

The Makeshift Mansion Studio

Facing the challenges of turning an upstate New York mansion into a recording studio

BY STEVE LA CERRA

There's something exhilarating about waking up at 11 AM in the New York countryside, looking out over the Hudson Valley, and knowing that the day's activities center around recording music. There's also a strange and wonderful feeling about taking a shower and shave in...the guitar player's iso booth? Yep. So began my second day of recording a new CD for the band Thick in Selkirk, New York.

Bob Napierski (drummer for Thick) has a "friend of the family" who owns this awesome mansion in Selkirk. After the band began rehearsing there in early 1999, they thought it'd be a cool idea to record their next CD quite literally "in house." They had already sonically explored the many rooms in the dwelling, so it was only natural that the guitar amp would be recorded in the second floor bathroom, which was big enough to support some kicking low end, and bright enough to keep the crunch of the guitar sounding...well...crunchy. And, besides, we didn't mind sharing the bathroom with guitarist Tom Atkins's Mesa Boogie Dual Rectifier Solo amp/4 x 12 cabinet. The only rule was no tossing any towels on the mic stand!

GETTING INTO THE THICK OF IT

Before recording began, we first had to consider what equipment we'd need for the project so that it could sound great but not cost a huge amount of money. A remote truck was out of the question due to the expense. Plus, there'd be no fun and adventure in simply making a call and having the gear show up, ready-to-record in a mobile studio.

The band and I decided to pool our gear and somehow strap it all together

to record the sessions. Tom brought his Mackie 24•8, TASCAM DA-88, a few assorted toys such as a DigiTech TSR-12, Symetrix SX201 parametric EQs, and Sony CD player. In the meantime, I grabbed a TASCAM DA-38, my trusty Demeter VTMP-2b tube mic pre, and a rack full of compressors, including a pair of Empirical Labs Distressors, Purple Audio MC76's, and an ART Pro VLA. In addition, I brought a bunch of mics, including Audix D1's, D2 and D4, beyerdynamic M420 and M201 dynamics and an MCE82 stereo condenser mic, Lawson L47MP and L47, Sennheiser MD421's, Neumann U 87, KM 84's, and TLM 103, plus a few Shure SM57's and 58's. The plan was to spend four days on the project, with the first for setup and auditioning of sounds, the second and third for tracking, and the fourth for overdubs (though overdubbing would be minimal). Tracking would be live with bass, drums, guitar, and lead vocal. It turned out that we overdubbed lead vocalist John Grignon a few weeks later because he was ill during the week of tracking.

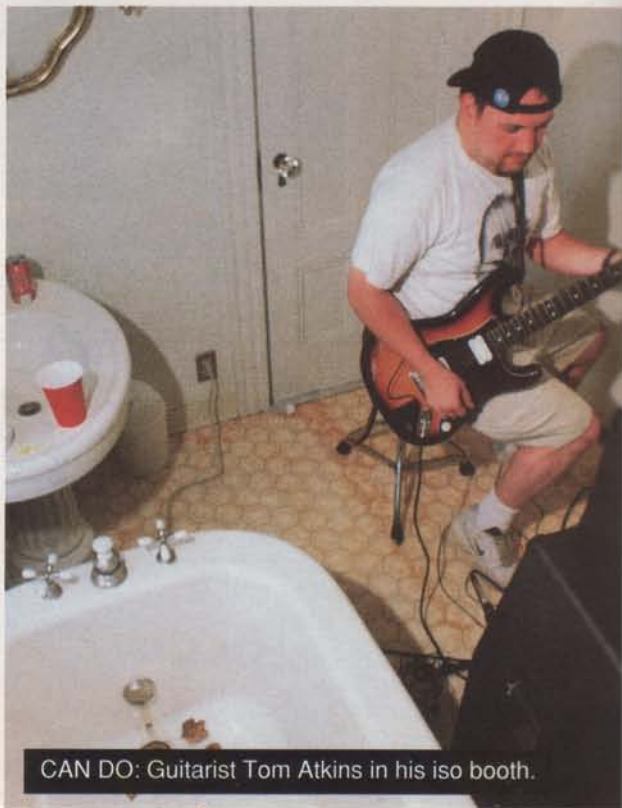
AN OUNCE OF PREPARATION...

