

Fleetwood Mac Live



If you polled the world's live sound engineers for their top five all-time great mixers, you'd probably find Dave Natale's name near the top of every list. Dave specialises in large-scale high-profile tours, and maintains a very hands-on approach. Christopher Holder discovers that technique wins over trickery every time.

If you met Dave Natale behind the controls of a mixer at your local Leagues club or at your church, he'd probably strike you as an amiable old fart who hasn't changed his working methods for 30 years and no-one's had the heart to tell him to go home. Digital consoles? Pah! Computers? Gimme a break! What you fail to understand sonnyjimmynym'lad is that blah yaddah blah...

The thing is, Dave's one of the most influential, most admired front of house engineers on the planet. Probably the biggest endorsement of Dave's prowess is how sparse his credits read – just a couple of dozen or so really long, really high-profile tours over a 25 year period (including Tina Turner, Van Halen, Lionel Ritchie, Lenny Kravitz, Prince, Yes, Joe Cocker, John Mellencamp etc).

I had the good fortune to chat to Dave before a Fleetwood Mac concert in Melbourne. Things started shakily. It was two in the afternoon and after lighting up a Malboro lung-buster Dave just realised his t-shirt was inside out. Thank heavens this was an old fashioned 'analogue' t-shirt – no fatal errors, no full-sartorial meltdown... just a quick one-two switcheroo and we were back in business.

Christopher Holder: *It seems like you're the front of house engineer's front of house engineer. Other professionals marvel at the quality of your 'amazing dynamic mixes'. What do you put that down to?*

Dave Natale: I keep things simple and I push the faders up and down a lot. I use gates on the toms, and a limiter on Stevie [Nicks] and Lindsay [Buckingham's] vocal, but that's it. I know a lot of guys who have a lot of outboard patched in – a gate shuts it off when the signal gets too

low, a limiter stops it when it gets too high. I mean, what's the engineer actually doing? My thinking goes along these lines: the vocal needs to occupy a certain amount of space, because everyone knows the lyrics – on the way home they're not humming the bass line – so the vocals are loud, really loud, louder than the music, so everyone can understand the words. When the vocals stop there's going to be a giant gap of nothing. So if there's a solo, the guitar is going to occupy that same space. So it comes up loud. You need to learn the music really well, and then it's all up, down, up, down – there's always something going on. Sometimes someone's playing something that's really cool but it's not a featured part – cool patches, bell sounds, or whatever – and you can accentuate that stuff by knowing what they're playing and bringing it up and down.

It's more fun to mix that way as well – to push the stuff up and down rather than sit there. I can't do that.

CH: *So there's absolutely no dynamic or snapshot automation in your mixes?*

DN: None.

CH: *How does automation detract from a mix in your opinion?*

DN: I can't comment because unless I'm absolutely forced at gunpoint I won't use a digital console, there's no way. I have a computer that sits at home in my air-conditioned house and I know that it doesn't work every day without fail. And if you're going to take a computer out on the road, bounce it around, subject it to dust, dirt, humidity, smoke machines, all that stuff, I just don't trust it. I don't, because I'd surely hate for it to go down. I

know the [Yamaha] PM1D [digital console] has multiple levels of redundancy to deal with emergencies like that and you have to have that. But in the end I only want something that'll do something when I tell it to. If the computer decides to put one zero in the wrong place the desk can do stuff without anyone telling it to.

CH: *What mixing console do you trust then?*

DN: I use a Yamaha PM4000 and I only use a PM4000 – have done almost since its introduction. For a while I stayed on the PM3000 as I watched how the PM4000 went. That way, by the time I used it, I knew it was rock solid. I've called up Troy Clair [at Clair Brothers, largest live production company in the world] and told him, "I hope you've got a lot of spare parts for the PM4000, because they don't make them any more and I'm not using anything except that".

CH: *Including the recently released PM5000?*

DN: I've looked at the 5000, I know it's got a really nice mic preamp, but again it's got a little pad with a little digital display on it, and instead of having a hard switch to assign each VCA and mute switch there's one assignable switch for all the VCAs and mutes – you've got to select the thing. So I've got to find out whether you lose all the VCA assignments if the computer takes a crap during the show. But if I lose all my VCA assignments, the whole band is going to come up 10 notches and it would be kinda horrific. [More on why later]

Manual Labour

Just for the record, after the interview and sitting alongside Dave during the show, I can personally attest to how hard the man works – especially in the first couple of songs. His hands are flying everywhere, nudging, tweaking, almost to the point where you felt that if you threw a potato past him it'd come out the other side as French fries. Dave may not use automation but he keeps detailed notes that are stacked in the centre section like a big deck of cards. As the song progresses Dave will periodically move to the next card which will be a failsafe reminder of the bell tree in the middle eight or the Leslie organ in the chorus. It's humbling to observe someone who's so at the top of their game and having done this tour for so many months, still ensures he's missing nothing.

CH: *Once the music starts it sounds like you must be working really hard.*

DN: If you can call this hard work. Yeah. I keep busy.

