



Recording Henry Rollins

When it comes to rock 'n' roll producers, few are better than Clif Norrell at 'keeping it real'. Little surprise, then, that he's Henry Rollins favourite producer.

If you like your rock 'n' roll straight up – no ice, no glacé cherry, no little umbrella on top – but raw, powerful, and with enough energy to outgun an energiser bunny on Red Bull, then few can go head to head with Henry Rollins.

Saying that, few can go head to head with Clif Norrell if you want that energy captured on tape.

Clif's list of credits looks like a who's who of groups and artists serious about real no-nonsense rock 'n' roll – his production, engineering and mixing credits take in the likes of Jeff Buckley, REM, Inspiral Carpets, Faith No More, and quite recently, Australia's own You Am I.

I caught up with Clif while he was in an overdub session with The Rollins Band at Cherokee Studios in LA. It was good to get a sneak preview of what's in store

for us on the next (as yet un-named) Rollins album, but even better to discover some of the secrets to putting a powerful recording to tape.

Christopher Holder: *How does The Rollins Band prefer to record?*

Clif Norrell: The Rollins sound is straight up rock 'n' roll, and we don't want to over-think it and over-work it at all. We've been recording real fast, and real laid back. We work normal hours, no more than eight hours a day, and a lot of it is kicking back and talking. When we *do* track it's no more than three takes of a song. It's all about live performances.

Henry will do live vocals and a lot of the time that ends up being the one we keep. If not, he'll maybe do two or three more vocals and generally there's no

ProTools or other editing involved. Maybe we'll comp a vocal out of three takes, but it's usually whole sections of a song at a time. We're trying to keep a real live feel – if it's a little bit rough, so be it. There's not much high tech involved at all. At one point I suggested we fix something with ProTools and they're like, 'no no no, don't do that, we can get it right'. We would probably have spent an hour on 'Tools doing something we ended up fixing in a minute with a retake. It's a great attitude.

CH: *Can you set the scene for us at Cherokee? What does a typical studio session look like?*

CN: Cherokee's Studio One has a nice size live room, and we put all the band in that main room. The drums are in the middle of the space facing the control room. Tacked onto the live room is an iso-booth which is tiled. I've been putting some room mics inside there, and it gets a really huge room sound. Even though we've got a nice size live room, by miking up this iso-booth (and propping open the door leading to it) we get a nice big room sound which fits the music quite nicely.

CH: *What exactly are you capturing by miking the tiled iso-booth, are we just talking drum ambience?*

CN: That's right, because we've isolated the guitar amps. We were able to put the amps at the back of the room behind a wall of baffling. There's also a small 'cubby hole' which gets isolated off for the bass amp. Because Jason [Mackenroth, the drummer] is a real heavy hitter there's enough volume to really fill up this attached iso-booth and it's just great drum sound. There's also an attached vocal booth which we put Henry in for live vocal takes. Every once in a while he'll do his vocals in the live room with a handheld Shure SM58. But most of the time he's in the iso-booth.

CH: *I suppose a 58 in the studio fits the Rollins profile?*

CN: We've tried a lot of different mics on Henry, and for most of the hard and heavy hitting songs, yep, the handheld 58 is what really captures it. It has that sound where you can hear his lips hitting the mic – the sort of things that engineers and producers sometimes shy away from – but it's what works with this. Sometimes if we're doing a quieter song, and we want to get a fuller sound, we'll use a tube mic like a Neumann U67 or an AKG C12. And sometimes he'll even use those handheld, it's just how he feels comfortable.

CH: *Hand-held?*

CN: Yeah. We'll take a U67, tape a pop filter onto it, and he'll do it handheld. We'll even put foam around it so you can't hear the sound of him moving it around too much – because it's so sensitive. But it's kind of a funny thing to see somebody doing a live vocal take with a 67 in their hand, but you can't expect a guy like Henry to just stand there, that's not what he's about.

CH: *I guess he's one of the few people who's got the biceps to hold a 67 for more than a minute.*

CN: Right! It's fun to see. But the 58 is his mic of choice. Even on overdubs he'll use a 58. We've tried other mics, but in the end it doesn't sound right, and he doesn't get the response that he's used to in his headphones. So we go with what works.

