



Chris Lord-Alge

Paul Tingen is at the receiving end of some refreshingly frank opinion from the American mix master.

Spending a few hours with mix legend Chris Lord-Alge is an interesting experience. For starters, the mix room he rents on a semi-permanent basis at Image Recording Studios in Hollywood is festooned with all manner of colourful and funky paraphernalia. Monsters lurk on his desk, Easter Island statue shaped lamps gaze out a window into the recording area, and a Swiss flag and posters of Switzerland emblazon the walls around the desk (he has Swiss ancestry).

All this fun stuff doesn't distract for a moment from the fact that Lord-Alge is a man who takes his job very seriously indeed. Also, he has clearly thought a lot about his job, and articulates forthright opinions in some very powerful language. Take, for example, his summary of what the job of a mix engineer is all about. The following quote is practically a direct transcript of what he said in a couple of breaths:

"A mixer brings freshness, expertise, a general feel and an overall vibe to his job. An engineer knows the album he has worked on inside out to the degree that he may hate those songs. He may be so fed up with them that he doesn't want to hear them any more. As a producer it is also really hard to mix the records you produce, because you have heard it 100 different ways. Your final mix is never as good as the rough mixes you've done, so you often end up using a rough mix. So what engineers and producers want is someone who can offer a fresh perspective. A mixer gives that. As a mixer I have to nail things in such a way that everybody is happy, and I have to do that every day. I usually do at least one mix a day, and every day I get a client in here to approve a mix – whether it's the artist, or the producer, or the label head, or the manager, or a record company executive. Whoever comes in to approve what I'm creating, I have to be able to hit a home run for them. If you don't hit a home run, you are going to have problems. You have to knock their socks off, act like it's the only mix you are going to do for the rest of your life. You have to take their song and do justice to it and make it work. And you have to do that every day."

This is the way Chris Lord-Alge talks, and it seems likely that he brings the same forceful on-the-ball clarity of thought, and the same exuberant energy, to his mixing and production work.

As a producer Lord-Alge has a credit list that ranges from Tina Turner to Joe Cocker. But it is as a mixer that he has made the most waves. He's enjoyed two Grammy Nominations (in 1998 for Faith Hill's *Faith*, and in 1992 for Lindsey Buckingham's *Out Of The Cradle*), and has brought his mix skills to artists like Hole, Stevie Nicks, Cowboy Junkies, Rod Stewart, Bruce Hornsby, James Brown, Little Richard, Jeff Beck, Keith Richards, David Bowie, Bruce Springsteen, Pete Townshend, and more recently to American hits by Fastball, Green Day, Savage Garden, Stabbing Westwards, and Dishwalla.

Chris Lord-Alge first got a real taste of the studio when his mother, a jazz singer, got him a job as tape op at H&L Studios, where an engineer called Steve Jerome became his teacher and mentor. After three to four years of working at

H&L, the company was taken over by Sugar Hill Records, and Chris ended up working at the Sugar Hill in-house recording facility, where he recorded bands like Grandmaster Flash and The Sugar Hill Gang.

In 1983 he moved to New York, to work at a studio called Unique Recording. Chris remembers his time at Unique as especially fruitful, because the studio was at the forefront of the Midi revolution, giving him a solid grounding in the technical ins and outs of all the new and emerging computer technologies. He did a lot of dance mixes, which is where his focus on mixing began. Building up an ever more impressive track record, he went freelance and moved to LA in the late '80s. He's been at Image Recording for almost 10 years now.

51 Compressors

Chris Lord-Alge's studio offers quite a few surprises. First up, he has a choice of 51 compressors to score his daily 'home runs'! At this point, the eyebrows of many readers will raise to somewhere close to their hairline! This upward movement will hardly be halted when they hear that Lord-Alge 'nails' his mixes on an E-series SSL desk with a G-series computer, NS10 monitors, and his Sony 3348 digital 48-track. When queried about sonic issues that surround the SSL console and digital recording, he immediately responds with another one of his boisterously declared opinions, and one which eloquently captures his attitudes towards technology and music.