CH: *So you've always got one hand hovering over the vocal faders...?*

DN: One on the vocals and my left hand is on whatever is playing the solo – guitar, keys, or the drums. I push that stuff up. If Mick [Fleetwood] is doing a drum fill, then the drums go up, and then the drums come down when he's finished. That's the other key: you can turn stuff up really loud, for the sake of dynamics, but you've got to remember to turn it back down! I've seen a couple of guys who turn stuff up and then kinda leave it up. Then everything gets a little louder than that, then a little louder than that, then pretty soon it's all mush.

CH: *With all this pushing and pulling in the mix you've*



Dave Natale sandwiched between two of his beloved Yamaha PM4000s

obviously worked out where your headroom limits are?

DN: Well, I run the output of the desk at -5 and I turn the inputs of the Clair iO crossovers up to +5. That adds up to unity gain, zero. I do that so I never clip the console, which I won't ever get close to doing. But because I have the band VCAs down 10dB below the vocals, that still gives me enough space. I can still turn anyone of the subgroups for the band to unity without limiting the system or clipping the desk – so there's room there.

CH: *What techniques do you use to ensure that the vocals sound natural but stay really loud?*

DN: I just EQ the vocal to make it sound like Stevie and Lindsey, only louder. That's the best way I can describe it. I talk to them, all of the time. I know what their voices sound like... for real. Obviously I use a high pass filter to get rid of any unnecessary low frequency that is not needed in a vocal, but that's pretty much it. The limiter is only on, just in case. It's not compressing it the whole time.

CH: *What limiter do you use for the vocal?*

DN: A Manley electro-optical, which I think is a really nice limiter. Tube-based, very fast... and what I like most about it is it's got two knobs – 'Out' and 'how much doesn't go out'. That's me, simple.

990 Reasons to Stick with SPX

CH: *What does a new bit of kit need to be showing you for you to give it a go?*

DN: For a start, my old stuff needs to not work any more. I've used the same stuff forever.

CH: *So what are some of those old favourites?*

DN: First, The Yamaha SPX990 [multi-effects processor]. Second, the Lexicon PCM91.

The thing is, I don't use that much in the way of effects. If you take a look at a building the size of the Rod Laver Arena or the Sydney Entertainment Centre, with however many cubic feet of air in there, do you need reverb? Maybe you do sometimes – some venues are drier than others – but for the most part there's plenty of ambience in a venue. I've heard other guys use reverb, and use it



Rack of compression: (From top) Aphex Expander/Gate, 4 x dbx 160X compressors, 2 x Focusrite mic preamp/EQ, while the Manley electro-optical compressor was used for Stevie Nicks' and Lindsay Buckingham's vocals.

well... but for me, I don't think anyone misses it.

CH: Your favourite SPX990 patch?

DN: Patch No. 1. You turn it on; it sounds good; hey, that'll work. Sometimes people want something specific – a gated drum sound or a delay – but that's just a case of finding the first gated drum sound or delay on the 990. Saying that, I do like the Lexicon PCM91 because I think the Lexicon algorithms are the best as far as reverb go. It has great depth. I came to that conclusion

while on a Lenny Kravitz tour. Lenny has effects on all his stuff all the time – lots of effects. On this tour, it was the first time I'd mixed Lenny, so the sound company just sent out the same stuff from the last spec. And I'd never seen so much stuff – one of these, two of those etc etc – and I'm just looking at all this stuff, and thinking 'I don't even know how to use most of this stuff... what is all of this?'. So I listened to his albums and, song by song, made up a list – drums are flanged all the way through on some things, the next song is dry, a Leslie on his vocal on one song, next time there's a delay on the snare... I somehow needed all this to work and I needed the outboard with which to do it... so I got eight SPX990s!

CH: But the Lexicon PCM91 still got a guernsey?

DN: That's right. During that initial period when I had all this exotic gear from the previous spec, I had a chance to A/B the 990 against all this other stuff – harmonising, delay, phasing – and the 990 was their equal in

just about every regard. But when I A/B'ed the 990 reverb against the PCM91 there was a massive difference. I know Yamaha has done a lot more work on their reverbs in recent years but for me that's it – get as many SPX990s as you need and if you've got to use a reverb, then use a PCM91.

CH: Do you find yourself using the same old mics as well, or has things changed in that department?

DN: I'm finding myself using more condensers than before. In the old days it was always the Shure SM57, now I find I'm putting condensers up everywhere. Audio-Technica is doing some nice stuff. The 4050 gets used a lot, while I have the AT4054s on vocals.

CH: No wireless mics on vocals?

DN: No wireless. Only Mick has a wireless mic and that's for his drum solo. He uses a Shure headset with Shure transmitter and receiver. John McVie has a wireless bass setup but everyone else is connected. Lindsay has a guitar with leads, as do the other guitar players.

CH: What do you put the increasing prevalence of condensers down to?

DN: There's better stuff available now. For example, the Audio-Technica AT3060 tube condenser I have on Lindsay's guitar sounds really good.

CH: Are you an Audio-Technica endorsee or something?

