Gareth Jones

The producer and engineer for the legendary likes of
Depeche Mode and Erasure gives his take on how
computers have changed the business of music making

> **Gareth Jones' career has been remarkable, not least because within four years of working in recording studios he'd been involved in two seminal albums. The first of these was John Foxx's *Metamatic* in 1979, the original pure synth album by a UK solo artist. Then, in 1983, he engineered Depeche Mode's *Construction Time Again*, the album that brought the art of sampling to the masses. Since then, he's worked with dozens of bands and musicians, including most of the Mute Records roster (Nick Cave and Erasure among others), scored numerous gold and platinum albums and, more recently, worked with new indie darlings Tiny Masters Of Today and Top 10 US album chart-hitters Grizzly Bear.**

After 30 years in the industry, Gareth has seen it all technology-wise. But he's quick to note that, for all its developments and his pioneering use of it, technology is just a glorified paintbrush – good music has always been, and will remain, about *ideas*.

Finding the path

Gareth's first job was at the BBC in the mid-70s, where he gained plenty of engineering experience. He realised, though, that it would be a slow route to his ultimate goal – combining his loves of music and technology and working in a recording studio. He picks up the story...

"I wrote a load of letters to studios – which is a pretty pointless way of doing it, really – but a guy called Mike Finesilver at Berwick Street Studios got back to me. He was a producer who owned a tiny but legendary eight-track studio called Pathway, and he was looking for someone to be a freelance engineer. He mentored me. He was a great help."

One of Gareth's earliest recordings was *The Prince*, Madness' debut single; but his first album proper was John Foxx's *Metamatic*.

"In my teens I'd discovered *Switched On Bach* by Walter Carlos, which was my first experience of synthesisers, so it wasn't a totally alien world," Gareth says. "I also didn't really have a history of working with drums, bass and guitars and was always interested in computers so, as a hi-tech vision, I was comfortable working on *Metamatic*. I was a very junior engineer and it was one of the first albums I recorded and mixed. But it was John's vision and he did all the programming and synth work. He was mentor number two and I learned so much from him."

The album was successful and Foxx used his recording advance to set up his own studio in Shoreditch, East London. Bearing the same name as his 1981 release, The Garden was hired by Depeche Mode to explore some fresh sounds on their third album *Construction Time Again*. Gareth was on hand to help with the new sampling technology that was about at the time.

"We just sampled everything and played melodies and beats with the samples," he recalls. "We did it as much as we could, and a lot of fun it was too. I had a portable Stellavox recorder – a high-quality ¼" reel-to-reel machine with mics – and we went out into the industrial wastelands of Shoreditch, sampled stuff and put it into a Synclavier for the record."

The resulting album featured massive hits like *Everything Counts*, and its success not only bought sampling technology to the fore but also started a relationship between the band and Gareth that's lasted, having worked on many

albums together over the intervening years. But for every Depeche Mode and Erasure, Gareth has also chosen to take a chance and work with new bands, constantly searching for, as he puts it, "music that's worth its little corner in the world. By which I mean, music that has something to say, that has value and communicates something new and original."

As such, Gareth has worked with a long list of diverse musicians, both signed to major labels and unsigned. In fact, the only constant in his career has been his ability to stay on top of the rapidly evolving music technology of the last three decades, which has not only radically changed the way we make music, but also the budgets behind it.

"The laptop is as powerful as The Garden studio was back when I was working with Depeche," he says. "And that's incredible, but probably only to people like me who have lived through it. To the new generation, who only know high-powered computers, it's probably irrelevant. We're now massively empowered, but whether the work is any better or not, I don't know. It's created a new business model where budgets have been driven down, but I guess there are pluses and minuses."

The minuses are that the computer is the tool that's being used to download the music and not pay for it, but while technology helps suck the money out at the end of the process, it also helps save money at the start...

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Everyone wants to be a producer

When pushed for pointers on how to get into the production industry, Gareth's advice is to keep trying, as the creative rewards are still there.

