

Home Grown

Gavin Hammond

Wanna be king of the world? Produce the toughest music on the block? Industrial metal band Jerk and rap artist J-Wess did, and they've made it – and the charts – from the comfort of their bedrooms. Here's how you can do it too.

Listening to the music of local powerhouses Jerk and J-Wess, you can't help but be blown away by the sheer force of their sound. Although one act is Metal and the other Rap, they share an integrity and intensity that is rarely found in this age of manufactured pop.

Yet they are both very crispy and commercial acts – with slammin' grooves, wicked hooks and killer vocal sounds – that stand undeniably tall in a crowded marketplace, much to the pleasure of their major label distributors (Sony and Festival, respectively), no doubt.

But the producers of both sounds say the real secret to their success is strong songs, close collaboration and good ears. Oh, and lots and lots of time.

Let's look a little closer...

Jerk

First up, Jerk. The band's producer, founder and main songwriter, Lamar Lowder, is well known in remix circles for his searing industrial metal soundscapes, and has a well-stocked larder of high-end audio toys in the spare room of his Sydney apartment.

But Jerk is his real passion – and it has paid off handsomely. Their debut album *When Pure Is Defiled* has gained rave reviews, UK radio play, topped the JJJ National Net 50 for several weeks, and seen the band tour extensively, supporting Marilyn Manson, Killing Joke and others.

Gavin Hammond: Lamar, describe your studio and the equipment you're using.

Lamar Lowder: My studio is still in the next bedroom. I love the idea of being able to work out any idea that comes to mind whenever I want. My equipment consists of: a dual 1GHz G4 running MOTU Digital Performer 2.7, Reason 2.5, [Native Instruments] Absynth, Yamaha AN1X, Yamaha 02R, Neve 1272 mic pre's, a Distressor, MOTU 2408, 896 and Avalon VT 737SP.

I chose a tight setup because of my 'residential uncertainty' in the past few years – I was moving around a lot and didn't want a lot of gear sitting around doing nothing.

The only crazy thing I had was a homemade box of mine that acted like the transformer button on a DJ mixer. A simple, momentary switch that was normally closed. I was way into the sounds that DJs made with that switch and would insert it on a lot of different tracks. It isn't really used anymore though.

For monitoring I use Genelec 1029As with the subwoofer. Effects are a combination of plug-ins, Lexicon LXP-1 and 5, and of course the Neve preamp and Distressor combo can be a nice effect.

GH: How do you get your inspiration for a track?

LL: I got into synth-based heavy rock from banging my head to my older brother's Black Sabbath records as a kid. From there Tackhead came along and the wonderful world of sampling and rap became the new punk rock to my ears. I thought, 'finally,

someone has stripped music to something even more bare'. All of these influences can be found to varying degrees somewhere in a Jerk track.

Inspiration seems to come best from my head, first. Usually, it happens around water for some strange reason. The toilet, dishes, etc., make me hear something, then it's off to the studio for the perspiration side of the equation.

I don't have any real crazy techniques for the sounds or grooves

– I usually like to keep 'em simple. But I do sometimes walk into another room while the idea I have is playing, so I can just barely make it out and then my brain will make up some new stuff 'cos it's not getting all the information.

GH: Is there one song (or remix) you could talk us through, step by step, to show how you work?

LL: *Say It* is probably the most typical of my process. It started with the chorus riff, which I programmed some live recorded drums to. It was pretty straightforward in my head. For the verse I had a bass line that needed a loop, so I found a nice groovy one in Norm Cook's [Fatboy Slim] library of hip hop beats and ran it through Digital Performer's basic preamp plug-in.

The beat had the right feel but the distortion made it too messy and intense for this more subdued verse, so I ran it through a gate before the distortion, which really tightened it up.

This was the point at which I started hearing vocal lines for both the verse and chorus. I probably tried a few different approaches for the chorus, but ended up going for the one with the most impact. In the past I have turned my nose up at vocal lines that follow the riff (Iron Man, etc.) but this was an instance where I had to follow my gut and not my intellect.

