

Paul Oakenfold

Paul Oakenfold the DJ is well known – packed houses in Hong Kong and Taipei attest to that. Oakenfold the remixer is famous – U2, for one, are in his debt. But Christopher Holder asks Paul Oakenfold the producer to please step forward...

When most of us finish off a rough mix we might take it out to the car for a listen, or play it to a friend on their beatbox. When Paul Oakenfold finishes off a rough mix he plays it to a couple of thousand of 'his mates' at a club he's DJ'ing at on the weekend. Not a bad test audience.

And he's had plenty of reason to see how his mixes connect with his market, as in recent years he's been one of the most prolific remixers on the planet. Why? Well, Paul Oakenfold is probably the biggest name in dance music. He's known as being largely responsible for introducing the UK to 'Garage' sounds from New York and the Balearic beats of Ibiza. Bear in mind this was over 10

years ago, long before you could buy an *Ibiza Dance Sensations* CD from the supermarket. Back then, Acid House was a sensation. The British establishment was absolutely terrified of the throngs of whistle-carrying youths, who weren't so much as touching a bottle of booze (some happy pills and a tub of Vicks would do it) and if provoked, might indeed hug you to death. Scary stuff!

But, anyway, I digress... Paul Oakenfold is immense. In fact, he's just as much a brand name as he is a DJ or a producer. But until this year he hadn't actually released an album under his own name. *Bunkka* has changed all that. The new album is an eclectic bag of musical liquorice all-sorts, and demonstrates Paul's love for progressive house and hip hop in equal measures. If it were anyone else producing this record they'd be accused of producing a confused and muddled musical manifesto. But not Paul, he's always been that way. He can't understand why anyone would be so narrow minded as to not want to listen to a variety of great music – 'why limit yourself?' would be his argument.

For a progenitor of a genre that has largely been defined by the gear used to produce it (think Roland TB303/Akai MPC) Paul Oakenfold cares little for being a slave to the studio.

Paul Oakenfold: I'm not really a gear junkie at all. I'm less into equipment and more into performances and recording musicians. If I want a guitar part on a track I'll ring a mate who plays guitar rather than spend a week trying to program something. In fact, I don't actually own a studio myself.



Christopher Holder: So for the recording of *Bunkka* how did you do your pre-production?

PO: For *Bunkka* I just set up some gear in a room to record and work on my samples and loops. I mean, it's a small setup; it's not what I'd call a 'studio' – it certainly wasn't purpose built or anything.

Then once we were happy with a certain track I'd take it to an SSL or Neve room to mix. I wouldn't realistically go into a large studio before that point. The studios we were using were like a 1,000 pounds a bloody day. I ain't got that sort of money to waste really.

CH: Can you talk me through your pre-production?

PO: We'd start with the rhythms. And, being a DJ, I'd generally start with samples and loops. We'd work on getting together a basic rhythm track, then I would approach a singer and sit down with them and talk to them about the overall direction I was looking for. For example with the track *Time of Your Life* I said to Perry [Farrell] that the track wants to be about people going out – in nightclubs bars etc – and just having a great night. So we'd work on the lyrics, record the vocals about five or six times then comp the vocals at a later date. Once the vocals were comp'd we'd approach the track like I'd approach a remix. I'd bring in a guitar player, bass player, maybe a keyboardist and start building on the rhythm track, making sure we were arranging it around the vocal. So then it became what I'd class as a true song.

CH: What would you say is the secret of the perfect breakbeat?

PO: Feel. It's got to feel right. The rhythms have got to be cutting edge. Once I'm happy with the feel then I'm looking for quirky sounds to overlay or replace the existing rhythmic elements.

CH: Quirky?

PO: When I say 'quirky' I mean disturbing, not quirky as in cheesy. A disturbing sound will grab the listener's attention and draw them in. If you overuse that sound, it'll become annoying, but you've just got to strike the right balance.

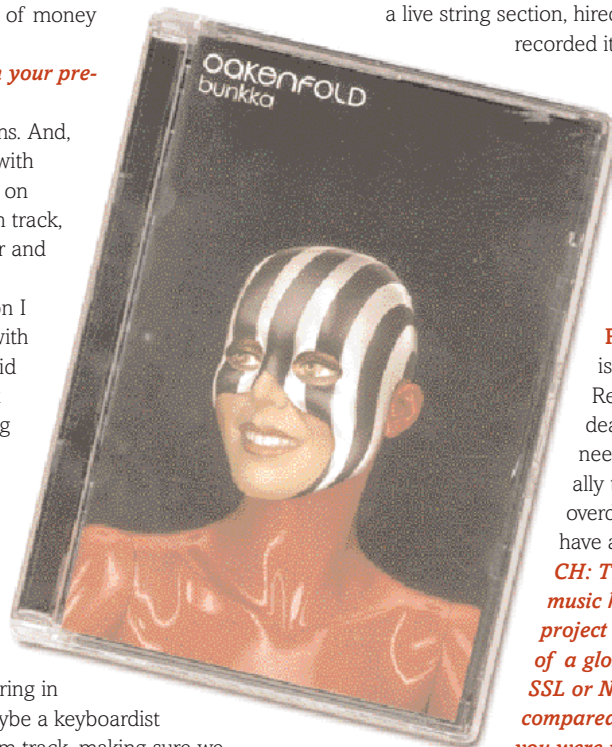
CH: A good breakbeat is just as much about the bassline as it is about the rhythms and *Bunkka* relies heavily on 'subby' bass sounds.