Lord-Alge: "What are people saying? That SSL and digital sound bad? You know what? It doesn't matter. It's the driver of the equipment that matters. If you go to a restaurant and you get your meal and it tastes horrible, are you going to blame the food, or are you going to blame the cook? You're going to blame the cook. The same thing with the console, or with digital. It's the driver, not the desk or medium that matters. I've heard mixes coming off \$300 Mackies that sound amazing. And I've heard mixes that come off the most expensive console ever made, and they sounded horrible because the driver had a bad day. That's what it boils down to. People have opinions and may say that SSL sounds shit, or that digital is crap, or blah blah blah. That's their opinion and they can have it. But I think it's a little naive to say 'you can't mix on an SSL, because it won't sound good'. Give someone a shot and see what he comes up with. Don't gauge the driver by what he's driving, see whether he wins the race or not. You may think that I'm racing against a Mustang or something, but if I pass you on the finish line, so what? The gear doesn't matter. If the console dictated the hit record, everybody would be working on that console."

SSL Questions

I wanted to find out more about the reasons for the SSL/Sony combination: "I think SSL is the best console to

mix on. Of course there are a million others, Neve or digital, whatever you can drive, but as far as I am concerned, I have learnt this particular desk. I know it will make a lot of engineers laugh, because they are all using newer consoles, like the SSL J or G+. Even my brother [Grammy award winning engineer Tom Lord-Alge] sometimes laughs at me for working with a console that's over 10 years old! But at the end of the day, whatever you can drive, whatever gets you the sound you want, stick with it. I have tried all the new consoles, but this particular desk has personality, and I use additional stuff to improve the sound as much as possible. I think the J-series SSL sounds a little better, but generally I don't think the automation is as easy and simple to use. You are only mixing music, you are only moving faders, and I think their new automation is too detailed. I don't want to have to read the manual, I don't want to fight the automation, I don't want to fight the console. I want a console to be an extension of my ears and of my hands. I don't want to have to think about technology, I want to be able to focus on the song. I just want the easiest thing to use that they have. Twenty or thirty years ago people didn't have the greatest equipment, but they had guys with great ears who

made things sounds great. They made Sgt. Peppers. Do you think that could be bettered today? No. It's about music, it's not about the gear."

A similar theme underlies Lord-Alge's insistence on transferring every tape he gets onto the Sony 3348, although some other considerations come into this as well: "My preferred medium to mix from is the Sony 48-track 16-bit machine. So the first thing I do when someone comes in is to transfer their stuff, from whatever format it's on, onto my 3348. Partly because I do not want to wear out their tape.

Analogue will, generally speaking, get duller if you play it too much. Secondly, I do not ever want to have to lock up machines again, unless it's for transfers. I want one machine and one remote and something that's fast. Speed is important to me. I don't want to be waiting for a slave to lock up. I've done that for 10 years, and never want to do it again. I also won't mix things live, like samplers or drum machines, and I won't mix from ProTools. For me ProTools is not yet a manageable medium to mix from. It has to be on tape for me to mix from. Every element that you're mixing, including special effects, should be printed onto the tape. When someone comes in here and tells me to mix from ProTools, I'll ask them why, and if they say: 'I may want to change something', I'll say: 'why don't you do that before you get here?' A lot of guys get ProTools, get the plug-ins, and are ready to go to town. But the technology dictates the song at that point. I prefer musicians that go into a room, press record and see what they come up with. That separates the men from the boys. And once they have gone through that process, they

"People talk about digital, digital... the format thing is a little bit out of control"

can take the tapes and stick them into ProTools and manipulate them all they want. ProTools is great for that. Technical tools are there to help make the song better. I think people should stop looking at screens and boxes and blinking lights and start looking at the song. Because without the song or the vibe, who cares what compressor or EQ or desk you use?"

