



Greg Penny

Take the entire Gus Dudgeon-era Elton John catalogue and prepare to remix it in 5.1.

Greg Penny is on the case and talks technique and philosophy to **GEORGE SHILLING**

GREG PENNY COMES FROM a musical family — his father was a guitar player and his mother is a singer. In his youth, Greg met Elton John when he was touring in Vegas, and it turned out Elton was a fan of his mother. As a young Anglophile with an eye on coming to England, he struck up a friendship, and when he told Elton of his plans to come to Europe, he was invited to drop in at the sessions for Goodbye Yellow Brick Road [henceforth referred to as GYBR or YBR] taking place in France, where he witnessed Gus Dudgeon producing the later stages of recording.

Back in the US, he gradually carved out a career as a producer, scoring massively with his collaborations

with KD Lang. His friendship with Elton was rekindled when he recorded Teardrops with Lang for the Duets album, and Elton asked him to produce his Made In England album. More recently, Greg had the idea of remixing that album for 5.1, and started to investigate the whole area of multichannel. Elton and the powers-that-be loved the idea, but suggested instead that he tackle GYBR as it was celebrating its 30th anniversary.

Penny set about tracking down the 16-track masters, and got to work transferring them to Pro Tools at AIR Studios, London. He then took the files home to mix in California. This has now been completed and released on SACD, and Penny is continuing with the mammoth task of remixing all of

Elton's albums from the Gus Dudgeon era, from Elton John up to Blue Moves, in 5.1. *Resolution* met him at Sphere Studios, London, where he was making further transfers. (Pictures by www.recordproduction.com)

Did you listen to other 5.1 mixes before starting this?

I listened to hundreds, I did my homework and asked a thousand stupid questions. I learned about all the codecs involved, and the different systems, divergence and all the things you could do. I got a lot of help from the guys at DTS, and later in the completion stages of YBR I got a lot of personal attention from Gus Skinas who is basically the embodiment of SACD in the US and works for Sony. And being able to talk to other people, I've become friendly with Elliot Scheiner, Al Schmidt, and my favourite of all these guys is Nathaniel Kunkel, I love his work.

How did you equip your 5.1 studio?

I use a Pro Tools HD system, a TC System 6000. I went through a lot of monitors, I've always been a Dynaudio



fan from years ago. I also used Meyer HD-1s for stereo mixing, and I decided to go with Dynaudio Acoustic Air 6. I was looking for something that would not be so high-end that it would put me in an area where I

wasn't hearing reality. I have a small room, any kind of self-powered smaller monitor, you're going to get a better spacial image in a small room, and you'll find it will translate better into a big room later.

Benny and The Jets

Q. So the slap-back delay on Benny And The Jets which is on almost everything...

That's what Gus always referred to as 'Flap-back'!

Q. Presumably that was a 1/4-inch, how did you do that? I did it digitally, I'll admit it, but I oscillated it so that it has a bit of tone-shift.

Q. How did you make the atmosphere work in 5.1?

I heard it when it didn't have an audience on it. Gus's gimmick was brilliant, because it made more out of something that was just a dead simple track. So what I tried to do was follow the gimmick. What you want to do is make the listener feel like they're sitting in the middle of Hammersmith Odeon or Santa Monica Civic or something like that, and they're hearing this funky band. And I think that's what you get out of it, you get more of a special effect, you get the same kind of flap-back happening, you get the same kind of flam on the kit, you get the vocal moving past you, but you definitely get the sense of space now out of the new mix.

Q. Was it a stereo audience?

Gus brought the tapes back to London and decided to go with this concept of making the gimmick, and one of the first things he did is that he put an audience milling around loop into the multitrack. And then he went out, probably with David Hentschel and maybe one of the teaboys at Trident, sat out in the room and stomped his feet, whistled, clapped out of time, and he maybe had the band, when they did the backgrounds do the things on the B-section of the song, they're like boot-heels flaming. And then in the mix, they flew in the audience stuff. And of course, I went into severe panic mode at AIR when I put it up — because I had heard the original dry track, I was always really aware of the crowd, so I'm waiting for the moment when I can put the audience faders up and go, there's those handclaps, there's that 'Whaaaah!' right after the solo — it wasn't on



the multitrack. It wasn't only not on the multitrack — it was not to be found, anywhere.

