

Old consoles don't die, they just...

Dismissed as overpriced and irrelevant dinosaurs by many in the bijou, compact and convenient digital production world, large-scale analogue desks have often outlived their original owners and facilities and gone on to find new lives and purpose elsewhere.

DAN DALEY spreads a little history.

SOMETIMES WONDER if, late at night, when no one's looking or listening, recording desks get together via some kind of electronic telepathy and hang out. They would light up a smoke, pour a drink (drawing from the vast pool of alcohol that had been spilt into their fader slots over the years) and reminisce about their careers. Fact is, there are a lot of consoles out there that have had careers as long or longer than the people who have used and owned them. The first Neve music console, the 8014, debuted in 1970, the same year as Let It Be.

Now, out in the deserts of the American Southwest there is a bone yard for old aeroplanes — hundreds of commercial jets sit in the arid, moistureless air awaiting a reprieve or the call for spare parts. Recording consoles, on the other hand, hardly ever seem to take such sabbaticals. In fact, the ones that have sat in storage for periods over the years have hardly languished, up until very recently actually appreciating in value, which is something their aviation counterparts cannot claim.

Even when a console has outlived its usefulness in one incarnation, its next is less that of spare part

and more like that of butterfly from cocoon: they get chopped up into packages, going on possibly for decades more in modular form (as distinct from spare parts), still highly prized yet far more portable and affordable.

Dave Malekpour, whose slicked-back hair and Van Dyke make him look like a wizened jazz producer from the 1950s, owns Professional Audio Design near Boston. He's restored many a vintage Neve and passed it on to new owners, and would prefer to keep it that way. But the changes in the economics of the recording industry have compelled him to make modules out of consoles on occasion. 'We usually try to sell these beautiful consoles as consoles, rather than modules, but the alternative is to break the console up and rack up the 1081s and other components,' he says. 'Still, there is also something cool about having a pair of racked modules out of a special console go to 10 or 15 studios and allow them all to get a bit of that sound. That's what we did with the Focusrite Studio 64 from Conway Recording [in Los Angeles], and it's now configured as 32 two-channel racks in 32 different



'The battleship console might seem almost quaint in the current technology landscape but the perceptual value of a large-format console seems to have moved in the opposite direction from its actual monetary worth.'

studios, living on.

'These consoles have become works of art in some cases, and in general have a personality much like a human, and if they're well cared for, they can last for years past the curve of the original investment. The consoles were all built to last 20 to 30 years with upgrades and maintenance, but they can go well beyond that in most cases.'

British audio desks might arguably be the last vestige of Empire. There's certainly plenty of them over in the States, where they would have more stamps in their passports than most Americans. Studio designer Fran Manzella recalls that the Neve VRP he dug up for the Studio at The Palms — a Las Vegas luxury hostelry that includes a recording studio along with other amenities such as a spa — originally came from Abbey Road.

Other Neves with similarly high-toned pedigrees still soldier on here (or is that solder on?). An 8088 originally purchased by Pete Townshend for The Who's Rampart studio found its way to another classic facility, Bearsville, in upstate New York, owned by the late Albert Grossman, Bob Dylan's manager. Malekpour upgraded it and brokered it most recently to Neil Finn of Crowded House where it now resides in his studio in New Zealand. An SSL J9064 that started out in the private studio Room With A Vu in Manhattan a decade and a half ago — a youngster, relatively speaking — went from there to Unique Recording and ultimately back into a private studio for the band Green Day.

Consoles have their own genealogical trees. The Neve 8068 that started out in the Boogie Hotel on Long Island, New York in the late 1970s travelled across the East River to Skyline Studios in 1983 before ending up at the home studio of jazz composer and television scorer Dave Grusin. Then again, some seem destined to be homebodies — the five SSL consoles at Quad Recording in New York are still in their original locations, save one, which travelled to Nashville when the studio took over another facility down there. In fact, the consoles were anchored pretty well — they outlasted the original ownership of the studio.

The battleship console might seem almost quaint in the current technology landscape and perhaps from a purely workflow-oriented perspective, it is. But the perceptual value of a large-format console seems to have moved in the opposite direction from its actual monetary worth. If you ask most studio owners, engineers, producers and artists, they would much rather be photographed in front of a 20-foot-long desk than a 2m x 2m box with 16 pages of digital overlay depth. Like the vinyl records that are still used in gold and platinum sales awards, and the semiotic tape reel flanges that still appear on hard disk recording system controls, the battleship console is as useful as an icon as it is a piece of technology, if not more so. Now that's staying power.

The following is unrelated to the above (except to the extent that everything is always related to everything else) but eminently worth noting in this space. In the never-ending search for the big picture, I ran across a few studies that quantify the digital music business in a way that reflects the true scope of what's happened. As you look at the stats, keep in mind that MP3 was barely on the radars a decade ago, and that there were eight major record labels then as opposed to four (and counting) now, and that The Hit Factory and Enterprise and a dozen other major studios were still open and thriving.

- Arbitron and Edison Research's survey of the digital radio world, *The Infinite Dial*, *Radio's Digital Platforms: Online, Satellite, HD Radio and Podcasting*, found that more than one in five people — 21 percent

of respondents — listened to Internet radio during the previous month — an audience that adds up to some 52 million people if the statistic is applied to the general US population — and that the weekly Internet radio audience grew by more than 50% from a year earlier.

- Worldwide music sales via the Internet and mobile phones exploded around the globe in 2005: sales grew three-fold, or 300% year over year, and generated US\$1.1 billion in revenues for recording companies. That's up from US\$380 million in 2004, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry's IFPI Digital Music Report 2006.

- Some 420 million single music tracks were downloaded globally in 2005, 20 times more than two years ago and more than double the 2004 total. Digital music sales grew to account for 6% of total music sales for the year — Internet downloads accounted for

roughly 60%, and mobile phone downloads for 40%, as of 2005's half-year mark. Source: New Wave of Commerce.

- The number of songs digitised and available online from major service providers doubled to surpass the two million-track mark, while the number of legitimate online service providers grew to 335 — that's up from 230 in 2004 and 50 as of year-end 2003 (IFPI).

As Mark Twain once said, 'There are lies, damned lies and then there are statistics.' But these stats bear out the sea change wrought by digital in the music business in the last several years. When we see the numbers again next year, expect they'll tell the same tale, only more so. But we can take some comfort also in the fact that a lot of that music was made on consoles that have been around a lot longer than digital anything. ■