INSIDE

THE ALAN PARSONS PROJECT

Recording engineer/producer Alan Parsons is best known today for his own albums, produced with Eric Woolfson. He spoke to Richard Elen about his techniques

Alan Parsons joined EMI's Abbey Road Studios in St John's Wood in 1969. While at school he was proficient on guitar, flute and piano but his first job on leaving school involved video camera research at EMI's Hayes plant. He didn't feel it was exactly his vocation and moved into tape duplication. Virtually the first thing he heard there was the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album, and it rekindled his interest in music. Within 18 months he was at Abbey Road.

His first task at the studios was in the tape library—an almost obligatory part of Abbey Road's extensive training—but he managed to escape within two weeks to become a tape operator, his first session being with a band called The Gods. As a tape-operator he worked with a number of artists: he was involved in the mixing of the *Abbey Road* album and with Glyn Johns on *Let It Be*. Then he encountered Pink Floyd, assisting on the *Atom Heart Mother* sessions. This led to his engineering *Dark Side Of The Moon* in 1973 and a period of live sound mixing either side of the recording as they took the project on tour.

His next major project was the second Cockney Rebel album, which included the hit single *Judy Teen*, which he co-produced. Then came Pilot—he produced their first two albums; their second hit single, *January*, reached No. 1 and was replaced by Cockney Rebel's *Come Up and See Me* giving Parsons two consecutive No. 1 hits. He went on to work with Al Stewart and John Miles.

Meanwhile, in 1974, he had met Eric Woolfson, who had come into the picture originally to help Alan out on the business side. He became Alan's manager, and soon after his musical partner: the Alan Parsons Project was born. Following the success of the Floyd album, Eric suggested that he should make his own 'Dark Side of the Moon'. The result was the release of *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, a concept album inspired by the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. It did very well, and set a pattern for the albums that followed. Each had a concept behind it—although the concepts have become a little looser as time has gone by—and each was highly successful yielding hit singles, although Parsons doesn't regard the act as a singles band. There was a change of label, too, for the second and subsequent albums, to Arista. The current release, *Stereotomy* is the ninth—although there is another LP which was never released. Yet for some reason the Alan Parsons Project has never been overly successful in the UK, despite the fact that virtually every album reaches No. 1 everywhere else—notably in the United States and Europe.

From the sixth album—*Eye In The Sky* released in 1983—Parsons has been using digital recording techniques. Initially he mixed analogue multitrack recordings to Sony *1610* but on the latest album he has made use of digital multitrack—in this case a pair of synchronised Sony *3324* machines—at London's Mayfair Studios. The majority of previous albums have been recorded at Abbey Road but for *Stereotomy* only the orchestral overdubs were done there. There is also a lot of use of modern music technology on the current album. Has it changed the way he works?

"Everything's changed over the years," says Parsons. "A lot of people find it refreshing to hear a real kit of drums—and I'd be a bit lost without one when I was doing a track. I think drum machines are excellent when you're writing, or demo'ing a track but you can't beat the real thing. But recently I've been getting into sequencers and timecodes... and I'm up for that."

There is often very little worked out beforehand when the Project comes into the studio. Eric Woolfson is responsible for the majority of the musical ideas, and the team develops these ideas into tracks. "There are tunes," says Alan, "and on my stuff I tend to do demos but I like to get people playing together. I'm quite traditional in that respect: I like the idea of the band out there and me in here."

On the present album, that band consists of David Paton on bass, Stuart Elliott on drums and percussion, Ian Bairnson on guitars, Richard Cottle on synths and saxophone, and Eric on piano. Vocals on *Stereotomy* are provided by John Miles, Chris Rainbow, Gary Brooker, Graham and Steve Dye, and Eric Woolfson, while the orchestral arrangements, as always, were by Andrew Powell.

"You can only get an idea how a track's going by playing it start to finish with the whole band." Alan continues, "It's so hard just to have a bass line and a sequence, and imagine how the track's going to develop. It's the rhythm section that gives a track its feel."

