



Tim Palmer

Tim Palmer gives Christopher Holder an insight into the U2 mixing and recording process, as well as some useful mixing tips.

Tim Palmer is a difficult engineer to pigeon-hole. From the moment he got his breaks early in his career in the '80s, he's been producing and mixing a hugely diverse collection of artists. His career has taken in sessions with the likes of Bowie's Tin Machine, two Tears For Fears albums, Sepultura, Robert Plant and Pearl Jam, among many others. Comparatively recently, Tim turned his attention to being a specialist mix engineer, "because staying up till 5am for two months on end has become less appealing". His invaluable blend of a mixer's proficiency and producer's creativity came to the attention of Irish über-group, U2. Tim was quickly inducted into the Dublin-based audio brains trust for the mixing stages of U2's new album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*.

Christopher Holder: First up, I've got to ask you about the U2 sessions. How did the U2 gig eventuate?

Tim Palmer: I first met Bono many years ago at the Tin Machine shows and subsequently I mixed the song he contributed to on the Michael Hutchence album, as well as mixing one song [*The Ground Beneath Her Feet*] for a film which Bono had co-written, called *The Million Dollar Hotel*. Then the band asked me to mix a couple of songs for the new album. They sent the tracks out to LA for me to work on. But you've got to understand that mixing isn't necessarily a final stage for U2, it's simply part of an ever-evolving process – I mean, arrangements are being changed right to the death. Anyway, they asked me to fly to Dublin where they were finishing the album off with Brian Eno and Daniel Lanois.

CH: So, are they control freaks, always looking over your shoulder?

TP: No, not at all, they are very open to new ideas. They have a band policy where they don't accept anything until every member is totally happy, and what with having to please Eno, Lanois, and myself, things take time!



Mixing

U2



CH: Did you approach the U2 gig like any other?

TP: I approached the U2 gig like any other, but soon found it *wasn't* a gig like any other! The band's determination to always better themselves is quite staggering considering they have been making records for so many years – there is no resting on previous glories here. They aren't precious about anything. At the drop of a hat, even after two weeks of overdubs and mixing, if they feel they can better the original track, they will be straight back in to recut. When you think you're ready to print a mix, Bono might appear with a new lyric and chorus melody and turn the whole song on its head. There are so many versions of songs I don't know how they remember what they've done. Edge carries a huge bag of CDs with him which should be lifted by two roadies! Somehow he can remember the smallest detail from an older version, and pulls it out of the bag for reference. I called him 'Edge, Ears the Size of a Planet'. You can't sneak anything by this band!

CH: What did U2 supply you in the first instance?

TP: Originally, they sent me their material over to my base in LA on Otari RADAR format. I set my ProTools rig up alongside the RADAR so I could try my ideas and run them separately – this way if I moved any parts around it was safely in ProTools and the original parts remained intact. In Dublin I pretty much replicated the same setup.

CH: It must be quite stimulating being part of project like that, along with so many audio luminaries.

TP: Well, yeah. It was good to have the opportunity to meet the other parts of the team. We would all eat dinner together every night and, at one point, we had the band,

ProTools – the good, the bad & the undecided

ProTools has been amazing for me because it's so flexible. Recently I've been using it purely as a 'mix tool'. Whatever recording format I'm sent, I will have my ProTools rig set up running alongside. For example, I can take the chorus vocals, record them into ProTools then mix them underneath the original vocal, but maybe distorted using a bit of Ampfarm. Or, I can take a guitar phrase which is just a bit strange and fix it. With some songs I'll even try a new arrangement.

I also love the fact that I can get in and move notes about and make things tighter, but you've got to know when to stop. I mean, this ability to tweak and tweak and tweak, was never anything that was demanded by the record buying public. I feel the same about Autotune, but engineers seem to Autotune just about everything these days. The fact is, people like things out of tune, they

always did, and always will. No one has ever said, "I'd buy this record if you could make the backing track a bit tighter and get the tuning a bit closer". Another word for this imperfection is 'character'. We're too preoccupied with perfection these days.

I'll tell you another thing about ProTools. Because you can record so much material onto the hard drives, bands and their producers are failing to make decisions. These decisions are often being left to me when I come to mix. I have seen a guitar part recorded over five tracks with different mics and been told to choose at the mix stage. At least in the old days people were forced to make decisions. The word 'bounce' doesn't exist anymore. As a consequence of this, I often have to spend four or five hours planning out how I'm going to get all the material up onto the console. Important decisions are being left

more and more to the mixer. On one level the additional creativity is appealing, but record company A&R are going to have to realise that the mix is going to take longer.

Brian Eno, Daniel Lanois, Mikes Hedges, Steve Lillywhite, and myself all sitting around discussing the album. Of course we didn't always agree on things, but that's the point really, the band has the opportunity to get more than one opinion on a song. It really is a team effort, just because you spend a week on song doesn't mean you get to finish it. It's a bit of a tag team situation.

