



Peter Cobbin

With a catalogue that is known by everyone, *The Beatles* in multichannel still remains rare. **GEORGE SHILLING** talks to the man who had the job of doing the Fab Four in 5.1 for the *Anthology* DVD.

PETER COBBIN GREW UP IN SYDNEY; his parents were music lovers and listened to a lot of classical music. He studied piano and flute and by his teenage years was playing keyboards in bands and flute in orchestras. He claims to have had ambitions for a career in recording as early as 5 years old after seeing a TV programme with someone operating all the control room knobs and switches and obviously enjoying themselves. His first job was in TV audio, but he went off and studied electronics and got a traineeship at EMI's studios in Sydney, where he met Richard Lush and Martin Benge, ex-Abbey Road engineers and Beatles session assistants.

He came into constant contact with British and American engineers and producers, and, of course, encountered lots of EMI equipment. After a couple

of years he went freelance and worked as an engineer around Australia, and also continued to write music with a MIDI setup at home. He'd just been offered a film score when a call came from Abbey Road saying they were looking for an engineer and Martin Benge had remembered him from Sydney. He spent a while deciding but eventually moved his family to London 8 years ago and has never looked back.

He is now chief engineer at Abbey Road and is able to sate his continued appetite for diverse musical genres by working on a wide variety of projects including recording large orchestras and film scores. He co-produces crossover classical projects such as Paul Schwarz – they are on their eighth album together – and last year he did an album with top cellist Caroline Dale and is still writing with her.

And he does plenty of rock and pop also, having just finished a surround mix to picture of U2 at Slaine Castle at the time of the interview. He will soon start work on the third *Lord of the Rings* film, having completed the first two.

After working on the 5.1 remixes for the *Yellow Submarine* Songtrack, he was pressed into service for the mammoth task of remixing *The Beatles Anthology* TV series for DVD release with new 5.1 and stereo soundtracks. I talked to him in Abbey Road's Studio 3 where he did the work on the SSL 9000J (photos by Henry Iddon).

How did this project come about?

For me this started over five years ago, after the *Yellow Submarine*, the guys were in listening to it and they got very excited about hearing remixes for the first time.

How did you remix 4-track material in 5.1?

I think that was the challenge, in fact the significant challenge was to make it sound just like the originals, but for it to be in surround. It had to evoke all the feeling, they had to sound the same. And obviously they had to work in a 5.1 format. So that was the challenge, doing new mixes but making them sound old.

Presumably it is mostly about decision-making.

It is, that's what I find, the sense of responsibility about making a decision, and so I just keep falling back on: 'Does it sound good, does it have the original intent of spirit?' I think also having worked with Yoko [remixing three Lennon solo albums], she's given me a bit of insight, I've got to know John a bit from this added dimension, and funnily enough in very subtle ways that affects decisions that you make, just about balances and treatments, there are reasons why he liked effects on his voice.

So, was there a lot of A-Bing with the originals?

Constantly. The tonal balance of a song was quite important, whether it was by chance or some sort of stroke of mishap, sometimes they varisped tapes a bit and that changed the tonal sound of the final outcome. Sometimes they experimented and used very heavy compression and EQ.

And that had been done at the mixing stage?

Yeah, so when I was putting the master tapes up it could sound radically different to what we know as the final mix. Sometimes they sounded remarkably similar, and some songs were fairly straightforward. The 4-track mixes on some were quite a straightforward mix – in other words a lot of the hard work was done during the actual recording and the decisions in submixing. They'd filled up one machine and bounced that to a second tape. But the great thing is that EMI, in its infinite wisdom, decided to keep all the multitracks, fairly soon after their recording career started. So even the

tapes in that intermediate stage, they kept those, so Allan Rouse, who was the project co-ordinator, knows exactly what tapes are where and he's got it all logged. And so often, we would be transferring these and we could synch them up, so suddenly from a 4-track, we might have access to six tracks or 12 tracks, or in the case of some songs even beyond that.

So you had slave reels?

Yeah, we'd probably call them slave reels today, of course they couldn't use them as slave reels because there was no means of synching them up.

So even after they'd bounced them down, they kept them?