All the timing from the tracks is taken from timecode, and all the tapes are pre-striped. "We usually do a live click-track, driving the click from the timecode, and sequencers and so on are also driven from the code. That's one of the wonderful things about digital: you have a timecode track, and a 'real' 24 tracks." The Friend Chip SRC is used to develop synthesiser timing information from timecode. "Most people wouldn't dream of doing sequences live—they'd put them down first and play to them—but we did exactly that, sending an SRC feed out to the studio, where 'Trix' (Richard Cottle) could introduce a sequence in the middle of a track simply by pressing a button, knowing that it would be in sync."

For many of the tracks, Richard Cottle had all his gear in the studio with the band, and provided a simple stereo feed, including echo to the control room from his own mixer. "An engineer's dream," says Parsons.

Apart from DI work, Parsons has tended to develop a standard approach to microphone technique. "On drums," he says, "it's a *D20* on bass drum, *KM84*s on snare and toms, and a pair of *4038*s on top, with no hi-hat mic. The hi-hat always appears when you put lots of top on the snare. Sometimes I'll go through three board equalisers to EQ a snare. Most of the mics I use are Neumann—all the condensers are. I place the *4038*s quite high—about 4 ft above the cymbals."

Parsons has had good results with the Tandy (Radio Shack) PZMs on piano: they give him the bright sound he likes. "If I put a pair of *87*s on piano, I'll put 6 on at 10 kHz before I even listen to it, automatically. There's a lot of things I put a certain amount of top on without even lifting a fader." Generally, he won't compress a piano sound, unless it's for effect.

On guitars, it's a couple of *86*s on the amps, and an *84* on acoustic. He'll generally track an acoustic guitar with varispeed for a fuller, stereo sound. "Roy Wood taught me that—getting it nicely out of tune," he notes. "This advantage of using tracking with varispeed is that you don't get the delay." Bass guitar is always DI'd only.

Parsons is not a great believer in very finely-tuned mic technique. While he takes care with placement, he doesn't take it to extremes. "American engineers in particular are very philosophical about exactly where the mic goes, and which mic to use, and so on—but very often I find that one notch on the EQ will compensate for any difference in placement. I'm almost cynical about mic placement—I virtually just stick a mic on it and the rest's done in the control room.

"In the old days it was different, when you had brass and strings and rhythm

section all going at once, then you had to think about what you were doing: you had to think about separation. When separation is not a problem—which it usually isn't these days...engineers these days never had it so good. They just don't know what bad separation is."

Parsons feels that modern studio design techniques—with deader rooms, and better overall separation—have enabled, or perhaps forced, engineers to worry less about mic technique and place more emphasis on getting it in the control room. "Occasionally you get a rogue studio...but maybe my mic technique is one that I know works—I do it automatically, and I don't think about it any more.

"Some people would say that was boring, not trying different mics, never trying different placings for mics but in fact I do. I'll experiment with using more than one mic something, if I want to get more space out of it, for example. But more often than not it's a futile exercise these days: you can get so much more out of a Quantec or others in the new breed of digital echo devices. You get so much more to play with with those devices than you do by moving the mic around.

"I like the Quantec very much. Given the choice I'd have a bank of them but some of the other digital reverbs, I haven't got much that I like out of them. It's partly because I'm fairly ignorant, I suppose: I don't know how they work. But the Quantec is so easy."

That isn't to say that Parsons doesn't use ambience—there are quite a few sounds of that type on the new album for example—simply that he will generally prefer to manipulate the sound in the control room to obtain such effects. There is also a return to orchestral textures in the current album (the previous offering, *Vulture Culture*, was devoid of orchestral arrangements). He always uses Andrew Powell and the Philharmonia Orchestra. "They're wonderful," he says. "I've worked for years with session players, but it's so great working with an orchestra that you work with all the time. They're used to working with each other, and you know you'll get the same leader each time, for example."

