



Nimrod Productions

Nimrod Productions is recording orchestras and recreating the sounds of the 1970s in the Oxfordshire countryside in a facility where it's Game On rather than Game Over.

NIGEL JOPSON

WITH OVER 50 MILLION game sales to their credit over six years, Marc Canham and Rich Aitken have built Nimrod Productions into the UK's definitive outsourcing company for delivering turnkey music solutions to games publishers. They are now in a position to offer corporations like Atari and Sony a menu of services ranging from original orchestral composition, recreation of tracks from different musical eras, a bespoke orchestra — the 'NSO' — for recording, as well as song licensing and legal resources.

Nimrod's founders got seriously involved with video games in 1998, when the offer came to produce a (subsequently BAFTA-nominated) soundtrack for the game *Driver 2*. It was an opportune stage in the evolution of the games console to become involved, as the hideous soundchip-synths were read their last rites and sample playback engines took a giant leap forward. An entire generation of adolescent level-champions had grown up, and for the first time publishers were seriously marketing games for young adults rather than teens. 'I think a microphone was like a foreign object to the video games world at the time,' Marc Canham explains, 'of course we use technology, but not purely inside a computer. So the music on *Driver 2* stood out as being rootsy,

authentically recorded music rather than a plinky-plonky computer game.' The adventures of the *Wheelman* as portrayed by Reflections Interactive went on to sell over 4.7 million copies.

Canham and Aitken had previous careers as musicians and producers with indie-label bands, and Marc admits, 'We were fortunate enough to start with a full-on Pro Tools rig, lots of decent outboard and loads of musical instruments.' Richard continues: 'There's plenty of good composers, and lot's of good studios. We made a decision — quite a brave decision — to stop recording bands about eight years ago. Staying focused is the key to success, when you deviate from the track you dilute what you are doing: we aren't gurus of anything — far from it — but we have stuck at what we do best. I run the recording side of the business. Marc is our composer in residence and alongside Ed Scroggie manages the licensing side of things. We are not a company that subcontracts sections of a project — we have always started a new part of the organisation to handle specialist parts of a job. So far we've been savvy enough to only start, and keep promoting, specialist areas that are helping us to stay alive and make money. But we are not a recording studio ... we just need a recording studio!'

The rural building at the centre of Nimrod's facility

is divided into a main recording area downstairs, with the control room above on the first floor. An adjoining extension houses offices, an editing room equipped with a Soundcraft 6000 plus a small overdub booth, and a composition suite for Marc to work in with a Mackie 1604 and Adam P11a monitors. The main control room upstairs has equipment arranged in a U shape, with the workstation keyboard, screens and a Mackie HUI in the centre, facing a pair of Earthworks Sigma 6.2 monitors. For the new generation of games consoles, much of the audio is delivered as stems to be played back dynamically by the audio part of the 'game engine'. Careful mastering is required to ensure smooth, distortion-free combinations during gaming. To this end there's a Manley Massive Passive EQ and a Cranesong STC8 compressor, installed in racks to the right of the listening position along with a couple of Distressors and other goodies. In pride of place on the left is a venerable Neve 24-channel 51 series mixer.

Richard had been looking for a vintage Neve for some time, but was somewhat deterred from purchasing a member of the classic 80 series owing to the weight, operating temperature and, not least, by the price now being asked for complete mixers of this generation. A big selling point for the Neve that Nimrod eventually acquired was that it had already had the arduous restoration job of re-capping and switch contact replacement done. 'If you want a track to sound like it was recorded in the 70s, the best way is to mic up like the 70s, play like the 70s and record through a Neve,' asserts Richard. 'You have to go through the authentic process, it's no good sitting there with Pro Tools copying and pasting, if you're doing a 70s project you damn well play it again if you get it wrong!'

