

# Long Distance Project Recording

Recording a project with two studios, two DA-88's, and plenty of miles between them all

BY STEVE LA CERRA

Owning a digital multitrack tape machine is a beautiful thing, not only because it sounds good, but because of the myriad of possibilities for the way records can be made using them. Two of the more interesting projects I've worked on recently involved producer/guitarist Thomas Atkins, who until recently, lived nowhere near my studio (the Wood Shop).

## HEADS OR TAILS

The first of these projects was *Heads Or Tails* (High Strung Productions) with Tom's band Reason, a four-piece alternative/rock band based in Dobbs Ferry, NY. Our goal was to create a high-quality, full-length CD on a modest budget. We were thinking in terms of 16 tracks because Tom owns a Tascam DA-88 and there's a single DA-88 at the Wood Shop. We figured that we could use the two machines together, but there were several problems to overcome. I was scheduled to be on the road with another band for several weeks smack in the middle of this project, and the modest budget supplied by the band's label required us to get it done as inexpensively as possible. Since the band lived and rehearsed in Dobbs Ferry, we thought that we'd do some of the recording at the Wood Shop and some of it at the band's studio. Then, when

the tracks were finished, we'd mix at the Shop.

Tom and I agreed that it made sense to cut drums at the Wood Shop, since we have a small but great-sounding booth and a good selection of mics. This studio is very small: the control room is roughly 12 x 15 feet and the booth/live room is about 12 x 8 feet (we also have a small lounge area, which came into play). That's basically it. Setting up the entire band and recording live (with amps miked) would be difficult or impossible, and recording the guitar and bass direct was not an option for us, sonically speaking.

Our solution was to bring Tom's DA-88 to the Wood Shop to cut "real" drum tracks and roughs for the bass, guitar, and vocal. Then the band could take their machine back to Dobbs Ferry and proceed with overdubs at their rehearsal studio. Drummer Scott Sosa



GO THE DISTANCE: Two studios separated by many miles and an engineer off on tour presented producer Tom Atkins (above) with some complications during the recording of Reason's *Heads Or Tails*.

brought his kit to the Wood Shop and set up. We had a tough time getting sufficient low end while working on the kick sound. Patching in a graphic EQ didn't really help because we were wrestling with the sound of the drum itself. After some retuning of the drum to drop the pitch, a '57 (oddly enough) turned out to be the solution. The snare was miked with a Shure SM98A, toms with Beyer M201's, and floor toms with Sennheiser 421's. Scott also had two smaller concert toms that were both miked with a single Sony C48 set to bidirectional. We used an AKG C414 on hat and a Beyer MC 833 stereo mic for the cymbals. The MC 833 was set to XY pickup (90 degrees) and placed approximately two feet above the cymbals, pointing down towards the snare drum.

All tracks were recorded onto the DA-88's through a Mackie 24•8 and, wherever possible, signal paths were kept short. The Beyer stereo mic went to a Demeter VTMP-2a mic pre, through a pair of Valley Commanders for a bit of compression and then directly to the DA-88. The rest of the drums were routed through the Mackie. Direct outs from the kick and snare channels were patched into dbx 160x compressors and then to tracks on the DA-88. The two rack toms and the two concert toms

were grouped to a stereo pair of busses on the Mackie and then routed to a pair of tracks (no processing), while the two floor toms were each recorded on their own track via direct outs. This gave us a set of eight drums tracks, all on what would become the "master" tape.

At the same time, bassist Dave Fontaine was recorded direct through a Countryman Type 85 direct box to a Symetrix 501 compressor and to tape. Tom's guitar went into an ADA MP-1 guitar pre and then straight to tape (no cabinet for the roughs). Since the bass and guitar were direct, we wouldn't have to deal with the isolation problems inevitable in such a small studio. Tom and Dave would play rough tracks in the control room for a live feel, monitoring on a pair of KRK 7000B's. Vocalist Kai Lee was set up in the lounge with a pair of Fostex T20 headphones for monitoring, and a Shure SM58 (we used a Radio Shack headphone extension cable plugged into "phones 2" of the Mackie and ran it out to the lounge. The "phones 1" mix was for Scott). The '58 went into the Mackie, then a Behringer Composer, and to the DA-88. Tom, Dave, and Kai were strictly performing reference tracks for Scott's benefit. These three tracks were recorded onto the slave machine. This entire setup pro-

cedure was done on the night before the actual recording was to take place. After getting some rough sounds and levels, we called it a night. Scott came in fresh on the second day to start cutting his tracks and finished up on the third day.

