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 De Vries: 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 submixers 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
At: When you're used as a programmer, the distinctions between writing music/programming must be difficult. Where do the lines get drawn?

MDV: Michael Batman and I both born Drummer now spend a lot of the time just hammering some of what we played on the Protools and we made the decision based on how we felt the track was going — whether it would stay in a fairly early Chorone with something up — which is an optical very interesting machine. He's also got a good selection of noise making machines.

At: Why did the recording process work?

MDV: There are lots of things that can do it, but we used the Skip Skip-It function of the Pro tools. It's a very basic tool, and it's also nice to have a program like RC3 Desk in Scoring's sample making program. But sometimes the sample making program is so simple that you have to go through all the way to the final product.

At: How do you work your way up in any business?

MDV: I see a lot of that. I don't spend time finding overdubs that would work, and then I have a look back at the recording to see what actually got done. There are many cases of overdubbing and getting the overdubbing right in the recording. Very often, it's all the same track as the original. You know there's no question of anything being edited in, but you're dealing with the same track. When you're not always getting paid, you sometimes have to work your way up in any business.
**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 refiletted. 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?**

**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.

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**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 Morphous; 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; KFR 9000 monitors