Q. So they flew it in at the mix?

They flew it in at the mix. And that's how David and Gus would mix. So I ended up pressing my case more and more, and within about a week, a very oddly labelled roll of an FX reel showed up. So I put it in my multitrack Pro Tools session, and did a bit of lining-up, as you do, a phase thing to find the parts. But they were radically different audience bits done at different times, and those audience tracks didn't particularly have any rhyme or reason, and they were not in real time, it was simply, play one until I tell you to stop or I fade it out, then cue to the next one... So I had to line them up in the track, and I initially thought about unwrapping them, because I wanted to hear what everyone was talking about with unwrapping. I put it on and I hated it.

Q. You mean automatic repurposing algorithms?

Pseudo-5.1, yeah. There's way too much phasing in the original tracks anyway, because it was a stereo blend of a lot of microphones at a live gig, so you've got combing stuff happening anyway. And you're only accentuating that when you try to do an unwrap. It doesn't matter what algorithm you use, or what sort of math you want to use, it's not going to work. So I painstakingly just rebuilt all the audience tracks and all of the things that make up the effect that you're in a live room, by actually putting discrete stuff in each speaker, building it and moving it around, cutting and pasting so that it doesn't phase, so that it feels really live from the fade-up to the fade-out.

What was the philosophy with this project?

When you get into 5.1 you've got to establish your artistic criteria of what you want to do. Push the envelope and make it as artistic as you can, but also remember that when Uncle Bob comes and sits on the end of the couch, you don't want to lose him completely. Especially something that's sold 5 million records like YBR has. And that's the challenge with repurposing these really well-known masters — how do you do them in a way that thrills the listener who knows them already, that lights them up a bit? And somebody who doesn't know it, they don't lose the plot or go, where's the vocal, because they're sitting at the other end of the room. So it's not really a tame approach, just a logical approach.

How accurately do you match to the original mixes?

I referenced David Hentschel and Gus's original mixes quite a lot.

Mastered or unmastered?

Both; I dragged in the original 1/4-inch mixes from analogue tape flat, and pulled in and upsampled the commercial CD versions, which gave me the EQed mastered version. I had to figure out what was happening emotionally in the mixes, what was compelling. And try to achieve that, and then make it something else without losing that. And that's not always easy. I think there are a number of 5.1 mixes that from purely a subjective standpoint you could put on and go, no, that ruins the record for me. I never want to hear the 5.1, I just want to hear the stereo version of that. Because there are certain things in 5.1 where a lot of the energy goes out of the window, it's coming at you from too many different directions. Pop music, a lot of the time, is a lot more powerful right up the middle.

And you mixed within Pro Tools?

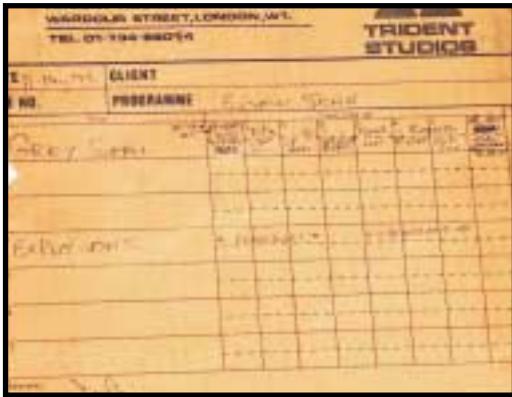
I did, but on certain tracks, I went out to some analogue pieces of gear. One thing that was wonderful, humble and simple, was this little TL Audio M3 eight channel desk with Sovtek tubes. And I don't completely buy into the idea that just because it's an analogue vintage album that you need to mix it through an analogue desk. I think all the warmth and the quality that you would want out of that record is there already on the tapes. And it was transferred and we retained that quality once we got it into the digital world. But sometimes I helped it out with a little analogue EQ and a little analogue compression.

