



Ronald's Vision

Galaxy Studios in Belgium has installed the world's first API Vision all-discrete analogue surround production console into in-house producer/engineer Ronald Prent's Studio One. How it got there is quite a story.

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IT'S THE SORT OF ONCE in a lifetime opportunity that very few people get – help to design the desk you want. Admittedly Galaxy Studios head engineer Ronald Prent started out on a fairly safe wicket with what is essentially a development of API's desirable all-discrete Legacy board. However, it's that desk and Ronald's experience as a multichannel mix specialist that allowed API designer Paul Wolff to combine the two into the Vision multichannel production desk.

Contact had originally been made via API's 2500 compressor, which had been loaned to Ronald for testing and he ended up buying it.

'I was getting into all this surround sound and was missing the sound of that box in my mixes and eventually I phoned them up and asked if we could talk about a surround compressor,' remembers Ronald. 'They said no, but I got to talk to Paul Wolff and, of course, he said yes. We spent half a year on the phone and email about how it was supposed to be and in the end I asked him to tell me how much it would be and I'd buy it. Paul was allowed to build me one. It wasn't

cheap, I don't think they made any money out of it, but he built a great machine. It's the best surround compressor but it's the only one in the world although there will be a modular one to go with this console.

'I was enjoying mixing with that thing on my SSL 9000J,' he continues. 'The XL came out and I had a look at it but we weren't at a point where we needed to buy a new console – I needed to have different features on a console because I felt limited by my desk's bus structure for the way I work in surround. At around the same time API emailed me and said – what about a new console? I wrote back and told them: "Only if we can talk multichannel, otherwise I'm not interested." A year later I was on a plane going out there to try a mix on an API Legacy Plus.

'I'd just done a mix here with all my outboard gear and I took a Pro Tools drive of it and mixed the same song again there with only the console and one reverb,' says Ronald. 'I was in there for two hours and I was really happy with it but when I got back here and played back that stereo mix it sounded better than my original. That's not in terms of

balancing but in terms of frequency – the bottom end was unbelievable.'

Ronald says it was very important for him to stay with an analogue board. 'The digital desks don't do it for me for the way I work,' he explains. 'Doing it in analogue is more difficult but I talked to all the manufacturers and I got to a stage with API where they asked me to tell them what I wanted so they could see if they could build it.

'After talking to Paul they came up with this concept where every fader, every channel has a dedicated 5-channel bus and a 5-channel panner,' continues Ronald. 'They've changed the way the routing works on the console – it's assignable routing. There are two full-throw motorised faders on each channel and every channel can be routed to a 5.1 bus, three stereo buses for stem mixing, and a 24 matrix. And, this is one of the big advantages of this console, under the LCR panner runs a second panner, which is only Left-Right. So the console always produces a stereo mix while you're in multichannel. It's not a downmix; it's an original stereo mix. There is a downmixer in the console so you can use it if you want but it always produces a stereo mix in multichannel or in stereo it produces a multichannel mix.

'Why that's significant to me is that it cuts down the production time enormously,' he states. 'I've tried to simulate this on other consoles. I mix in multichannel and once I'm done with that I press another button to listen in stereo, refine the stereo mix a little bit, and off you go. If a song takes a day or a day and a half to mix, it's 2-3 hours more to do the stereo mix or vice versa. It's one of the reasons why we started looking at this in a totally different way because doing both formats one after the other, clients don't want to pay for it.'

Ronald agrees that his take on this issue is a little different because he works primarily on multichannel mixes with the stereo mix bolted on, whereas most people still work primarily in stereo with the possibility of a multichannel mix. He says that the Vision can accommodate users coming from either direction but the upshot is the same: 'Doing it with this console it takes me half the time.

'On other desks you can route either one or the other fader to the multichannel bus but then that's it,' says Ronald. 'That's OK and understandable but I didn't want to have that restriction if we were building a new console. Sometimes I do mixes that run into 120 to 150 in surround. Because everything is, like, times 5 and with 70 channels and only so many multichannel buses, you have to put an extra console in. I did The Scorpions with the Berlin Philharmonic and that was 160 channels – I had a console at the back that was only orchestra and a console at the front that was only the band. You have to find a way to rededicate your reverbs to certain consoles; it's a mess. You do it, you get it done, you have fun with it and you learn a lot, but I wouldn't choose to work that way.'

He's saying that he shouldn't have to work like this in 2003. 'It's doable but I don't understand why other manufacturers haven't thought of this, haven't talked to people and thought more of the multichannel flow and not the signal flow,' he says.

Vision shares a lot with the Legacy; it uses the same frame structure with some different pieces to accommodate the different modules. The mic pres are identical, as are the gates, compressors, and EQ. It has a new input module called the 1068 as opposed to the Legacy Plus' 968 and Legacy's 768. Difference being that the 1068 houses the new pan, the second 100mm fader and all the assignment and logic. The

other big difference is that the Legacy Plus uses the static bus assign module with 24 main switches and stereo routing buses. The Vision uses an automated bus assignment structure – it's not new technology, API has done it before. It operates from the surface with a PC used only to store and recall settings.

Some of the electronics are not in the channel but in the patchbay. You switch an insert on the strip and you hear the relay click behind you. Assign 80 channels to Stereo A simultaneously and it's like the sound of running your nail along a comb.

Ronald will get a couple of automated joysticks, which the Uptown automation is ready for. But there's no recall.

'It could be a problem but we've decided it won't be a problem!' laughs Ronald. 'All the EQs are stepped, all the switches – the bus assigns, aux assigns and designations – are instantly resettable and automated. There is no provision for pot recall. But if you want to have a good sound it's the price you pay.'

