

# Marius De Vries

## Programmer **and** Producer

As a programmer and producer, Marius De Vries has defined the sound of many a high profile recording artist. Brett Mitchell and Christopher Holder learn more about the 'sound that sells'.



You may be unfamiliar with the name Marius De Vries, but if you take a close look at many of the most influential and highest selling albums of recent years, sleeve after sleeve will attest to the impact this man has had on the global music scene. Marius is among the elite of that fabulous '90s recording phenomenon, the 'programmer' – the person who invariably sees none of the limelight (or daylight!), because he's too busy buried in the depths of the studio working on the musical detail of the 'next big thing'.

Within the last few years Marius has done an impressive amount of mouse clicking, sound selection, and general audio and musical wizardry for the likes of Björk, Madonna, Massive Attack, Annie Lennox, PJ Harvey, Robbie Robertson and U2. In more recent times Marius has filled the producer's chair, where he has co-produced Neil Finn's new solo album, and tracks for Madonna, Annie Lennox and Robbie Robertson. If that's not enough he's also dabbled in film scoring where, incidentally, he has recently picked up a 'Best Score' gong at the British Film Awards for his work on Baz Luhrmann's spectacular reworking of *Romeo + Juliet*.

AT caught up with Marius in the bowels of Whitfield Street Studios in London where he was continuing work on the film music for *The Avengers*. We asked about the tools of his trade and his work on Neil Finn's latest album, *Try Whistling This*.

**AudioTechnology: Tell us a little about your history...**

**Marius DeVries:** I didn't really get into music seriously until about the age of 24 or 25. The first proper job I had was as keyboard player for The Blow Monkeys. I toured the world with them a couple of times, made a couple of albums, but then decided that the touring life wasn't really for me, so I started doing sessions as a programmer. I worked a lot with Danny D, who was one of the big remixers of the time. We had a band called D-Mob, which was Danny D's project and I was one of the main musicians. We did a lot of seminal '80s UK dance remixes with the likes of Chaka Khan, and Eric B & Rakim, and that's really where I learnt my trade, cutting my teeth from a remix point of view.

**AT: You've set yourself up with a studio at home, what does that consist of?**

**MDV:** My home studio is designed from a keyboard player's perspective. The room is acoustically treated and sounds beautiful, but it's not laid out with a mixing desk as its focus, instead it's laid out with a computer as its main focus. The computer sits between the speakers while the mixing desk is at the side with a lot of Yamaha automated sub-mixers laying around. It's set out more like a keyboard player's weird laboratory, as opposed to a conventional studio. But at the heart of the studio there's a massive ProTools system, in fact there's very little tape involved at all – I've got a couple of ADATs which are gathering dust. Logic Audio does it all for me now, it's the perfect mini recording environment.

**AT: Do you record everything straight to ProTools?**

**MDV:** Almost every production we do at the moment is all virtual, right up to the mix – vocals and everything. I think it's because it gives you so much flexibility, which of course can be dangerous at times, but that's just a question of discipline.

**AT: You don't get overly concerned by the so-called 'digital-ness' of the hard disk-based system?**

**MDV:** I do make some concessions for that. I like to mix to half inch, and when I'm mixing I prefer Neve boards. It might be questionable whether you can really hear any significant difference between the Neve and an SSL, but I think there's definitely something nice and punchy about the sound that comes through the Neve. When I'm mixing in the studio I'll often have racks of outboard Neve EQ. I think you can readdress the digital coldness that happens when you're totally in the digital environment.

An awful lot of rubbish gets spoken about the subject of digital versus analogue. If you sit anybody down in a chair in front of a good system and A/B something that's been recorded on ProTools against something that's been recorded on two inch analogue tape, they're not going to

pick the difference. There are probably a handful of connoisseurs who might be able to tell, but by the time it ends up on the CD I don't think it's much to worry about, whichever way you go. This analogue/digital debate can be a red herring at times. I think there are people who spend far too much time worrying about it and not enough time worrying about whether they've captured the right performance, or whether the piece of music they're working on is actually any good. That's the bottom line in the end. No one is not going to buy a record because it was done on ProTools.

**AT: Let's move on to the Neil Finn album, Try Whistling This. Given your different backgrounds, you and Neil Finn would appear to make strange studio partners. Why the collaboration?**

**MDV:** The point was in destabilising each other, to a certain extent. I just wanted to prod him a bit so that he wouldn't repeat the same multiple chords and those Crowded House-type songwriting tricks that he's probably finding a bit easy to do these days.