Thick was very well-prepared for this project; even though I had never seen the mansion, the band had already determined which rooms in the house would work best for their instruments. Bassist Eric Schwanke and Bob found the first-floor dining room perfect for the drum kit. It's a rectangular room of about 25 x 12 feet, with a ceiling height of 12 feet. From the attic up above the second floor (this became my makeshift control room), we ran a 12-channel snake down to the dining room. The snake

barely made the distance for placement alongside Bob's kit. We used a combination of close- and distant-mics in this room for the drums, with an Audix D4 on kick, beyerdynamic M420 on snare, Sony C48 for 'hat, and Audix D1's on rack and floor toms. The beyerdynamic MCE 82 stereo mic was used for cymbals, but it wasn't placed overhead. We put it on a stand in front of the kit, about 6 feet high and 10 feet from the kick drum.

Instead of centering the mic in front of Bob's vintage Ludwig Vistalite kit, we moved it slightly left-of-center to favor the ride cymbal a tad. We used a tall studio boom to place a Lawson L47MP way up the far corner of the room near the ceiling (the L47MP was set to omni). This mic was connected to the Mackie console via the snake with a channel of the ART Pro VLA compressor inserted in the channel path. The comp was set to a ratio of almost 5:1 with fast attack and slow release so that it would squish the room sound.

The result was absolutely wonderful. The remaining drum mics were



CAN DO: Guitarist Tom Atkins in his iso booth.

connected to the Mackie preamps with the exception of the kick mic, which went through an ART Tube MP. Output of the Tube MP went to a Distressor for about 6 dB of compression, and then the signal went to tape. Each of these mics were recorded to a separate track. A headphone send from the Mackie's "phones 1" out was connected to one of the snake return lines. At the snake box next to Bob's kit, we used an old Redco Little Red Cue Box to drive Bob's headphone mix (more about headphones later).

FIRST STRING

Initially, the entire band was going to play in the dining room facing Bob's drums for communication purposes, but there were several detriments in doing this. We could have placed the



COME AND GET IT: Drummer Bob Napierski in the dining room.

amps up on the second floor, using really long instrument cables for connecting Tom's guitar and Eric's bass into their amps. But I'm not a big fan of this because long cables tend to load down instrument pickups, resulting in a loss of tone on the way to the amp. If we put the amps downstairs, we could use short guitar and bass cables, but then

the amps would be in rooms nearby the drums, possibly leaking into the drum mics (we really wanted to avoid this). Also, placing the amps downstairs meant I'd probably have to come up with an idea to skirt a mic snake situation: although the snake had 12 channels, it was 8 XLR send, 4 TRS return. Since there were eight mics on the drum kit, I had already used all of the XLR lines (plus one of the TRS for Bob's cans), and I wasn't

thrilled with the idea of adding TRS-to-XLR turn-around adapters in the mic path — it was just another connection to possibly interfere with the signal. Finally, it presented Tom with the problem of not being in front of his amp to create feedback when he needed it.

Our solution was to put Tom and his rig in the second floor bathroom and



THE BASSIST HAS LANDED: Eric Schwanke on the second floor landing. Note the mirror on his left.

Eric's SWR bass rig into a medium-sized closet on the second floor. Miking Eric's rig was pretty straight: a Sennheiser '421 about 3 inches in front of one of the speakers with a home run to a channel of the Demeter VTMP-2b pre, from the out of the VTMP-2b into a Purple Audio MC76 compressor, and from the comp to DA-88 via Monster Cable XLR to D-sub harness. His direct sound sourced from the direct out on his SWR bass head, straight to the 24•8, and was

remaining channel of the Demeter VTMP-2b and from the out of the VTMP-2b to a tape track, again using the Monster Cable harness.

Picking the right mic for Tom's amp took a little bit of doing. After trying about five different mics, a Sennheiser '421 nailed the job, giving us enough top-end crunch with the right body in the lower mids. The '421 was placed pretty close to the cabinet, on the lower right speaker, just about dead center

recorded on a separate track. No EQ or compression was used on this channel.

