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Interviews

Tony Harris - waving the flag for good songs

WAREZ MAGAZINE



Tony... waving the flag for good songs

Tony Harris - Recording Engineer with Attitude
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Tony Harris or 'Nod' to his friends is a rare phenomenon; a studio engineer with over 25 years experience who is happy to be just that without hankering to make the move to become a producer. In a way, he's a typical 'old school' engineer in his no bullshit approach, but he's kept abreast of new developments in technology and is equally comfortable recording on a laptop as he is in a 48-track studio.

WAREZ: What would you describe yourself as?

TONY: Primarily I'm a recording engineer but at the moment I'm working at the British Library national sound archive, digitising. I'm transferring tapes of sociological interviews to digital format, backing everything up into a massive hard drive to be preserved for the masses. I have to do 1200 of those during a six-month contract so it's like a six-month freelance gig.

WAREZ: Can you tell us a bit about what else you've done as a recording engineer?

TONY: I've been an engineer since 1979; I've worked on recordings by the Sisters of Mercy, 10,000 Maniacs, Sinéad O'Connor, Bad Company, Rolf Harris, the Coronation Street Album... loads of things. The Coronation Street Album was a celebration of 35 years of the show with lots of the actors doing a track each. It was amazingly good fun because we worked at Abbey Road studios for three months; it was one of the best gigs I've done because now everyone wants to do an album really quickly and cheaply instead of taking their time.

WAREZ: Tell us about how you got started; were you originally a musician?

TONY: No, I got into music comparatively late when I was about 12 or 13. But at the same time, I was a bit of a swot at school and I liked biology, chemistry, maths and physics. I was buying more and more records and getting more into science. Then I saw this magazine, which had an article on how a recording studio works. I picked it up and it had pictures of mixing desks and things, and I thought it was interesting because it seemed to be halfway between science and music... it was to do with music but also it was to do with being logical, organised and scientific.

WAREZ: I heard that as a teenager you had pictures of mixing desks on your bedroom wall instead of the usual scantily clad females. Is this true?

TONY: Absolutely! When I was 15, all I wanted to do was to work in a studio.

WAREZ: How did you get your first job?

TONY: I wrote to every studio in the world a hundred times! When I left school I was temping at Debenhams for about a year because I couldn't get work at a studio. When I was 18 or 19 I got my first job at a studio down in Worthing. I couldn't get a job in London because I lived in Guildford, so when I had an interview with a London studio, the people who lived closer would get the job. It was that catch 22 situation of I couldn't get a place to live in London unless I had a job and vice-versa. I worked at the studio in Worthing for about a year, then left because the guy who ran it was a bit of a nightmare. I was doing the jobs of engineer, tape-op, tea boy and cleaner for hardly any money and no one else was working there for me to learn things from. Then I moved to London and did temp work cleaning pots and pans and packing shirts while looking for another job in a studio. I had a flat in Victoria and each day after work, I would cycle in a different direction, knocking on studio doors. I eventually got some freelance work for Odyssey studios in Marble Arch... I think Jazz FM are in that building now. They asked me if I was available for a session... they told me the producer was called Connie Plank, the band was Ultravox, then they gave me the keys. So I had the keys to a studio I had never worked at before and I was supposed to be in charge for the weekend while Ultravox were in... it's amazing because I could have been anyone and stolen everything! The session was to remix a single called 'the Voice'. It was funny because I didn't know where anything was in the studio and I had to search for the kitchen and the air conditioning etc. Anyway, I survived the experience and did a few bits of work for Odyssey over the next months. It was a really cool place to be because while I was there, they had Thin Lizzy in one studio, Black Sabbath in another and the Who came in at one point. A few months later I got a job at Livingstone Studios in Wood Green, which is still going today and has lots of big bands in. I was originally taken on as a tape-op/bottle washer/tea maker and I helped build studio two. Myself and the other tape-op helped the owner, Nick Kinsey to build it although we had no building experience! I ended up working at Livingstone for the next ten years, from 1981-91.

WAREZ: Tell us about how the 1980's were compared to now.