CH: *Does the vocals go straight to the board or are using some nice outboard preamps?*

CN: I mostly use a Neve 1272 mic preamp. I also have my own racks of gear which I bring to sessions if I can. So I'll bring in my Neve modules, an Amek 9098, and some Demeter tube pres.

I'll use those preamps a lot. The guitars go through a the Demeter tube preamps, the bass DI goes through another Neve 1272, while everything else will generally go straight into the board, which at Cherokee is a Trident Custom A Range. A nice old console.

CH: *Why is the Neve 1272 a favourite for the vocals?*

CN: It just seems to offer the fattest and most realistic sound. It combines a really clear high end but with a nice full body and low end. It's that combination of power and punch along with real clarity that I like. From the Neve pre the vocal goes to a Urei 1176 then straight to tape.

CH: *How do you set up the 1176 for Henry's vocal, is it really pumping away?*

CN: Henry's got a lot of dynamics in his vocal, and the Urei is there to mostly keep that dynamic range to a reasonable level – it's not really for the sound of it. Although, for his heavier stuff a lot of compression can sound good. I'll generally set the Urei so that when he's really singing hard there's, at the most, 7dB to 10dB of compression going on. At mix down I'll generally



Clif Norrell at Q Recording Studios during the You Am I sessions.

compress it some more with an EL8 Distressor. I tune that into whatever sounds good.

CH: *So you don't have much trouble keeping Henry's vocal under control.*

CN: Only when I'm using a nice tube mic. If I'm using the 58 and the Neve pre it's hard to get it overloading. If there's extreme soft/loud dynamics going on in a song I'll actually ride the gain on the preamp while he's singing. I'll figure out where the loud parts and soft parts are on the first run through and ride the preamp all the



“We’ll take a U67, tape a pop filter onto it and he’ll do it handheld”

way to avoid overloading. Skin from Skunk Anansie is another vocalist who needs that sort of special attention.

CH: Not really a task for the tape op?

CN: No, it can be a little tricky, and you

really only get one stab at it. Which is fine, I don’t mind doing that. Although, it is easier gain riding a mic pre like the Amek 9098, because it has a variable gain pot on it. Meanwhile, the Neve’s gain moves in steps. I’ve had my 1272 modified to include a variable gain trim as well as the 5dB stepped gain, which makes life easier.

CH: We’ve heard about the drums’ ambient mics, but how have you miked the rest of the kit.

CN: As far as close mics go, Jason’s got three toms which I usually mic separately. I put Sennheiser 421s on the top

of the higher toms, while the floor toms, to get a bit of extra low end, will have a mic on the bottom head. I’ll use a large diaphragm condenser on the top head of the floor toms, like an AKG 414, an Neumann U87, or sometimes an Audio Technica 4033 – I’ll experiment. This drummer plays big floor toms, he’s got a 16- and an 18-inch on the floor, so it’s a challenge to capture the big low end but still have it come through on the mix. So

I’ll try out a few mics for that.

CH: Is it also a challenge to marry the close mics to the big ambient sound coming from of the iso-booth?

CN: Not at all. I always print two separate stereo room tracks to tape. Then it’s usually just a matter of dialling any amount of ambience in that I like. I’ll put in enough to hear it but not to overwhelm the close mics – because I like to keep a lot of punch in the sound. Even though this studio has a large live room, thankfully there’s no noticeable delay between it and the iso-booth ambience. So when you turn up the room mics there’s no slap-type echo. Works really well. That sort of slap can happen though. Sometimes when I mix tracks recorded by someone else in, probably, a huge room, where they’ve got the room mics too far away, there’s a slap there. So I’ll run those mic tracks off the sync head when everything else is in repro, and move it forward in time and then use a nice stereo delay to try and bring it in, to a lessen the slap.

CH: Tell us about the guitars.