Yep. And sometimes that was extremely helpful to build up a surround mix. Sometimes having access to one extra track – for instance, often they may have recorded two vocal tracks then bounced those down – if I could unlock those suddenly it gave me more panning options to deal with two vocals instead of it just being in a fixed position. Sometimes I elected to maybe glue them back together if I thought that sound was so embedded in our minds, the way that some instruments interact with each other it sounds different, sometimes good and sometimes not good if they're spread apart.

Who else was in the room when you were making these decisions?

Well, I was pretty much left to my own devices, it was sort of like: 'We'll let him struggle with it (hehehe!)' Which was great, then I'd always play things to Allan. When we were happy with it we'd do a series of playbacks to EMI, to Apple and eventually the guys.

What sort of creative surround techniques did you use?

Tomorrow Never Knows is a good example of where we were pretty much dictated to by what we had – the video series was already out, and we had to replicate

everything that was in the video series, so a lot of it is under dialogue – this is the Anthology version of the song, not the released version. So when they made the Anthology CDs they pulled out some of the outtakes. So that particular track has only got two things, only two tracks. Instead of having it just left and right or monoing in the centre, that I made front-back, so when the dialogue was continuing I could have it sitting in the back – very simple use of surround with front-back orientation instead of left-right... That's something you'll hear quite a bit, and it's an effective means of using surround especially when you've got something strong and consistent like dialogue.

So is it central at the back?

It's slightly spread; even though it's two tracks. The thing about doing it all here is that a lot of the processing gear they had in the 1960s we still have. For instance, all these Fairchild compressors and our valve plates. So I just put a little bit of Studio 2's chamber, which they used, and we still use, and it sounds absolutely wonderful, a tight roomy sound, just enough to give a little bit of stereo ambience that I could use both in the front and the back. So that mix is almost like a 4.0 mix, with the dialogue in the centre and the music around. When the dialogue comes up I pull it back into the surrounds a bit more.

Did you fake ambiences?

Yeah, Paul and Guy did something great with the rooftop sequence. They actually went up onto our roof and just recorded that typical noise of wind hitting microphones, it's quite distinct, in a surround format, and that gives a real dimension. So, okay, the wind's different, it's not 30-year-old wind, but that sort of thing is fine to help create an impression. And where we've used it in the music, I'm sure the purists will go: 'It wasn't there originally, so why should it be there now?' It's a valid point. But it's only used if it helps create a sense of space, and I guess we've got the advantage that at least the processing we're using in some cases is absolutely identical to what was done then.

When you used the chamber did you use the same mics and speaker?

Yeah. KM56s we use quite a bit, we have an unrivalled valve mic collection, it's the biggest in the world. We've kept a lot of our mics, particularly from the 1950s on.

And the speaker?

No, that was an Altec, and there was one still kicking around down there but it didn't sound great, and somewhere during the project I changed the microphones. The KM56s sounded great, but over the years we've had condensation and damp problems in the chamber, and the moisture started to affect the capsules, so I swapped them over to B&Ks, and you can almost run those underwater, they'll survive anywhere. So that was more an issue of practicality really. But the chamber itself sounds remarkably the same.

Why another stereo mix?

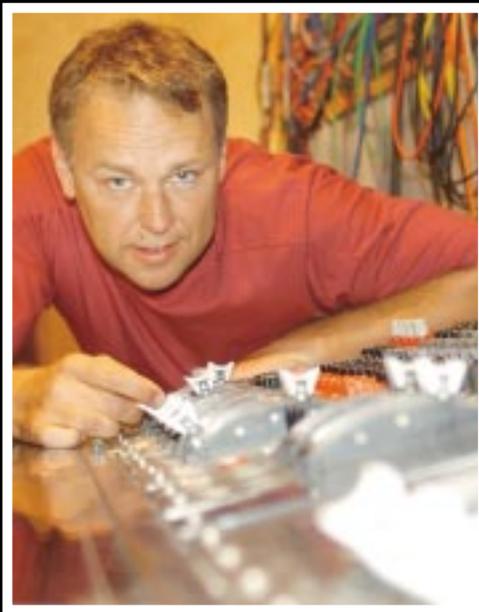
With the DVD format there is an option to fold it down and listen to 5.1 mixes in stereo, but I'm a pretty firm believer in providing a separate stereo track that has been mixed specifically for stereo. What that enables is less limitation on the 5.1 mix. When you fold down a 5.1 mix, a lot of the time it sounds pretty good; for