Following this funky theme, there is a huge wooden box housing a classic EMT 140 echo plate (the model with manual reverb-time wheel) acting as a divider in the recording room downstairs, which itself has an era-appropriate cave-like feel to it. Nimrod has made something of a name for itself re-creating the organic and funky flavours of the 70s. 'It's very cool,' Marc admits, 'because you are writing in the style of people whose music you really admire.' And sometimes the timescale is just as tight as in the early days of music recording. A recent project for Eidos, a game adaptation of the critically acclaimed Tarantino film *Reservoir Dogs*, had the team working flat out: 'We had 40 minutes of 1970's style music to record,' explains Canham, 'we had to write, record, get the singers in and clear contracts for all the independent musicians. We hadn't actually worked for that client before. In the end they really appreciated the quality of the final delivery and the time in which we completed it. The games industry doesn't have much room for big egos, you always have to be willing to meet clients half way.'

Nimrod has more strings to its bow than a dry drum sound and a funky backbeat, it's also established a reputation for impressive orchestral soundtracks on games such as the best-selling *Getaway2:Black Monday*, *Act of War*, and earlier this year, the music for Sony's *24:The Game* — based on the Sky hit series starring Kiefer Sutherland — and also the score for TOCA's *Race Driver 3*. 'A big stepping stone for us was when we set up the orchestra as well,' confirms Marc. 'There was an idea in our heads about forming an orchestra. We had heard, time and time again, horror stories about people going to Eastern Europe and using cheaper orchestras. That's when we brought on board our orchestral director Dr Jonathan Williams. He lent a massive amount of credibility to the organisation. It's taken quite a while to set up and get comfortable, and to form relationships

with the studios we like to record in. It was a good counterbalance to the cooler edge of us two having been rock musicians in bands.'

Williams is Tutor in Orchestration at Oxford University, and directs the NSO orchestra, which is built around a core of regular players. The orchestra's leader is Andrew Havoran, the first violin of the internationally acclaimed Brodsky Quartet who have also collaborated with Elvis Costello and Björk. The orchestra is managed by the renowned double bass player Stacey Watton, who selects instrumentalists from the pick of London orchestral and session players. 'We change the set-up a little according to what the project is. If we want a certain brass sound, for instance, we will change the musicians accordingly. The LPO trombone section play like laser beams, so if we need that we know who to book!' jokes Jonny. 'There are still issues with going to Eastern Europe,' observes Canham, 'sight reading skills are not as good, and what we can do in a day with our orchestra might take them three to four days. There's language, set-up and recording issues — their studios are just not as good as Abbey Road. That's still our Unique Selling Point.'

Demonstrating another skillset they've developed, Nimrod recently managed the music production for Atari on its Hollywood-blockbuster style action driving game *Driver: Parallel Lines*. 'It was a large project involving a massive musical component with a huge chunk which needed original music, then a big chunk that needed to be licensed, and amongst those licensed artists there was a desire to have some really unique pieces of music,' explained Rich Aitken. 'The reviews tell it all, we are getting top marks for the soundtrack.' Seventy original songs were licensed by Nimrod for Atari, split roughly half from the 70s and half from today. David Bowie, Blondie, Iggy Pop, War, The Temptations, Funkadelic,



Marvin Gaye, Parliament, and The Average White Band were among those scoring the 1978 era, and bands including The Roots, LCD Soundsystem, TV on the Radio, Kaiser Chiefs, Secret Machines, and The Dead 60's lent their sounds to the New York cityscape of 2006. Marc Canham worked overtime to pull something special out of the bag: 'The challenge was to work with and build relationships with people like Public Enemy, Grandmaster Flash, Suicide, Arthur Baker, The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and Audio Bullys ... actually create original material with them ... where we were sort of exec-producing, and on occasion, mixing and mastering their tracks.' The stand-out nature of the music production is reflected in the fact that *Driver Parallel Lines* has just been nominated for an MTV Best Video Game Soundtrack award.

Nimrod represents a new model of recording facility owners, a type of vertically integrated company in which the recording aspect is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. As Nimrod's founders demonstrate, the new model requires a more diverse skillset, a more business-like attitude, a less precious approach to recording technology and — it has to be said — a lot more hard work! The particular success of Nimrod is undoubtedly rooted in a synergy between the

founders and team members. 'We've got a good blend of personalities,' muses Canham, 'I don't know many companies that can get away with the way we talk to each other — we've got a good psychological balance!' Aitken agrees: 'We have a great team, we've got a great engineer in Ed Scroggie, Andy Gannon project managing and composing, and Jonny orchestrating and conducting. It's a one stop shop.' ■