So the vocal ended up following the riff with shout outs ('F**kin' Say It!') in the space between. The verse vocals were heard rhythmically and melodically first, with the words written to suit. I like



jarring bits and wanted to hint at the chorus, so she shouted 'Say It' in the verse was born.

By this time, the song definitely needed another place to go where it felt like the song had opened up, so I wrote another riff and made that into a 'C' section with the words 'I Can't Hear You'. It was then a matter of arranging all those parts into something that flowed.

GH: *Do you mix your own material or do you work with an engineer?*

LL: I love being able to work with a sympathetic mixer. By the time you've programmed, written, produced and edited a track you really wanna kick back and have the luxury of another experienced person mix it.

My best experience in mixing was working with the legendary Sean Beavan (Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, Guns 'n Roses, Pantera and more) on Jerk's album. He was so clued in to the sound we were looking for that it was like a psychic experience. I didn't even have to say anything and it was done.

A lot of the work is done at home. From the initial writing to mid-recording edits to final mix preparation and final master preparation. Big studios were mainly used to track the band playing live. Real drums were added to every song and recorded both in the traditional multi-mic setup in a great room and experimental setups in weird rooms. The mics were pretty much the usual suspects: Beyers M88s, stereo AKG C12s, Shure SM57s, Sennheiser 421s. Then it was mixed in LA at Sean's personal mixing suite. He has ProTools running through a Neve desk and some cool classy compressors and stuff. The tracks were mixed onto DAT and then back into the ProTools rig.

GH: *How did you see the sounds change in the studio process?*

LL: The only real surprises were in some of the more experimental drum sounds. One of the more helpful 'tricks' was the extreme use of limiting on vocal tracks. Done properly it can really make your vocals sit above a very dense track.

GH: *Where was it mastered?*

LL: I think CDs should be as warm and as loud as possible without destroying the depth. Tom Baker did the mastering and I have to say that it was the absolute best mastering job I have experienced – ever.

Jerk's album *When Pure Is Defiled* (Epic) is out now. For more information, go to www.jerk.com.au

J-Wess presents...

Melbourne-based producer J-Wess has just released one of the finest examples of commercial rap/urban music heard in this country. Entirely self-taught, his music is tough, tight, melodic and real – and has already spawned a Top 20 club hit with *Bang This* and a Top 10, gold-selling single with *What Chu Want*.

Originally from LA, he began his life in Australia as a pro basketballer, but soon switched to music. He has since collaborated with several outstanding local rappers and singers to create the recently launched *J-Wess Presents Tha LP* (Vicious Urban).

Although the album was professionally mixed on ProTools and mastered in LA by a top hip-hop engineer, it was made entirely in his flat in St Kilda. A refreshingly honest guy, here he gives us the lowdown on the making of his masterwork...

Gavin Hammond: *So Jay, how did you get into making music?*

J-Wess: I started out with pretty much with what I have today: Cakewalk, a Soundblaster card, a trigger keyboard and a pair of Event speakers.

At the time I had a little Mackie 1204 mixer – but that's all! I do a lot of programming and Midi to come up with simple grooves, then I get other musicians in to jam on top of that. I have a Rode NT2 mic and that's what most of this album was recorded with. A couple of overdubs were done in other studios, but 90 percent of the album was done with this equipment.

These days I use Sonar 3 – it's the latest version of Cakewalk. But I recorded everything on a SoundBlaster card – it's 16-bit and basic as hell! My whole setup cost about \$5,000 and that's about it.

I've met some guys who are real tech-heads and have a Neumann this or that, but when I hear their tracks I think they must be using the wrong stuff 'cos it's not happening!

You've got to have great songs and good grooves, that's it.

GH: *Where do you get your inspiration from?*

JW: Most of the time it can be a simple guitar riff or a drum pattern. I'm not the kind of writer that can write a melody in my head. It can be a guitar riff going back and forth – the simpler the

better, to me. I like to keep it basic and let the vocal be the most important part – and then build around that.

When I'm writing, I will get a groove going with General Midi sounds and when I'm happy with the feel, get my own sounds up and put the kick or the synth sound I want in afterwards. I use entirely soft synths and Sound Fonts.

