so variable, even when you think you know the room, maybe they slip, or someone adjusts them for someone else, or a unit gets replaced — they're not constant. And I would find that I get more bottom end from the Dynaudios than many large monitors.

And they extend deeply enough?
The Mackies do, they are amazing. It took a little while, but I'm on them most of the time, I love listening to them.

You have a few gadgets, I notice your trackball has four buttons…
I use three out of the four! They are assigned so one is a single click, one is a double-click, and one is Option-click, which on Pro Tools will delete a node on the volume graph.

And you have a Big Knob and a Command|8, presumably that gets used for fader rides…
It does, not as much as I thought it might — only the faders get used on it, and the Record button, but it's nice to have a fader — shut your eyes, listen, and move the fader.

How do you cope with the myriad options available in Pro Tools?
Well you've still got the same objective, to get the best out of the song, get the best out of the mix, but you're not limited by only having a certain amount of outboard, or a certain number of channels, so it's wonderful.

You're not distracted by the details?
No. For years I've been mixing in studios, and quite often it's a day as that's all people are able to afford,

so you've got to be pretty objective, crack on, and be very disciplined about it. The last thing I want to do is faff around. I'm not saying I rule out experimentation, but I've seen people lose themselves in too many options, and I generally have a pretty clear objective about where I want the mix to go.

Do you A/B with other things you've done?

Constantly. I quite often have the rough mix running on a couple of tracks, to make sure I haven't missed any of that rough mix magic, which exists in every rough mix. You get a lot of information from a rough mix, no matter how ropey it sounds. Or I listen to DATs or CDs.

How do you cope with complex session multitracks?

So far, people have been pretty organised about it, I think people realise now they have to be. It's more often the case that things are missing. Why can't I hear this? I haven't got it! Why not? Sure enough, it was never on the original CD.

Do you mix back into Pro Tools?

I use Bounce To Disk, and put it simultaneously down to DAT — it's a convenient, fairly reliable medium. There was a case on the Medieval Baebes where one track wanted to be vari-sped, and the mastering engineer preferred DAT over any other system for vari-speeding.

Do you ever vari-speed your multitracks?

I don't, because I haven't got a sync box. It was an issue once, but we just decided we'd do it later. We auditioned it — put a mix down and put it through Pitch 'N' Time, figured out it was going to be fine, so it wasn't really much of an issue.

Do you chuck people out when you're setting the mix up?

Generally people leave me alone, I don't mind if they hang around but I think it must be very boring for them. I prefer to be on my own, I think if someone's in the room you feel obliged to listen more than you should. You should take more breaks while you're mixing — make a phone call, twiddle your thumbs, rest your ears and it's obvious what the next move is.

Do you value a second opinion?

I think it's absolutely essential that someone turns up. It's unlikely I can guess exactly what they want from a track. When people turn up we make a few small changes and they're happy to do that. It saves coming back to recall it, and I think it's important to get it signed off in the studio, that someone in a position of authority comes and says, 'Yes, that's good, it's finished'.

Do you use mix bus processing?

Oh yeah. I've become very fond of the Waves C1 Compressor, which I think is a remarkable piece of software — it's so versatile, it sounds great, I love it. So a bit of gentle compression from that, and follow it up with a bit of Sony Oxford EQ, or the Massenburg, and then maybe a tiny touch of limiting from the Waves L1.

What do you use for reverb?

I'm glad you asked that, I'm using Digidesign's ReVibe which I think is absolutely breathtaking, it sounds gorgeous. It's a modelling reverb and it's very malleable, shapeable, adjustable. Loads of depth. It's all over the Baebes album, heaps of it. I still have my Ursa Major Space Station, which is unbeatable. The Roland Dimensional Space reverb is another great sounding unit.

Do you use its RSS 3D phasey programs?

Yeah I do sometimes, it's nice. And from the same era a chorus box [SDX330 Dimensional Expander], it's got a Dimension D emulation and some lovely choruses, it's got the Boss CE-1 pedal emulations. I was very pleased to come across the MXR Flanger/Doubler, and the Marshall Time Modulator is a personal favourite, but these don't come out very often because it's so easy to get a weird effect with a plug-in. I've got Sound Toys PhaseMistress and that series. I love Mondo Mod, and SciFi and LoFi.

How do you set up a mix?

I get a balance fairly quickly then turn it all off and work with the rhythm section and the vocal, and then add things in. I have the vocal in at an early stage as it helps me to learn the song. When you think about it, going into a commercial studio for a day to mix a track that you've never heard the components of before — you've probably heard a rough mix and you've got 60 outputs, but none of them have been assigned in the Pro Tools Session because they've been working on it with one stereo bus. So you have to figure out all the parts, assign them all, then start mixing. It's already after lunch, and a very good part of the day is gone. And that is starting to be a real hindrance to the quality of the mixing. I feel it should be quite spontaneous — you hear something and go, alright, it needs to be like that, ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch! [mimes moving knobs!] Being able to drop in my analogue effects — fumbling around a strange patchbay, 'Where's the assistant because I can't find — Oh, it's not labelled like that…!' It's very immediate for me here, and I love that about it. I'm not limited by a certain number of channels or outputs.

What is your biggest skill?

I think I'm best at getting the essence of the song out. I'm not here to recreate my version with my favourite drum sounds of your song, I'm here to bring out the essence of what you've recorded. ■