When it comes to orchestral recording, Parsons likes to make his decisions at the time. "Nearly always, I'll record a string orchestra on two tracks," he says, "using close mics—*86*s on violins and *84*s on the others. On an overdub I used to put a pair up as well but the way Andrew writes you'll generally get, say, a funky cello thing that'll just get lost if you rely on that. And there's a time-delay problem as well. Generally I'll just get the balance—Andrew can hear it's right, I can hear it's right—we put it down, then it's another worry out of the way. That's perhaps one of the things that lead to us recording rather quicker than some people do."

Stereotomy took slightly longer than usual, mainly because of the 'newness' of the use of digital multitrack. "That's terrific," Parsons comments. "It's very creative. Having two machines, and being able to do unlimited copies, it's extremely creative. Not so much for taking options but for changing things. If you say, 'I wonder what it would sound like with another chorus in there' you can do it, without feeling guilty about having copied the chorus and slotting it in. It's totally transparent." Parsons has used two 24-track machines before but then, as now, it is mainly a case of transferring completed sections across to one machine. "It's generally a 24-track mix in the end."

The availability of tracks means, however, not having to worry if, say, a vocal must be done line by line. "Singing is a difficult job," says Alan, "especially with cans on. To sing in tune is a real art. You're constantly fighting for tuning. A good singer is a good singer, and you can usually bring the required emotion through. It's just bringing the required emotion through and staying in tune that's the problem. There are very, very few singers who don't have tuning problems of some sort."

On vocals, Parsons is currently using an *84* with pop-screen. "It pops ferociously if you don't," he says, "but it just has the edge on the accepted vocal mics—*47*s and *87*s—it just has a little brightness to it, and you don't have to EQ it so much." He goes for quite a lot of high top end—10 kHz and above—on vocals. As a result he often has to use de-essing. "With digital, you have to be very careful about recording problems—with noise and hums and so on. You have to be a lot more fussy."

Generally, Parsons puts the sound he's after on the multitrack—and with digital, he finds that what he puts down comes back, unlike analogue. Sometimes he will put echo effects down as well but generally on separate tracks, if they're available. "It's another device available for the mix," he notes. "A lot of the drum tracks I've recorded echo on, on a separate track. You avoid going through all the rigmarole of setting it up each time, although often it'll be wiped at the end of the day and reproduced on the mix. But at least it's there each time you play it back. And a lot of the time we've been working on a slave, with a half-decent mix of everything else on it. It's really quite an easy way to work."

When it came to the final remix, Parsons continued using the two multitrack digital machines, laying mixes back on to the second *3324*, unfaded, on different pairs of tracks, with overlaps where crossfades needed to be done. Then effects that needed to be added could also be assembled on multitrack at the right points. The final master was then assembled on the multitrack by digitally copying the other tracks across, going through Mayfair's *6000* series SSL desk only for the crossfade and effects section, using the impressive punch-in and out facilities of the *3324*. The final result was then copied across to *1610*. "I like to be able to assemble the master in the studio," says Parsons, "rather than spend time in some alien editing suite putting the album together. I like to keep it part of the studio process."

Parsons also utilised the British Ambisonic surround-sound system on the mix, using the Audio+Design Ambisonic Mastering Package. Although the system has been used for several years for classical releases, *Stereotomy* is only the second rock album mixed to 2-channel UHJ, as the gear for multitrack mixing to Ambisonics has only come on the market recently. Although the album reveals its full surround content through a decoder—like the Troy in-car Ambisonic system which is now widely available—Ambisonics also gives it a very impressive stereo on conventional equipment. All the tracks are encoded except for *In the Real World*, which is normal stereo. Parsons tried the Ambisonic system as an experiment and although he is pleased with the results, he is uncertain about the likelihood of surround-sound being a standard approach in the future.□

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Photo: Paul Spencer