Our next step was to prep a tape that would return to the band's studio for overdubs. With the second DA-88 locked to the master, we bounced a rough mix of the drums from the master to an open track on the slave tape. A total of four tracks were now on the slave tape: keeper drums and reference bass, guitar, and vocal. The band took the slave tape and their DA-88 back up to their rehearsal studio, and I hit the road.

### MAKING TRACKS

Tom recorded his guitar tracks in stereo using Shure SM58's. His cabinet was a Boogie 4x12 stereo box, so he used two 58's close-up to the cones, plus one in the back of the open cabinet (phase-inverted) and another mic about two feet away from the front of the cabinet for a bit of room tone. For clean guitar sounds, Tom added a second microphone in the rear of the cab. A Samson 2242 mixer was used for signal routing and monitors were Tannoy PBM 6.5's driven by a Samson Servo 5000 amplifier. Compression came from a dbx Project One 266 comp/gate.

When it was time to record Dave's bass, Tom used a Shure SM57 close up to the speaker, and another mic slightly farther away to get a bit of air into the bass. Working in this manner really allowed Tom and Dave to take their time, getting both their tones and performances to sound the way they wanted. This was especially important for Tom, who really takes a lot of care in his guitar sound. By the time Tom and Dave were finished tracking bass and guitar, I was back from the road gig and ready to continue the project.

### CAREFUL WITH THAT ERASE BUTTON

Tom returned to the Wood Shop with his DA-88 and the slave tapes,



**BOOGIE NIGHTS:** The guitar was recorded using a Boogie 4x12 stereo box miked in front by a Shure SM58 and also with another mic in the back of the open cabinet.

which typically had five finished guitar and bass tracks per song. We locked the two DA-88's together and erased the rough drum mix, leaving three tracks for the vocals. Without the rest of the band around to distract us (which was always a distinct possibility), Kai and I began recording the vocals, almost exclusively through a Peavey PVM-T9000 tube mic (which really sounded great on Kai). This was patched to the Demeter pre, Valley Commander, and then to tape. Kai really has a strong voice, so we used the LF rolloff (but not the pad) on the mic, and also put a stocking-type wind-screen in front of the mic. Kai and I comped many of the vocals, recording tracks while he was loose and then editing afterwards by picking sections off the work tracks and dumping them via bus to the comp track. When the vocals were finished we were ready to mix.

All mixes were done manually on the Mackie and recorded to a Sony DAT recorder. The kick drum continued to present a problem in the mix, so for a few of the songs, we triggered a sample and mixed that in with the real kick. In the patchbay, the kick track was patched to a mult. One side of the split went to a tape return on the Mackie. The other side of the split was patched to a Valley Kepex gate, through a DOD R830B 15-band graphic EQ, and then to a dbx 463 gate. The Valley gate and the EQ were used to remove as much extraneous sound from the kick track as possible, and to create a strong spike for the trigger. The second gate helped clean up any sounds that the first gate missed (which could have caused a mistrigger). Output from the 463x went to the trigger input on an Alesis D4 drum module; audio output from the D4 was returned to the console, where it was mixed in with the real kick sound.

One of the cool things about working with Reason was that Kai asked me to come up with a unique vocal sound for every song. Naturally, I did my best to oblige and play with some toys. Some of the songs have a combination of reverb and delay from a Lexicon PCM80 or reverb-only from a Lexicon PCM90. On one song we used a Lexicon LXP1 set to a small room. On several of the songs, I used an ART SGE Mach II to create some very strange sounds. In particular, the song "Indian" employs a distortion program ("Turbo Dist 3") along with EQ, flange, and a reverse-gated reverb ("Rvrs 1A"). This sounds very

creepy and was added in with the straight vocal in the verse. For the opening song, "Head," we used a flange from the ART unit that sweeps very subtly as Kai's vocal lines develop. A one-octave pitch shift fattens up Kai's verse in the song "Fat." Mixes were mastered by Roger Lian at Masterdisk (NY) and then released by High Strung Productions on CD.

More recently, Tom has been working on a project with vocalist John Grignon called John-Thomas (imagine that!). During the recording of this project, Tom was living up near Albany, NY and the budget was even tighter than that for *Heads or Tails*. Having purchased a Mackie 8•Bus and built a studio, Tom now had the ability to do all of the recording on his own time. The problem (again) was that he only had one DA-88, but needed to record more than eight tracks.