PO: The reason for that was because half way through doing the album I took a break to work on the score for *Sword Fish* [starring John Travolta]. For that film I was getting into recording large string sections. I had an orchestra in the studio and in the control room we were putting in sub basslines underneath. We found that the heavy bassline/orchestra combination kind of worked, so I thought, 'right, I'm going to start putting this on my album'.

For example, *Ready Steady Go* was my attempt at coming up with a soundtrack for a non-existent film trailer. So, it's a little bit James Bond-like – we threw the kitchen sink in there and tried to make it full-on.

CH: So even when you were doing overdubs that required strings you'd simply bring them into your pre-production room?

PO: That's right. We'd record straight into ProTools. That's what we did for *The Harder They Come* [a track featuring vocals from Nelly Furtado and Tricky]. We used a live string section, hired an orchestrator and recorded it in my room.



CH: You've got Peter Gabriel's *Real World Studios* credited on your sleeve notes. Is that the '1,000 pounds a day' you were talking about?

PO: But it's fantastic isn't it? I would go into *Real World* only at the death really – when we needed to mix. Occasionally there might be a little overdub to do and they'd have a room for that.

CH: Traditionally dance music has come out of the project studio. But how much of a gloss does going to an SSL or Neve room provide, as compared to the rough mixes you were producing at home?

PO: It can make all the difference.

I've done rough mixes that I've been quite happy with, gone and played it out on the weekend at a club and it hasn't sounded right. I'd take that track and mix it in a proper studio, and immediately it gives it that dynamic and feel that I'm looking for.

CH: What's uppermost in your mind when you're doing a mix?

PO: I've got two main aims. Firstly, I want the mix to sound big, and secondly I want to really bring the vocal out. Some of the vocalists I've worked with like Emiliana [Torrini] or [Australian singer] Carla Werner, have got beautiful voices and I'm looking for a warm sound that complements their vocal. Alternatively, when we were doing the Ice Cube track [*Get Em Up*] I wanted that to sound really tough (we compressed the f**k out of that track)... You can make those decisions and achieve the sound you want on an SSL in a proper studio – you can't do that at home.

CH: What's inspiring you musically at the moment?

PO: I've been going through this phase of finding loads of samples – which I'm really enjoying. It's not something I've really done before but that's where my head's at right now. I'm currently living in LA and there's this wonderful



record store here called Amoeba. It's the biggest record store I've ever been in and it sells loads of second hand records. I spent three hours in there the other day finding all these old records and now what I'm going to do is just sample bits and pieces from them. Maybe my next record

will be more sample-based, I don't know, but I'm enjoying that process of discovering old records.

CH: *The Avalanches is one group that demonstrates how far you can take that process.*

PO: Funny you should say that, because I was literally going to say the same thing – you could take it to the point where you make the whole album based on samples. That is an extremely creative record [*Since I Left You*]. I've sat there and listened to it and thought – there's taking samples and then there's *taking* samples – and the way they've taken samples and put them together is really,

really clever. The time they must have invested to do that... they've done it really well.

CH: *What sort of old albums do you find yourself picking out?*

PO: Old rock... I'm talking about bands like Love... I'm talking about '60, '50s rock – strange stuff... I'd say, 99% of these bands I've not even heard of... I'm buying records blind by the cover – that looks interesting, I'll have that. Most of them are crap, but who knows, I'll find something. And I'm having fun finding out.

CH: *Finally, I've got to ask you about how the Hunter S Thompson track Nixon's Spirit came about?*

PO: Like many people I'm a fan of Hunter. I had a mutual friend of ours introduce us and I asked him whether he was aware of the strong worldwide fan base he had among young clubbers – we're talking about 16 to 25 year old people. And he said that he wasn't. So from that point I tried to introduce him to the clubbing subculture. I'd come out of nightclubs at three in the morning, give him a call and talk him through what's going on in clubs and raise his awareness. Then I flew to LA and for a couple of nights we hung out and talked about his childhood and what music he liked. Then I told him how I wanted to do this track where I'd record his dialogue, then go away and write some music around it. So we recorded this song that relates to dreams, how young people have these dreams and the older you get the harder it is realise them – that's the message behind it. I've got to admit that it was a very self-indulgent piece of music, but we enjoyed doing it.