STUDIO MAKEOVER: STUDIO 52 RECORDINGS

When Studio 52 decided its 'A' Room needed an overhaul, it was decided that a radical approach was required to attract today's DAW generation.

Text: Christopher Holder

▸ It's no secret that commercial studios have been shutting up shop the world over. A bit like those dinosaurs we see in text books lumbering around in the mud and slowly dying, the larger studios have found their market being usurped and undermined by more nimble project studio 'mammals'.

Without going into the ins and outs of why it's still a worthwhile investment renting a purpose built recording space, one thing's for sure… commercial studios haven't moved with the times as much as they could. Most are beyond the budget of a market that's bereft of grass-roots record company support.

Studio 52 has decided to move with the times. Established in 1986 by Paul Higgins and Trevor Carter in the hustle and bustle of the inner Melbourne suburb of Collingwood, they've dispensed with the traditional look of a control room and gone left of field. Embracing the DAW-centric world of recording and mixing, they figured: "why not make the DAW the centre of the studio layout?". Furthermore, people are increasingly embracing outboard preamps, EQ and compression, so why not offer an analogue 'console' comprising a bunch of desirable front end?

So, as you can see, front and centre is an Apple 30-inch LCD, then underneath that are two Focusrite Liquid Channels, and to the right is a cartload of Focusrite and TL Audio preamplification, EQ and dynamics processing. It's a radical approach. Rather than requiring the engineer to swing around in their chair and stoop down to tweak a setting on their outboard, it's all within arm's reach.

Priority Shift: The new Studio A layout. During recording, the valve and solid state outboard offer a variety of sonic flavours, and collectively act as a de facto recording console. Check overleaf for a full list of the gear in the picture.

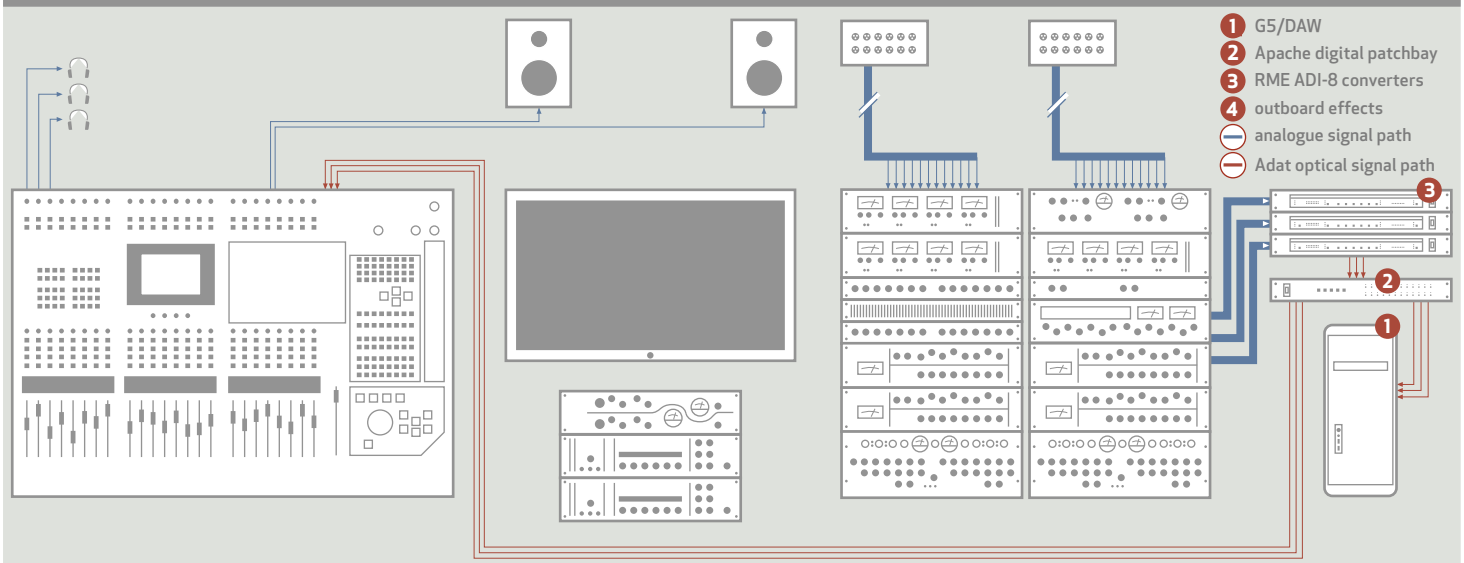
THE PATCH MINUS THE BAY

Don't panic, the mixing console hasn't been completely consigned to the scrap heap. Ranged left is a Yamaha DM2000. But it's not the recording/mixing hub of the studio as traditionally might be the case. As you'll see on the 'Recording Mode' diagram, the inputs from the live room tielines are 'hard-wired' directly to the outboard preamps. The output from the outboard then heads to the DAW via RME ADI-8 (analogue to Adat optical or 'lightpipe') converters. But before it does, an Apache lightpipe 'patchbay' sends a parallel output to the DM2000. The beauty of this setup is that the engineer can monitor the recording process without any DAW-induced latency and he/she can quickly and easily throw up some faders and set up some headphone mixes from the DM. But the DM2000's mic preamps are not used.

