Between Isolation and Integration

Creating the Jazz Aesthetic in Acoustic – Electronica Recordings



This paper will explore my practice in jazz production and engineering, with a focus on my early output on Gondwana Records and latterly with Gogo Penguin for both Gondwana and Blue Note Records.

The key records I'll be referring to are Gogo Penguins V2.0 (2014) and Man Made Object (2016), both co-produced and engineered by myself and Joe Reiser.

Between 2007 and 2011 I engineered a series of seven releases for Matthew Halsall's Gondwana Records, the label is based in my home city of Manchester in the UK.

I came to work with Matthew after he had a series of disappointing experiences in some of Manchester's commercial recording studios. Matt had heard some of my recordings of both small and large format jazz ensembles - largely associated with my work at the University of Salford - and whilst visiting my colleague Dr Robin Dewhurst to discuss arrangements of some tracks he was keen to record, we arranged to meet and discuss the possibility that we might work together in the future.

Matt seemed surprised to meet an engineer familiar with his listening habits, we had both immersed ourselves in 'joining the dots' between Miles Davis, his side men and

subsequent related ensembles and projects, bringing us to the Coltrane's, Pharaoh Saunders and eventually to much contemporary music involved with re-imagining the jazz cannon through sampling and sequencing. Although we were interested in contemporary performers our sonic reference points were securely routed in the era covering the late 1950's to around 1973. I was interested to understand why he was yet to experience a recording session – and indeed its output – which satisfied his vision for how his music might be presented. We discussed the experiences of his ensemble so far in the studio, to paraphrase Matt...

"it just doesn't sound right, it's too clean, they made us all wear headphones, we couldn't really see each other properly, we were in different rooms, the piano was no good"

The studios Matt had worked in had produced many excellent recordings but were primarily working with guitar oriented bands, with very different – genre specific – needs to that of a small acoustic jazz ensemble. Engineers would immediately assume that there were going to be big problems recording all of these acoustic instruments in the same room, and indeed they were – given the relatively small live rooms they were working in – most likely right.

In these facilities we would find fairly lively – but relatively small - main rooms, with smaller dead spaces where amplifiers might be isolated, or a vocals tracked. Studio design follows the market, with so many primarily electronic producers now able to finish most of their work in a small domestic project space it made sense for these studios to focus on creating an environment where a band could make a lot of noise, play together, with a focus on obtaining isolated – but often simultaneous - drum, bass and guitar takes.

Trying to squeeze Matt's ensemble into a main room of this ilk created many issues: There were many near reflections to deal with in these tight spaces, isolating upright bass – in order to capture an appropriate level of detail - from drums and piano is never easy, so the engineers encouraged the band to make use of the smaller dead rooms, compromising line of sight and the ability for the band to self-balance, as they might on stage.

The needs of Matt's part-improvising acoustic ensemble were sacrificed in order to retain an engineer's conventional sense of separation between the instruments, in order to facilitate contemporary expectations in the mixing process. The results neither sounded like traditional jazz recordings - the aesthetics were 'wrong' - nor encouraged a creatively successful performance from the musicians. The listener was presented with a series of disassociated acoustic instruments attempting to share the

same sound-stage.

We discussed what Matt wanted from future sessions and I formulated a list of criteria which I felt would guide us as we set about working on some recordings.

- The band should play entirely live, with no overdubbing of parts if at all possible
- The band should all be in the same room and they should enjoy playing in that space
- The band should self-balance acoustically whenever possible
- The band should not wear headphones if at all possible
- There should be clear sight lines between all musicians

After a period of research, I gained access to two spaces which might satisfy the ensembles needs and through the aforementioned four year period I 'chased down' the sound-world I had grown so familiar with. Some of the most successful recordings were made in the University of Salford's Peel Hall. A 300 seat neo-gothic concert hall with a fairly long – around 2 seconds - but dark reverberation. I felt that this space offered me something akin to Columbia's 30th St Studio, I poured through photographic resources – many found in Ashley Kahn's Kind Of Blue – The Making Of The Miles Davis Masterpiece in search of clues regarding how our reference points might have been realised, arriving at a lightly baffled 'in the round' configuration.



The success of these recordings had little to do with the equipment I used to record the performances with. I was working on location with relatively inexpensive preamps and microphones, recording digitally to Logic Pro 8. Sometimes we used analogue tape to add a little saturation / compression to masters, sometimes not. What *was* important was that the space supported the performances acoustically, the band enjoyed performing there (as they could largely self-balance) and that the large room resulted in instrumental capture free of troublesome close boundary reflections, which often 'smeared' detail in the final presentation.



University of Salford's Peel Hall.



The ensemble in situ.



Please refer to Matthew Halsall's, Fletcher Moss Park

Over time the records gained an audience, receiving a lot of support from BBC Radio 1's Giles Peterson and picking up a couple of awards along the way. Halsall then signed the Manchester Based Trio Gogo Penguin to Gondwana who were already in the process of recording a record there first album *Fanfares* at the time.

I was asked to record the band's follow up and chose to include my then MA student Joe Reiser in the process as he had been working closely with the band as their front of house engineer and also helping them to record some demo's.