So I think he found it quite challenging that I would set up a single drum loop with no harmonic change for five minutes, and say, 'okay let's do a song based on this', rather than, say, constructing a song with two modulations and three bars leading into the chorus. At the same time, the extravagance of some of his melodic writing was such that it was a challenge for me to find ways of fitting the more hip hop-based grooves that I'm used to working with into his slightly more elaborate harmonic frameworks.

**AT: How much of Try Whistling This was recorded in New Zealand?**

**MDV:** A great deal was recorded in New Zealand. There were one or two tracks that we recut in New York, but I'd say that 70% of the tracks feature, at least in part, performances recorded in Auckland. The reason for finishing up in New York was because I think Neil was getting a bit cabin-feverish back home in New Zealand. So we decided to go somewhere a bit more active and take advantage of all the great musicians who were in New York. But we got the whole thing off to a flying start in the month or so that I spent down in New Zealand.

**AT: Has Neil built himself a nice studio?**

**MDV:** It was beautiful. He's built it into the basement of his home, and he's done a beautiful job of the acoustics and the sound treatments. He's got a really good live room, with a slightly deader live room next to it, so you have a choice of recording areas. He's built a large, comfortable control room, and an adjoining machine room. Recording-wise he's got a two-inch Studer 24-track machine and a Euphonix CS2000 console. The best thing in his studio is a magnificent collection of vintage keyboards and strange ethnic percussion from the around the world. For me, whatever equipment you've got, if you haven't got a bag full of interesting instruments, the studio seems a bit soulless. He's got one of those very

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early Chamberlins, and an Optigan – which is an optical disk-based sample replay home keyboard from the '50s. Very interesting machine. He's also got a set of vibes and a Hammond organ – a good selection of noise making machines.

**AT: How did the recording process unfold?**

**MDV:** Michael Barker [the Kiwi born drummer now resident in Australia], Neil and I would spend a lot of the time just jamming. Some of what we played was recorded to two-inch, some of it was recorded directly to ProTools, and we made that decision based on how we felt the track was going – whether it would stay in a fairly live form or whether it was going to be more

programmed. The evenings tended to be taken up more with song construction, out of what we'd already done. We'd spend time finding overdubs that would work, as well as putting the drum parts into ProTools and seeing whether they could be made to work with other loops that I had going.

**AT: How do you rework your rhythms?**

**MDV:** There are lots of ways of doing it. You can do it within Logic Audio, using the Strip Silence function, or you can use a program like ReCycle, which is Steinberg's sample chopping-up program. But sometimes the reconstruction has to be done so delicately that you have to go manually into ProTools and make the chops in appropriate places and move things around yourself. It can be a very painstaking and laborious process, but it's sometimes the only way, especially if you want to mix and match machine-feels with live performances, which is something we ended up doing quite a bit. If you're not careful, the whole thing can get so untidy that it ends up sounding like a room full of random type writers!

**AT: Let's talk specifics. Can you remember how the first single, Sinner, came together?**

**MDV:** *Sinner* was an example where, in the first place, I just had a simple groove going on the computer and Neil wrote to it. On that basis he found himself not being able to change chords quite as often as if he was writing on the acoustic guitar. I think he possibly had to apply himself more strongly in the more elemental areas of his melodic work because of that. So it's the sound of him being excited by, and coming to terms with, unfamiliar territory, which rubs off on the final product.

## Laying down the law

**AT:** When you're hired as a programmer, the distinctions between producer/programmer/writer must be difficult. Where does the line get drawn?

**MDV:** Well there are no lines. There are grey areas between the arrangement, writing, production and performance roles – often it's as much down to political influences as any accurate assessment as to what is actually going on in the studio.

**AT:** So for example on a Björk record, she might say, 'I'd like a thing that goes wiggly, bing, wiggly, wiggly, bong', and then you would generate a 'wiggly' sequence – surely that constitutes writing?

**MDV:** Well, you might say that, but then there are several lawyers who might have a different angle on it.

**AT:** It's an awkward area. Do you run into these sorts of discrepancies often?

**MDV:** You can't come into this business as a programmer without running into that an awful lot, especially when you're coming up through the ranks. On those early budget projects you might be the only musician involved – everything that's played, all the arrangements and

all the musical parts might come from you – but because you're starting out you don't get writing credits. As you become more established you begin to get writing credits and get treated more fairly.

Matters became complicated when the whole remix culture started to happen – where you take an existing piece of music and entirely reinvent it. You almost get to the point where you might only use a couple of lines of the vocal and everything else would be an entirely new piece of music, but legally it's still the same track as the original. You know there's no question of any writing credit available for something like that, but possibly there should be. It's one of those many instances in copyright law where the reality of what is going on is so much more complex than the current laws can cater for. Then it becomes purely a question of precedent and who's got the cleverest lawyer...