CH: *Even in extraordinary circumstances like this U2 gig, are there certain immutable truths about mixing that still hold true?*

TP: To a point yes. I like to think of every song as a story. The structure of a song should build the plot, and it's your job to ensure the story unfolds. For example, in a pop song, the chorus obviously needs to hit home. You look at the tools you've been presented with, and you say, "okay, how am I going to make these tools work for me to make this song successful?"

CH: *With any new job, what's the first step you take?*

TP: The first thing I would do with a mix is to listen to what the band has done before. This would include previous work and any new rough mixes. I can have a listen to what it is they're trying to achieve, and try and make it happen.

Maybe the rough mix can tell me that it's the groove which is driving the song, and in that case, I would home in on that. Or, from a more technical standpoint, the rough mix might tell me that the recording lacks brightness. So rather than EQ every single individual thing, as I push it up, I could start off by getting a very rough balance and putting EQ over the entire mix and give it a tweak. For that sort of thing I love to use a GML EQ. Some EQs seem really unnatural and pointed, but the GML is very smooth and musical (I know this is a term

“Bono might appear with a new lyric and chorus melody and turn the whole song on its head”

which is often overused). You can fine tune your mix without cranking the top end on every channel.

CH: *Is it important to get a good sound happening quickly to keep you inspired, rather than fiddling about with too many of the intricacies early on?*

TP: It's useful to get started on a good footing – you at least have a focal point for what you are trying to achieve. The thing about being in a

studio is you're presented with a million combinations of ideas, sounds and effects, and if you don't quickly decide what it is you want to do, you really could spend a lot of time just fumbling about trying to find something. You really have to know your reverbs and what's available and be able to pinpoint what you're after.

CH: *After you get a rough mix together and get a general vibe, how would you generally approach it?*

TP: It's different every time. For example, in one song I might go for a nice clean, solid, compressed bass sound. In another song I might decide the pre-chorus needs a really reggae, squashed bass with very low end. Maybe I would even distort the bass for the chorus of a particular tune, who knows! Very rarely would I have the same effect from the beginning of the song to the end. Take the vocals, for example. Quite often you want the vocal in the chorus to be more vital, so you might mix in some distortion or you might put a little bit of delay on, while in the verse you might make the vocal very dry. For the bridge you might have a tiny bit of slap... the song should tell you what to do. After all, a drummer and a bass player will change their groove or their parts according to what is required at that point in the song, so when you're mixing you must think the same way. Nothing needs to remain static.

Tim Palmer on his involvement with Pearl Jam's classic album, *Ten*.

*While in LA I mixed Mother Lovebone, which essentially was Pearl Jam's previous incarnation. That was one of those strange cases where I'd mixed an album without the band present – I was in LA, they were in Seattle. Months later I got a phone call to tell me that the band's singer had died of a heroin overdose, which was awful news. They carried on for a while and still put the album out. The remaining members decided to form a new band and auditioned for a new singer, found Eddie Vedder and from the ashes of Mother Love Bone, Pearl Jam was born. They recorded *Ten* and asked me to mix it. I didn't need a lot of convincing, but I really wanted to mix it in London where I was living at that time. So they all flew to London, and we began working at Ridgeland Studios in Dorking, just outside London.*

I found the whole process to be very relaxed, I just got on with it. The band came in to listen each morning, we had a little chat about things, a couple of pushes and pulls and it was done. The whole record was done in 10 or 11 days, it

was fantastic.

Coincidentally, only a few months prior to that Pearl Jam mix I was in LA producing a rock band, and began working on mixes for them, when the head of the label (I won't mention his name, but he's a very big man in the American music industry) said, "I don't think you have what it takes to mix rock records for America, I'm going to get someone else in to do the mixing". I was gutted because I'd always mixed the records I'd produced. Anyway, I thought, "well, bite your lip, and just finish the project". I had to sit there and watch somebody else mix my production and I found that really hurtful – which is a little ironic, seeing I now do this to other people all the time!

After the A&R man's brutal comments, the next project I undertook was the Pearl Jam album. So, "I do have what it takes! they liked it!". It was the tonic that was required because for a minute there I was worried. I was thinking, "maybe he's right", but when the time came to do the Pearl

Jam mix it was a case of: "well, fuck it, I'll just do it the way I always do it and see what happens".

*Piece of trivia: on *Ten* I got credited for playing 'pepper shaker and fire extinguisher'! The reason for that was purely because we were in the middle of the countryside and I just wanted a bit of percussion, so I tapped away on a pepper grinder and a fire extinguisher with a couple of drumsticks!*

Another important point is: you shouldn't make too many important mixing decisions until you've heard all the necessary parts together. Otherwise, you could EQ the song and fill up all the space, only to realise there are more parts to go in.

