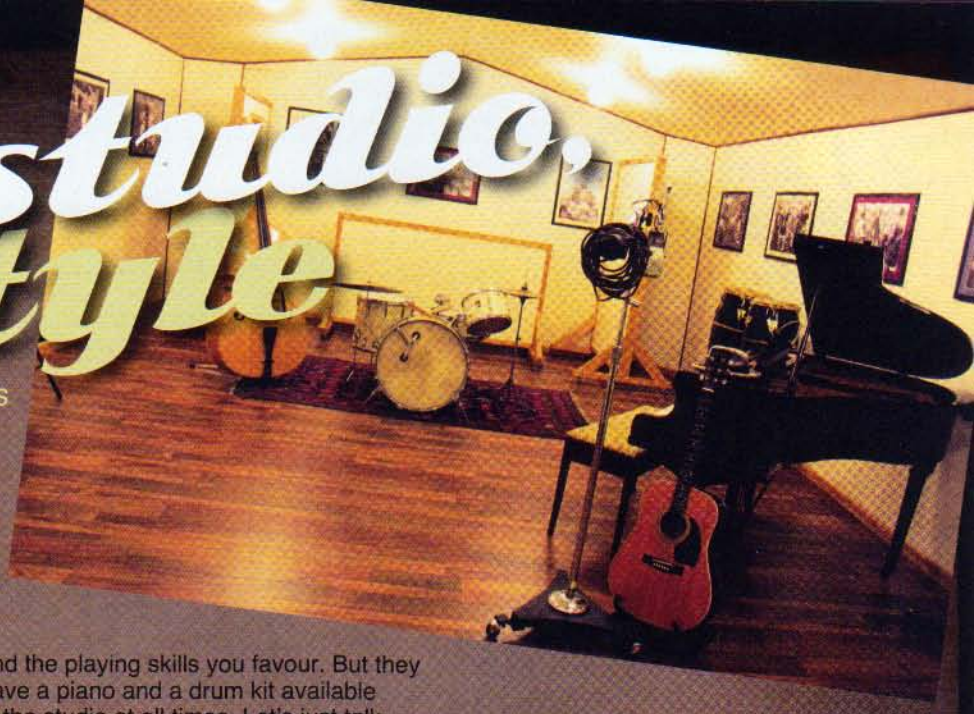
New studio, old style



Paul Waring brings you Part 2 of his enlightening experience when he took a trip to Sugar Ray's Vintage Recording Studio...

Audience participation

Another thing you often hear about in recording sessions in the 1950s is that the likes of Little Richard, Fats Domino, Ike Turner , Wynonie Harris and Screamin' Jay Hawkins frequently had girl-friends, family members and friends, and even drinking buddies with some alcohol, in the studio with them. So not only did the band play live with the vocalist, but the whole lot also had an audience to pitch at! Sometimes you can even hear them on the recordings, clapping along! Sugar Ray's is that informal! This is so very different from the disjointed way of recording using multi-track techniques, let alone sticking the vocalist in some sort of booth with headphones on!

The instruments

The 1950s was full of great instrumentalists playing great instruments. Buddy Holly flew sax-man King Curtis from New York to his recording studio in the south because he thought his tone and style was unique and he wanted it on his records. Many of the top session musicians were booked up for session for months ahead because their sound was so much in demand. We could get totally bogged down discussing the makes and models of sax or guitar played by the big names like Plas Johnson or Grady Martin. Sugar Ray's expect you to come through the door with the instrument and the playing skills you favour. But they have a piano and a drum kit available in the studio at all times. Let's just talk about drums and use them to make a few more general points, because drums are at the heart of rock 'n' roll. This will also demonstrate the attention to detail at Sugar Ray's.

Pat took me through the drum-kit, which is a mid 1950s British Premier kit. The first thing he mentioned was that the type of skins can be really important in getting the sound you want. In the 1950s the skins were mainly goat-skin. This is still available but because of its sensitivity to room temperature, drum skins of synthetic materials are often used in studios today. Remo was the brand of basic skin on the tom tom on the day I visited. Pat was able to get the opening drum pattern of Bill Haley's "Birth Of The Boogie" sounding just right on it, but they had not had a chance to try goat-skin yet. At this point we both recalled that photos from the 1950s show that Jimmy Van Eaton had the skin of a black and white Friesian cow on his bass drum, with the fur still on it! In a more recent interview with Jimmy in "Now Dig This" magazine, Jimmy remembered this well. Jimmy was the drummer who sounded so good on the big hit recordings Jerry Lee Lewis made for Sun Records, such as "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" and "Great Balls Of Fire". Jimmy knew all about how to build and relax tempos and tensions during a song and how to play so sensitively along with the lead given by Jerry Lee in his piano-playing and vocals. It's very rare to hear anything as good as Jimmy's work in the bands playing the rock 'n' roll clubs today. Sometimes a blanket was put in the bass drum to give it more of a heavy thud.