'There are engineers who will live with that for a shorter production time and better sound. The other thing is, let's have good assistants again!' he adds. 'It's about music and music is about hearing and feeling, it's not about reproducing a line on a screen. If it's not right and you have to recall it, you might as well just do it again; it's fast enough. I've done as many mixes from scratch again as I have recalled ones.'

'The whole thing with SACD, DVD-A and all this high resolution stuff is that we should be putting more value back into the music so people have a reason to buy it. Recall's not going to help that,' he says.

The centre section is comprehensive but extremely simply laid out without the sort of switch redundancy that you can encounter on high-flyer centre panels. It also follows a sort of graduated increase in complexity as you move up the panel with the really obvious and essential stuff right down at the bottom and the least frequently needed stuff up at the top.

The beauty of the arrangement with the break out patchbay is that you can freely patch around the EQs,

gates and compressors according to need. 'Everything has a patch point, it's the way API has always done it and it's just that simple,' to quote Paul Wolff.

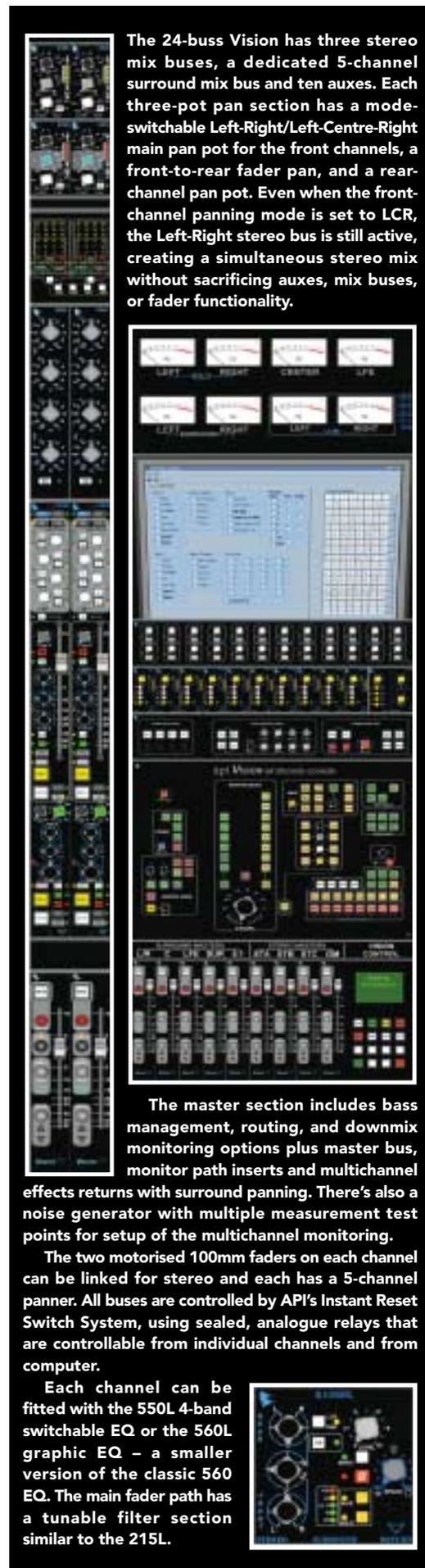
While there are number of APIs in Europe, the nearest modern API to Galaxy is in New York. Performance is identical to a Legacy although Vision asks a premium of 15-20% on a size-for-size Legacy. Even so you could have a desk just like Ronald's for around US\$600,000. With 80 channels, 80 225L compressors, 80 235L gates, plus 56 550Ls and 32 API 560Ls EQs, Galaxy's console is the largest ever produced by API. The centre section has 32 212L mic preamps, 16 215L sweepable filters and four 205L DIs and he has 24 stereo effects return modules too. The warranty is 5 years unconditional on every part including the jacks in the patchbay. 'And it has black VU meters!' adds Ronald. 'One of the best things is the stereo return module that also has a 5.1 output bus plus a Space button, which is 5.1 divergence with control.'

It adds up to a total of 208 inputs. 'And they'll all be used because I can use all of them,' says Ronald. 'On my last desk I had 42 faders sitting there that were never used, they were just returns. And in surround it gets even worse. This desk had to be built.'

I have to say that the Vision really, really appeals to me. It hits all the right buttons: all analogue, lots of historical references, great name, good pedigree, all the bits, stacks of genuinely innovative functionality for modern multichannel working methods, and it looks fantastic. It goes without saying that it has to sound great.

Ronald is clearly delighted and excited by his new board: 'I really wanted something different because everyone mixes on the same desks.' He had sessions booked on the week after commissioning the Vision and I've checked back and his enthusiasm was not dampened.

'It's amazing,' he told me. 'It's going to make my life so much easier.' It'll also save his clients money and save him time to apply his boundless creativity. Money well spent. ■



The 24-buss Vision has three stereo mix buses, a dedicated 5-channel surround mix bus and ten auxes. Each three-pot pan section has a mode-switchable Left-Right/Left-Centre-Right main pan pot for the front channels, a front-to-rear fader pan, and a rear-channel pan pot. Even when the front-channel panning mode is set to LCR, the Left-Right stereo mix bus is still active, creating a simultaneous stereo mix without sacrificing auxes, mix buses, or fader functionality.

The master section includes bass management, routing, and downmix monitoring options plus master bus, monitor path inserts and multichannel effects returns with surround panning. There's also a noise generator with multiple measurement test points for setup of the multichannel monitoring.

The two motorised 100mm faders on each channel can be linked for stereo and each has a 5-channel panner. All buses are controlled by API's Instant Reset Switch System, using sealed, analogue relays that are controllable from individual channels and from computer.

Each channel can be fitted with the 550L 4-band switchable EQ or the 560L graphic EQ – a smaller version of the classic 560 EQ. The main fader path has a tunable filter section similar to the 215L.