CH: *By constantly evolving the mix you need to have your hands constantly on the faders, trimming levels?*

TP: Yes, absolutely, and I'm never afraid of taking stuff out all together. Sometimes people can cram too much into a mix. If I think it sounds better without a certain guitar line, I'll get rid of it. Or, I might bring it in during the second half of the chorus to help develop the song. Try and keep things fresh – that's the sort of thing that can be very constructive.

It's worth understanding that there's a lot of psychology in the way mixing is done. When a musical part first enters it's a good idea to let it come in strong, then you can drop back the level as the part repeats. You can even push up the master fader at the head of a chorus and then drop it back very slowly. That's a good trick to keep up your sleeve when A&R men want the chorus to 'hit hard'!

CH: *So what does a Tim Palmer mix offer?*

TP: Being a producer for 15 years I would like to think that I can be the objective 'last man' in the chain and take the song to a new level. I rarely just sit and balance what is sent to me. If I'm presented with a problem in a song I'm about to mix, I'm in the position to say, "well okay, the second verse doesn't really have anything to build it, I'm going to put something in". Because of my experience as a producer and musician I can whack in a guitar loop or a percussion part and attempt to take what they've done to the next level.

To stay objective, I never listen to new material sent to me too much. I think once you get into repeated listenings you end up unavoidably sharing the band's plan. When I get a demo of a band, or a mix I'm supposed to redo, I listen to it and write notes straight away. Otherwise, after a few plays, I end up saying, "oh that demo sounds great, I don't want to change anything!".

CH: *What's your attitude towards compression in the mix?*

TP: I think some people can be lazy with compression and just squash things because it's a quick fix. Compression is great but it doesn't have to be on everything – a mix doesn't have to be flat. I prefer a mix to be more dynamic if I can. I mean, let's face it, when it gets on the radio it's flattened anyway. It's sad that a lot of the people who listen to your mixes, whether it's A&R men, managers or bands, can be deceived by the compression. If you burn a CD, often the mix that's been squashed flat and cranked at a high level is the one they'll go for. The thing is, after a few listens, you feel short changed by the heavily compressed mix.

CH: *Do you find yourself turning to a particular compressor for a vocal?*

TP: It depends. First of all you have to ask yourself whether you're using compression to help control the dynamic or whether you want to hear the compression as an effect? Something like a Teletronix LA2A is a great compressor for vocals because you can squash it without actually ruining the sound. Meanwhile a EL8 Distressor is great as a compression effect – you can mix in a bit of distortion and actually hear it working.

CH: *Is mixing an instinctive process or can you purely approach it from the standpoint of a technician?*

TP: Personally, I'm very mood orientated and I'm not the most technical person in the world. By 'mood orientated' I mean that if I'm feeling good and I'm enjoying things, I can be very creative. Meanwhile, if I'm at a low point, it's better to just walk away for an hour, read a book or watch a bit of TV. In fact, I often put the TV on and listen to other music while I'm mixing. If I have MTV on it's surprising how often I think, "that sounds good, that might be useful in this". It helps if I can keep my brain as open I can.

CH: *Which might be different advice to those who would suggest focus is the key.*

TP: Focus is good, but I think it's even more important to stay excited about what you're doing. I have managed to really enjoy what I do, which is a key to being consistent.



Mixing on a Budget? Some Sound Advice

If you're starting out, the thing I would say is to become as familiar as you can with the way your equipment sounds. Have a selection of CDs you think sound great and be familiar with how they sound in your room. The first point of reference is your monitors: it makes no odds what monitors you've got in your studio, if you're aware of what a great record sounds like through those monitors, then you're half way there. Reference what you are recording back to your favourite CDs – you can turn knobs as much as you like, but you have to be confident you have what you want, so you can then move on. My advice to people working on budget consoles is not to overdo your processing, effects and EQ. Make sure the source sound is good and keep it simple. I mixed about four or five tracks for a band which were all recorded on a Mackie 8-Bus

and I remember thinking the drum sounds were some of the best I'd heard. I mean, there's no reason why that shouldn't be the case. Obviously, with a million dollar SSL J-Series or a Neve you are getting a clear, clean signal path and you can add your EQ and it's going to sound good. But if you start crunching up the sound too soon with cheaper electronics you are not going to be able to do too much to tart it up later. Make sure your miking is good (mic technique is very important) – then you won't need to use so much EQ anyway. At the end of the day it all boils down to your set of ears. Some people have a real affinity to doing this because they can hear things in the right perspective, end of story. You can be as technical as you like and know everything there is to know about audio, but you either make good decisions or you don't, and your work will

reflect that. People don't pay you for the fact that you know how to use a compressor, they pay you because you have an idea about what sounds good. You're being employed for your taste in a way.