"I don't just want to give clichéd answers," he says, "but I would say don't give up. We can achieve amazing things – anything we like. The means of production are available. If you have a laptop, two microphones and a band, you really can make a record that's incredible. That's how Grizzly Bear make their records. They just go somewhere with mics and record, and this third album out now is number 8 in the Billboard charts in the States. You really can do it if you want to."
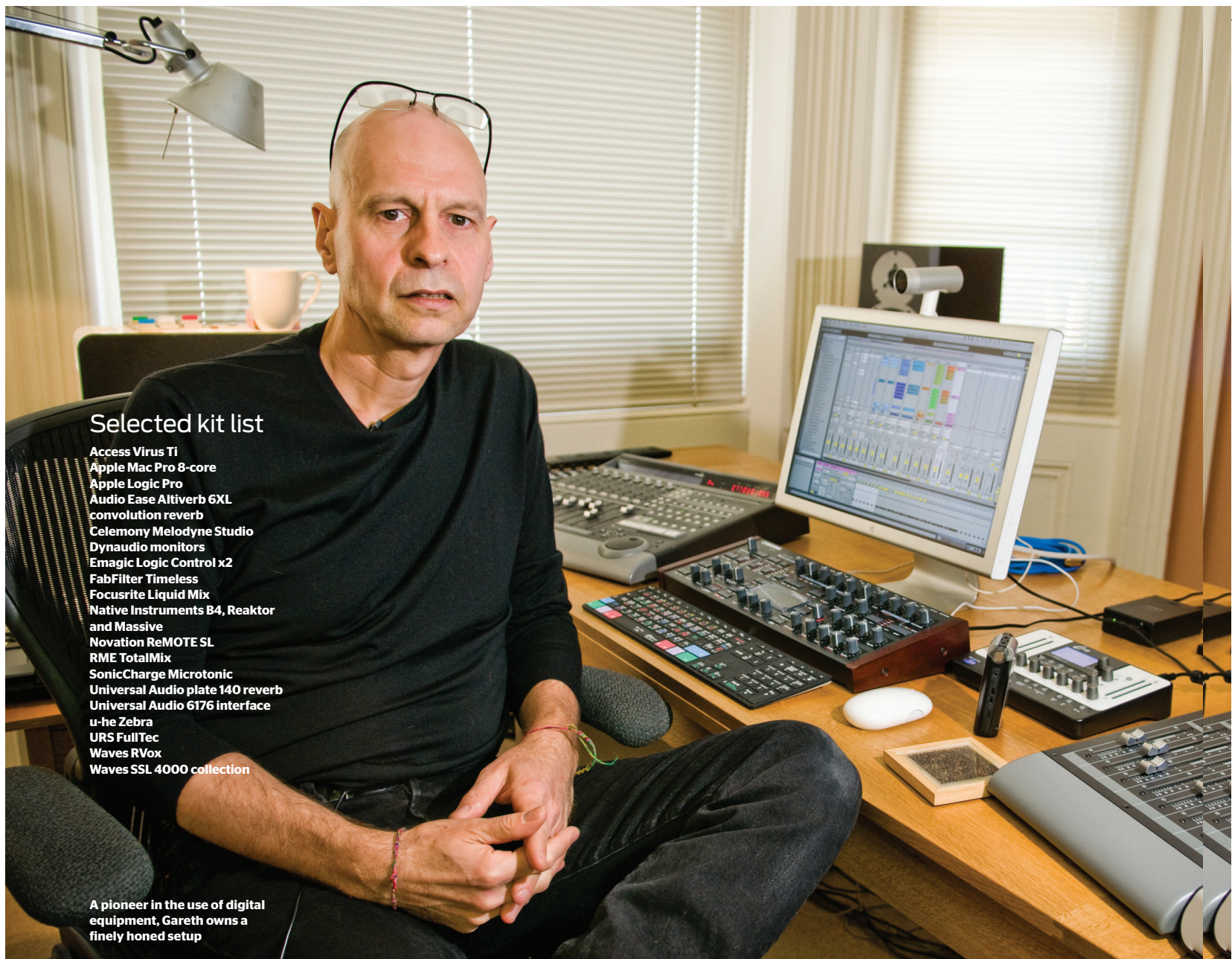
A pioneer in the use of digital
equipment, Gareth owns a
finely honed setup

studio," says Gareth of his home setup. "And a lot of record companies need recall and expect a mix to be adjustable four weeks after you've done it, so that's where working on a computer wins out massively."

Keeping up with the Jones

"My gear has been stripped down to this," says Gareth, pointing at his small but bespoke setup. "There's a high-powered 8-core Mac running Logic, a few fader controllers, loads of DSP like the UAD2 card and the Liquid Mix. I have no analogue synths left.

"I try and stay up to date and have the latest version of Logic," he continues, "so I might work on a mix like this one by Tiny Masters Of Today that was recorded in the States but mixed over at Daniel Miller's studio. As I say, the great thing about new technology is recall, so I can just pull it up on my computer and work on it at home,

which is how the business has to run now. The mix then goes to the band, the record company and the management. They all hear it, make some notes, and I can simply open it up at home and make adjustments as they require."

Alongside Logic's plug-ins, which Gareth is a fan of, he also has a lot of other favourites.

"I'm a big fan of the UAD plate reverb and the Altiverb reverb," he says. "I've always liked spring reverb and I also like the new convolution reverbs. On a historical note, when we were

sampling sounds back in the 80s, we were also interested in recording the acoustics. So when I was out in the wastelands of Shoreditch with Depeche Mode, I had a close mic and a distant mic and would mix the two. At the time we would say, 'Wouldn't it be amazing if you could sample the sound of a room as well as the sounds in the room'. Of course, that's what a convolution reverb is now. I'm really into the

Altiverb one – as much as anything, I like the pictures you get with it! I use much less reverb than I used to, though: maybe a plate, a spring and a room set up on three buses. The spring reverb has come back, which is nice, but the original was a big box, and unless you had big budgets that wasn't practical, so it's good to have it in my computer.