The Team

'Allan Rouse was the project co-ordinator, and then there were two other engineers (Guy Massey and Paul Hicks) who work at Abbey Road, and Bryony Cranstoun was from Apple, a production manager, extremely familiar with the series. We were given the series on Digi-Betas, and told to remix everything. A lot of the elements couldn't be found, so Bryony helped us locate everything.

'Guy and Paul took all the dialogue from the original DAT recordings and relayed everything to synch with the picture. A lot of it was noisy, so they cleaned everything, and with the surround dialogue, everything has been rerecorded in Studio 2 with mics and speakers, so even the ambience on the dialogue, as subtle as it is, it doesn't matter if it's effects or dialogue. And then we had two assistants, Chris Bolster for those two guys, and I had Mirek Stiles, so it was a team of seven. Guy and Paul assisted me when I did Yellow Submarine, so it seemed logical – they're good engineers in their own rights.

'Both of them mixed songs on parts 7 and 8. I would oversee the work they were doing, and we built up really good teamwork – the whole thing couldn't have happened with just one person. When you've got an assistant who is up for anything, it frees you up to try things, and to log all this Mirek did an amazing job with all the recalls and notes; it's reams and reams of information, documentation, backups...'





film scores it usually sounds pretty great. You might do a couple of tweaks or special rides. For pop music, it would be a shame to approach the whole thing going: 'I can't really put that in the surrounds because it's not going to sound good on the fold-down'. So right from the word go, part of the philosophy was that we had the budget to do stereo mixes. So they come up on the DVD as a linear PCM CD quality track.

Did you go back to the original masters?

Yes, for most of their career they recorded on 1-inch 4-track tape, and we transferred those in initially with good converters straight to a Sony 3348 HR machine. But then I was needing the flexibility to work out things like edits. Sometimes, when you play back one of their final masters, there's a whole archaeological trip behind it that needs sorting out. Whether the edits happened at a 1/4-inch master level, or whether they happened at a multitrack level, all those things are much more flexible to work out in a workstation, and I've primarily used Pro Tools.

Hearing Day Tripper, I notice the stereo spread is more 'normal' than the original mix...

That's right. I think if there was any kind of overriding desire, it was where we could centralise the vocals to try and do that. And it's not like, there's something in the left rear, there's something in the right, it's just to create a sense of space, and if you flicked to the stereo you'd feel a shift forwards. On the original, which was 4-track, there were two tracks panned left and two right. Now, they had used ADT on the original mix, which I replicated with tape-based ADT, and I was able to use that in the surrounds. And there was a plate reverb with a tape predelay that they used quite a bit, so I replicated that.

Did you ever refer to the mono mixes?

Yes all the time, because I think much has been said and written about the mono mixes, but I've had the privilege of listening to just about every mono mix of every song they ever made, along with the stereos, and the mono mixes are amazing, they're fantastic. The balances are great. If they had spent time doing the mixes, it was the mono mixes. Particularly until 1968, the stereos were a requirement, often done after the band, and sometimes the producer, had left. I would love to see the mono mixes out there on some format because they're good.

It must have been difficult to decide whether to remove obvious errors.

I would always err on the side of caution, and go: 'Would they, if they had the opportunity to remove a noise or something?' They probably would have. And some things are really obvious, like on Day Tripper there was a punch-in, you could hear a clunk, that's the sort of thing that's painless to remove.

Is it audible in the original stereo mix?

Yeah, but you don't really hear it in the mono. So little decisions like that, you're always juggling. Then if there were things I wasn't sure about, we had a team, and we'd discuss it.

Meetings about clunks?

Not specifically setting an agenda, but it would come up in conversation. Having the added responsibility of trying to make something like The Beatles songs work in surround, knowing people are probably going to be fairly critical, listening to those songs – it's been a bit of a pressure, but probably a healthy one. ■