



Ken Scott

There'll be records he was involved with in your collection yet he's surprisingly low key for a man of his skill and experience. Ken Scott worked at Abbey Road and Trident in the golden age, engineering and producing some of our greatest and most enduring talent. NIGEL JOPSON

KEN SCOTT'S VERY first session was as an assistant at Abbey Road, recording The Beatles' *A Hard Day's Night* LP. He went on to engineer *Magical Mystery Tour* and the legendary *White* album. Later he worked at Trident studios, recording the likes of Harry Nilsson, Elton John, Van Der Graaf Generator and Procul Harem. His first job as a producer was with David Bowie on *Hunky Dory*, with whom he went on to produce the groundbreaking *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane* and *Pin Ups* LPs, and record and mix Lou Reed's legendary *Transformer* album. In 1974 Ken produced Supertramp's smash hit *Crime Of The Century*, and in the 1980s he continued to produce albums at the cutting edge with Devo, Level 42, The Tubes and *Missing Persons*. More recently he delivered *Pop Trash* from Duran Duran, and remixed the epic *Ziggy Stardust* for 5.1 surround. Ken is now based in Los Angeles, and met with *Resolution* during a brief visit to his old alma mater in St John's Wood. (*Pictures at Abbey Road by www.recordproduction.com*)

After recording *The Beatles*, what persuaded you to leave Abbey Road for Trident?

I had problems with a new manager who'd been a classically trained musician and didn't like the pop stuff. As far as he was concerned, an engineer should do only what was technically correct, not what the producer or artist wanted. I recorded a reggae record produced by Gus Dudgeon, and reggae has lots and lots of low end, so that's what we did. When this manager heard it he said 'Why did you put this much bass on it?' — because that's what the producer wanted — 'You don't do what the producer wants, you do what is right!' He did all he could to get rid of me, I won that battle but I knew I'd never win the war so it was time to move on. Gus did a lot of work at Trident and said 'I'll get them to call you.'

You then engineered several Elton John albums with Gus didn't you?

I did three albums with Elton, the two that I did all were recorded at Strawberry studios and Château

d'Hérouville in France — the 'Honky Château'. It took a little work in France to start with, one of the things we had to deal with was trying to match up to the Trident piano sound. That Trident piano was amazing, it was so harsh. Classical musicians would absolutely abhor it, but for rock 'n' roll it was perfect, it had all of the cut. *Hey Jude* was probably the first song it became famous for, and that carried on through Supertramp, Queen, Carly Simon ... the piano in France wasn't quite as good, Gus had a big box made that went over the top of the piano with holes for mics so we could have some separation.

Bowie's *Hunky Dory* was the first album you produced, how did that opportunity arise?

I had recorded the *Space Oddity* album, then *The Man Who Sold The World*. There was an amazing atmosphere at Trident, musicians just came round and hung out in the reception area. You could walk out of the studio and you never knew who would be sitting there. David came in to do a single with a friend of his, I was starting to get fed up with engineering and wanted more artistic say, he told me on a tea break he was about to start a new project — he was going to do it himself — would I like to co-produce it? What was I going to say?

What was EMI's reaction to *Ziggy Stardust*, quite a radical concept at the time?

When I was working with David, there was 99.9% lack of input from the record company, which was

good. We just did what we did and they happened to like it. When I produced Supertramp there was a little involvement at one point — and it terrified us! We were about two weeks into the project and going very slowly — I obviously had something in my mind at the time about a particular drum sound, so it took like a day and a half just to get a snare sound — insane!

It is quite a nice snare sound...

Thank you! I would change it, most definitely, these days ... but that was what we were after at the time. We had got almost nothing done, and a guy from A&M records said that Jerry Moss [the M of A&M] was going to be in town and wanted to come to Trident and hear our progress! We nearly shit our pants... he came in, we played him what we'd got, it was my first time dealing with the boss of a record company ... he stood up and said 'very nice, thank you' and left. We thought that was it, tomorrow all studio time was going to be cancelled. But we got the word back next day that Jerry had loved what he heard, we had all the time in the world and anything we wanted, and he was behind it 100%!

How do you feel when you hear recordings you made 30 years ago — like when you remixed All Things Must Pass with George Harrison for the double CD boxed set in 2000?

First of all we were astounded, all those years later, to be working on exactly the same stuff. Back then the life of an album was 6 months, if it lasted more than that we were amazed. If people were still talking about the first album by the time the second album came out, you knew you'd made it.



What was your initial reaction when you pushed up the faders on *My Sweet Lord*?

It sounded over the top! We actually accepted all this? It was unbelievable ... we were quite shocked, I know I hadn't listened to it for some time and I don't think George had either. When we sat down with it, we wished we could take off all the reverb and de-Spectorise it, as they did with *Let It Be*. We knew at this point in time we couldn't do that, what people wanted was the original, but in the best quality we could give, which is what we attempted to do.

Are major labels committed to re-releasing classic albums in new formats?

I don't know if they believe in it 100%. And when surround versions are brought out, I don't know how much promotion is put behind them. I've seen very little for *Ziggy*, I think many people don't know it's been done in 5.1. When quadraphonic first came out, that was much the same: I got a phone call about doing *Crime Of The Century* in quad. I was asked how long it would take, and estimated no more than a couple of weeks. They said: 'Are you kidding, we've got a guy who says he can do it in an afternoon!' That's the principle labels often work on, if they save \$100 they've made that much more profit.

When you mixed *Ziggy Stardust* for 5.1, how did you handle the film-orientated components of the format, like the centre channel?