As if on cue, Lord-Alge receives a phone call from an engineer who wants some advice on using digital equipment, especially 24-bit ProTools. Lord-Alge talks to him for about 10 minutes in an equally forceful tone of voice, puts down the phone, and carries on without missing a beat: "Don't let technology make your project overly expensive or overly complicated. Let your ears do the work! Who cares whether you're working in 24-bit or 100-bit. Give me a break! Sure, if you have your rig all set up, and everything works easily and smoothly and your budget allows for it, great, go 96k and three million bits. But if you're mixing a rock'n'roll record, or you're adding loads of EQ and compression, then what are you accomplishing by using 24-bit? I can hear the difference between 16- and 24-bit, but is it enough to charge a client \$1000 a day extra? Never. Record on analogue, that's a million bits! Once the Sony 3348HR [24-bit version of the 3348] comes down enough in price, I may get it, but for now the 16-bit version works fine. And I mix to half-inch analogue, +6 on a nice old Ampex machine here, as well as to DAT and CDR of course.

"People talk about digital, digital, digital... the format thing is a little bit out of control. You shouldn't let technology dictate the music! Hard disk recorders are great devices for manipulating audio, but hard disk is not the most stable storage medium. What happens if you want to resurrect your track a year later on a different or upgraded system? Will it play back exactly the same? [See Michael Gissing's 'Backing Up' on page 54 for more.] Hard disk is still too unstable and not standardised. A 30 year old analogue tape still plays, but are you going to play back a ProTools file in 30 years and not lose something somewhere? I doubt it.

"So after I've transferred the material over to my 3348, I will listen to their rough mixes and their masters, and I'll figure out where I want the elements placed on the console. We'll crosspatch the tape, tidy it up, erase things that shouldn't be there, and when there are two different instruments on the same track, I'll bounce one of them to another track. All this to make the tape more manageable. After this I'll figure out the cues in the song: the beginning of the verses, choruses and so on, and program them in to the computer. Then I'll put all the faders up, get a sense of the balance of the whole song, and equalise the song like that. Generally speaking I don't listen to or EQ parts in isolation. Nobody listens to

parts in solo, so who cares? Of course you sometimes solo an instrument to figure out what's going on.

"I have the metering set up in such a fashion that when I push the faders up the meters go up as well. I like to visually see what's going on. And at this stage I'll also start to move parts around, using the built-in sampler of the 3348, to fill out the arrangement, if I think that's needed.

Generally speaking I'll make more changes than I think will be required, because it's easier to subtract than to add. When the band or producer comes in they can then edit my ideas: 'oh, that sounds great, but could you just mute that one thing?' that sort of idea."

Sweet Spot

For those readers who still have their eyebrows stuck somewhere in the stratosphere, there is relief at

hand: we're finally getting round to the subject of the 51 compressors that Chris Lord-Alge uses. So what about it, Chris? "A lot of the new gear is very repetitive in what it does. Usually it's an attempt to get more features into a smaller box for less money, turning out things that tend to be the lowest common denominator. But I like to have a box do one thing well. The two Empirical Labs Distressor EL8 boxes are my most recent acquisitions. I also like the older, crunchy-sounding gear. They tend to have more personality and work more musically for the things we're doing. So I have a lot of vintage equipment.

"I go for the Noah's Arc approach, which is to have two of every compressor and limiter I own, with the exception of my Fairchild 670 compressor. Every piece of gear, every compressor, has a slightly different flavour. Obviously there are a few I use a great deal because their flavour works. If I get a vocal and I can't get a vibe on it, I'll try a

"engineers and producers, want someone who can offer a fresh perspective"



A more recent snap of Chris (second left) with the Savage Garden lads

couple of compressors. Usually I know straight away which one I need, and I'll say to my assistant, 'this calls for a blue Neve 1176 compressor'. Or, 'this snare drum isn't hitting me right, and I need to try something – let's try some tube EQ, like the Inward Connections Vac Rac'. I know exactly what each of these 51 compressors do.

