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Sweet & Low

Jun 1, 2004 12:00 PM, By Maureen Droney

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In an ideal world, recording master-quality electric-bass sounds in your studio would be a piece of cake. You'd simply connect the bass to a DI and maybe to a preamp, adjust gain to avoid overload, slap on a compressor, press the record button, and off you'd go. But reality is more complicated. You have to take into account the quality and sonic signature of the outboard gear, the condition of the instrument, the skill of the player, the musical style, the acoustics of the control room, whether the sound of an amp will be added into the equation (and if so, what mics will be used), and so forth.

To help sort through these variables and others that are integral to bass recording, I consulted a panel of experts: three veteran engineer-producer-musicians. All have labored in the trenches of both home and pro recording and have plenty of useful advice to offer on capturing great bass sounds.

MEET THE PANEL

Quadruple-threat Dusty Wakeman (dusty@maddogstudio.com) is a bass player, an engineer, a producer, and the owner of Mad Dog Studios in Burbank, California. A Texas native who migrated to Los Angeles, Wakeman worked in recording-system sales and studio design at West L.A. Music before scoring his first big break — engineering for producer Pete Anderson on the cow-punk classic *A Town South of Bakersfield*, a compilation that featured Dwight Yoakam, among other notables.

Wakeman went on to engineer 12 albums for Yoakam and to produce and engineer records for artists such as Lucinda Williams, Jim Lauderdale, Rosie Flores, Me'Shell Ndege'Ocello, The Bonedaddys, Reacharound, and the Lonesome Strangers, all the while continuing to tour and record as a bassist with artists such as Jackson Browne and Michelle Shocked.

Carmen Grillo (carmen@carmengrillo.com) is a singer, songwriter, and guitarist who teaches audio recording as a mentor for Recording Connections in Los Angeles. Rita Coolidge and Bill Champlin are just two of the artists he's toured and recorded with; he also spent ten years as a member of the legendary funk group Tower of Power. During his tenure with TOP, Grillo taught himself engineering and began recording the band's rehearsals and album demos. Word got around, a home studio resulted, and soon he was as much in demand for his skills as a producer and engineer as for his musicianship. The studio is now called Big Surprise Music, and it's where Grillo did most of the work on *Everybody on the Bus*, the solo album he produced for TOP's legendary bassist Francis "Rocco" Prestia. That project reunited the members of the band's mid-1970s rhythm section: Prestia, guitarist Bruce Conte, keyboardist (and longtime Santana band member) Chester Thompson, and drummer David Garibaldi.

Producer-engineer Ken Kessie has amassed plenty of bass-recording experience working on platinum albums in major studios with R&B artists such as Tony! Toni! Toné!, En Vogue, and Bel Biv DeVoe, and with rockers like Santana, Blue Oyster Cult, and Ronnie Montrose. Like most pro engineers these days, he also has a home studio. That's where he recorded an indie CD for Los Angeles rockers Sevensoft and two well-received, Billboard-charting major-label jazz albums, *Hidden Agenda* and *Midnight Morning*, for trumpeter Greg Adams (who, coincidentally, was the original horn arranger for Tower of Power).

ROOM OF DOOM

The panelists agreed that one of the biggest problems facing project-studio owners trying to record proper bass tracks is bad-sounding control rooms. Although correcting a misleading listening situation is beyond the scope of this article, an abundance of helpful information is available from many sources. (For instance, see "A New Approach to Personal-Studio Acoustics" in the April 2004 issue of *EM*, online at www.emusician.com.)

The important thing to realize is that to get a great bass sound, you need an honest and trustworthy reference from your monitors and from your control room. If you don't have that, you may think the instrument or your recording technique is causing the uneven bass response, when room sound adding or subtracting frequencies is the real culprit. With any sound, but especially with bass, effective room treatments will make more difference than your preamps or EQ in your final product.

Even if you have an accurate-sounding room — and especially if you don't — it pays to use as many kinds of monitors as possible. A couple of different pairs of bookshelf speakers, a boom box, your car system, computer speakers, headphones — take advantage of them all. But do

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have a primary set of quality monitors that you know well.

And at all stages in the recording process, don't forget to use reference CDs of your own and others' music. Not only do reference CDs provide inspiration and create challenges by giving you a sound to aspire to, they will also keep you from going too far astray.

