

Jim Skinner

Resident: Westville, OK
 Music Lover/guitarist/singer/songwriter/tinkerer
 Studio: Recondiment Studio – “Spare Bedroom Studio”

Background:

The one thread that winds its way throughout my 51-year existence on Planet Earth is my undying fascination with all things musical. While my fellow “duck and cover” baby-boomer contemporaries were biding their time on Saturday mornings in the late fifties and early sixties glued to cartoons, I was searching out Flatt and Scruggs on the “Martha White Hour”, the Stoneman Family Show, the Grand ole Opry TV show and The Porter Wagoner Show. Most people gauge their lives on “BIG” memories and milestones of discovery – I’m no different, except my milestones were things like my first transistor radio, seeing the Beatles, Rolling Stones and the Animals on Ed Sullivan the first time, my first LP (Marty Robbins “Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs), my first live concert, my first Guitar and the first time I played music on stage!

I think the single most life-changing event in my life was when the neighbor across the street gave me a large box of 45rpm records he had collected when he was a DJ in Memphis in the late 50s. Shuffled in among the Elvis, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry and Everly Brothers were these INCREDIBLE, powerful songs by Muddy Waters, BB King, Albert King, Willie Dixon and Howlin’ Wolf. While some of these were the same songs that I’d seen the Stones, Animals, Zombies and the Yardbirds play on Ed Sullivan, Where the Action Is and Hullabaloo – there was this RAW Authority and Emotion that just permeated the grooves. I HAD to have an electric guitar – there was just no way around it! I got my first Kingston 6-string and tiny Supro Amp for Christmas in 1965 and began my life of addiction to all things stringed!

I went through my High School days listening to the music that was on the radio and secretly learning about Robert Johnson, Ledbelly and the Reverend Gary Davis and their approaches to Acoustic Country Blues. I still watched Country/Bluegrass oriented television sometimes and happened to catch John Hartford on the Glen Campbell show one time and was completely

taken by his virtuosity on the 5-string banjo. The next day I took my meager savings that were earmarked for new chrome wheels for my Chevy and went to the local music store and bought one. Since then I’ve had overt love affairs with harmonicas, lap steel guitars, Resophonic guitars, mandolins and electric basses. Along the way, I occasionally strayed to a few weeks with a keyboard and played around with various hand drums. I never seemed to have the right kind of coordination for playing a drum kit and usually wound up having to sing in the various bands that I was involved with.

I’ve played around with recording devices throughout my life, owning two and four track reel-to-reel decks of various ilk and wore out a STRING of cassette decks from the early seventies until the late 90s. About that time, I discovered that you could record audio on the personal computer and started building a small home studio around 2002, as the PC became powerful enough and hardware/software became available to facilitate it’s use...

What made you choose these two songs you recorded for this comp?

As we talked about the criteria for this compilation – lesser-known songs by major artists or great songs by little known artist from the 60’s and 70’s- the list of possibilities made my head swim. My first choice was “**Euphoria**” by the Holy Modal Rounders. This song has been a lifelong part of my “campfire” repertoire and always pleases the audience! I thought that I could do something creative with this simple “old-timey” song that would be fun for both new listeners and long time fans. My approach was to try to do the ultimate 60’s and 70’s makeover by trying an arrangement that paid tribute to the contribution of Creedence Clearwater Revival to the 70’s and the Surf Music Greats of the 60’s.

My second choice for a contribution was a bit more circumspect! I have long enjoyed the way that the Jerry Garcia Band did the Beatles’ “**Dear Prudence**” and decided I would try a version somewhere between the original “psychedelic vaudeville” White Album recording and the JGB “gospel dirge”, both of which I found uniquely compelling. While listening to my playback of the first backing tracks, it occurred to me how much the tempo and feel reminded me of Cream’s “**Tales Of Brave Ulysses**” from the incredible “Disraeli

Gears” LP of 1967. You can hear the result on my contribution to the compilation!

Can you describe the instrumentation used on your recordings?

