Ty Unwin

He's a musical prodigy turned music for television specialist with his own work space.
Ty Unwin is also one of the first power users in the UK of Mackie's new DigitalXBus desk.
KEVIN HILTON gets him to explain his working methods.

CHILDREN OFTEN HAVE an idea of what they want to do in adult life. Whether they achieve the dream is another matter. Ty Unwin knew from the age of eleven that he wanted to compose music and, specially, compose music for television. Seeing the TV series version of Wolfgang Petersen's epic Das Boot, which was underpinned by an impressive electronic score by Klaus Doldinger, inspired him.

While Unwin started as a lover of lush romantic classical music he later turned to the more minimalist influences of Philip Glass, Eric Satie and John Cage. This influence can be heard on the recent BBC series Your Life in Their Hands.

He began learning the piano at the age of nine and gained a Grade A when not much older. He says he was more interested in writing his own compositions than playing the work of other composers and when aged 14 got into synthesisers and drum machines. At the age of 16 he won the BBC Song for Christmas competition, which led to other TV appearances. He studied music and composition at Huddersfield University and, on leaving, wrote music for a number of children's programmes and later became regular composer on the mid-1990s BBC series Vets in the Wild, followed by the celebrity-based Born to be Wild. His later credits include the 2000-2001 epic series Space, fronted by actor Sam Neill, and the drama-documentaries Genghis Kahn, Pompeii: The Last Day and Super Volcano.

Originally from the UK's Midlands, Unwin is currently living in a small village not far from Oxford. He has a temporary studio set up in a bedroom, based around

a Mackie DigitalXBus console and many keyboards. He is planning to move soon and build a separate studio with a control room and live area. He spoke to *Resolution* about the need for a mixing console, music libraries and hardware versus software.

You have a large set-up of synthesisers and computers but you mix on a console instead of in a virtual environment. Why is that?
I don't understand how people use virtual faders and interfaces to mix in software. I need to mix from hardware; the physicality is very important. It's as though you lose something unless you can pull on the faders. That's part of the reason I've now got the DigitalXBus, because of the control surface. Others are starting to see consoles as redundant or at best just use hardware for sub-mixing, relying on computers and interfaces for the main mix. I use the DigitalXBus like a traditional mixer, with the computers and synthesisers running into the desk. At the moment I'm waiting for the FireWire card, which will allow me to connect from the DigitalXBus into the Macs.

Why did you decide on the DigitalXBus?
I used to have a Yamaha desk but I wasn't happy with the sound and couldn't really get to grips with it. After that I moved onto the Roland VM7000 series, which cost a fortune and sounded amazing but the user interface was not ideal. The DigitalXBus was the first desk where the sound quality I wanted was there. Whatever you put into it comes out the same and the processing is in a league of its own.

Moving to the DigitalXBus made sense because I'd

used Mackie Control in the past and that is integrated now into the desk. It was also a logical move because I use UADs. I'm something of a DSP freak so having the combination of the DigitalXBus and UADs, as well as PowerCore and the Creamware Scope platform, gives me a powerful set-up.

What do you record onto?
Generally Nuendo or Cubase. I've also got Logic, which I use if I'm working with someone who has it too, and Ableton if the project is very loop-based. Otherwise I use either Nuendo or Cubase.

You've got comprehensive outboard gear, so do you use that for EQ and other processing or do you prefer to work within the desk or the Mac?
It depends on the project but generally I'll process either in the Mac or in the desk with the UAD. The Mac also has a UAD card so I can use a combination of the two. Theoretically it's possible to do everything within the desk; the internal EQ on it is good enough so I don't have to worry about outboard effects.

Do you try to strike a balance between software and hardware?
At one time I was working mostly with synthesisers and held back completely from computer systems because I was into hardware. When people were getting into Atari and Mac in the late 1980s, the Akai ASQ10 digital sequencer was the only piece of software that convinced me it was the way ahead. Later there were lots of samplers on the market and it

was only the Tascam GigaStudio system that switched me over to working mainly with software. It enabled me to do things that I couldn't do with hardware samplers, which made a great difference to the way I work. Because of the amount of work I do for television it's important to be able to sync properly to the image you're working to on screen and hardware often had problems syncing up to SMPTE. I've still got hardware but it's not used very often.