My thought process was more surround — as in four speakers — but the hard part for me was the subwoofer. We never had loudspeakers like that before, and trying to get the sub to actually do anything I had to add some really low stuff, I wasn't used to hearing the record with all that low end. It felt kind of weird for me.

What were you mixing on?

I was using the SSL, David had the original multitracks copied to Pro Tools for me to mix. I was matching up to the original as much as I could, I'd pull up a track, do some EQ — the frequencies I work at have never really changed — so that made it relatively simple. I got each track so I thought it sounded similar to the original, but by the time I had put up all the tracks there was a harshness there that wasn't on the original. If you listen to a couple of tracks it sounds fine, it's something about the particular digital format



that the more you bring in and combine, the harsher it becomes. I was mixing it in Studio 3 upstairs with Paul Hicks — who is great with Pro Tools.

Nowadays the second engineer sitting next to you is likely to have a degree in recording technology, and has maybe paid over \$10,000 per annum in tuition fees to get it. What's your reaction to that?

When I started no one even knew what a recording engineer was. Now it's: 'We'll become producers, record a hit and make a fortune!' ... and there are corporations who play to that idea. Nobody quite realises what's really involved: it's a lot of hard work, a lot of luck, and a lot of being in the right place at the right time. I went through the greatest training you could possibly have here [at Abbey Road]. Starting right at the bottom assisting on sessions, then, before

you could become an engineer, you had to go upstairs and do some mastering. How could you be expected to put the right stuff on tape if you didn't know what would work on vinyl? The sense behind that — which a lot of other studios missed — was amazing. Upstairs, the first time you had an EQ controller in front of you it was: 'it needs some high end — so I'll turn that one all the way up ... now it needs some low end — wuuuum.' Next week you realised the error of your ways, I feel sorry for the people who got those particular playback acetates! But when you came to sit in front of the board you really knew that one click was probably enough.

Do you believe the recording equipment side is overemphasised now?

I think it all has its place, the problem is, as human beings, we always have to overdo everything. Go back to the wha-wha: it was used on one record, a month later it seemed to be on every single that came out. It was the same with synth sounds: 'I like that sound — I'll use it on my record' ... then it's on every album.

So when you mixed *You Shook Me on Jeff Beck's Truth* album, drums to the left and bass on the right, had pan-pots recently been discovered, were you seeing how much you could use them?

I guess I was! I remember that whole thing of having a repeat or delay from the guitar panned to the opposite side, that was very new then. Actually, there's some of the best vocals Rod Stewart has ever sung on that album. I was just engineering on *Truth*, later I produced an album called *There And Back* (1976) for Jeff, he'd started with Jan Hammer producing but then they fell out. I'd worked with Jeff on and off for years, I produced some Stanley Clarke albums and there'd always be a track that Jeff guested on.

You produced three albums for Stanley, four for Billy Cobham and you engineered the seminal *Mahavishnu Orchestra Birds of Fire* album and produced *Visions of the Emerald Beyond*. Do you think there was more of a demand from audiences for virtuoso playing in the 1970s, and were labels more indulgent of that?

It's that guitar hero thing, it isn't there in the market anymore. We started *Birds of Fire* at Trident in London

and finished it in New York. The only record company involvement was the union representative engineer CBS had to use in NY, he'd come along at the beginning of the session every day to find out what time he had supposedly stopped working the night before, apart from that we never saw him! For the kind of music it was, it did very, very well sales-wise. I feel that type of music doesn't really exist anymore, the jazz that is being done now is so watered down that the majority of it is like elevator music.

Do you think this has to do with the blandness and lack of original programming on US radio?

All DJs are just told what to play by central programmers now — there's nobody like John Peel — why not allow the DJs to play what they want to play? The public can hear it and make their decision to buy it or not. Then DJs would rise or fall on the merits of what they played — don't leave it up to a promotions department to decide what we want to hear. We need people who are prepared to go on the line and play a Bohemian Rhapsody — which everyone said could never be a hit because it was 7 minutes long! Or someone who would play A Walk On The Wild Side — it 'could never be a hit' because of the lyrics — but one person played it and it took off from there. That's what we need, and it's not there.

What's next for you?

I have spoken at a couple of universities in the States, and although I'm always terrified going in front of an audience to start with, I finish up really enjoying it. I'm putting a lecture together at the moment about my work with David Bowie, I've got a 5.1 system set up so I can play the surround mixes I did. There's one major point I want to get across: in the US music is so segmented by genre, if people listen to rap day and night, they will never get any other influences. I want to get over how things cross and you develop a personal mixture of influences. When David and I were growing up there were only three radio stations you could listen to during the day: the BBC Home Service, the Light Programme and the Third Programme. If you didn't like a song there was nothing you could do! Eventually you'd get to like it or you'd really know you hated it, but it would always be implanted somewhere in your brain as an unusual influence for a riff. Led Zeppelin: all of the stuff that Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones played on when they were session musicians — the most inane music — influenced them. David has always said he's a melting pot, he's taken everything he ever had and put it together. I'm going to play them some parts of the awful songs Rolf Harris did with the stylophone — guess what — David must have heard that, or whatever, and then he used a stylophone on Space Oddity. Clive Dunn's soppy 1971 hit Grandad — Herbie Flowers wrote it and played tuba on it — then he came up with the bass line on Lou Reed's Walk On The Wild Side. Talk about strange mixtures! It limits you if all you ever do is listen to and play one sort of music — all this music can be pulled in and made part of your own sound. Give people freedom, don't do it by committee. ■



With Abbey Road chief engineer Peter Cobbin.