The main instrumentation used on my contributions include a Fender Telecaster, Alvarez and Washburn Acoustic Guitars, A Yamaha Electric Bass, a Cheap Casio Midi Keyboard and an Intel PC loaded with a LARGE array of midi software, SoundFonts and Sampled Sounds. Most of the electric guitar parts were DI recorded using a Behringer X-V Amp modeling input device. A couple of the tracks on Dear Prudence/Tales were done with a Peavy Combo Amp mic’d with a Shure SM57 and using an original Dunlop Crybaby Wah pedal. Other microphones used included a Nady SCM-950, a pair of Tascam PE-120 small diaphragm condensers and a couple of old Audio-Technica dynamics.

How about the recording network used?

My DAW consists of a mini-tower PC equipped with an M-Audio Audiophile 2496 and either a Midiman Audio Buddy or Behringer Tube Ultragain MIC200 Mic Preamp through a Behringer MDX 1400 outboard compressor for input. Output is routed through a Samson C-Control to a pair of M-Audio Stereophile DX-4 monitors coupled with a 12-inch Audiosource Subwoofer or through an NAD 312 integrated amplifier to a pair of Paradigm Mini- Mk III Studio Monitors. My main recording suite is Adobe Audition 1.5 and various DX and VSI plug-ins. I use an array of Midi software, including Band In A Box and Jammer Pro 5, Magix Studio 7, PowerTracks Pro v.9 and Synthfont as well as the Edirol VSC3 package to generate various backing tracks, particularly the drums and more adventurous keyboard parts.

How did you go about recording these songs?

My typical recording technique is to first generate a fairly complete Drum/percussion part, often including a bass and keyboard track which is usually removed after recording the rhythm guitar and scratch vocal parts and re-recorded using live instruments. For efficient memory use these tracks are usually rendered in a low-resolution standard GM midi FM sound. If I especially like a keyboard part, and on the drums, I will later re-render them to a large

soundfont sampled sound. A good example of this is the Harpsichord at the beginning and final keyboard flourish on Dear Prudence. My own keyboard parts are also re-rendered in a large Soundfont. Since my last upgrade to the DAW, all basic tracking and rendering is done in 24 bit/48MHz resolution. I initially worked in 24/96 but found the processing/data manipulation costs outweighed the benefits, to my ears. Adobe Audition uses 32 bit as it’s native mixing environment, as well.

“Euphoria” was done just as described above. After generating the original Drums/bass/keyboard parts, I erased the original midi bass line and recorded a live electric bass part and basic rhythm guitar part. After recording the lead vocal, I then deleted the piano part completely and added two surf guitar lead tracks. Then I added the backing vocals and started the mixing process. The total number of tracks involved was 14, some of which were muted out of the final mix.

“Dear Prudence/Tales of Brave Ulysses” was much more involved. I wanted to capture a truly representative late 60’s “psychedelic” feel for the opening sequence that was softer and could unfold into a “larger” sounding song for the ramp up to the “Tales” section. I was looking for something more like the “Magical Mystery Tour” or the Grateful Dead’s “Anthem of the Sun” or “Aoxomoxoa” feel for the first verse. My original percussion track for the first verse was a muffled tom sound on a single 8th note beat. After I recorded the harpsichord and acoustic guitar parts, this sound just sounded dull and lifeless. I used this input to trigger a simulated Arp 2600 “burp” sound in stereo, then took the right channel and reversed it. After some HEAVY compression and EQ, the sound I was hearing in my head finally came through my speakers!!! Several hours of time spent for less than a minute of drums! Who says home recordists don’t obsess! I did a similar thing with the convoluted sound that follows each vocal phrase on the first verse. This was originally a two-note piano part that I added for “spice”. The piano sound just didn’t fit. None of the soundfonts that I had available really sounded right, so I took the original piano sound and mauled it until it sounded like a bent up and dented organ pipe echoing through the forest – that’s just what the song needed! All told, this song used 28 tracks, including 14 different vocal tracks.

How did you approach the mix?