HIRING THE BEST

"I'm going to let you in on a secret," says Kessie with a laugh. "One of the main reasons the big-name engineers and producers sound so good is that they use the best musicians." So if you're not playing the bass parts yourself, make sure to get the best player you can. Don't hire a jazzzer to handle an aggro drop-tuned rock track. Don't get a country guy to play funk, or vice versa.

Of course, there will be many situations in which the choice of bassist isn't yours to make. But any time it is, get the most qualified player you can. This will save you hours of corrective work. Not only do great players have good time and tone, but their instruments are usually in fine condition.

TOP-NOTCH AXES

That brings up another important point: you should record the best possible instrument you (or whoever the bass player is for the session) can get your hands on. Don't waste time on a bass with fret rattles, buzzes, or hums. Get new strings and break them in a day or two ahead of time. Make sure the instrument is set up and intonated properly. Good bass tuning is essential in maintaining clarity in the low end. Have an effective and easily accessible tuning system. (You might want to assign a bus on the console to your tuner and feed it with a clean, preeffects split from your direct box so you're always set up to check tuning.) On the other hand, don't rely completely on your tuner. Sometimes shifting the pitch a cent up or down can make a track glow and shimmer.

String choice, of course, can make a huge difference. "For rock, roundwounds are my usual choice," says Wakeman. "They're bright, and when you're recording rock, that brightness helps the bass compete with the guitars and bass drum. Having edge on the top also helps if you're going to add any kind of distortion. For country, blues, reggae, or even a McCartney kind of sound, flatwounds give you a tone that's darker and warmer and rounder."

THE DIRECT RESULT

These days, the direct box is almost always the first part of the signal chain for bass recording. Even if you're miking up an amp, you're still likely to be using a direct box to split your signal so that you can also send a direct feed to the multitrack (often passing through preamps and compressors on the way). Direct boxes run the gamut from expensive tube and solid-state models to battery-powered "stage" boxes like those made by Countryman and Whirlwind, but your basic choice is between active and passive. Active boxes are powered by either an internal battery or phantom power; passive boxes simply transform your instrument's signal to mic level without being powered. Active DIs generally have user controls such as volume, tone, and impedance selection; they also tend to have more headroom.

Wakeman alternates between two favorite DI boxes, using an Avalon U5 for a clear sound and the popular Demeter STDB-1 tube model when he wants more grit. Kessie's favorite DI is an '80s-era active box by Audio Design. "It's the only one I have," he admits. "It has no controls on it at all, but I like its fat tone and the fact that it's bulletproof — I never have problems with it." Other DIs that Kessie likes and deems "affordable" are the JDI Mk3 Passive and JDV Mk3 Active Class A from Radial Engineering and the Avalon U5.

For Prestia's bass on *Everybody on the Bus*, Grillo used a simple signal chain (see Fig. 1) that included a DI he constructed himself. "It's a passive direct box," he says, "and it has almost nothing in it — just a transformer, a ground switch, a pad, and a jack. The best way I can describe it is to say it sounds 'old.' Its simplicity gives a strong, clear signal."

PREAMPS

All three panelists generally avoid using their consoles when recording bass. Remember, one of the keys to getting a good sound is recording with the shortest signal path possible; avoid even the patch bay if you can.

There are plenty of preamps to choose from: you could use one of the popular vintage models by Neve and API that many recordists swear by or one of the sleek new designs from Martech, Avalon, Manley, or Focusrite — to name just a few. While professionals readily acknowledge that a great preamp is worth its high price, real pros also make the most of whatever tool they have available. If that's the console preamp on a Mackie board, so be it. Use your ears and try to maximize the gain structure of your signal path. Every piece of gear has its "sweet spot," a designed-in optimal setting that you should not ignore. Your manufacturer may provide information on what the most favorable setting is. If not, a three-quarters-on setting is a good place to start.

Unless you're going for distortion, what you generally want on bass is as big, clean, and full-frequency a sound as you can get. If you're looking for a little rasp or even some flat-out blazing distortion on your track, keep in mind that you might be better off getting it at a later stage. Distortion locks you into a sound that is difficult to revise. It's preferable to get a nice, clean, fat sound and mess with it in the mix.

Also keep in mind that a preamp is not always necessary. For example, on Prestia's bass for *Everybody on the Bus*, Grillo found that his home-built DI (into a dbx 160X compressor-limiter) provided sufficient gain. "I just used the output control from the compressor to get the gain that I needed into the ADAT we were recording to," he explains.

