Synclavier: A Sample of The Future for Recording?

Microphones Special Feature

Zeus B Held, Tim Palmer

Studios: Terminal, The Yard
Richard Buskin talks to Tim Palmer, ex-Utopia staffer who has been bridging that mythological gap between engineering and production with consummate ease for the likes of Robert Plant, Limahl and newcomers This Island Earth.

Enthusiasm is the first thing that one notices about Tim Palmer when talking to him regarding his work: enthusiasm for all of the different aspects of his job, combined with a fairly insatiable appetite for ever more musical and technical knowledge to aid his already precocious ability in the studio, that all clearly stems from his own deep love of the music itself. Indeed it is doubtful these characteristics that have enabled him, at the age of 22, to freelance around the studios and at present be co-producing and engineering Robert Plant’s new album, having recently worked with, amongst others, Kajagoogoo, Limahl, Marilyn, Dead or Alive, This Island Earth, Foreign Press and Darren Dean.

At 16 he experienced his first real musical influence when punk exploded onto the scene; at 18 he was failureing all his A-levels whilst otherwise preoccupied with the band that he was playing in, and shortly thereafter he was applying to Utopia Studios for a job, any job. Having been appointed as tea-boy and practising relentlessly with his little perforations, he soon took his first step into the big time when he brewed a cuppa for...a very famous person!

“I was sent into Studio 1 and told to ‘clear up all the cups and make some tea for everyone’ and I said ‘sure’ — I was prepared to do the running around, anything! Anyway, there was a black band in there and I thought “I know that singer from somewhere!” I went to the kitchen and they said “You know who that is in there who you’re making the tea for, don’t you?” I said “no”... “Stevie Wonder!” So one of the first cups of tea I made in Utopia was for Stevie Wonder. He was a really great guy to talk to. He was producing — the engineer was Pete Walsh — and was working on some of his material with his backing group Wonderlove.

Tape-Opping

“I would sit in on as many sessions as I could, staying behind as long as possible just watching. I had been in a band and seen what studios were like, but they were only 4-track and 8-track, and then seeing such a big desk I couldn’t believe I would ever be able to understand how it worked. At Utopia I was basically just the runaround boy, doing everything; making sure the studio was clean, the microphones were all wired up, and basically just helping the tape-op and running around doing whatever the producer and engineer wanted me to do to help the session run as smoothly as possible. Then by basically sitting and watching I would observe the assistant engineer who would talk to me and explain what he was doing. Eventually I got into assistant engineering myself. A lot of people got fed up with it but I really did enjoy tape-opping with different people. It was great, and obviously the best way to learn, from other people’s mistakes and other people’s good points, and I was privileged to tape-op on a Heatwave, Donovan and Lulu albums, and with Dire Straits, so I was tape-opping with outside engineers and studio engineers and that way I could learn. You’re really as good as your teachers can make you because you learn the basics from them, and it is down to you to decide which parts of their skill you do and don’t like. You mustn’t be afraid to ask questions, and I must admit that as a tape-op I was a bit outspoken. But I was really into the music. I’d often be told to shut up because if I felt something should be changed I would say “why don’t we try this?” and at first I was a case of all the eyes looking round at me, but really it’s just a case of learning when you should and shouldn’t speak.

From that I got the breaks to start engineering.

Production

“I worked a lot with Zeus B. held, doing the Dead or Alive album and mixing John Foxx, and I got into production purely because as an engineer rather than just sitting around doing my job I was very interested in how the track was progressing. I would write notes and listen to the demo tapes which I would get a copy of, and make sure that I would put in my two pennies worth of how I thought it should be. Then I got my big break into production when I was tape-opping on the Kajagoogoo album with Colin Thurston, and when it came to doing the B-sides he was busy so he said to the band “why don’t you work with Tim on the B-sides?” So I engineered and co-produced two B-sides with them and they chose one of the tracks to go on the album. Now suddenly from tape opping on the album I had produced one track on it which was a really good break and that obviously is how I met Limahl. I then met Dee Harris whilst tape opping on the Fashion album, and Zeus was producing that... as you know, it’s a very small world in this business!”

Tim’s favourite producers are George Martin and Phil Spector although he prefers the work technique employed by the former as opposed to the more dictatorial style of the latter, citing a quote by Martin in an interview whereby he stated that “a good producer will make the artists think that they thought of the idea themselves”. Palmer agrees that he prefers to act as ‘an extra member of the band’ rather than as the resident Fuhrer, and this extends to collaborating with others in
the same line of work as himself. "I find it very hard not to fiddle when I'm working with another engineer. I have worked with other engineers but I like to do the sound myself. However, when for instance I'm working with Dee Harris or Benji Lefevre (who has co-produced Robert Plant's last two albums along with Robert and the engineer), it's a nice change because as an engineer you can tend to let your ego get in the way of your producing. If you get what is technically a perfect sound, that is not always what is best for the ear of everyone else. So it's nice to be able to bounce ideas off other people, and it's the same between the musicians and the sound people. Sometimes it may sound better to leave in a rough edge, and it would be silly to let one's ego get in the way and to say "no, no, That's the way I want it!"

