Mixing U2
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Olympic Opening Ceremony
Tim Palmer is a difficult engineer to pigeon-hole. From the moment he got his breaks early in his career in the ‘80s, he’s been producing and mixing a hugely diverse collection of artists. His career has taken in sessions with the likes of Bowie’s Tin Machine, two Tears For Fears albums, Sepultura, Robert Plant and Pearl Jam, among many others. Comparatively recently, Tim turned his attention to being a specialist mix engineer, “because staying up till 5am for two months on end has become less appealing”. His invaluable blend of a mixer’s proficiency and producer’s creativity came to the attention of Irish über-group, U2. Tim was quickly inducted into the Dublin-based audio brains trust for the mixing stages of U2’s new album, All That You Can’t Leave Behind.

Christopher Holder: First up, I’ve got to ask you about the U2 sessions. How did the U2 gig eventuate?

Tim Palmer: I first met Bono many years ago at the Tin Machine shows and subsequently I mixed the song he contributed to on the Michael Hutchence album, as well as mixing one song [The Ground Beneath Her Feet] for a film which Bono had co-written, called The Million Dollar Hotel. Then the band asked me to mix a couple of songs for the new album. They sent the tracks out to LA for me to work on. But you’ve got to understand that mixing isn’t necessarily a final stage for U2, it’s simply part of an ever-evolving process – I mean, arrangements are being changed right to the death. Anyway, they asked me to fly to Dublin where they were finishing the album off with Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois.

CH: So, are they control freaks, always looking over your shoulder?

TP: No, not at all, they are very open to new ideas. They have a band policy where they don’t accept anything until every member is totally happy, and what with having to please Eno, Lanois, and myself, things take time!
Mixing

CH: Did you approach the U2 gig like any other?
TP: I approached the U2 gig like any other, but soon found it wasn’t a gig like any other! The band’s determination to always better themselves is quite staggering considering they have been making records for so many years – there is no resting on previous glories here. They aren’t precious about anything. At the drop of a hat, even after two weeks of overdubs and mixing, if they feel they can better the original track, they will be straight back in to recut. When you think you’re ready to print a mix, Bono might appear with a new lyric and chorus melody and turn the whole song on its head. There are so many versions of songs I don’t know how they remember what they’ve done. Edge carries a huge bag of CDs with him which should be lifted by two roadies! Somehow he can remember the smallest detail from an older version, and pulls it out of the bag for reference. I called him ‘Edge, Ears the Size of a Planet’. You can’t sneak anything by this band!

CH: What did U2 supply you in the first instance?
TP: Originally, they sent me their material over to my base in LA on Otari RADAR format. I set my ProTools rig up alongside the RADAR so I could try my ideas and run them separately – this way if I moved any parts around it was safely in ProTools and the original parts remained intact. In Dublin I pretty much replicated the same setup.

CH: It must be quite stimulating being part of project like that, along with so many audio luminaries.
TP: Well, yeah. It was good to have the opportunity to meet the other parts of the team. We would all eat dinner together every night and, at one point, we had the band.

ProTools – the good, the bad & the undecided

ProTools has been amazing for me because it’s so flexible. Recently I’ve been using it purely as a ‘mix tool’. Whatever recording format I’m sent, I will have my ProTools rig set up running alongside. For example, I can take the chorus vocals, record them into ProTools then mix them underneath the original vocal, but maybe distorted using a bit of Ampfarm. Or, I can take a guitar phrase which is just a bit strange and fix it. With some songs I’ll even try a new arrangement.

I also love the fact that I can get in and move notes about and make things tighter, but you’ve got to know when to stop. I mean, this ability to tweak and tweak and tweak, was never anything that was demanded of the record buying public. I feel the same about Autotune, but engineers seem to Autotune just about everything these days. The fact is, people like things out of tune, they always did, and always will. No one has ever said, ‘I’d buy this record if you could make the backing track a bit thinner and get the tuning a bit closer’. Another word for this imperfection is ‘character’. We’re too preoccupied with perfection these days.

I’ll tell you another thing about ProTools. Because you can record so much material onto the hard drives, bands and their producers are failing to make decisions. These decisions are often being left to me when I come to mix. I have seen a guitar part recorded over five tracks with different mics and been told to choose at the mix stage. At least in the old days people were forced to make decisions. The word ‘bounce’ doesn’t exist anymore. As a consequence of this, I often have to spend four or five hours planning out how I’m going to get all the material up onto the console. Important decisions are being left more and more to the mixer. On one level the additional creativity is appealing, but record company A&R are going to have to realise that the mix is going to take longer.
Brian Eno, Daniel Lanois, Mike Hedges, Steve Lillywhite, and myself all sitting around discussing the album. Of course we didn't always agree on things, but that's the point really, the band has the opportunity to get more than one opinion on a song. It really is a team effort, just because you spend a week on song doesn't mean you get to finish it. It's a bit of a tag team situation.