In his studio, Tom has Opcode Studio Vision Pro 3.5 running on a Power-Mac 8500/180 MHz with an AudioMedia III card for audio I/O. Recording tracks in Studio Vision and locking the Pow-

erMac to tape would be an option, but Tom does not have SMPTE lockup capability in his studio. And, besides, we wouldn't be able to process the Studio Vision tracks individually, due to the nature of the I/O card (two analog and two digital outs).

Our solution was rather unorthodox. Tom recorded the drums onto "master" DA-88 tapes (a total of two) across eight tracks. Two different drummers played on the John-Thomas project — Pat Knittel and Bob Naperski. The drums were miked mostly with Shure SM57's through a Mackie 8•Bus — the exception being an Audio-Technica AT421 stereo condenser mic for the overheads and an AKG D112 for the kick. Pat's kit had more toms, so one '57 was used for each pair of toms. When drum tracks were completed, Tom made a mix of them and bounced them directly into Studio Vision Pro.

This rough drum mix was then bounced back out to a fresh piece of DA-88 tape, thus creating a slave tape. Tom and John proceeded to add their overdubs to this slave tape, working on



DRUM 'N' RUN: The drums at Tom Atkins's studio were recorded on one DA-88 tape, across all eight tracks.

their finished tracks while monitoring a rough mix of the drums. Bass was recorded direct and guitars were recorded with SM57's on a multi-amp setup (the ADA/Boogie rack system previously described and a Boogie Mark III combo amp). When the recording process was finished, Tom and John brought the tapes and the DA-88 to the Wood Shop for mixing.

**LOCK AND LOAD**

For this project, we approached the

remixes differently — both in technical and creative terms. On the song "Peeping Tom," the bass had actually been doubled. In the mix we would end up running one bass track through an ART Tube MP preamp, overloading the input for a bit of attitude and mixing that in with the "straight" bass track. And on the song "Told You First," John sang some very cool background tracks that we chorused through a TC Electronic M2000 to make the vox stack up fat.

Our technical adventure at mix-

down began by connecting the second DA-88 into the studio but *not* locking it to the first. Tom had logged start times for each song, both on the master drum tapes and the slave tapes. We picked a song to mix first, manually cued both tapes to the start of that song, and noted the locations of the start point for each machine. Then we did a bit of math and calculated the difference between the machine locations. The resulting number would be our offset.

There was absolutely no consistent relationship between the location of a song on the master drum tape and that song's location on the slave/overdub tape, so some of the offsets were positive while others were negative. We'd lock the machines together, hit play, and listen to the drums, hearing both the master drum tracks and the slave's rough drums. If there was a delay going on, we knew the offset was wrong. By switching the slave DA-88's display to "offset" we could adjust the offset while the tapes were playing and continue to listen. When we heard a flange between the two machines (or heard the kick drum get thin from phase inversion), we knew the offset was right. Just as a quick note: It's probably not a good idea to do this with one instrument's tracks spread across two machines. If the machines are a hair out of sync (say, a few frames) it will be OK musically, but it would cause definite phase problems between (for example) the kick mic and the overhead mic tracks.

Every song had a count at the beginning, so in some cases, we'd listen to the countoff and hit the MEMO 1 button on the DA-88 at the first note of the song. We'd do this for both machines. By hitting LOC 1, the machines would go to the first note of the song and park. We could then use those locate positions to do our math and figure out a rough offset. Then we'd lock the machines and fine-tune the offset while listening. Once we had the correct offset, the machines were run in the normal fashion and the song was mixed. After doing this a few times, it became more and more easy. We mixed seven songs for the John-Thomas CD in this manner. Although getting the offsets was tricky, the whole thing worked!

*In addition to being an audio mercenary, Steve La Cerra is also the senior editor of EQ magazine. You can hear some of the music he discussed in this article at the High Strung Web site: [www.highstrungpro.com](http://www.highstrungpro.com).*



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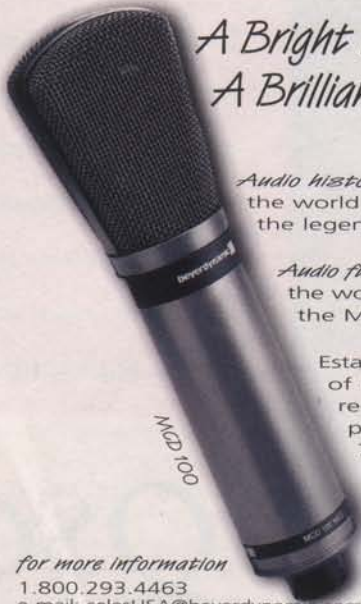
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