These days, Grillo is fond of using an Avalon VT-737SP preamp, a 3-in-1 combo unit that combines a dedicated instrument input with an optical compressor and equalizer. He likes the sound of the Avalon and the convenience of having everything in one box. "The compressor sounds good," he notes, "and it's a very versatile equalizer. It has two bands of EQ with sweepable shelves on the high and low end. I use it a lot for bass to dial out a little bit of 400 cycles. That seems to lift the bass in the track and keep it from getting muddy."

Kessie's first-choice bass preamp is a classic Neve 1073 preamp-EQ module, about which he says, "It's fat and tough sounding. I guess because of my R&B roots, I like some grit in my bottom end, and Neves tend to provide that. It's not that they're dirty, but they add coloration.

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They're warm, but something about the transformers always puts the sound right in your face. I can't explain it — I'm not sure anybody but Rupert Neve can — but that's why these units are so popular and in demand."

Obviously, there aren't enough 1073s around for everyone to own one even if everyone could afford one. On the other end of the price scale, Kessie suggests the RNP8380, "an excellent and very affordable preamp made by FMR Audio. Some other reasonably priced good pieces are MAudio's Tampa, the Eureka by PreSonus, and Summit's 2BA-221."

Wakeman loves classic gear and reaches for Neve or API preamps whenever possible, but he also praises several more modern and less expensive options, including the Summit 2BA-221 and the Bellari MP110 tube model. "Good transient response is one of the most important things to look for in a preamp," he says, "But it's a very personal choice. I highly recommend developing a relationship with a music store and a salesperson there. If they know you will do repeat business, they'll help you out. You can get to try out a number of them until you find the one you like."

DYNAMIC CHOICES

Compressors are essential in modern recording, but they're also overused. Each panelist had favorites, both cheap and expensive, but all cautioned about the dangers of abuse during recording. Once recorded, compression is difficult if not impossible to undo, so use it sparingly. Grillo, Kessie, and Wakeman recommend light compression to tape, and they advocate saving final compression choices for the mix. That said, here are their favorites.

Grillo frequently stays "in the box" with his Avalon VT-737SP for compression. "I tend to use a medium attack, not quite half way up," he says, "because I want to make sure I keep the sound of the finger or the pick, whichever is plucking the strings. I don't want that getting lost with an attack that's too fast. And I generally use a fast release. Especially with someone like Rocco, who plays a lot of notes, I want the compressor set to give up the note quickly enough so that it can start working on the next note."

Grillo also likes the dbx 163X on bass but prefers to use it on mixdown rather than during tracking. "It's a great compressor because it's idiotproof. There's just one slider, and it does what it needs to do: it makes the bass stick out in the track evenly. Notes that were hit softer come up, those hit harder come down, and overall it still sounds good."

Grillo's wild-card compressor choice is the 1980s-era solid-state Valley People Dynamite compressor-limiter. "For some bass players you might need a little more impact, a more aggressive sound, and the Dynamite is great for that," he says. "It only has two controls: input and release. The only way to determine the amount of compression is with the input control. It's a strange box, but it's got a sound."

As the owner of a commercial studio, Wakeman can take his choice of a wide selection of compressors; UREI 1176s, Summit tube boxes, and Empirical Labs Distressors are his top picks. "If I could have only one compressor in my studio, I'd make it a Distressor," he says. He also has several suggestions for more affordable compressors. "The Summit half-rackspace [TLA-50] is quite good. Dbx 163s are good on bass; I used to sell a lot of those. And the dbx 161, the consumer version of the 163, is a good choice if you can find a used one. It's the same as the 163 but doesn't have balanced inputs. It's perfect for home recording and good for bass."

"Ultimately, I'm always recording with the mix in mind," he says. "I want the bass to sit evenly instead of having it coming and going. If I'm lucky and the player is consistent, I won't have to compress a lot. Sometimes, if I want to compress something a lot to control the level but I don't want the sound of compression, I'll use a slow attack and release so that you don't hear it working."

By contrast, Wakeman at times uses compressors to add color. "Especially with a UREI 1176," he points out, "you can play around with the attack and release. Particularly on bass, it can sound almost like you're using EQ."