CH: Even in extraordinary circumstances like this U2 gig, are there certain immutable truths about mixing that still hold true?

TP: To a point yes. I like to think of every song as a story. The structure of a song should build the plot, and it's your job to ensure the story unfolds. For example, in a pop song, the chorus obviously needs to hit home. You look at the tools you've been presented with, and you say, "okay, how am I going to make these tools work for me to make this song successful?"

CH: With any new job, what's the first step you take?

TP: The first thing I would do with a mix is to listen to what the band has done before. This would include previous work and any new rough mixes. I can have a listen to what it is they're trying to achieve, and try and make it happen.

Maybe the rough mix can tell me that it's the groove which is driving the song, and in that case, I would home in on that. Or, from a more technical standpoint, the rough mix might tell me that the recording lacks brightness. So rather than EQ every single individual thing, as I push it up, I could start off by getting a very rough balance and putting EQ over the entire mix and give it a tweak. For that sort of thing I love to use a GML EQ. Some Eqs seem really unnatural and pointed, but the GML is very smooth and musical (I know this is a term which is often overused). You can fine tune your mix without cranking the top end on every channel.

CH: Is it important to get a good sound happening quickly to keep you inspired, rather than fiddling about with too many of the intricacies early on?

TP: It's useful to get started on a good footing — you at least have a focal point for what you are trying to achieve. The thing about being in a studio is you're presented with a million combinations of ideas, sounds and effects, and if you don't quickly decide what it is you want to do, you really could spend a lot of time just fumbling about trying to find something. You really have to know your reverbs and what's available and be able to pinpoint where you're at.

CH: After you get a rough mix together and get a general vibe, how would you generally approach it?

TP: It's different every time. For example, in one song I might go for a nice clean, solid, compressed bass sound. In another song I might decide the pre-chorus needs a really reggae, squashed bass with very low end. Maybe I would even distort the bass for the chorus of a particular tune, who knows? Very rarely would I have the same effect from the beginning of the song to the end. Take the vocals, for example. Quite often you want the vocal in the chorus to be more vital, so you might mix in some distortion or you might put a little bit of delay on, while in the verse you might make the vocal very dry. For the bridge you might have a tiny bit of slap... the song should tell you what to do. After all, a drummer and a bass player will change their groove or their parts according to what is required at that point in the song, so when you're mixing you must think in the same way. Nothing needs to remain static.

Tim Palmer on his involvement with Pearl Jam's classic album, Ten.

While in LA I mixed Mother Lovebone, which essentially was Pearl Jam's previous incarnation. That was one of those strange cases where I'd mixed an album without the band present — I was in LA, they were in Seattle. Months later I got a phone call to tell me that the band's singer had died of a heroin overdose, which was awful news. They carried on for a while and still put the album out. The remaining members decided to form a new band and auditioned for a new singer, found Eddie Vedder and from the ashes of Mother Love Bone, Pearl Jam was born. They recorded Ten and asked me to mix it. I didn't need a lot of convincing, but I really wanted to mix it in London where I was living at that time. So they all flew to London, and we began working at Ridgefarm Studios in Dorking, just outside London.

I found the whole process to be very relaxed, I just got on with it. The band came in to listen each morning, we had a little chat about things, a couple of pushes and pulls and it was done. The whole record was done in 10 or 11 days, it was fantastic.

Coincidentally, only a few months prior to that Pearl Jam mix I was in LA producing a rock band, and began working on mixes for them, when the head of the label (I won't mention his name, but he's a very big man in the American music industry) said, "I don't think you have what it takes to mix rock records for America. I'm going to get someone else in to do the mixing." I was gutted because I'd always mixed the records I'd produced. Anyway, I thought, "well, bite your lip, and just finish the project". I had to sit there and watch somebody else mix my production and I found that really hurtful — which is a little ironic, seeing I now do this to other people all the time!

After the A&R man's brutal comments, the next project I undertook was the Pearl Jam album. So, "I do have what it takes! they liked it!" It was the tonic that was required because for a minute there I was worried. I was thinking, "maybe he's right", but when the time came to do the Pearl Jam mix it was a case of: "well, fuck it, I'll just do it the way I always do it and see what happens".

Piece of trivia: on Ten I got credited for playing 'pepper shaker and fire extinguisher!' The reason for that was purely because we were in the middle of the countryside and I just wanted a bit of percussion, so I tapped away on a pepper grinder and a fire extinguisher with a couple of drumsticks!