CN: The guitars are mostly close miked. The big part of

Clif explains why a good headphone monitor mix is so crucial

“I can’t over emphasise the importance of the headphone mix, and I think it’s something people don’t pay enough attention to. You’ve really, really got to check your headphone mixes well. Personally make sure everyone is hearing the right thing in their headphones. Sometimes musicians don’t want to be perceived as complainers and they won’t say anything, but their headphones could be completely screwed up. Their mixes might be out of phase, or they might be hearing things in mono out of phase – so everything in the middle is being cancelled out and hearing nothing but reverb – and they’re just going with it! It’s important to go around the room and check everyone’s headphones and check they’re working correctly. Check they’re not blown, check they’re not too loud, or too quiet, and make sure they’re hearing the right things.

“If you notice that someone is playing out of time a little bit, then check their headphones and make sure they’ve got a good blend of the drums and that their own instrument isn’t obliterating every-

thing else. If a musician isn’t hearing things well in his headphones how can you expect them to play well?

“Sometimes you’ll get studios where you don’t have the ability to hear the headphones in the control room. Sure, you can check the headphone mix on the speakers, but that’s not the same. You need to hear exactly what they’re hearing through the same setup.

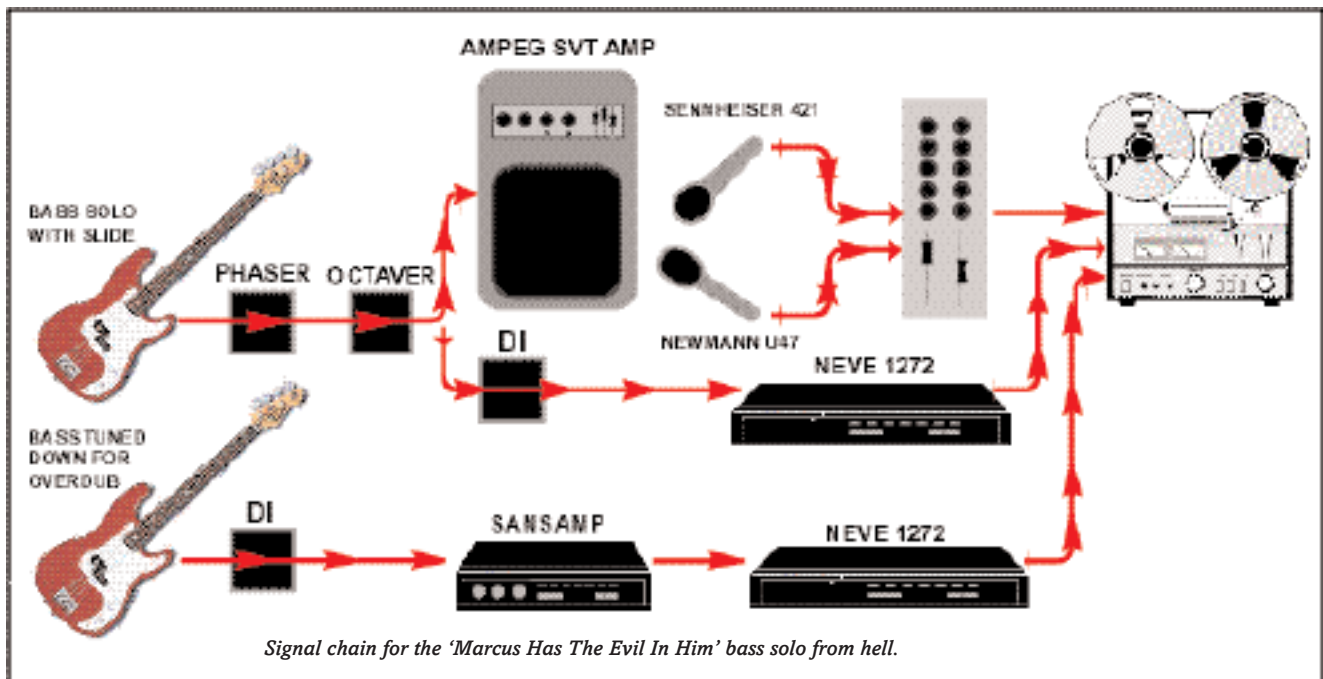
“Some studios have mixing stations in the live room for the musicians to set up their own personal mix. Even then you still have to go around and check and see what sort of crazy mixes they’ve dialled up for themselves. Those little mixing stations are great, in theory, and often producers will think, ‘one less thing to worry about’, but you really do need to worry about it. The musician won’t be complaining about the mix but when you go and have a listen yourself, well, ‘what the hell are you listening to?!’