"I use a lot of compression," Gareth continues, moving onto vocal processing. "I really enjoy using RVox and the emulation of a Fairchild from Liquid Mix. Again, the UAD stuff suits me well, in particular, the LA-2A and 1176 compressors. I'm also currently loving their Fatso plug-ins. I like using FabFilter Timeless on my vocals and I also use a URS emulation of a Pultec, as well as the UAD Pultec, of course – it's got a really good sound, like a Pultec on steroids. When I need to tune the vocal I use Melodyne – it's just so easy to do. I really like the way I can tweak the pitch centre of the vocal. I once worked with a singer who studied physics, and the first time we used Melodyne on his vocal he said, 'Oh, so there was a point in studying fast Fourier analysis after all – I get it now. It's made my vocal sound better!'.

"Everyone's obsessed by in-tune vocals at the moment, so something like Melodyne allows you to concentrate on the interpretation, enunciation, delivery, energy and vibe of the vocal – all the different elements that make up a great vocal performance – knowing you can

> "Melodyne allows you to concentrate on the interpretation, enunciation, delivery and vibe of the vocal knowing you can tune it afterwards, which is an enjoyable process"

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Old synths vs new

Gareth likes working with both new and old equipment when he gets the chance, but one recent experience put them side by side, enabling him to really compare the two...

"Working with plug-ins compared to the original... it's just different. There are no knobs and it's different if you can touch buttons. Daniel Miller [*Mute Records guru*] and I did an electro remix for a Tiny Masters track and we had a plan to start with all virtual synths, because we thought it would be easier and quicker. So we were sitting in his studio and he has some modern hardware modular synths that he's into, and we ended up using only those, not the virtual synths, and recorded everything into Ableton! I was with my assistant at the time and said to him, 'Don't you think the sound of the modular gear is just so much better?' and he said, 'No, I don't think there's any difference in sound but I can see that you two are enjoying it more.' It's like if I had an SSL desk here, I probably wouldn't use a software compressor, but I don't, so I mix in the box."

tune it afterwards, which is an enjoyable process with the software."

Synths then and now

Obviously, having been there and done it with synth legends Foxx and Depeche Mode, Gareth has seen and owned a fair few synthesisers over the years, but now they're all software.

"As a Logic user, what incredible plug-in synths come with the software!" he says. "Additionally, I like Urs Heckmann's Zebra, which seems to have incredibly fast envelopes, and is an incredibly creative tool and semi-modular in its approach – a lot of fun. I also like MicroTonic. It's a different angle to the drum machine in Logic. I've been a fan of Native Instruments over the years, too, because of Reaktor. I had a little bit of a go just to say I could hook an oscillator to a filter, but the huge range of user-built synths is incredible – from emulations of a Juno 60 to new beatboxes that sound incredible.

"I also like the B4," he continues. "I was working on a Depeche Mode album and they had a really nice Hammond in the studio. One of the engineers was a huge Hammond fan and the B4 had just come out, so we played them side by side and were amazed. I also got excited by Massive when it came out but, for some reason, I don't use it. Maybe I'm spoilt for choice!"

Which could be true, but Gareth is keen to add that it's not how many plug-ins you have that's important – it's how you use them.

"Treat each as just a paintbrush, like someone might give you a new paintbrush that enables you to express your ideas. It's easy to get too fixated on the technology. Plug-ins are a lot of fun, and if you have fun you do better work. But, if I'm honest, you can do great work with the basic Logic plug-ins."

And while Gareth is happy to keep working in his virtual environment, he has some quite definite ideas on how it can be improved.

"There are some things in Logic that bug me," he says. "Basically, the stuff that Pro Tools does that Logic doesn't! But some of my Pro Tools-using friends are just as irritated that there are things they can't do that can be done in Logic. I'd really like to see easy channel imports from other mix sessions [*with Logic 9, this is now possible*] and whole mixing desk imports. I don't seem to be able to do that and I find it tedious. It's really easy to do it in Pro Tools."

Gareth has worked with some top artists on some great projects during his three decades in the industry, but which are his favourites?

"Working on *Metamatic* was a massive achievement. But then I've just mixed the Grizzly Bear record, *Veckatimest*, which was fantastic. Overall, though, I feel I've been very lucky, as I've worked with so many people who I get along with, which is a bonus in any job. Every so often I think I really should do something else, but then I ask, 'Can I do anything else?'. I'm happy working with musicians, creating music." **cm**