



## Neil Pogue

With a sizeable contribution to Hip-hop's triumph at the recent Grammy's, mix engineer Neil Pogue has been working with OutKast since 1996. **NIGEL JOPSON** talks technique on *Js*, *Ks* and *The Love Below*.

**T**HE 46TH ANNUAL GRAMMY awards will go down in history as the year when Hip-hop took over popular music. 'Hip-hop is at its most commercial point,' said Andre 3000 of the duo OutKast, nominated for six Grammys and winning three, including Album of The Year for *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*. It was hard to imagine how OutKast were going to top the success of 2000's *Stankonia*, ultimately they surprised everyone with a double CD, complete with reversible front

cover and booklet — one disc (*Speakerboxxx* a harder, rap orientated CD) from Big Boi and one (softer and more idiosyncratic) from Andre. The appearance of Prince dueting with Beyoncé at the award ceremony was prescient — in many ways Andre has picked up the baton from the Purple One — extending Hip-hop to challenging aural locations beyond rigid beat boundaries. Mix engineer for *The Love Below*, Neil Pogue has worked with OutKast since their 1996 CD *Atliens*.

### How did you first get to work with OutKast?

I met them through a production team called Organized Noize (Rico Wade, Ray Murray and Pat 'Sleepy' Brown) who did all their stuff back in the day. I met Organized Noize through working with a group called Parental Advisory (MCA) who were working with an artist called Pebbles (married to LA Reid, OutKast Executive Producer). After that they found these two guys called Dre and Big Boi (Andre and Antwan) whom I had met back in 1993.

### Have you always worked as an engineer?

I was in some bands in New Jersey, I played drums until I was about 21. I got a bit bored with the band thing so I thought I'd try it on the other side of the glass. I went to an audio school out here in California called Soundmaster in 1984-86, after that I did an internship at a studio owned by Randy Jackson, Michael Jackson's brother. I was assistant there for a year, I met Kevin Mills through Randy, then Kevin needed some help at Larrabee and I did another internship there for about two years. I met Bobby Brown, I was working on a song with him and he suggested I move to Georgia. Georgia to me was not a place that I thought I'd wanna be, but the recording scene was coming up there then, so I did a stint with Bobby Brown from '92, then I went out on my own when the La Face record label was blowing up, I did some stuff with TLC.

### Had you heard *The Love Below* as a work in progress, before mixing it?

Most of the recording was done at OutKast's studio *Stankonia* (in Atlanta, Georgia) but they did a bunch of vocals at Larrabee East. One day Dre came and picked me up in his Mini Cooper, we were driving around and he played the song *Hey Ya!* At that time Dre only had a verse and a chorus, I told him he really had to finish that song. That's the one that's gonna be big! It took a few months to get to it, I kept on at him: 'Man, finish that song!' He still wasn't sure if that was the single but I said, 'Trust me, that's it.' They had pressed up a bunch of copies of *She's In My Lap*, that was going to be the first single, but at the last moment they changed their minds.

### Was it strange working on a project split in half?

It was very fun to work on. Dre has a way of bringing back that type of Prince sound — I think it was brilliant. Andre likes to be there all the time while mixing, he's a perfectionist. I like to nit-pick too, so everything has to be right, we worked long hours on that record!

### When you are setting up a mix, what parts do you start with to set the vibe?

I put up all the faders, check the elements, to hear the melody of the song. Then I pull all the faders down and I start with drums, with the kick and snare — that's the heart of Hip-hop — you gotta make sure it's banging. For the kick drum I love the sound of the SSL board EQ and compressor, it comes across, it really colours the kick well. I've tried using different combinations of outboard gear on kicks, like the API 550, but the SSL just adds something, I just love the sound of the board for beats. I really haven't found anything that can top it, yet. If the kick really needs a certain type of 'umph' on the bottom end, I might use a Neve EQ just once in a while. On bass guitar I also used the LA2A limiter at Larrabee, that's one of my favourites.

### Do you let the song run through or do you work on it section by section?

I like to focus in on little sections. I'm pretty much a hook person because the hook is the most important part of the song. I make sure I always work on the hook part of the song first because that's the part that's going to catch your ear. I'll always make sure that everything has emotion in the chorus. I work on the verses last, they have to fit in with the hook and the intro.

### On Hey Ya! the track is mixed very dry, yet each instrument seems to have its own space, like the two acoustic guitars driving through the whole song.