What format were your master mixes?

24/96 files as my masters. And in the case of the SACD I played out analogue into the Sonoma.

So mixing was bounced down in real-time?

It's real-time into the DSD system, and the 24/96 files too. There will be a DVD-A release too after the first year. And now, Universal has opted to give the consumer the MLP codec, which is in theory a lossless codec, so it's really affected mostly by the batch-processing that goes into creating the files, and then the converters on the way out of whichever player you choose to use. The Dolby Digital, which is the default lossy codec, I'll get involved in that, that uses the 24/96 files, and then the DTS 5.1 files can now be 24/96 as well. I think it's pretty well planned out. Although, I love tape at the end of the day. And it becomes more and more apparent as we put other



Elton multitracks up. Tape rules. Put Rocket Man up on the original 16-track tape and it'll knock your hat in a creek, it's amazing.

How do you decide where to pan things?

The album is very simply recorded, so my blueprint was to try to keep it simple. And I always try to go from the vocal back, and I do that in all my productions.

Is everything static once you've decided a place?

Not necessarily. I didn't move anything for the sake of moving something. There's things moving around, but I didn't cheapen YBR by flying stuff around the room. Going out from the vocal, you've got lead vocal, up front, centre.

In the centre speaker?

I use the centre monitor, and here was my mindset with Elton: the die-hard fans would love to be able to hear this guy's vocals without anything else in the mix, so when you listen to YBR the lead vocal is in a phantom centre position, and it is also discrete in the centre monitor. It is then joined by doubled lead vocals that are in the centre monitor but not in the phantom, and then accompanied occasionally by Elton doing his own harmonies. But the background vocals are generally kept out of the centre monitor.

An occasional lead instrument, like the lead guitar or Elton playing organ, is kept in the centre monitor. And then there's a considerable amount of divergence used, so that Uncle Bob sitting on the couch in the back of the room can still hear the lead vocals and the drums and stuff. But it's physically built outwards from the lead vocals in the centre of the room at the front. This guy happens to play piano, so the piano is physically near him, it's not in the left surround speaker. Then drums always sound good up front, bass sits in a bowl that's front and rear, and heavily subbed. Then the guitars, by virtue of the piano taking up a lot of the front field, the guitars, mandolins, banjos, tons of electric guitars, have lots of room to breathe in the rear speakers. Background vocals are generally in the surround speakers, but there's divergence used to get them up to the front occasionally. I keep them out of the middle. And for reverbs I generally used a System 6000, using two reverbs that I tried to model after what would have been the original plates that they were using at Trident, I'm not really sure what they were, but I tried to replicate those as well as I could.

It's quite simple on the original album, and I tried to keep it as simple as I could. However, I set up a series of presets for each song on the album, so when I wanted to do recalls they would pop up with the files.

How would you suggest a novice approaches 5.1?

I think you've just got to find your own way, everybody's got their own way of doing it. There are no rules, my only thing was to make sure I made a more enhanced version of the original experience, and try to keep to Gus's original plan. I'm sure if Gus was around, he would have been flying stuff around and playing with it, because he loved the tricks you can do — he loved the stuff to be pop-tastic!

What are the pitfalls?

I would say, learn very early on what your delivery format is going to be — if you're going to mix to 8-track analogue tape, or within Pro Tools 24/96, or you're going to play into the Sonoma. They all have different characteristics. Just in the same way you would have made an album to optimise the delivery medium — know your delivery medium, and optimise what you're doing during the process for that medium. And don't give it to some authoring guy at a video cutting room to work out for you later. Because we do different gigs. And I approached YBR like making a record. I didn't approach it like an audiophile thing, or the way a guy in an authoring house would, I approached it like the way I want to hear it coming out of my sound system at home as a pop record. That's why it's loud, it's got some rough edges on it, I wanted it to be fairly aggressive. ■