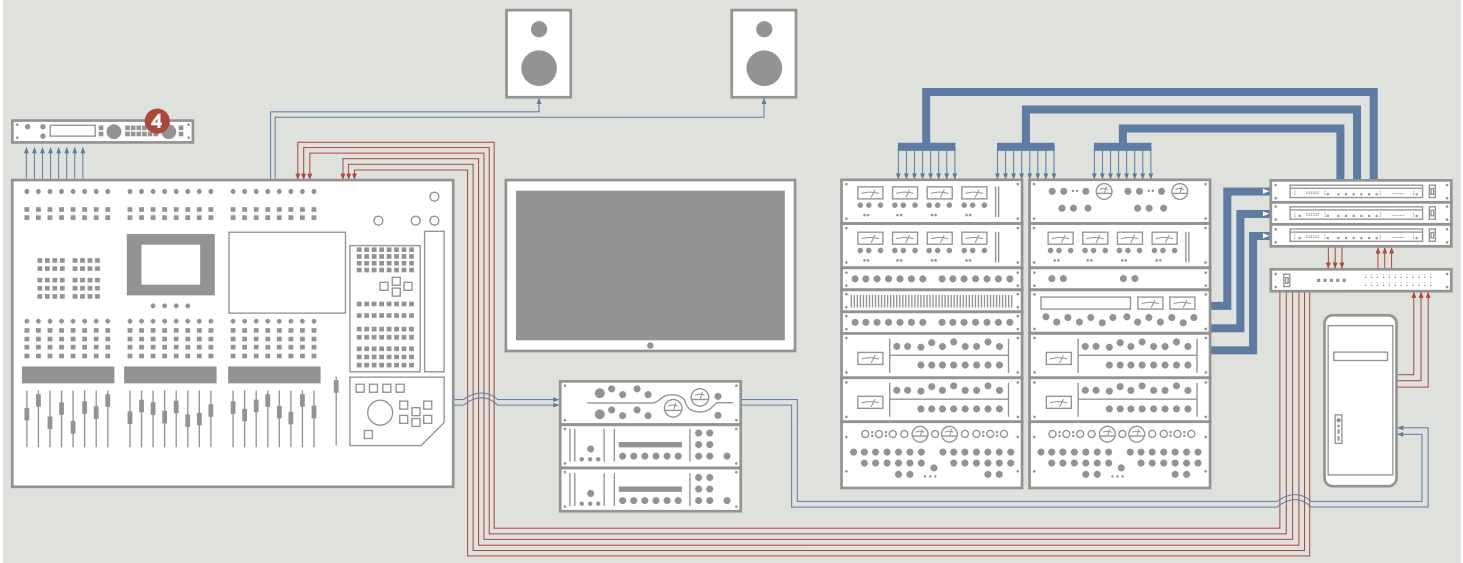
During mixing, the DAW's bus outputs are routed back through the line inputs of the outboard to make the most of the available compression and EQ, but (again) a parallel set of outputs goes from the Apache to the DM2000. So, come time to mix, the engineer has a choice of using the direct-from-the-DAW signal on one fader layer, or the gone-through-the-juicy-outboard source on another fader layer.

As Paul Higgins points out, most people are performing 'fader' moves from within the DAW and relying on the computer for plug-in effects etc. But Paul still espouses the sonic benefits of selectively routing through the outboard processing and then getting the DM2000 to do the final summing of the mix rather than the computer – when it comes to funnelling 80-odd tracks down to a left/right output he contends there's still a lot to be said for a real-life mixer.

RECORD MODE



MIX MODE



Record Mode: Input 1 on the patch panel in the live room is hardwired to channel 1 in the rack (in this case the TLA 5052). If you want a different preamp then plug your mic into a different socket of the patch panel. The 24 channels of output from the preamps are converted to Adat optical 'lightpipe' via 3 x RME ADI-8s. Lightpipe handles eight channels of audio, so three fibreoptic cables go to the Apache digital 'patchbay'. The Apache send 24 channels to the DAW (Logic is program of choice, hosted on a Mac G5) and, simultaneously, 24 channels to the DM2000. That means latency-free monitoring via the console.