To put any processing on it would not complement the track. I had to keep the guitars warm because that's what drives it, and make sure the drums are bumping. Those guitars are thinned out, it would crowd the mix if they were too full, because there's a big bass in there, that pluck thing. I brought out the low end around 300Hz, and almost went for a metallic sound on it. I really don't use much outboard EQ, I guess you could say I'm a real SSL man.

### Do you ever use the SSL master bus compressor?

I try not to use that too much, because in the past when I've done that, it comes back really squashed ... you listen back to it next day and it's like 'oh my God!' The double squash is a nightmare, the kick drum sounds like it's just pity patting, it sounds crazy. If I do use a master compressor, I'll use it ever so lightly. I always go down to Studer A80 half inch and DAT. I definitely rely on the tape to add some compression, I hit the tape pretty hard. I just love the way it comes back at you from the A80.

### There's a varied selection of vocal reverbs and effects on the album, like the long reverb on the lead vocal for Spread, and the echo on Prototype ...

That's the standard D-Verb that comes with Pro Tools, I think it had something like a 4 second trail on it. I basically use Pro Tools just like a tape recorder, and put everything up on the SSL. I'm an outboard guy, I really don't use any of the Plug-ins on Pro Tools normally, that vocal reverb was the only one. On Prototype I used a Lexicon PCM42 for the delays — that was definitely a fun track to mix! I use reverb to enhance a track, just to fill in those little spaces that need it. It's not about putting it on just to be putting it on ... you hear a bunch of songs where people put the 'verb on and it just sounds like a mess, I only use it to fill little spaces in.

### You used a lot of vocal effects that are more akin to flanging or chorusing, though, didn't you?

I love the choruses on the Sony DPSV77. I also use the Yamaha SPX90 for panning things. I like to create sounds that pan around your head, because when I was a kid I used to always sit in my room and put my headphones on, there'd be something that was so low in the mix — I wouldn't hear it until months later — I loved those things. I'm that type of mixer, I don't like to put everything up in your face, I like to create almost a painting. Some parts way in the back, some effects like delays going only to one side, those type of things. It's that sort of touch that makes people talk about the songs.

### At which stage of the mix process do you start saving to the computer?

I don't start automation until much later on. As far as rides and cuts are concerned, I'll do that last. Even if things are really popping up at me! I'll ride and trim vocals until hell

freezes over, I just love to ride vocals, letting certain phrases and parts come out at you. My favourite outboard for vocals is the Manley compressor with the Variable Mu on it, I also use the Summit Audio DCL200. On lead vocals I love the Neve 33609, I also sometimes use the older dbx 160, the one with the VU meter, on vocals.

### Do you find that working with Pro Tools has meant production decisions are being postponed, and the track count on projects arriving for mixing is rising?

I'm a creative person so leaving a lot up to me is not a bad thing, I'm not afraid of that. I'm not used to having a sparse track. Like with the production team Organized Noize, a lot of their tracks are really busy, with three or four guitars, keyboards and synth lines coming at you. I think more is just better — I like having tracks that are busy — so I can trick things and cut things, create break downs. Pro Tools has made it so much easier now: you may have to work more with the sound, but it definitely makes mixing quicker. If a part needs to be copied into a certain section, or if I have to create a grid in Pro Tools, I might have the assistant do that for me. But assistants don't seem to have much to do now — just boot the Pro Tools up and we're ready to go!

### How have you found the new series SSL consoles to mix on?

I love the sound of the G series, but now I'm a J guy.

It still has that G sound, but with some extra warmth to it now. I do love the K, but sometimes it's hard to get into those K rooms! The J is excellent, it's so great that you can automate the sends, the inserts and the EQs. Back in the day you'd have to put a bus on the fader, float it and all that stuff — now it's so much easier — you can just pop the send and you're done.

### Do you agree with those who say OutKast are extending the genre, that Speakerboxxx/The Love Below is setting the tone and taking Hip-hop to a whole new place?

I don't think this album should set the whole tone for Hip-hop, I think it should be part of it. I think Hip-hop should be a melting pot of different things, different ideas. It shouldn't be tightly based on one style or one group or producer. Dre likes to be a person who stands alone and does his thing, and he wants the next man to do his! Not the same beat or sharing the same loops.

I think it will make people more aware of what they are doing, and hopefully more creative. I don't want to say we've set the tone — but people's ears are definitely standing up! Hopefully they are thinking 'OK I've got to step up my game now' and hopefully it will give young artists more room to do their thing, to be themselves. Dre could do that because he's already proved himself as a Hip-hop artist and as a rapper. ■