TONY: It was the beginning of the end in some ways for music, because it was the start of technology taking over from 'real' music. I didn't mind using SSL for automated mixing but it was when sequencers and samplers and Fairlights came in and everyone was spending £15000 on an Emulator One or a Synclavier that things went downhill. Everyone was obsessed with making records that were the most in

tune and in time possible, but not succeeding. There's a lot of records from the 80's that are unlistenable because everything has a stupid big sample of a snare drum and it's all a bit out of tune with loads of chorus and things on it. I hated it; it was pseudo science with people trying to look like they were clever and that they knew what they were doing. Don't get me wrong, I love technology if it's doing something useful but it's annoying when you've been in the studio for 2 days and you can't get the code on the tape in order to organise a click track so the band have all committed suicide or split up and left because they're bored out of their minds! I think things did recover quite soon though, because good sense prevailed in the end. There are lots of records from around 1983-85 that sound totally appalling. 1960's and 70's records sound great and then once things like Nirvana and grunge came along at the end of the 80's, everything sounded fine again and has ever since, but there was this horrendous chunk in between! A few people got it right, like Trevor Horn who was really good, but everyone else was trying to copy him and failed. Also, it was a time of complete stupidity where you had every man jack from America who's ever made tea for Prince or Madonna, coming to this country to be an American producer and getting £500,000 budgets when they'd never actually done anything. They were imported by A&R dimwits who had no idea, who were impressed by a credit as a tea boy on a Prince record or something. Budgets for albums were ridiculous by today's standards; obviously you can't really compare because technology has moved on in terms of you can afford to have a studio at home. But then, the studio would be costing the artist around £1200 per day, my fee was £250 per day and although I tried to avoid the really long sessions, I did a Runrig album for 10 weeks, so you can see how that cost a lot. Some people would spend a year making an album at Livingstone, hiring every session musician you can imagine, and hiring loads of extra stuff in, that was also the fashion in the 80's; to hire in racks of valve EQ's and effects. There was always 'this week's thing' that you had to have and all that was costing as much as the studio itself. That sort of scenario can still happen today though; I did some recording 18 months ago with this 18 year old Irish guy called George Murphy who's got a fantastic voice... he sounds like Shane McGowan's dad! He had a number one single in Ireland so you'd think they'd try and bang an album out quickly to capitalise on that success, but 18 months later it's still not finished. It's probably costing 100's of thousands of pounds. The first album was all covers and was done really quickly but now he's writing his own stuff; I know you can argue that it's the artist's right to express themselves creatively but... do it in stages and start with a couple of original tracks rather than spending all that time in an expensive studio learning to write!

WAREZ: Do you think that developments in technology have benefited music or harmed it?

TONY: I think it's entirely neutral in effect. It's a tool; intelligent rational people using it make good records and morons or coke added fools don't! There's lots of records now that use a lot of tech and sound great and have been done in a way that you couldn't make records before, for example the Eels and the Flaming Lips who are farting around with technology in a kind of 60's approach to making music whilst still being high-tech.

WAREZ: Do you think the effect on the industry in general is neutral as well?

TONY: Yes... I mean what's better? Having 10,000 records out there, which cost £1000 each to make, or one record that cost a million. People can only listen to a finite number of records in their life so you could say it's good to have choice, but then there are a lot of not very good records out there. It is better if people have learnt their craft; the brain behind doing stuff is more important than the stuff. The internet has made it easier for people to put stuff out there, but it hasn't increased the quality of what's on offer. Look at Myspace; it has something like 40,000,000 people on it and everyone's got a track on Myspace. It's inevitable, and the same applies to TV, radio, art writing; computers have made it possible for everyone to make their stuff accessible. Sometimes I think it would be great if everything got erased and we had to start again! But you can't now; you can't imagine a world where you can't hear Sergeant Pepper or see the Mona Lisa because there's millions of copies of these all over the world and more and more are being generated all the time... you'll never get rid of them, we're stuck with them for all time. We're drowning in it really, and to make an impact gets more and more difficult.

WAREZ: What are your main influences?