Pat is using Zildjian hi-hat cymbals from the late 1950s for the right cymbals sound. Visiting drummers often choose to use the nucleus of the studio drum kit but bring their own cymbals and snare. Such is Pat's attention to detail that he told me the studio was in the process of purchasing a Radio King snare, as used by Buddy Rich, Gene Krupa and most of the other great drummers of the late 1940s. The Radio King snare is a lot deeper than the Premier and has a different sound.

At this point I thought I'd test these guys with another trick used in the 1950s. I took out my wallet and put it on the skin of the snare drum and asked them if they had seen this done before.

Pat immediately said yes, and that DJ Fontana had used this trick on Elvis' hit recording of "Don't Be Cruel". As Pat then took up the drumsticks and demonstrated, the wallet deadens the sound of the beat. Without the wallet, the drum has more of a ring unless you press the stick down on it at the end of the stroke. Using the wallet is much more economical and fail-safe and gives you more time to do other stuff. Pat also demonstrated that the position of the wallet is important. You can have it near the centre for the full effect or lay it partly on the rim for a different sound again.

Of course you can have the greatest instruments in the world, but unless you have mastered the necessary skills, you aren't going to sound good and make the records we like. And we must talk about drummers because so often these guys get it wrong and let down the whole band.

The first thing to tell drummers is to really listen to how it was done. We need a lot more sensitivity in drumming. The percussion in the majority of classic rock 'n' roll records is not that loud or that fast. Many drummers today have been polluted by heavy rock! Often a light skipping beat that lifts your feet is what is needed for rock 'n' roll. Not thud, thud, thud, which can be as boring and stodgy as porridge for a jiver!! Pat made the point that back in the day drummers listened to the rest of the band and blended in with bass and piano. It was the piano that put the roll in rock 'n' roll and it is important you don't get in his way. But there is often a lot of complex percussion going on in jive records, including use of brushes and ride cymbals. Very few drummers today ever produce a really good jiving groove. Check out "Why" by The Cues, "She's The Most" by the Five Keys or "Promises, Promises, Promises" by the Penguins for prime examples of how to do it. The early Bill Haley hits on Decca took this sound out to the world, with rimshots and all. These drummers kept it interesting and did a lot without any component getting in the way of another and lessening the impact. For an extreme example of how successful and captivating a busy percussionist or two can be, listen to "Stack A Records" by Tom T. Tall. And instead of an absolutely regular beat like you might get from a drum machine, which can become tedious, a good rock 'n' roll drummer can subtly build and release the pace, tension and intensity as the song develops. Jerry Lee Lewis's "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" is easily the most well-known example of this. It was hugely popular in 1957 and clearly influenced some of the absolute classic records which followed such as Glen Glenn's hugely effective "Everybody's Movin'". For those with broader taste, check out Chico Hamilton's drumming on Joe Houston's "Dig It" for some truly exciting stuff with tremendous drive.

Swing drummers had a big influence on the drummers of the early rock 'n' roll records especially. In fact, some of the rock 'n' roll guys had been swing drummers, such as Panama Francis who is on masses of sides cut in New York and Billy Gussack who was Bill Haley's drummer of choice for recording sessions in the mid 1950s. A great place to see a swinging drummer at work is to watch Johnny Otis drumming on Youtube alongside Lionel Hampton at the end of the Johnny Otis TV Show from the 1950s which you will find there in its entirety.

Pat and I then had a chat about rhythm and building a song. The black approach to a song was generally to get a good groove going with the drums, bass and especially piano. That bass hand on the piano can be so important to a song. Only when you have got that lot cooking do you worry about the vocals. And the great session players were able to meld themselves quickly into a groovy backing for any type of song. Unlike the big band arrangements of the previous era, which were written out in detail on paper, these were known as head arrangements. Band leaders and arrangers were much looser in the way they worked during the rock 'n' roll era. The sax, guitar and right hand on the piano then added accents and solos which were often spontaneous, or only thought out in advance as a general concept rather than planned in every detail or written down. You can tell this when you listen to various different takes from these historic sessions. The solos are seldom note for note the same on each take.

The skills of the sound engineer and producer

At Sugar Ray's you don't just get the studio, the acoustics and the warm sound. You get the skills of Pat as sound engineer and producer. This is very important because the sound of the final recording depends a lot on the aesthetics of the guy doing the sound and the production. It is especially important when the whole band is being recorded live onto one track with no chance of changing it later.

A good example is the way that the sax is recorded. Sax players were originally the second voice of rock 'n' roll, and the rhythm &blues from which it developed. Frequently the lead tenor sax man would play call and response style with vocalist, answering every phrase with a reply just like in a black church gospel-style. This leads to a very exciting effect. One of the best examples is "My Playful Baby's Gone" by Wynonie Harris, with Charles Edwards playing the fierce sax part. Other examples are "But Officer" by Sonny Knight, with J.D. King on tenor, and "The Pick-up" by Etta James with Maxwell Davis.

