

Gareth Jones

After his famous work with Depeche Mode, Erasure and the great and the good at Mute, **Daniel Griffiths** discovers a producer that's still at the cutting edge. It's not about the gear, it's about the ideas...

With his roll in the creation of some of the greatest Electronic albums of all time, helping rack up hits for bands such as Depeche Mode, it's safe to say that Gareth Jones has earned his reputation royally. However recent projects including mixing and production work for Grizzly Bear, Efterklang, Sons and Daughters, Emmy the Great, Josh T Pearson, Mogwai, We Have Band, Polly Scattergood and more show that his skills are still very much in demand.

FM: You seem busier than ever these days.

Gareth Jones: "I'm actually mixing three albums at the moment in here. I did an album for Emmy The Great. I mixed an album for Sons and Daughters that's out now. I mixed an album for Josh T Pearson which is wonderful. It's just guitar, strings and vocals. No beats. It's great. And right now I'm mixing for Mary Epworth."

Your perhaps most well known for Electronic work but recent are much more... real?

"Emmy's record, for example, was very much about capturing performances, and the album I'm working on at the moment is very like that too. I'm giving myself an artificial limitation in that I'm recording it at 192kHz partly because my Metric Halo converters can run at that frequency, but mostly because it massively limits the track count and the amount of effects I can use. The recording went great as I was only recording about six tracks – vocal and acoustic guitar – but as soon as I've started to add effects it's getting a bit tough!"

And does it sound better?

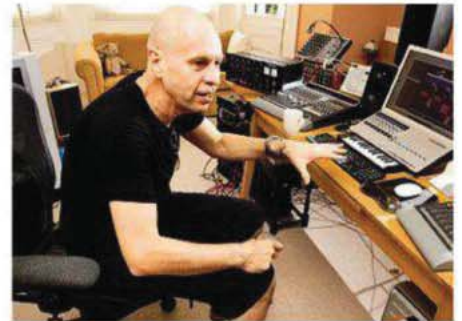
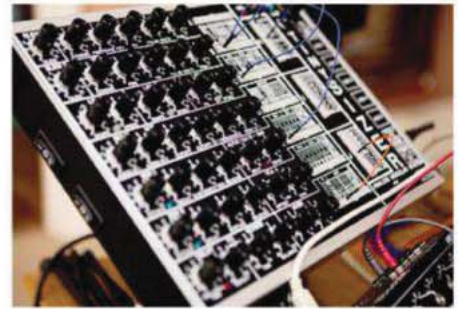
"I have no idea! I didn't do an A/B but I do know that 192kHz does sound great. I always work at at least 96kHz now."

Is everything in the box these days?

"I'm not actually completely in the box. I do analogue summing through a Thermionic Culture Fat Bustard. I hired it for the Sons and Daughters album which was recorded on 16-track analogue. I rented a room at Strongroom, and one of these from Unity Audio but after having it for a month I couldn't give it back. It's loads of fun."

How did you get started in the business?

"My first job as an engineer was on a Madness single produced by Clive Langer in a little one-inch analogue eight-track studio – Pathway – that's since closed down. I got a break. After that I helped John Foxx set up his studio – The Garden – and that came to the attention of Mute and Daniel Miller and Depeche Mode because it was an 'electronic' studio, where we were recording 'Electronic music'. BEF had just made *Songs of Quality and Distinction* there and Depeche wanted somewhere to make what turned out to be *Construction Time Again*. Every other



studio was really '70s back then... Shagpile carpet in the control room... But John's place was minimal, streamlined and modern."

Construction Time Again is famous for its pioneering use of the first samplers. What was it like working on that record?

"Obviously it was mind-blowing. We take it for granted now but it was incredibly artistically important in that we could take sounds out of the world and make beats and melodies with them. We were never interested in using samplers to recreate the sound of real instruments.

"We had an Emulator II and a Roland MC-4 sequencer. I had an AMS studio sampler and there was an ARP sequencer... Between Depeche and Daniel [Miller] they had loads of gear. I mean, I'd just come out of doing *Metamatic* with John Foxx which was made with an ARP Odyssey, an ARP sequencer, an Elka String machine and a Roland CR-78 and that was it."

Did you and the band share technical duties?

"The hardcore of the studio side for the three albums I made with Depeche became Daniel, Alan and me in the studio all the time. The others were there, of course, but we were there *all the time*.

"And in those days the whole thing was making 'Experimental Pop'. There were no budgetary

restriction as Daniel was right there as producer, so the record company WAS the production team."

What kind of technical problems did you have?

