

# TAPE OP MAGAZINE

## Bob Olhsson: Looking at Digital Recording

by Philip Stevenson

{copyright 2001 Philip Stevenson}

Bob is a former Motown engineer. See his full interview in an upcoming issue of *Tape Op*.

### **Well here's a classic *Tape Op* interview question for you: how do you feel about digital?**

Frustrated. [laughs]. There's so many great things about it and yet - there was a thing at the AES called "When Vinyl Ruled" - this was incredible. I hope to heaven that they let them do it again but I can see how a lot of manufacturers would not let them do it again. They set up a state of the art 1962 control room and played back a bunch of old 3-track safety masters from that era. The sound destroyed everything at the show. I mean, it was a no-brainer better than anything we're doing now, it's sickening. And at one point, Doug Botnik, who used to be at Sunset Sound turned to me and said, 'Man I remember the first time I tried to do a session on a transistor board I wanted to slit my wrists.' [laughs]

Yet the coveted stuff in audio is really the discrete stuff. Most people want tube compressors but they don't want tube boards, they want Neves and APIs.

Well they want big. I mean that's the thing. They want a million inputs, and the old boards didn't have million inputs. People want to do things in real complicated ways, and the old ways were really very simple. You know the magic happened out in front of the mic, and if the magic didn't happen in front of the mic, it sounded awful, and you did it again.

If you play some damn music, you'll get some damn sound

Yeah. And to a large degree that's true. Part of it was in the '50s the songwriters had an absolute stranglehold on the record business. Basically, the songwriters would come up with a hit song, shop it around the labels and it would go to the highest bidder. Labels did not like that, and that's a lot of what allowed the self contained group thing to come in, because the labels said, okay we're only going to sign people that write their own material.

**You come partly from audiophile side of things and a lot of those people still reject digital. One of the first things that struck me and I think it struck a lot of people, was that 44.1 was kind of a random and not very satisfactory sampling rate. You know, it was low.**

Yeah, it was primarily because you could use a video machine as an editor.

You could encode it on videotape, edit the videotape. You had to edit digital audio, that was the whole thing.

**Do you think that the day will come when high definition digital or something fixes all these problems with digital?**

It's very hard to say. We keep hoping! [laughs]. It's a real catch-22 because a lot of the problem with digital is that fewer and fewer recording engineers are working on things. It's become a thing of now you just ask anybody who's hanging around to do the tracking and then you save lousy tracking in the mix, save lousy mixing in the mastering, etc. One of the biggest problems with digital is just that it is not idiot proof. You need to know that every time you perform some math on that signal, you're gonna degrade it and it's not magic. It's like analog: with analog you just really carefully thought through 'How can I go the least number of generations, how can I not damage this.' With digital, it's been sold as this bulletproof thing, so people often just don't realize that they're completely ruining their audio. Through the history of recording, there've been these things which ostensibly are supposed to save time, and make you freer to do what you want, but often they do the opposite. One is console automation and another is Pro Tools.

Automation was implemented not so much to help with mixing but to solve the problem of being able to come up with identical first generation masters. I mean in some ways, digital recording made automation obsolete only people had decided that this was the 'professional' way to do it, [laughs] so they keep doing it. But the original reason was because you didn't want to take the generation hit from copies and so, if you could automate a mix, then you could run three or four mixes and you'd have three or four first generation master tapes.

**Right, and I can understand that, but it seemed to suck a lot of the boldness out of the way that people mixed.**

Oh sure, it took it left-brain.