"Of course," he continues, "the amount of compression I use also depends on the style of the music I'm working with. Sometimes, especially on rock stuff, I'll want to get something a little different, so I'll play through a little blue Boss compressor pedal — the CS3. I'll record to tape with that. I'm totally locked into the sound, but I'm prepared to live with it. Running through the Boss will affect how I play: I'll use a different touch because it gives me sustain, and a particular kind of suck on the attack. That's something important to remember: how you treat the sound can definitely affect how the bassist plays. It all works together to get the right sound for the right part."

Kessie often uses a Teletronix LA2A to add color; its tube sound provides what he calls "tone and glue." Other, more budget-friendly compressors he recommends include FMR Audio's RNC1773. "It's an incredible box for the money, and it has attack and release controls," he says, "perfect for dialing in a rhythmic bass part. I also own an ART Pro VLA, which is very transparent. And I've heard from other engineers that the PreSonus APC88 and Summit TLA50 are great values and easy to use."

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL

When it comes to EQ, the panelists are adamant: they avoid using it during tracking whenever possible, preferring to get the sound right at the source. "I used to EQ to death," Kessie laughs, "but I've learned that with less EQ, sounds translate better on different speakers."

Wakeman says, "If I absolutely need to EQ going in, I will. But I always try first to get the sound right with the instrument and amp."

Grillo agrees, saying, "It just sounds more true in general if I don't EQ during recording. And when you do, and then you EQ again in the mix, it builds up and you lose the natural sound of the live instrument."

Speaking more broadly about EQ, Kessie says, "Good hardware EQ is expensive, and EQ is an area where plug-ins, in general, really shine. If you want the good hardware EQ for your major projects, consider renting instead of buying. API 560 graphics sound great and are very easy to use. I also recommend Audio Arts parametrics. I bought a reasonably priced used pair some time back, and they are very nice sounding."

IN THE BOX

Both Grillo and Wakeman are Pro Tools owners and operators, and both have used numerous kinds of plug-ins on bass. "My favorites for bass and other instruments are by McDSP," says Grillo. "They make great compressors, and they also have excellent British-sounding EQ. It has filters on the top and the bottom and two bell curves in the middle that help you dial-in what you're looking for. I like Waves' MaxxBass, which adds a kind of resonant frequency that you can mix in with your original sound. It's great for bass, kick drum, or any kind of low-end material. I also like the Bomb Factory Joemeek compressor [now owned by Digidesign], and their EQ, the Meequalizer, works great on bass. It's very string friendly."

"I've used Digidesign's Line 6 Amp Farm for distortion on bass, and it works very well. And IK Multimedia Amplitube is good. It can give you distortion and EQ that really sounds tubey. It totally goes to 11! *[Laughs]* And it is great for emulation. If you have a bass player who normally plays smooth jazz, but he's the only guy you can find for a rock 'n' roll date, you might want to use Amplitube on his bass to put him in the band."

While Wakeman loves his hardware 1176s and LA2As, he also raves about Universal Audio's plug-in versions of the same units. "The thing is," he explains, "once you get into the digital domain, you want to stay there. Because every time you convert your sound back and forth you lose something. I prefer to stay digital rather than go through converters over and over again. So, once I'm digital, I'm happy to have plug-in versions of the hardware I like."

Wakeman also gives props to the compressor and EQ plug-ins by JoeMeek, and he loves Bomb Factory Sans Amp PSA-1 and Amp Farm. "But," he says, "I'm still waiting for the bass versions."

MAKING CONNECTIONS

The panelists offered specific setup suggestions for various bass-recording needs.

Going direct

Using high-quality cables, connect the bass to the DI, the XLR output of the DI to the mic input on your preamp, the line out of the preamp to your compressor, and the line out of the compressor to the multitrack (see **Fig. 2**).

Adding an amp

If an amp is important to your sound, try this setup: after connecting the bass to the DI, run a 1/4-inch line from your DI out to your amp head. (Hopefully, it's readily accessible in the control room with your bass player.) Next, run a line from the head to the speaker cabinet. Record to two tracks, one with the miked bass sound and one with the direct feed from the DI (see **Fig. 3**).

As for what microphone to use, the panel had a number of suggestions: the AKG D 112, the Sennheiser MD421, the Electro-Voice RE20, the Royer R-121, or the Soundelux IFET7. Wakeman likes using two mics. "I usually put the 421 or the RE20 pretty much right in the center of the speaker," he says, "and then I put the Royer a little off the center and back a bit" (see **Fig. 4**).