DN: I used to be. I think I still am but they've never asked me to do anything, ever. Every time, they say, 'try this', and they leave it. The rep came around last time with the 3060 condenser mic, and it sounded great, so I used it.

The good thing about Audio-Technica is when they asked if I wanted to be an endorsee, I said, 'sure no problem, but I will not use Audio-Technica mics on every input on the stage. I'll use the ones I think are good and that's it'. 'No problem'. So I don't use their mics on drums. I still use a Beyer M88 on the kick – I've been using that mic for 25 years; a SM57 on the snare – again, 25 years; an AKG 451 – which is an old man's microphone; Sennheiser 409s on the toms; and AKG 414s on the overheads – another old man's mic.

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dB TECHNOLOGIES



Dave Natale sets the vocal VCAs at a nominal level and the rest of the band down 10dB, to ensure the vocals will always be 'louder than everything else'.

CH: What's your overhead approach? Are you getting a cymbal sound or something more ambient?

DN: Only cymbals – there's enough ambience in the room. I think some live guys think they're

in some kinda recording studio, but you're not. You couldn't be further away from a control room. Stuff feeds back, there's the room ambience, you have no control over the environment – temperature up/down, humidity up/down, how many people are in the venue...

CH: Does that approach carry across to your panning of instruments in stereo?

DN: There's nothing in stereo, it's all mono. Everyone on the left needs to hear what everyone on the right hears or they get cheated.

CH: But, surely, it's not like you have to pan hard right or left?

DN: Doesn't make that much of a difference, especially for those not in the centre.

Looking Back

CH: From what I gather, in the 25 years or so that you've been doing this job at the highest level, not much gear-wise has got you excited?

DN: I don't get very excited about stuff, as long as it works. As far as mixing consoles go, I used Clair's 32-channel folding desk for a long time and then Yamaha's PM3000 came out and I used that, then the 4000 and that's about it.

CH: Not wanting to harp on about digital consoles, but how has the excitement surrounding that sort of gear passed you by?

DN: Best way of answering that question is with this story: one of the PM4000s I have on tour now (I have one for drums and percussion and another for the rest of the band) took a 'Jack and Coke' at a gig. Somebody stood up and lost control – they didn't throw it like at a heavy metal show, it slipped out of their hand – whoosh, right onto the desk. It just happened to be right in the middle of an acoustic part where I wasn't using that desk. I lucked out. It hit the console, I turned the power supply off. For a couple of songs I sat there with paper towels and blotted it all off the top. I thought – well I gotta turn it on now because I can't tell them to stop playing. I turned it on and it came back on. Try dropping

a coke on a Midas XL4, Heritage, PM1D, D5 etc. and that little processor inside is definitely not going to like it.

On another occasion the stage hands tried to move my PM4000 out of the way by pushing it sideways, as opposed to pushing it length-wise. I was standing about 100 feet away, 'yeah' I thought 'you know you can't...' and right then it went wham! The fall broke every latch off the case – it fell over that hard. I picked it up out of the case, put it on a box, plugged it in, no problem. I'll take reliability over bells and whistles any day.

CH: But not everything 'old school' and non-digital is without its problems. What about analogue multicores with all their associated buzzes and hums?

DN: Sure, and sometimes it's hard, especially on this tour where we've got six desks – two PM4000s at FOH, two Midas H3000s for the band's monitors and two H3000s for Stevie and the backing vocals' monitors – that's a lot of splits. So we've been using Jensen transformer split boxes that Clair Bros has. You still get a little bit of hum every now and then that's difficult to pinpoint – some days it's there, some days it's not there – but with all those consoles interconnected it can be a real pain in the butt. But Clair has a 'tech ground' system which we're using on this tour. I've never really used it in the past because I always thought that with a traditional monitor console/FOH console setup you shouldn't need any tricks to make the PA work without buzzing or humming. Not that the tech ground is a trick it's just another job to do and if you know what you're doing you shouldn't need it. But for any situation like that, I'll definitely use it from now on.

CH: What is the tech ground system exactly?

DN: It's a separate ground wire. It links all the electronics, racks and desks together on a separate piece of wire in addition to the regular ground in the mains cable. It's just an extra bit of welding cable that links everything together to the AC distro, back to ground.

CH: You've spent a lot of time on the road over the years. Does touring still hold the same attraction?

DN: It's still a buzz. Making something loud, big and heavy, is an amazing experience. I mix shows for the same reason that some guys fly fighter jets. It's a lot of fun. Saying that, I could do without the travel. If I could start mixing shows from my bedroom, via a satellite uplink, that actually would be much better.

CH: I should imagine that would involve a computer...

DN: Yeah, you're probably right. Maybe I could do it with smoke signals. AT

The PA (supplied by Jands Production Services)

44 x Clair Bros i4
40 x Clair Bros i4B
28 x JPS Sub
8 x Clair Bros P-2 Frontfills

Amps

QSC 9.0 (Bass)
Crest 10004 (Sub/Low)
Crown 2400 (Frontfill)