Remixing

"There's a lot of remixing going on and record companies saying "I think needs a remix", but I think that when you are working and producing you have to consider really what the majority of people are going to listen to! I mean we pick out fine details that most people would never notice. "I often play other remixes to my girlfriend and say "do you like this one better?" And nine times out of ten she says "well, it's not really all that different", and that makes me think that very often remixing is a waste of time. If I am going to do a remix then I like to make sure that it really does sound different, rather than just an extra bit of reverb on the snares or whatever. "You have to be really objective regarding a song's structure and the perspective of all the parts. I really feel that it is very important that every part has its own place in the stereo picture, and that every section has its own identity, because then the track is interesting from beginning to end. You have to be able to change and adapt yourself to each individual situation: There's no point in becoming an expert on sequencer work and then trying to get a rockabilly band to have sequencers in their track. You have to apply yourself to that kind of music and get onto their wavelength and try to make the best rockabilly record. You have to be able to change accordingly. I'd rather the band are behind me in the mix giving their suggestions than me acting as dictator." Working all of the time at different studios Palmer enjoys experimenting and gaining experience as he has to adapt his skills to any new piece of equipment that he encounters, and amongst some of the newer devices he expresses an especial liking for the digital reverbs and the AMS triggering technique: "I love the fact that as an engineer you can have something on a sample tape and then put it on the track and say "what do you think of this, guys?" When it comes to drumming, however, Tim recently found himself having to adapt his skills to man rather than machine when working on Robert Plant's album at Marcus Studios.

Drums and Machines

"The drummer was Richie Heyward, (Ex Little Feat). It was a change really, because over the last year or so as you know the Linn drum machine has virtually taken over and it was great to actually record live drums again. I had almost forgotten what it's like!

"It took up such a large chunk of the first multi-track that we thought we'd do what is quite common now, which is to go on 48-track to keep the first 24 tracks as fresh as possible, so that the quality was very high. We then decided to move on to Rockfield to do the overdubs which were on the slave, so we made a bounce down of the whole kit and a bounce down of the rough overdubs that we had done at Marcus and gradually we replaced everything on the slave reels, so that eventually when we come to mix the drum track it will be virtually unplayed. Mind you, it was purely on the basis of being a convenience as well because, with the drums taking up so many tracks, rather than having to bounce them down it was nice to be on fresh reel. That way if somebody has an idea just go for it and try it rather than say "well, we can slot you in on track 14" and having to worry about all of that, because that is what these...
24-tracks are all about really: it's just a case of leaving the options open until a later date.

"I think that you have to approach every situation differently really. For instance, in the case of Robert Plant's album real drums with Richie Heyward were definitely the thing to do. He was using modern sounding Simmons pads mixed in with his kit, and you get a really good combination of feel with the modern sounds. But I've used drum machines a lot, especially when a band basically don't know which way they want to work. For example, when I did Limahl's album - we used a Fairlight - and the way he writes songs is that he has the complete melody but the arrangement we work on between us. I worked with Dee Harris on that. We put a code from the Fairlight down, and with it a basic rhythm, and then as the track progressed and began to take shape we could then reassess the drum part which we couldn't have done with a real drummer. We could go back and say "well, why don't we try it like this?" and I really like that aspect but I don't think you can beat real drums for 'that' drum sound. I like both really: I do like playing around with drum machines and at the same time I think that there are a lot of things that a real drummer can do that a drum machine will never be able to do.

"Recently a band that I was working with for EMI wanted to use a real drummer but we started by working with the Linn and we were going to put the drums on last. When he was playing it wasn't really the sound that we wanted, so to get the combination of the drum machine tightness and the real drummer he played along with his snare drum and hi-hat and played all of the fills which were very high velocity, really up and down, then we triggered his snare with the AMS on a separate track and I bounced it and switched between the triggered snare, and his real snare. It was great because you had the combination of the Linn during the verse which was rock solid, and the fills into the chorus which caught that real human element. It was my favourite combination really so far.

"On the Dead or Alive album, which is very much dance-orientated music and really aggressive, we had a tape of loads of different snares and a load of different bass drums and other percussion to put into the AMS and then trigger. We mixed about five or six snares until we achieved an enormous racket, and it was great because their songs were so aggressive and up-front and that was exactly what they required."