Preceding the sessions I had had long discussions with the band and Halsall regarding how they felt the album could sound, specifically how they might improve capture at source. They had had issues sonically with their first release, the drums lack a little weight and detail, largely due to the room in which they were recorded; a small single room studio much like the ones mentioned earlier in this paper. I knew however that a big room like Peel Hall would not work well in this context; the band were heavy at points, the arrangements were dense and the tracks often fast. The long reverberation tail would have been extremely problematic and in live performances the band never really self-balanced anyway, they were reliant on stage or in ear monitoring.

In April 2013 we travelled to Giant Wafer Studio, a rural residential facility on Mid-Wales, where I had previously worked with the UK band Dutch Uncles.



Giant Wafer Studios



We decided to split the band across two spaces (a distinctly 'non-jazz' decision), with bass and piano in the main room and drums in a heavily treated 'dead room'.

Throughout our work the term 'acoustic electronica' (coined by a Greek journalist) emerged as a guiding philosophy of sorts, both compositionally for the band and for myself and Joe as producers. The band wanted to perform live, with no click track and with no key instrumental overdubs, beyond high frequency percussive or synthetic textures. Whilst the band themselves are not particularly concerned with the genre boundaries in which the press might place them they all felt that – if there had to be a label applied - they should be perceived as a jazz trio who were influenced - both compositionally and in terms of production aesthetics – by electronic music. We felt that all of the instruments should be attributed equal footing in the mix, mirroring the instruments equal roles compositionally. We wanted the capture to be accurate – in terms of frequency content - and detailed with the possibility for creative processing where necessary. So, each instrument was captured as carefully as possible, with multi-microphone techniques, with as little spill as possible whilst retaining good line of sight between the performers.



Line of sight between pianist, bassist and drummer

Spatially the album relies heavily on three spring reverb units, a Great British Spring, an AKG BX10 and a Master Room, in addition to these mechanical reverbs there was a good deal of real time processing through guitar pedal boards and the drums were often reinforced with a triggered Pearl Syncussion dual oscillator drum synth.



Please refer to GoGo Penguin's Hopopono

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Whilst there are moments on V2.0 where the presentation is more traditionally 'jazz like' (Home for example), I feel that – in very general terms - we were attempting to make a record which altered the perception of – and audience for - 'jazz like' composition / performance through our engagement with contemporary recording techniques and processing. Whilst they layperson when asked "what music is this" might reply, "it's jazz, it's a bit like trip hop or drum and bass though" they were probably not aware that the production aesthetics were actively trying to encourage them to make this association; it doesn't sound like a traditional 60's jazz record.

The record was well received and nominated for the 2014 Mercury Music Prize, this caused a chain of events that ultimately led to the band signing with Blue Note Records. Both myself and Joe were under no illusions that our production / engineering roles were secure in this new landscape, but – much to our surprise – the label were keen that the whole 'team' responsible for V2.0 were part of this new arrangement.

In the gaps between the bands extremely heavy touring schedule we began to carve out a rough vision for a new record. After considering other facilities we decided to return to Giant Wafer, but were afforded a longer stay and a larger budget for piano hire. We also had a budget to mix in a studio environment – Manchester's 80Hz rather than my project studio where we had completed V2.0. But with this physical repetition in mind we felt that it was important to consider how we might aesthetically differentiate the records.

Compositionally Man Made Object is a darker, more harmonically static offering. It is more groove oriented and driven less by melody. Whereas V.20 was largely written in a rehearsal room situation the majority of the new pieces were conceived on the road in a DAW environment, by the drummer Rob Turner, with the band as a unit arranging and developing these embryonic sketches whilst simultaneously working out how the heavily syncopated 'riff like' parts might be physically played. To generalise, this proposed record was closer to what we might call electronica or intelligent dance music than its forebear from the onset of the compositional process.

This shift in direction caused myself and Joe to consider a production methodology which might re-inforce a sense of the bands more jazz oriented roots, in the context of a record due to be released on one of the world's most recognisable jazz labels. This creative rational also served a dual purpose; we did not want to aesthetically alienate the bands audience to date too much.

We developed a modus operandi of sorts; less obviously synthetic reverberation, no synthesizers and a greater sense of natural space, supporting the notion that whilst these compositions were designed with the aid of technology they were realised by human beings, they were 'man made objects'. We would also go to great lengths to manipulate the drums 'at source', seeking out more and more unusual textures.



Again, great care was taken to capture the performances with as much detail as possible. The musical dynamic covered a huge scale, from the extremely quiet contemplation of *Good Bye Ferg I'll See You Soon In Heaven* to the metal-like intensity of Protest. Tracks such as the later called for more acoustic treatment to be added to the already heavily dampened drum room and greater isolation between the piano and bass.





Yet whilst we were seeking greater isolation in order to highlight the detail in these dense arrangements we also had one eye on the mixing process; Having previously recorded many records at 80Hz I knew the large reverberant live room well. I felt that adopting an age old technical process – the use of a reverb chamber – could result in a natural, integrated sound stage and a more 'jazz like' aesthetic. Chambers had been used in the days before mechanical reverberation, often to add depth to a central melodic instrument or vocal, in studio's like Columbia's 30th St and Capital Records, but what I wanted to achieve was a tightly controlled system where we could place each member of the band at different depths within the soundstage by working with relative volume.



The record was mixed on a Neve Genesis, utilising a good deal of outboard dynamics and equalisation. Three auxiliary sends were sent to three active monitors which were arrange in the live room facing away from a high Decca tree using Telefunken M61s. This video illustrates the process



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