In the meantime, Tom was getting comfortable in the bathroom (!). Two long mic cables spanned the distance from the bathroom straight up to my "control room," into the

and 3 inches away from the grille. Interestingly, we had tried the two top 12-inch speakers in that same 'Boogie cabinet, but they didn't seem to have the same tone as this one particular speaker. Just for the entertainment factor, we also ran a DI line straight from Tom's guitar to the console and recorded the signal on a separate track (though we didn't use it).

For communication purposes, Tom and Eric needed headphones, so we dropped a long headphone extension cable from the 24•8's "phones 2" output down to the second floor and plugged it into a Furman HR-2 headphone box. We parked the HR-2 in the hall near the bathroom door and connected two pairs of cans to the HR-2: one pair went into the bathroom for Tom, and the other in the hall for Eric. Eric was playing on the landing of the second floor so he could be relatively close to his amp, yet still communicate with the other guys.

Tom actually cut the tracks while in the bathroom (there's gotta be a wise-crack in there somewhere...), so, by leav-

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ing the bathroom door open slightly, he and Eric could see each other. Unfortunately, with Bob downstairs, neither Tom nor Eric could see Bob — which naturally made playing difficult. Our solution was much better than doing something modern like, say, using video cameras and monitors. We took two big mirrors, set one at the top of the stairs, the other at the bottom of the stairs, and adjusted them until Tom and Eric could see Bob downstairs and vice versa. It worked like a charm!

HEADPHONE MADNESS

With all of the gear positioned, connected, and tested, the last issue to address was headphone mixes. In effort to keep things simple, I thought it might be a good idea to run one headphone mix to Bob and a separate mix for Tom and Eric. Meanwhile, I could monitor the L/R bus in the attic/control room. The Mackie 24•8 has two separate stereo headphone outputs. In theory we could have used sends 3/4 for one headphone mix and sends 5/6 for the other headphone mix, but the problem was that the console — like a lot of project consoles — has only four knobs to cover 6 sends. The first two knobs always route to send 1 and send 2 (we set those up for a bit of snare 'verb). The second pair of knobs can route to sends 3/4 or sends 5/6, but not 3/4 and 5/6 simultaneously. This becomes a problem when, for example, you want to send the kick drum to sends 3, 4, 5, and 6 simultaneously (in other words, to both stereo 'phones mixes). You can send it to 3/4 or 5/6 — but not both. We came up with a pretty good solution that didn't take rocket science.

Multiple sources can be assigned to the 'phones outputs, so we double-assigned sources to the 'phones, routing my "control room" mix *plus* "aux 3/4" to phones 1 (Bob's mix), and the control room mix *plus* "aux 5/6" to phones 2 for Tom and Eric. Tom and Eric got my L/R mix (all instruments) via the "monitor," and then aux 5/6 *in addition* to the L/R. When Tom and Eric needed more snare drum, I went to the snare channel, switched the aux to 5/6, and turned it up. *Voila!* More snare in 'phones 2, mix unchanged in 'phones 1.

Eventually we found out that since Bob was in the same room as his drums, he really didn't need much drums in his cans because he was hearing enough of

them acoustically. The L/R mix was removed from Bob's cans, and aux 3/4 was used to add just the guitar and bass to his mix.

Almost all of the "grunt work" was done on the first day, including getting sounds, tuning the drums, placing mics, and roughing out headphone mixes. The next morning, we each rolled out of bed around 10 AM and had breakfast together outside by the pool in the fresh air and sunshine! After a bit of noodling on the basketball court, we came into our "studio" fresh, tweaked a few mic positions and drum tunings, and started tracking songs. The whole vibe of the sessions was very laid back and, as a result of the relaxed atmosphere — plus a lot of careful preparation on the part of the band — they typically nailed their rhythm tracks in one or two takes per song.

We worked this way for the next few days, tracking about half the songs on day two and the other half on day three. If we started getting burnt on a song, we'd take a break for a couple of baskets or toss some steaks on the grill, then come back with new ears until our rhythm tracks were completed. It was probably the best tracking session I've ever done, and certainly the most interesting. Makes me want to come up with a bundle of money to buy that mansion and turn it into a permanent studio!

The self-titled debut CD from Thick is available from High Strung Music. Visit their Web site at www.highstrungpro.com/thick.

Steve La Cerra's most recent CD, Flight, is available from Amazon.com or by calling Indiego Global Distribution, 888-311-0796.