My approach to mixing is to look at the song as a journey. You have a starting point that has to get the listener's attention, a middle section where you try to point out the interesting "lay of the land" while telling your story and the final conclusion, which hopefully leaves the listener satisfied that they've arrived at the proper destination. Since "Euphoria" is so short, the mix was more of a snapshot of the journey – I tried to make sure the colors were all there and visible and the joy of the lyrics weren't obscured. "Dear Prudence/Tales of Brave Ulysses" was much more of a trip (on several levels) and required quite a bit of thought and time. I decided that the two main elements were the bass guitar line, which anchored everything and provided a pivot for everything else, and the vocal parts.

Audition uses a graphic interface for full automation of each track, including volume, pan, effects wet/dry and effects parameters. I usually mute all tracks other than the bass, drums, pad keys, basic rhythm guitar and lead vocals until I can get a solid mix on those elements that lays out the intended "Journey" of the cut. I then fold in any doubling/harmony vocal lines and create a sub-group for what I call "lead vocal parts" and treat that as a single stereo track thereafter. The next step is to do the same with any "backing vocal" parts that are not doubles/harmony of the main lead vocal line. Initial vocal effect decisions are made after this step, though they sometimes change after adding any percussive keys and any lead instruments.

At this point I usually spend quite a bit of time in the land of "Pan"- I like to keep double/harmony and backing vocals moving around a bit – sometimes they come in at one position and move to the opposite channel within a phrase. I tend to use these pan effects and delay/reverb in tandem and often try various before/after compression combinations to get the sound I'm looking for. When I first started mixing there was a lot of trial and error involved in this process, but I've done enough now to be able to find ways of massaging this part of the mix to my vision, if you could call it that. Effects in Audition can be routed either serially or in parallel, so I can sometimes patch together some interesting sounds!!

All of the lead parts for most of my tunes get much the same treatment after I have the basic tracks and vocals semi-mixed. Except for a bit of compression to tame the peaks, most everything is recorded "dry" with all effects (other than the expressive effects like wah-wah and amp/mic modeling basic sounds) added during this stage of the mix. After A/Bing this pre-master rough mix on the two playback systems in my studio, I generally dither a mixdown to 16/44.1 resolution, make a CD of it and listen through my main home system, my cars, my bedroom system and the several boomboxes/portable players that the family owns. I usually make some notes when listening critically and adjust the mix accordingly. When I'm satisfied, I make a master mix and proceed to the mastering stage...

How were these songs mastered?

My mastering chain on this session started with a Waves Linear Phase low-band Shelving EQ, used to remove any subharmonics below 25hz. I then serially added the following: 1). A Waves Renaissance Compressor in Opto/Warm mode with a 1.25 ratio, ARC (auto) attack/release and a -4.4 Threshold, essentially just to smooth everything out. 2). Audition's native stereo expander set to about 160% to widen the stereo soundstage a bit. 3). Waves Renaissance DeEsser, to tame some minor sibilance issues. I didn't completely resolve this, but was satisfied with what I had left on the track. 4). The BBE Sonic Maximizer, adjusted pretty conservatively – just to add a bit of sheen and air to the track. 5). The Waves Linear Multi-band Compressor used as a bit of an EQ and compressor in this case – I wanted to get full control of the bass energy and make sure that the bottom end maintained it's steering of the mix throughout the track and also to bump the upper mids just a tad to add some presence to the vocals. 6). The Waves L2 Ultramaximizer, with limiting set to -4, output set to -0.3db, ARC release, low-noise dither and Normal shaping. This latter device, if used properly, can REALLY add that final touch to your track while outputting a wav file that is ready to burn with ZERO clipping and DC offset...

Any tips for other home recording enthusiasts?

If I were to have any “Tips” for other home recordists, it would be to use your ears – all of the time. Listen to as much music in a live situation as you can and listen to as much recorded music as you can. Don’t be afraid to listen to your inner ear, either, and trust your creativity. You can achieve any reasonable goal you set if you have a vision. EVERY home studio (or for that matter, every studio “period”) has limitations in Equipment, money, time, etc. Don’t let that stifle your creativity. I’ve heard some GREAT music recorded with a couple of dynamic mics, an inexpensive recorder and a great pair of ears!! Use ‘em and you’ll train them...

Do it because you LOVE it and do it because it MATTERS. If you keep doing it, you will eventually find some quality music coming out of your studio – I promise!