Mix Mode: During mixdown a different preset is switched on the Apache digital patchbay which sends the 24 bus outputs of the DAW back through the converters and into the line inputs of the outboard. The output of the compressors and EQs are then converted back to Adat optical and sent on to the DM2000. On another fader layer is another 24 channels taken directly from the DAW via the Apache. That way there's a choice between the juiced-up 'analogue' signal and the straight-out-of-the-box digital version. Once the 2 x 24 channels hits the console you can take advantage of the outboard effects or the internal Yamaha add-on effects/processing, and then route the mix through a Focusrite Red3 before printing the mix back into the DAW.

USEFUL LINKS

studio52.com.au
koolskools.com.au
empirerecords.com.au
frontierdesign.com/Products/Apache

Check out:
Issue 35 for more on Focusrite's Liquid Channel
Issue 31 for more on the TLA 5052
Issue 30 for more on the Focusrite ISA 220

IN THE RACKS

Rack 1 (centre of desk below LCD)
- Focusrite Red3 dual compressor (stereo bus from DM2000 returning to DAW via RME ADI-2 converter)
- Ch22: Focusrite Liquid Channel (can be used from any recording space)
- Ch21: Focusrite Liquid Channel (can be used from any recording space)

Rack 2 ('Drum Room' rack – mic channels located in drum booth)
- ETA Power distribution/filter
- Ch9–12: Focusrite ISA 428 4-channel mic pre
- Ch5–8: Focusrite ISA 428 4-channel mic pre
- TLA valve two-channel parametric EQ (insert from ISA 428 Ch5&6)
- TLA valve 2-channel parametric EQ (insert from ISA 428 Ch7&8)
- Ch4: Focusrite ISA 220 Studio Pack
- Ch3: Focusrite ISA 220 Studio Pack
- Ch1&2: TLA 5052 2-channel valve channel strips

Rack 3 (rack for other three recording spaces other than drum booth)
- ETA Power distribution/Filter
- TLA 2-channel compressor (insert from ISA 428 Rack 2 Ch9&10)
- Ch19–20/23–24: Focusrite ISA 428
- BBE 822 Sonic Maximizer (insert from ISA 428 Ch19&20)
- Ch17–18: TLA 'Classic' 2-channel mic pre/compressor
- Ch16: Focusrite ISA 220 Studio Pack
- Ch15: Focusrite ISA 430 Producer Pack
- Ch13–14: TLA 5052 2-channel valve channel strips

The new Studio A. The DAW takes centre stage thanks to a 30-inch Apple display. Two highly-desirable Focusrite Liquid Channels are given top billing as well. Two banks of valve and solid state outboard are within easy reach while the Yamaha DM2000 is the compact alternative to a large-format console. Nearfield and midfield monitoring is by EMES, while a pair of JBL 15+horn whoppers lurk behind their scrims (top of picture).

As an added sweetener, there's a Focusrite Red3 patched between the left/right bus of the DM2000 and the DAW for some final stage bus compression.

EASE OF USE

Studio 52's new Studio A is dead easy to use as a visiting engineer. Accessing the outboard is as simple as plugging a mic into the right numbered tieline. Want a solid-state preamp for the drum overheads? Well, then just plug into any of the Focusrite channel inputs. Want some valve sound on the toms? Then plug your mics into inputs 1&2 in the drum booth and access the TLA 5052.

It's a similar deal when mixing. Want some Liquid Channel emulation action on your backing vocals? Then simply route that subgroup to buses 21&22 in your DAW.

In the end the redesign has to meet the demands of Studio 52's clients. It's not a studio that makes money out of two-week lockouts; most of the bands aren't flush with cash and need to be able to get a result in a hurry.

"We've designed the studio to be flexible," noted Studio 52 boss, Paul Higgins. "It's a room designed to do all things. Most of the clients we work with are trying to get the best possible results on a budget and the more you can achieve in the one room the more efficient and cost effective things become."

What about the ergonomics of the new layout? Paul Higgins: "Swivelling in your chair and bending down to get to a compressor isn't friendly. You can't set up a compressor or an EQ with your head down near the floor, you have to face the speakers and listen to the sound as you're altering it. We reckon we've got the balance right with this layout."

And the reduced importance of the console? Paul Higgins: "A lot of engineers are used to mixing inside a DAW, but at least with this setup it allows us to bus your mix out to 24 channels and utilise real outboard effects – not just plug-ins. We're pretty committed to the TC gear. We've got the System 6000, a dual-frame M5000, as well as a couple of D2s for dialling up a quick delay setting. On top of that we've got the complete add-on effects and surround sound package for the DM2000, so there are plenty of options during mixdown." ■