**Obviously, with all of these things, the argument is always, yes, the most talented person who understands it can do a good job and use it in the right way, and of course that's true. But I don't hear the infinite possibilities of the technology when I turn on the radio, I just hear people moving things over on the grid.**

Yeah, it's sad. You need performance. In getting into the new age stuff and so forth, I learned a lot about Indian music, and the theory of Indian music. An integral part of the theory of Indian music is that the effect music has on a listener is how it affects their breath. The fascinating thing is that I had realized at Motown while I was recording Levi Stubbs, that I could ride the gain right if I sang along with the singer in my mind; if I could breathe with

the singer, I could tell where they were gonna breath and I could tell when they were gonna get louder, when they were going to get softer and ride gain on the vocal much more effectively. Of course, nobody rides gain on the vocal anymore, which is insane. Anyhow, I discovered that, and then when I learned about Indian music, it kinda went one step further and I realized that the way that a person breathes when they're doing a performance, when they've gotta get through something that's hard, and they've gotta get all the way through it, is a very exhilarating thing to breathe along with. I think that this is actually a big commercial factor in how much people enjoy listening to a recording is the ability of feeling like the artist when they achieve the performance. Of course if the artists are just singing one chorus and splicing it all together, and there's no heat on the artist to perform, then its all gonna be limp, dead. so, I think that's a lot of what's wrong today. I don't know that I can just blame it on Pro Tools. I think that you can blame it on Pro Tools in that it hasn't got the risk of cutting tape, which intimidated people and made people really think twice about whether they wanted to do it, whereas with digital you just throw it together and do it. it definitely allows for a lot of what I call the 'good enough syndrome' where people do things until they're 'good enough' as opposed to doing them until they can't do them any better. Certainly at Motown it was about doing it until we couldn't do it better and there was no such thing as 'good enough.' You tried to make it as good as you could and you generally were not very satisfied. I mean I'm still pretty embarrassed about what a lot of the things sounded like, but I know they had to sound that way because of the production that we were doing, it just had to be that way, and it was the best combination of what we had to work it with, was the best we could come up with given the combination of the artist, the arrangement, the song, the whole thing. It was a solution. In fact this is one thing that is really kind of missing from today's production, nobody commits to anything.

### **That's very true.**

Back then, you had to make final decisions as you went. You had to be willing to throw out a track. Brian Holland used to point to his bottom desk drawer, it was full of tapes, and say 'the only reason I'm successful is that I threw out more basic tracks than anybody else around here.' I think I told somebody '*Sgt. Pepper's* is not a recording, *Sgt. Pepper's* was the solution to the various problems they came up with in the process of producing the record.' You put something on and then you have to figure out something to put with it that'll make it work and you couldn't go back whereas now, you've got this huge palette and you can do anything, but you wind up with it all being so conceptual that it's lame. There's no magic, no opportunity for the recording to come out any better than your concepts.

**It's a problem, all the way around, because I think that people learn by rote so much now, that what they're gonna do is paste something together in Pro Tools or comp 25 takes of a vocal that they don't**

**encourage the artist to do it the right way.**

Oh yeah, over-engineering is rampant.

So what's your advice to all your readers?

[laughs] Good luck! No. I guess it's, 'Hang in there.' I think we're at a low point. It's like we're at the Frankie Avalon age of rock and roll and something new is sure to happen. I think radio is about to explode because internet and satellite radio is going to put so much pressure on the over the air radio stations that they're going to be forced to going back to being creative again and we're going to see a return of the deejay and we're gonna see a return of interesting music that's successful, that carries its own weight. I mean there used to be a saying, 'You can't stop a hit record' and certainly the experience of a lot of the ones back then was very much that: you literally felt that you couldn't have screwed it up if you'd wanted to. The record has its own soul, so to speak, and it tells you what to do. I think our problem now is that we don't have records that have enough of that magical quality that causes the record to sell itself and so we've become very dependent on very expensive promotion and publicity and video - and all of these ancillary things. I mean think of the absurdity, that people are being asked to buy a record that the video cost more than the CD to make. I mean, what's wrong with this picture? [laughs] I think that we've got to start investing in records again, not doing them the cheapest possible way and it think there's gotta be a return to records that are so exceptional that they sell themselves.

**Something you can't stop. So, I guess we should call this article 'Nowhere to run?'**

There you go!