GigaStudio is now my main tool; I couldn't live without it. The kind of work I do is very intensive in the amount of processing required. I have four GigaStudio systems but some of the Hollywood composers go even further and are running 25. We do need that kind of power, particularly running the big production music and instrument libraries like VSL [Vienna Symphonic Library] and Quantum Leap. It would be very easy to have a solo violin on just one machine, so you can see how it all mounts up. If people want to put up with less realistic sounds, that's fine, and there is the argument for getting in real players, but because of the nature of the work I do, it's not really possible. Scenes are sometimes being changed right up to the last dub. A scene might be finished as far as I'm concerned but the director may alter it or pull it altogether, which means that the audio recording needs to be changed and if that change comes through in the early hours of the morning you can't call in a flautist or a violinist to play a new part. At one time we couldn't get away with a sampled solo instrument but it's different now. That doesn't mean I wouldn't or don't use real musicians but I only do it for a film that is locked completely.

and 626s for the centre and rear.

Super Volcano has a 5.1 soundtrack but not for the music. I could have done fake 5.1 but there was so much going on with the effects that it would have been redundant. High definition will be appearing through next year and I can't see myself getting through 2006 without doing 5.1 for at least one project.

I had a surround sound system at my old place and my attitude towards 5.1 music is that it shouldn't be used purely from an effects point of view. We can put the bass and the drums in the rear channels and pan everything around but are we doing that because we can or because it's musically correct?

In some cases it might be enough to take the stereo mix and just pull it forward to give a sense of extra depth and use the rears for big effects and to give a sense of space. The idea of flying instruments and sounds round people's heads is pointless.

Do you have to work hard to get a balance between the sound effects and the music?

When you write for TV you need to be aware of everything that goes around the music. On smaller projects I've sometimes had to integrate sound design within the score because there wasn't enough budget for a sound team. On Space, things were rushed because I was brought in to replace someone and I didn't know what was going to be done in the dub. I spent time putting in sound design and when it came to the first dub that clashed with the big effects the actual sound designers had put in. For Super Volcano I had to judge how much of a hole to leave for the effects. It takes years of trial and error to know where to leave gaps. You need to be cautious; you can't go hell for leather if everything else is going big as well. Something will give way if the limiter is being pushed and it's usually the music. That's why I've gone in a more minimalist direction, making things small. It's easy to make everything bigger but more difficult to be intimate. ■

Can the technology dominate the music rather than being a tool?

Technology can occasionally get in the way of the music — that's the frustrating thing about it. Over the years I've read the magazines and dreamt of owning this or that keyboard. Now I'm in a position where I can have what I once dreamed of. The trouble is that when I was limited in what gear I could afford I still knew what it was all about but now I've got unlimited access to equipment I know only ten per cent. It's especially true of software and I have to hit the manuals.

Is there a danger that with wide access to music programs, libraries, synthesisers and samplers music can begin to sound alike?

That's why I steer clear of the presets and the loop syndrome. Anyone with a home PC and £500 can knock out something, but writing for picture is something different — it's another leap. Sometimes you can't avoid using a sound because it becomes associated with particular things in people's minds. On Pompeii: The Last Day I used the Bizarre Guitar sample as part of the volcano effects and although I was cautious about it the production team loved it. Later I heard the same sample on another programme and swore to myself that I wouldn't use it again. When I came to do Super Volcano the producer kept referring to that particular sample; in a way it had become

associated with the sound of a volcano, so I used it again. People think that if they've got the software and the gear they can do the job, but if you're going to do it properly you've got to have certain tools. Central to that is the mixing console. I had one of the first two DigitalXBuses in the UK, this January, because I could see where the desk was going. It's had its software problems but I saw the potential, particularly in integrating it with UAD and using it as a hub for the computers. It's mixing down from four GigaStudio systems, as well as other sources. Sometimes I'm running all 72 channels but other times it can be just eight.

Of course, once it's on television people can't tell what something was mixed on, which is different from sample libraries because sounds can be recognisable. I try to get in first with new libraries; even if I use a sound very occasionally it's still worth having everything available.

What arrangements do you have for surround sound, given that the recording space you have at the moment is temporary and not purpose-built?

The layout I'm using at present is configured to the shape of the room and the main problem is that I don't have any surround sound capability because I couldn't fit in the loudspeakers. Luckily the last couple of projects I've worked on didn't call for surround. When it's all set up I have Mackie 824s at the front