And most records would let the sax loose on a solo in the middle of the song. Today most sound men and even the many bands themselves seem to regard the sax man as an optional addition. On stage he is often stuck way off to one side. Look at the old photos and you will see the soloing sax stepping up to the same mic as the singer, and playing in the centre and at the heart of the band. Just like the old-timers, Pat knows where to put the sax and when he steps up to the mic for his solo, Pat will give him a little extra volume to make the sax appear to jump out at you, just like Tom Dowd did at Atlantic for so many of the recordings made in the fifties. This technique of giving the tenor solo a little extra is even more important in songs where you have one or more additional saxes, such as a tenor and a baritone, riffing away behind the lead sax during the solo. Pat calls all this an instant mix, and he uses this approach a lot at Sugar Ray's.
Whole articles and chapters in books have been written about the engineering skills and slap-back echo of Sun owner Sam Phillips, who the music magazine "Now Dig This" has dubbed "The Most Important Man InThe World". Sam was the guy who recorded Junior Parker & his Blue Flames' seminal original versions of "Mystery Train" and "Feelin' Good" which influenced the rockabillies like Elvis and Jerry Lee who recorded their own versions. Sam would play such 78s to the white rockers like Carl Perkins,

Roy Orbison and Billy Lee Riley to get them in the mood before they made their recordings. At Sugar Ray's they have a record player just for this purpose! Sam was of course the guy who recorded Ike Turner's Kings of Rhythm cut "Rocket 88" with its distorted guitar sound, back in 1951, when the amp had fallen off the roof of the bands car onto the road! This cut is often claimed to be the first rock 'n' roll record of all and a lot has been written about that. Actually this claim is nonsense because "Rocket 88" is really only a reworking of "Cadillac Boogie" by Jimmy Liggins from 1947 and lots of other guys were already rockin', along with Jimmy, by this time. But for capturing the sheer shuddering power and intensity of a band playing full-on pounding r&b at its best, listen to "Juiced" which is the follow-up Sam recorded to "Rocket 88". "Juiced" was released as by Jackie Brenston, who played tenor sax on it but the piano and vocals are actually by Billy "Red" Love. Get Billy's CD "The Sun Years Plus" on Bear Family for this and other equally powerful recordings and for the detailed liner notes . Guitarist Scotty Moore said of the Sun studio that it was so "live" that when someone spoke you could feel the air pressure change!

Microphone placement

Men like Cosimo Matassa in New Orleans and Tom Dowd in New York, knew how to quickly balance the sound by moving the instruments around and by placing the mics in the best places – and in the early days they might be recording the whole band into only one or two mics! Pat explained that by the mid 1950s a mic was generally used in front of the bass to pick up both the bass and the drums behind it. Nowadays, some studios will put a mic on every drum and then try and balance the whole sound out, with varying results and degrees of success! Back in the 1950s another mic would be used for the piano. At Sugar Ray's they sometimes use an old trick here. This is to put the mic inside the piano and then cover the piano with blankets, to trap the sound inside but keep it full and loud for the chosen mic.

The lead vocalist would generally have a mic of their own. Any other vocalists, such as the rest of the members of a doowop group MIGHT have another mic, but they might all be gathered around one, with just one other for the rest of the band.

If these circumstances sound crude by today's standards, don't under-estimate how inventive the recording guys were. Producer Lee Hazlewood, in Phoenix, Arizona, played the sound of Duane Eddy's guitar via a loud-speaker into a big tank for storing grain and placed a microphone at the other end of the tank to capture that deep, resonant, twangy sound that Duane used on his first hits such as "Movin' 'n' Groovin'" and "Rebel Rouser". The engineers at Capitol Studios in LA devised a flutter echo which they used on Gene Vincent's voice for his 1956 sessions including "Be Bop A Lula" after Elvis Presly's echo-laden "Heartbreak Hotel"on RCA had hit big-time and spun the world on its axis. Innovative Art Rupe at Specialty records in Los Angeles recorded many gospel groups who were steady sellers of records while the pop field was move changeable and unreliable. He noticed that the gospel groups often patted their feet for rhythm. So he had them stand on a board on the floor to emphasise that sound and a microphone there to capture it!

Dean would like to make the point that recording techniques did not remain the same throughout the 1950s. The engineers were experimenting all the time with whatever they had. New models of microphones, and tape machines were becoming available constantly. Some would prove better than their predecessors, but not all. And of course even the instruments were changing. Particularly important were the many developments in the electric guitar, with tremolo arms, hollow bodies versus solid bodies, and the change-over from acoustic upright bass to Fender Precision bass guitar. Dean also pointed out that, just like today, some guys were quick to adopt new gadgetry, while others sometimes resisted and preferred the familiar or tried and tested option which had served them well over the years. This was also true for the valve-based equipment as solid state technology came in. Most of the valves or tubes were replaced overnight, but a few studios lagged behind, often in the poorer neighbourhoods or backwoods. Frequently such places had lower charges than the bigger more modern and go-ahead studios, and if you were a struggling rockabilly or rhythm & blues band, that's where you might go. But the likes of Eddie Cochran were keen to seek out studios like Gold Star, with both cutting edge technology and engineers and studio bosses who were relaxed about studio time and understood the music. Eddie was over-dubbing himself playing guitar, bass and drums, and turning himself into a one man band before the end of the 1950s!

Join me in issue 45 for the final part of this series...