Necam

Regarding desks, having engineered at Utopia Tim does retain a fair degree of affection for SSL's. "Firstly an SSL was installed in Studio 1 and we had a Neve with a Necam in the remix room. I really liked the sound of the EQ's on that. I like the Necam because when you can sit back and watch the faders actually moving, you can really see what you are doing." However, he readily admits that every desk has its good and bad points.

He enjoys being able to tour the studios and experiment with equipment that he is thus far unfamiliar with. "It can be somewhat disappointing to be faced with yet another SSL on almost every assignment. It's not that I think there's anything wrong with SSL's at all — they're the best user-orientated desks — but equally there's nothing wrong with all of the other desks! I find that a lot of A&R men ring up studios and say "has your studio got SSL?" and if the answer is "no" then they are automatically crossed off their list of studios.

"The last few projects that I've been involved in, I've found that for recording keyboards for example you don't need to be in a £70 or £80/hour studio. Thinking of the budget, if you're just playing a Juno 60 and it's going straight into the desk. (You might send it into a live room and mic up the speakers just to give it some space) you really don't need to be in a big studio and I think it's a real waste of money.

"I was working for Phonogram on a project with the keyboard player Darren Dean at a studio in Oldham called Pennine, and the sounds that we got there were just as good as in a £70 or £80/hour studio. You don't need to have a nice settee and the expensive lounge if you just want to get down and do the work, it doesn't matter where you are. Darren felt a bit uneasy, I'm sure, in some track studios where the pressure's on all the time because of the cost, and so he asked me if I would mind going to Pennine and I said "of course I don't mind!" We did the vocals there and they were fine, and as it was a very reasonable price to work there we found that we could spend longer on it to get the parts right and no one felt under pressure. If the vocals weren't happening that day we'd say "okay let's come in tomorrow", and we wouldn't be wasting £750/day.

"In the end I think that was reflected in Darren's vocal performance for the better. When it comes to the mix I obviously like to be in a studio where you can really rely on the monitoring, and it's nice to have a large desk so that you can experiment.

Digital

I asked Tim whether he has worked on digital:

"I haven't. I've mastered onto digital and I found that it does change the sound somewhat. When I mix I like to experiment with edits to change the perspective. I like to do that straight away and see if it's going to work but with digital you'd have to have the editor all set up, so I haven't actually mixed an album onto digital so far. When I was working with Zee on a collaboration between Rick Wright of Pink Floyd and Dee Harris we made a comparison between ½" and digital and the ½" sounded brighter, but that was purely because there is a very, very small amount of hiss which, mixed in the track, actually does sound like top end. I honestly feel that mastering to digital tends to change the sound slightly, and therefore if I was going to mix onto digital I would mix through the digital and get the sound that I want."

Management

After leaving full-time employment at Utopia and turning to freelancing Tim not only had to encounter new equipment but also came to terms with trading his wares in the market place, something that he was not at
all prepared for having been previously only really required to concentrate on
the musical aspect of his profession.
When this threatened to become a
possible detrimental distraction and
he finally realised that he is quite
possibly not as adept in the financial
arena as he is in the studio, he turned
to a management company to take
care of his business affairs, World's
End Management.

"For me as a freelance engineer/
producer the greatest thing about
Sandy and Paul (Robertson and Brown
of World's End) is that I don't have to
worry about disturbing the sessions
by constantly saying "I've just got to
make a 'phone call to so-and-so . . .
do you mind carrying on for a minute
without me?" I think that's really
bad news, very unprofessional. Espe-
sially if you're in the middle of a
take and the 'phone is ringing! And
secondly I don't want to have any-
thing to do with the financial side
of it, I'd much rather leave that to
them. I think that my job is working
with the music and making the best
records that I can. I don't want to be
involved in the contract side of it and
niggling over this point and that point.
I let Sandy and Paul look after it all
and they tell me later. I used to ring
up record companies and they'd ask
"how much do you want?" and I'd say
"er, I don't know, how about
this figure?" and they'd say "Yeah!
That's fine!" And I never used to
understand why they would say that

Tim has been co-producing with Robert
all of the time! You know, I'd rather
let someone else get on with that
side of the business. I want to stay
well clear of it and just stick to making
music!

Which is precisely what he is now
doing and how he wishes to continue,
and although in the future he may
possibly do some live work here or
abroad should the occasion arise
this is not at present a particular
objective of Tim Palmer and he is
quite content to be in the studio.

Plant at Rockfield and Air.

"I have never and, I hope I will
never, ever listen to something I have
done and say "that's perfect!" The
thing that I love about working in
studios is that working with differ-
ent artists and sound people you are
constantly learning something new
off of them, and as soon as you get
to the point when you think you
know enough to just sit back and say
"that's perfect!" I think you should
pack it in."