TONY: I'd wave the flag for a good song that sounds crap rather than a crap song that sounds great! I was totally influenced by punk, being 17 in 1977. Punk was all about getting out there and doing whatever you wanted to do; that Eddie and the Hot Rods record was actually pivotal. Favourite albums would be Never Mind the Bollocks, London Calling, Ziggy Stardust, and Physical Graffiti but not necessarily for sonic reasons. Sonically, I really do like the Flaming Lips, the new Arcade Fire album, and anything the White Stripes do; I think Jack White is an absolute genius and everything I've heard by him is madly good. He takes some wild risks but it works. My favourite yardstick record of all time is that Jellyfish album, Bellybutton, which is an extraordinary record. As an engineer, I was influenced by Roy Thomas Baker and all those early Queen records; I loved him. You got the impression he really had to work hard to get all those things on a track and that he had to make final decisions as he went. They had to get things right so they could bounce them down free up tracks for more layers. Not like now where you can get hundreds of tracks on Pro-tools and they're all full of rubbish that won't get used in the mix.

WAREZ: Can you give any tips on recording?

TONY: This is where I sound really Victorian... write some good songs, learn how to play your instruments, put some new strings on your guitars and heads on your drums and make sure you can play your songs and make a sound you like yourselves. Put a microphone in a rehearsal room and if it sounds good, you're halfway there. When it comes to recording drums, I'm glad that the world seems to have gone back to reality with drum sounds. My favourite sounds have always been the Led Zeppelin albums and I'm a massive Glynn Johns fan; all the records he did sound great. The drums sound like you are there in the room and the sound doesn't date. He recorded the Stones, the Who, Led Zeppelin, the first Eagles album, all the greats. Glynn Johns would be one of my absolute heroes in lots of ways. With guitar and bass sounds, you can make more difference to the sound by moving where you hit the strings with the pick by a centimetre, than by moving the mic to a different part of a speaker cone. New strings will always make a better sound. With mics, I'm a Sennheiser 421 man all the way... I love them. I use them for lots of things including guitars. Vocal sounds are very hit and miss; I generally try and use an expensive top quality mic, as long as it sounds good.

WAREZ: With all the people you've worked with, can you say what quality makes someone good?

TONY: I don't really believe in star quality, I think as long as the song is good, that's what counts. But having said that, I once worked with Joe Strummer and he really did have it. He knew what he was doing and what he was going for. I'd like to get a t-shirt made that says 'a bad decision is better than no decision' because no-one makes decisions... they do a hundred takes of something for no reason because they can't decide what they really want.

WAREZ: Do you have any favourite guitars etc when it comes to recording?

TONY: Not really, people can turn up with the most unlikely looking instruments and then when they play, it sounds fantastic. Someone else will turn up with brand new top-of-the-range gear and sound awful. I've never noticed a correlation. Simple is usually better though; I prefer passive basses to active ones. One of the most important things, I think, is to use API mic pre-amps. The mic is the most important thing, and the mic amps come a close second. I record everything through them because when I push the fader up, the sound is the same as it was in the room with the instrument. I also have a theory that any equipment from America with an 'X' in it is always good!... MXR, Ampex, Lexicon, Teletronix, Electroharmonix, DBX... they're all good.

WAREZ: What are you currently doing and what will you be doing in the future?

TONY: Because of what I previously ranted about; that everyone has a home studio now, I decided that if you can't beat them, join them. So I've got a pile of gear together which hasn't cost much. I've got Pro-tools, a hard disk recorder, a little desk, mic pre-amps and loads of good mics that I've accumulated over the years and I'm taking bookings as a mobile studio. Going back to what I was saying about how old records were made, I've always loved the idea of using a mobile studio. Rooms that aren't in studios can sound better sometimes. Radiohead have been doing that lately and Led Zeppelin recorded in big old houses. It makes sense and I like the idea of it being an unrepeatabe event; you can get a good vibe going, have fun, take loads of photos and enjoy the process. I charge between £200 and £250 per day depending on the location. If someone has a nice room there's no reason why you shouldn't make a great record that way. Then I can do mixing at home on Pro-tools. I recently did an album with the Bikini Beach Band in Stoke Newington in a Hawaiian furniture maker's shop. They are an instrumental surf band and we recorded it in 2 days, then mixed for 4 days. They contacted me through a guy called Mike Gibson from the Godfathers; we also did his solo album at my house. I can do projects involving one or two people at home; there just isn't room there to do a whole band. You can contact me at tony@nodharris.com and my website is www.nodharris.com my mobile is called New River Studios, or go to myspace.com/newriverrecordings

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