**AT:** With the money to back them up...

**MDV:** That's right. But to be honest, I'm not complaining, because I think as you



work your way up in any business you're serving an apprenticeship, and you don't always get paid top dollar when you're doing that. Sure, there are many cases of injustices going on, but at the same time a lot of that is just part of the process of learning and getting on with it. You get screwed on the way up sometimes, that's life.

**AT:** *Where did the first looping orchestral and piano sample come from on that single?*

**MDV:** That's actually from one of the original Mellotron tapes. In the early days of the Mellotron it wasn't just a case of it providing vox samples or string sounds and so forth. Rather in the same fashion as home keyboards today, early Mellotron left hand parts would come with complete orchestral arrangements of, say, bossanova styles, mambo styles, or cha cha styles. So they would have got session musicians to come in and play in each of the keys of the instrument up the keyboard, in semitone increments. Then as a performer you would be able to use your left hand to provide a crude, but quite effective, accompaniment to what's going on in the right hand. So basically that was a slightly manipulated lift from those original Mellotron tapes. Nice royalty-free sampling!

**AT:** *How much of the rhythm parts on Sinner were played by Michael Barker, and how much did you program?*

**MDV:** Pretty much all of it was Michael Barker. Michael played the performance, and the basic grooves from each section would be lifted, probably four bar loops in each case. The sample would have some of the timing tidied up or processed a little. There may well be bits and pieces in there that come outside his performance, but fundamentally everything you hear comes from him – with a little additional dressing.

**AT:** *Where did the modulated stabby synth sound come from?*

**MDV:** Originally, it was another Mellotron sample actually, which was very heavily compressed, ring modulated and then refiltered. I don't have a Mellotron, I wish I did, but I don't have the space for it. Although there's a whole list of must-haves for my studio which are slightly more important and more practical.

**AT:** *Was the vinyl crackle that crops up mid song a ProTools plug-in effect?*

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**MDV:** Like an Opcode Vinyl plug-in, you mean? No. It's a straight forward sample from an old Elvis Presley 78 record!

**AT:** *When it came time to mix did you find it hard to alter your mind set from dance music to a more acoustic genre.*

**MDV:** I try not to mix by any set of rules. I'm very conscious of the fact that any time you mix a new track it's a whole new experience and it never gets any easier. And if you start to do the same old tricks to every track, then it ends up getting stale very quickly. So I don't think I had to be any more fresh in my approach to mixing these tracks on this album, you just have to take each song as it comes.

On this subject, I think that there's a lot of damage done in the breaking up of the process of making a record into a 'recording stage' and a 'mix stage'. I always try and keep things a lot more fluid than that. Even up to the mix, there will be things that I'm re-recording and retreating, while some of the tricks normally left to the mix stage I'll be working on early in the production process.

I think you can get to the stage where you've finished recording a track and you think that everything sounds good, and it all sounds exciting. Then you pull it down and you go away for a week. When you come back to it, you mix it and try and capture the feeling you had a

week ago, and often it's just not there – you end up struggling to feel good about the track. So my preference is to mix as I go along, and hopefully put down a fairly definitive version of what's going on as part of the recording process. That way the mix becomes more of a recall process where you have to tidy things up and not do too much rebuilding. Of course, sometimes you have to completely rebuild, then it becomes an exciting process in itself, because of that.

There wasn't any special preparations for mixing this one, I just tried not to be too freaked out by the fact that mixing is all about closing down options, and part of the exciting thing about making a record is having as many options as possible.

AT

### **Marius' studio equipment**

Soundtracs Solo PC Midi 32-8 mixing desk; Apple Macintosh 9600 350 with Emagic Logic Audio and 32-track Digidesign ProTools hardware; Yamaha VL1; Yamaha SY 77; Oberheim Matrix 12; E-mu Vintage Keys; E-mu Morpheus; E-mu E-Synth; Sherman Filter Bank; Mutronix Mutator; Lots of old Electro-Harmonics pedals; ARP 2600; Various Moog 'bits'; Doepfer Modular system; EMS VCS-3 – “we've got a couple of those which we still use”; EMS Vocoder; Akai S3200 x 3; Nord Lead x 2; Nord Modular; Roland MKS80 Super Jupiter; Roland Juno 106; Roland System 700; Roland JV 1080; Roland JP8000; KRK 9000 monitors