"Snare drum and vocals are two crucial ingredients that I tend to spend the most time on. The Neve 1176 is my favourite for vocals. I use three generations: the blue ones, the silver/yellow ones, and the black ones that belong to the studio. The 1176 is old, clunky, and it adds personality. If a vocal is a little lacklustre and needs some excitement added with some EQ, I'll definitely use the 1176. But if a vocal is really sibilant, I'll use the Inward Connections Vac Rac, because it adds excitement without too much EQ, and it tends to flatten out things that are sibilant, because it's tube-based. I love those Vac Rac compressors! They only have one setting: both knobs at 10! And that works really well. They sound really musical.



Chris Lord-Alge circa 1983, kicking back at Unique Recording Studios.

"If a vocal is really bright, and the equalisation isn't warming it up, I'll always try any of my Neves. I'll start with the oldest one I have, the transformer-driven 2252 – there aren't too many of those around. A lot of the time you get stuff that is recorded on digital and the high end sounds really unpleasant. It can be hard to deal with. To add some warmth and fidelity, you really need to mess around with compressors, not to compress things, but to add some personality to it. Sometimes I just cannot bear to listen to the sound, and I will transfer the whole tape to analogue and back to digital, just to add the analogue

sound and make it more musical.

"The Neves are great for their warmth, especially the 2254 which adds a big bump at the low end and a lot of air on the top. So when I have female vocals that are squeaky, or a little too thin, I'll beat them into shape with the Neves. I'll also run the whole mix through my two Pultecs, which adds some bottom end, probably to compensate for what the SSL takes off. It's like magic when you run it through the Pultecs, because it makes up for all the high-end you're adding to create a certain sound. Incidentally, dealing with the bottom end has become a lot easier for me since I got the little Infinity subwoofer to complement my NS10s. It was like getting new monitor speakers! Back to the compressors: the older the Neve, the darker the sound. The newer ones tend to be brighter and flashier. Also, I don't want to hear the compressor working. I want the compressor to be inaudible, I want it just to create sound and personality.

"Finally, another important aspect of all my gear is repeatability, because people sometimes come back to have small things tweaked to their mix. My concept is based on the idea that every piece of gear works at an optimum level at a certain setting, it's like it has a sweet spot, a perfect window where it works best. So my outboard gear is almost all the time at that setting. If I want to change a setting, I'll usually do it on the desk, and that makes it much easier for me to bring a mix back exactly the way it was. Recalling everything is really easy for me."

With his collection of vintage and '80s gear, one wonders whether Lord-Alge hasn't invented his own version of the retro fever that's grabbed a hold of the world during the '90s, but he denies any inherent bias against modern gear. You won't hear from him that all gear made before the '60s is better than what came after. Instead, he continues to go for what he believes really matters: "I have new equipment coming in to try out here every other day, but it rarely makes my rack. It doesn't offer me something new. At the end of the day, you stay with something that sounds good enough, and then it's up to you to take it up to the next level. Equipment should be easy to use, so I can focus on the music. Equipment should be invisible. I want gear that I can depend on, and doesn't slow my process down. If it slows you down or takes you away from your creative process, what's the point?"

Keep on telling it like it is, Chris...



Chris Lord Alge's Rack

Empirical Labs Distressor EL8 (x2), Pultec EQP-IS3 (x2), Inward Connections Tube Stereo Limiter TSL-1 (x2), Inward Connections Vac Rac with 2 EQs and 2 limiters, Neve limiter/compressor 33609/A, Neve precision stereo limiter/compressor 33609/c, Neve 2254A & 2254E, Neve 32264a limiter/compressor (x4), Neve 2264x (x4), Neve 1074 EQ (x2), Focusrite Red dual compressor/limiter, Manley Pultec EQ (x2), Urei 1176 yellow (x2), Urei LA3A, Dolby 361 (x2), Neve 2252 (x2), Studio Technology AN2 stereo simulator, API mic pre 312, Quad QA (x2), SSL original compressor (Grey market), Tubetech LCA2A stereo compressor, Eventide H3000, dbx 163X, Fairchild 670, RCA model 86A (x2)