"Timing. Especially with the early digital stuff. The analogue [Roland] MC-4 was so tight but jitter meant everything digital was so sloppy! We had to commit it to tape as soon as we could so that it would stay together. A beat would be written on the Drumlator, and that would be recorded to a track of tape. Then a bass sound would be recorded alongside it and so on. Each time the equipment would then be free to do another part. And it was all synced to a timecode on the tape. That was the only way we could keep everything together.

"It was like 'when it's on tape we believe it'. It's 'there'. We know that when we come back and put the tape on, it's going to be there."

Did you wish you had more sequencers and synths?

"No. The gear just wasn't sophisticated enough to run more than a few bits together. It's incredibly creative working like we did. We just used the same four or five synths over and over. There were no presets – you just *commit* all the time.

"The gear really came together with the *Black Celebration* album and we went as dark as we could go. Daniel had this idea, inspired from Werner Herzog, that we should LIVE the album. So we all

kind of went nuts. We didn't have a day off from starting with blank tape to mixing the album. We all signed up for it. Working every day and not stopping until it was finished. We were like 'yeah!'"

How long did that enthusiasm last?

"For us it lasted to the end. Though the band got a bit pissed off because they wanted to go on holiday. They had a band meeting and told me and Daniel to get our finger out and get the album mixed! But we lived it. We did it. And I would never do it again."

"The technology was a great democratic leveller. There was no 'ego' in those productions because there was no bass player, no drummer and no 'player' because the machines played it all. So no-one was attached to 'a part' because 'they'd played it'. Everyone was instead able to focus on the song. The fact that 'the machines played it' allowed the musicians to interact with each other in new ways.

Black Celebration is remarkable in its use of reverb.

"A Yamaha REV1 – which was very expensive – and a Lexicon 224 and plates. And springs. And gold foils... I'm always interested in the 'meaning' that a space gives to a voice or a sound. I was always disappointed that in the early days all the synths were DI'd so I had all the synths come into the desk and be sent off to rooms, or guitar amps, or big speakers in a live room or a cellar or a broom cupboard... Turn a few knobs and we had the sounds flying all around the building. That way we were able to create a sense of acoustic space around the melodies. It's very quick to shove six faders up and very quickly build a sound that would be bounced down to one track. The reverb was atmosphere, and we really worked on the principle that the more atmosphere we could produce the more the record would draw people in."

So you could take a relatively boring synth sound...

"Well, not really because Daniel and Alan never made 'relatively boring synth sounds'! [laughs] No,

they made wonderful synth sounds to start with which were then enhanced."

And the vocals got the same treatment too?

"Dave likes the [Roland] Chorus Echo and Space Echo on his voice so that would be printed onto tape too. He hated hearing his dry vocal, so pretty soon I was just recording the vocal with the effect on so when you pushed the fader up with Dave on it, it sounded cool already.

"A lot of the reverb sounds are the Hansa Meistersaal, a great big room there. I persuaded the band – rather than keep using guitar amps and so on – that we rent a PA for a couple of months and set it up in the Meistersaal. When *Black Celebration* was finished, when it was all mixed, we played it out through that room. So the whole record is mixed, played out through the big hall, mic'd up and recorded again and mastered from there. That's the finished version. It's layer on layer on layer on layer... Which seemed like a good idea at the time [laughs]. It gave the sound a... gluing together."

And did it sound better?

"I have no idea! I wouldn't mind hearing the tapes before they went into the room." [laughs]

Which do you prefer working with? Analogue or digital?

"Well digital sounded shit at the beginning and it was sold at us as sounding really good partly for stupid reason because there was 'no tape hiss'. Which is a stupid reason. Nobody says 'Marvin Gaye, *What's Going On*. Great record. Pity about the tape hiss.' Stupid.

"I was a very early adopter because it felt like an extension of sampling for me. Like everything could be sampled. I had an old Mac SE/30 Mac and Digidesign cards. And a Mac IIFX. It seemed to be a miracle that I could have a 24-track studio in a computer. But it's not really about the gear – and I know this is *Future Music* – but it's not about the gear, is it? It's about the ideas. Limitation is really good for ideas and now when I open Logic and see thousands of plug-ins I wonder about how productive that is for me.

"I've invested in a Tinsizer and a Dark Energy synth because I can't save the presets. No sound comes out of the Tinsizer until I plug it up. I've got to record it, and to me that enforces a different kind of productivity. Even the Thermionic Culture. That has a different sound depending on how long it's been switched on and that means you have to record it! So it's 'Everything's in tune, let's record it!'

"Things like the Tinsizer really kickstart my own creativity. Urs Heckman of u-he heard how much I loved their ACE synth so he sent me a special version where there's no presets and I can't save any patches. I think that's brilliant." **FM**

Turn a few knobs and we had sounds flying all around the building. It's very quick to shove six faders up and build a sound



Jones' Thermionic Culture Fat Bustard is a current favourite bit of kit

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