



From Neve To Native

By Toby Gad

Can a laptop computer replace a fully-equipped tracking studio?

During the last ten weeks I had an eye-opening experience: After years of piling up equipment in my studio and expanding the space to accommodate all the outboard gear, keyboards, and mixers, I now find myself selling most of my beloved gear on Ebay to improve my studio. No, I don't need the money and I won't buy new things in exchange. Well, maybe I need the space since my studio is in midtown Manhattan, but something else happened...

All those colorful synth expanders, stylish keyboards, expensive outboard gear and, yes, even the most impressive piece of equipment, my analog mixing desk are on the list. The question is: Should I keep the studio looking big just to make the A&Rs of record labels that walk in during most productions believe they get more value for the recording budgets, or should I only keep what I really use and make room for a massage chair?

The massage chair won, for one main reason. The last four albums I produced (for Columbia records, Interscope and Sire/Warner records) were not really done in my studio any more but almost entirely on my laptop computer. I mixed the songs in my NYC studio but I recorded all the final vocals and guitars with just the Neumann U87 and the Digidesign Mbox on the laptop, and I did all the programming of drums, keys and bass just using Apple Logic.

Taking the studio to the artists

Last year, instead of having the artists come to NYC, I made nine two-week trips to where the artists live, to work in environments they chose, and recorded everything on my 12-inch PowerBook. My artists sang much better in such familiar environments. We wrote and recorded in living rooms, bedrooms, hotel rooms, on hotel rooftops, on the beach, in foyers, and in December 2004 Warner/Sire even got me the honeymoon suite in the Swiss Grand Hotel overlooking the big surf of famous Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia.

We wrote great songs watching the surfers and the setting sun in the bay. We took surf lessons in the morning and were full of energy and inspiration in the afternoon. Ironically, the record label even saved money, comparing the \$550/night room to a \$1000/day recording studio. We did seven songs in 12 days, and the artists

were under no pressure to perform—and came up with the funniest moments of creation that might not have happened in the usual high-end studio facilities.

I used to produce records in studio giants like the



The author, writing with Jay D Skyy on the beach.

Orlando Transcontinental or the Nashville Tracking room and spent seven years in Germany's biggest studio complex, Frank Farian's FAR studios. (Stevie Wonder recorded "I Just Called To Say I Love You" there.) Those

places have so much electronics around you that technicians constantly have to troubleshoot and fix things. Just switching on all the gigantic Neve consoles, the Sony DASH recorders and the outboard got so complicated that we preferred to leave everything switched on 24/7.

The artists felt lost in the cathedral-like recording rooms which were designed to fit an entire orchestra. Communication got reduced to a bare minimum due to crackling talkback connections and disturbances from engineers who randomly entered the studio to see what was going on in Room 3 when they had a break in Room 4.



Simple things like editing two bars out in a song became a technical nightmare. We'd have to move the 48-track machine down the hallway into the next studio when their work was finished and copy 48 tracks to the right place and if we pushed "record" too early, 48 tracks would be irreparably damaged.

The more I downsized my own recording equipment, the more I became aware of the problems of regular studios. Tracking tracks before a mix took an extra day which led to bills of \$10,000 just for the studio time of mixing one song, and it began to feel like a handicap, as I usually do a lot of tweaking of the arrangement in the final mixing stages.

There came a time when the record labels even preferred the sound on my rough mixes out of my preproduction studio over the final mixes in the expensive mixing studios. I believe that a lot of unrepeatable magic happens when you mix things for the first time. Having this

first mix on total recall is very valuable. It also adds something when you know your speakers well and when you don't second-guess your intuitive "demo" work. Often it doesn't get any better.

The funniest situation happened last year when I took my 16-year old protégée Jay D Skyy (now signed to Jimmy Iovine, the president of Interscope, Geffen and MCA, album release mid-2005) on a writing trip to some of my hit-writing friends in LA and SF. On one session with Narada Michael Walden (who wrote many big hits for Whitney, Mariah, Shanice, Tina, you name them...) we started jamming in his multi-million-dollar studio in San Francisco, and I actually put up my tiny laptop setup in the middle of the huge recording room, preferring to produce and record the song right where it's at, face to face with my artist, instead of using his huge Neve consoles and multitrack machines.



Recording the group Fatty Koo in the foyer of a small house in Ohio.

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Don't get me wrong—I love Narada and his studio, but we saw that day that times were changing. In one hour we had a slamming track, he jammed a few drum grooves to the click, 20 minutes later I was done with the guitar tracks and after two hours we finished the lead vocal. We spent the rest of the night dancing to the new song in the recording room and fooling around.