“It’s also really important that they have a good stereo headphone mix. Otherwise things can get very mushie when everything is in mono. I think it’s

important to find a studio where you can get at least two stereo and one mono mix together. Everyone likes to hear things a little bit different in their headphones and you want be able to give them the mix they want and have it sound good. I’ve worked in studios where I’m told, ‘we’ve got two mono mixes available’ – not good enough.

“You’ve got to have pretty powerful amps as well. A 50w amp won’t cut it, not to power four headphones, and not for an outfit like The Rollins Band. Our drummer is hitting really hard, and he needs to hear it loud.

“Your headphone mixes mightn’t seem like they have a direct relationship to the sounds coming out of the speakers but in the end they absolutely do, because it’s going to make the band play much better – more in time, more in tune, with more accuracy and with more passion. Especially if they’re hearing a really big stereo mix in their headphones, they’re going to be that much more excited about they’re playing. Essential stuff.”



the sound is using the tube pres, and I also use Pultec EQs on guitars. For most of the heavily distorted sounds we'll use two different Marshall cabinets and a variety of heads – an old Marshall 50w plexi head, which sounds amazing, and an also a 10 year old Marshall JCM900. Normally I'll put close mics on that – a couple of Shure SM57s and a Neumann U67. I'll put several 57s on the cabinet at different locations and blend them together. A lot of times it'll be a blend of two different cabinets off the same head. Using a good selection of mics at different location means I can often avoid using EQ. I'll maybe start with a seriously bright sounding mic which might be closer to the centre of the cone on the cab, and then another mic that's got more bottom in it and just combine them.

CH: *Why use multiple SM57s?*

CN: For some reason they tend to combine in a nice way. And often the sonic variety is down to mic placement rather than mic choice. Moving a mic only a quarter or a half of an inch can completely change the whole character of the sound. Often I'll move one 57 around until it sounds great, then I'll introduce another 57, which means I can see if I can top the first sound without moving it out of place. Don't be afraid to move your mics around.

So I generally do something like that for the basic rhythm track and then bring in some different amps and guitars for overdubs.

CH: *So it's at the overdub stage where the fun really starts?*

CN: Yeah. We've not gone overboard, but on some songs there's been times where we've just gone for a really sick sounding distortion, way over-saturated. On some overdubs we've grabbed, say, six pedals and plugged them in a row and tried to do something, as Henry puts it, that's 'wrong' – where

it sounds like something's broken! Henry is one for going for extremes, and we'll try and go for those sick sounds. They might only appear momentarily in a song but...

CH: *How about bass?*

CN: Bass has been pretty simple. We've tried out several different direct boxes. I ended up using a Countryman Model 85 and it's just super punchy and gets what we're looking for. Then we go straight into a standard SVT Ampeg Amp, which I mic with a Sennheiser 421. And also used a Neumann U47 FET. So the 421 captures a lot of the punchy high end distortion, I then dial in the low rumble with the U47 and combine it to the one track. On a lot of the songs we used extra bass pedal effects, like a Big Muff distortion, or a Mutron phaser. Actually there's one song that's got a real crazy bass solo, called *Marcus Has the Evil In Him!* Marcus [on bass] does this crazy bass solo in the middle of the song which just sounds amazing. He gets the sound using a variety of pedals including the Mutron and an octaver, and plays the solo using a slide. There a lot of crazy high sounding stuff. And then we overdubbed a super low bass, where he tuned it way down, and recorded it through an old rackmount SansAmp – not the digital one, but the previous one to that. We got a seriously low sub bass which we put underneath this high slide bass solo. Sounds incredible!

CH: *Do you record most things to tape quite hot?*

CN: I don't really use tape compression as an effect – it's run as hot as I can go without really hearing tape compression. If I want compression then I'll use outboard, where I've got more control. I usually record +6dB to BASF 900. So it's a fairly hot alignment but I usually keep the drums, the kick and snare at a fairly low level so it comes back as punchy as I put it there.