It's important to keep your signal chain clear and clean, because the bass cabinet will probably add some dirt to your sound. Of course, you'll want to record on two tracks, one from the mic and one from the DI, and you can experiment with how much of each to use when you're mixing. You'll probably require more of the amped sound for heavy rock tracks and less for lighter rock and country. Reference CDs will be helpful in figuring out the best proportion.

If you're recording on a DAW, time-aligning your direct and amplified tracks will improve your sound. (Time alignment is necessary because the amped sound will take a few milliseconds to reach the microphone, while the direct sound is virtually instantaneous. Shifting the amplified track forward until it lines up with the direct track usually produces a "fatter" sound.) Remember that if you're not happy with the amp sound, you can always reamp the track on which you recorded the direct signal. Or you can add plug-ins like those mentioned earlier for grit and attitude. Line 6 Bass Pods are also popular amp substitutes.

For even more control, try recording the bass using two cabinets and two heads to achieve a biamping effect. Get great bottom out of one amp and some cutting treble out of the other. Record to separate tracks, and use each in the mix as needed. This is a great way to compete with sampled kicks and detuned guitars (see **Fig. 5**).

GETTING SET

Whether you're going direct or using a combination of direct and amped signals, it's helpful to get your levels maximized before you record.

Start off with the bass's volume at 10 and the compressor set to 0 dB with the ratio at 1:1. Have the bass player strum some loud three-note chords, and set the preamp gain so that you're just overloading your recorder. That way, when the bassist plays normal lines, you will have plenty of headroom. If your bass player is planning to play loud, strummed chords in the song, turn the preamp down far enough to let those loud phrases pass through it without overloading the recorder.

Next, have the bass player play along with the track (or the band, if you're recording live). Make sure the drums — especially the kick — are loud and clear in the player's mix. Turn down anything that won't help him or her lock tight to the groove.

If at that point you feel that the bass is uneven, kick in the compressor. Try a 2:1 ratio to start. Keep the compressor attack slow enough to let you hear the attack of each note. Keep the release fast enough so that each note is not affected by the note before it. Be careful: if the release is too fast, the compressor will "chatter" and distort as long notes sustain. (If you're using two compressors as part of a DI-and-amp setup, start by setting the compressors similarly, then fine-tune them to taste.)

You should shoot for 3 to 4 dB of gain reduction. Remember, you can always compress more at mix time. You will probably have to increase the output gain of the compressor slightly to compensate for gain reductions.

BASS-IC INSTINCTS

The central message that Wakeman, Grillo, and Kessie communicated to me is this: your goal when recording bass should be to get as clean and full-frequency a sound to tape or disk as you can. You'll achieve that more easily by working in an acoustically treated control room, or at least using monitors that you're familiar with. You want to use the best-quality instruments, DI boxes, preamps, compressors, cables, and mics that you can get your hands on, and keep the signal path as short as possible.

If you can, try to get your tone from the instrument and the components you're using rather than with EQ. You're better off saving effects and heavy compression for the mix, where you can mess around with the track to your heart's desire. That way, you have the option of going back to your original sound if you want to.

On the subject of the mix, here's a suggestion from Kessie to leave you with. If you're mixing from a DAW, don't move every note of the bass track to line up with a kick or a grid. You'll probably waste hours and just end up making everything sound smaller. Of course you want to clean up gross errors, but getting too precise can kill a groove. And a bass part without its groove — no matter how well recorded it is — is useless.

Maureen Droney is *Los Angeles* editor for *Mix* magazine. As an engineer, some of her own notable bass recording credits include Rocco Prestia, Alphonso Johnson, Randy Jackson, Pete Sears, and Larry Graham.

TONAL TWEAKING

If the character of your bass's tone isn't what you want for a particular song, you can alter it using some of the following suggestions.

To sound brighter:

- Switch strings to roundwounds.
- Switch to a brighter bass.
- Use a pick, or pick closer to bridge.
- Switch to a brighter preamp or compressor (solid-state units are usually brighter than tube).
- As a last resort, patch in a high-quality EQ between the compressor and the recorder. Try removing sub harmonic frequencies below 30 Hz, pulling out 2 or 3 dB around 400, or adding at bit at 1.8 kHz.

To sound darker:

- Switch strings to flatwounds.
- Switch to a darker bass.
- Use fingers, or pick closer to the neck.
- Switch to a darker preamp or compressor. (Tube models are usually darker than solid state.)
- Live with it. You'll probably appreciate the high end when the overdubs pile up.



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