But it's all about the hook for me. Like the single *What Chu Want*. I wrote the hook, then I told the guys I worked with to go write



the verses. I never go anywhere without the hook.

I'm always listening to the latest records and getting inspiration from them. I used to sample sounds from old records, but I found sample CDs worked better for me. If I'm going to dirty it up, I like to do it myself. If I have something raw, I can tweak it.

GH: *How do you create your sounds?*

JW: I'm always looking on the Net for new sounds on sites such as Big Fish Audio. You need to look out for construction kits, so when you hear a groove, you know what the individual sounds are, and you can hear what effects are used and so on... E-Lab has some great stuff. *Strictly Hip-Hop* is a good one.

Layering is the key because it makes the sounds fatter and takes it all through the audio spectrum. You can have a high kick for punch and then put a big low kick under it for the bottom end – it makes your sound so much bigger.

I'm pretty open and free with creating music and my mixer Steve Scanlon has helped me a lot with the technical side. He has ProTools and some very expensive speakers, and he's taught me that sounds are the most important thing.

You might have a muddy kick that you like but if it clashes with the bass, it's no good. You have to make room for everything.

GH: How do you put your grooves together?

JW: Organisation's the key. I'm pretty organised. I have my drum grooves 90-99bpm and then 80-89 all the way down to 40bpm.

In Sonar I can save things as a groove loop and drop it in in any key. If I get musicians in to jam, I'll work until I get 16 bars I like and then save it in its category. When they come over I'll have all my basslines in key at different tempos, and I'm ready.

GH: Vocals?

JW: There are three things that make my vocal sound: J-Wess, Jerome Phillips and Steve Scanlon. For me, I'm the melody and emotional person. I listen to the timing and the melody and make sure that's all right. Jerome is the pitch guy (Jerome is my manager but he used to be in Kool & the Gang and he's very experienced). He will go, 'she's a little flat here' while I'm getting into the vibe. When it comes to mixing, Steve puts his compression techniques and all that onto it and creates the finished product.

I like to get the vocals very tight in the take stage. Some of the vocalists hate me 'cos I'd rather get it down without too many studio tricks. You have to use certain things sometimes, but we like to keep it natural. It's a lot of takes, trust me, a lot of takes!

On the technical side, the Rode NT2 is great for me. On a couple of tracks we used a \$10,000 mic in a studio, but no one can tell the difference. You might be able to tell it if you solo'd it but no one who's bought the record can tell me which one's which. The proof is in the pudding – and it's on this album.

GH: How did you guys approach mixing?

JW: First of all, I make sure we have all the sounds sitting right and do a rough mix at my house. When I'm happy with the arrange-

ment, I take it over to Steve's house. I save it as an OMF 2 file. That way he pulls it up exactly as it was on my computer – no plug-ins but with all the levels and everything. Steve has the latest ProTools HD3 rig and great monitoring. His Quested speakers are what made the biggest difference to me in the mix. I could really hear what it was going to sound like on other systems.

He'd spend about a day and a half on each track, but when I come to him, it's pretty much there. We're just getting the levels right and using effects. I think the biggest thing in mixing is having the sounds right in the first place – I can't stress it enough – and your listening environment. Forget the programs and the \$5,000 mics. If you have a good mic with good leads and a good monitoring system, you've got it all. We have better-sounding systems on our computers now than they had in the '70s, you know? Your ears are the most important thing – and I take care of mine now, let me tell you.

GH: Where did you do the mastering and did you get any attitude about your home studio productions?

JW: The thing is, I've not had one person who can tell me what the album was done on. Even compared to some of the US CDs, it sounds great.

The only issue I had was that I wanted to make sure it had the best low-end possible, so I sent it to Brian 'Big Bass' Gardner in LA (who's done all the big names in hip-hop and R&B), and just by the name I knew I was going to get some good bass. I wasn't worried about having too much top end, you know what I mean?

J-Wess Presents Tha LP is out now on Vicious Urban. For more information go to www.jwess.com