The need for speed

My work got ultra-efficient this way. I would meet with the artist at noon at their home or on the rooftop of a hotel, jam with an acoustic guitar and a \$99 Casio keyboard and write a song within 2-5 hours. Then I'd go back to my hotel room and start programming the beat in Logic with the built-in ES2 software synth and the EXS24 sample player using my extensive personal sample library on the tiny 160 GB HD. One hour later—dinner time. Then a few quiet guitar tracks not to wake up the hotel

10-day/6-song trip, I'd load the songs into my big setup, convert the Logic environment, add some details, and mix.

This is when I understood that most of my studio gear had become redundant. All the wonderful Waldorfs and Kurzweils, Tritons and JVs remained switched off and 90% of the mixing desk had the faders down in every mix. I had

started those songs native and once I put them into the Digidesign Pro Tools TDM system, they already sounded great.

2004 was also the time when Digidesign and Emagic/Apple "went to war" and my Pro Tools HD2/Logic 7 OS X combination had incompatibilities that led to unfixable everyday crashes in my extensive use of



Writing with Narada Michael Walden and Jay D Skyy in San Francisco.

neighbors, and some keyboard programming. Next morning I'd wake up two hours earlier to do the loud distorted guitars, usually with \$99 Sam Ash Guitars and \$69 amps, which I would then give my artists as a present. I would comp the vocals with headphones at the airport, and back in NYC after a

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the TDM system. Coming back from Sydney I had ordered a MOTU Traveler and an RME Fireface, but the delivery got delayed while I could not delay the delivery of my mixes, and I did not want to even touch the TDM OS X horror system with the new songs any more.

say the least, about what I had accomplished on such basic gear. I might still use a few select outboard pieces just for the lead-vocal chain in the mix, but as for the rest of the equipment, I am sorry to say that after ten mixes without it, I don't miss the room full of gear any more.



The honeymoon suite in Bondi Beach, Sydney.

Then I dared to try something I never believed possible: I mixed 10 songs completely without an interface! Without outboard and without additional synths. Without Lexicon reverbs and, believe it or not, without third-party plug-ins! And I'm talking productions with 16 live drum tracks, 16 orchestra tracks, 12 guitar tracks, 48 choir tracks, 5 different lead vocalists with ad-lib tracks, and extensive ES and EXS programming. I only used the dual G5 and the \$999 Logic!

At first I struggled quite a bit, trying to make the vocal sound good. I was used to Lexicons, Focusrites and Tube-Tech outboard, Waves, TC and Soundtoys plug-ins, and the record label expected nothing less than that perfect crisp vocal sound I used to deliver. Of course I didn't tell them about my crashing studio and I must admit that I was quite nervous that week. But after two or three songs I discovered certain combinations of the Logic compressors, equalizers, de-essers and reverbs, busses, aux channels and other Logic native tools that came quite close to what I was used to.

It took a lot of improvising and juggling but I actually did ten mixes that blew the labels away. Some of these songs are for the Veronicas album (Sire/Warner paid 1.5 million dollars to sign them in 2004, the biggest US newcomer deal that year!). Others are for Jay D Skyy, my artist on Interscope.

When the interfaces finally arrived I was done with the project, and looking back now I am completely stunned, to

One "laptop song", "Happy" with my artist Meleni (my manager David Sonenberg got her signed to Columbia Records and I co-wrote/produced her entire upcoming debut album) is in the movie *Hitch* with Will Smith. Another "laptop song", "The Boogaloo Song" with the group Fatty Koo (David Sonenberg got them signed to Columbia; a 13-episode reality show about the group is now showing on the BET cable network, and I co-wrote/produced the entire upcoming album) was in the *Fat Albert* movie with Kenan Thompson and Bill Cosby. The "laptop album" with Jay D Skyy is scheduled for release mid-2005 on Interscope and the "laptop songs" with the Veronicas will appear on their 2005 debut on SIRE/Warner USA.

Now, three weeks later, I say goodbye to the huge and hugely beautiful mixing console, my incredibly sexy Waldorf synth collection, the Kurzweils, many reverbs, compressors, and the entire \$ 17,000 TDM system that wouldn't play ball with Logic (a sad tale told elsewhere

Writing with Jay D and Toni Wine (she wrote "Groovy Kind Of Love" and several other standards) on the rooftop of the Cadillac Hotel.



already)... More than half the studio will go and it will look empty, but I'll finally have room for the massage chair, and still I'll make even better mixes. ☺

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