Cenzo Townshend

We first caught up with Cenzo more than six years ago when his life was considerably different to what it is now. He now works from his own premises in Suffolk and he's still as busy as ever.
NIGEL JOPSON

With more than 20 years' experience, award winning engineer Cenzo Townshend has mixed numerous best selling albums and singles from artists including U2, Snow Patrol, Elbow, Kaiser Chiefs, The Courteeners, Florence & the Machine, Friendly Fires, Ben Howard and many more. He was awarded Best Mix Engineer for 2009 and 2010 by the Music Producers Guild. Townshend's obsession with sound has driven him to assemble an extensive collection of classic outboard equipment, valve amps, vintage effects and guitar pedals. He recently moved to a handsome wood-clad barn in Suffolk, where he has had his own mix room constructed by White Mark, with sliding glass doors providing natural light and splendid views over fields and a lake.

What was the first project you mixed in the new studio?

I came here originally to do the Maccabees album, which has just been released — and is doing very well — it went into the charts at number 4. We had great fun making it, they were here for about three weeks, it was sunny and they were out on the grass playing cricket and fishing. They very kindly bought me these remote control boats to play with on the lake. We can have races on the lake between mixes ... quite 80s really ... except in the 1980s I suppose they'd have been full size speed boats, not toys!

What inspired you to create a facility here?

I've been commuting weekly to London for years, so it's been a long-term goal for me to move to work closer to home and family. There are quite a few rural, beautifully formed, boutique American studios that I admire. That's really what I've always wanted to have, ever since I worked at Rockfield ... but in a smaller way. The eventual plan is to build a tracking room next door and install my Audient mixer there, we've had all the plans done and they look really amazing, David Bell from White Mark has been working on it for me. The aim is to put a live room in the centre of the building, and a duplicate of this control room on the other side, with the same aspect and three windows looking out over the lake. The live room will be full height, and there will be an overdub booth with a small mezzanine floor.

Now we're getting the equivalent of 8meg bandwidth, sending a .WAV file for mix approval only takes a couple of minutes. For mastering I sometimes upload overnight, or send a USB stick, because they're all 96k files.

Many specialist mixers, even analogue die-hards, have moved to working in DAWs because of the many client requests for changes.
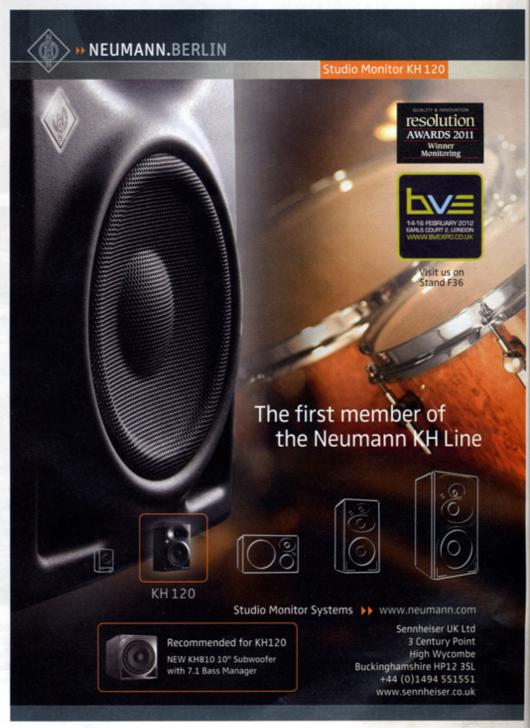
It is a problem, but I still prefer a desk, I like to be able to work with the best of both digital and analogue, and this SSL, apart from being a signal summer, is also the interface to all the great outboard equipment I've collected over 20 years. Although a lot of the automation I do is in-the-box, it's still about 50-50. I still use the SSL computer every day and I do the main rides on the SSL. I think a lot of the clients that choose me want that sound, they want to know it's an analogue mix. I'm still very interested in analogue equipment and enjoy it, and I definitely find it faster to work that way myself.

Since you've specialised in mixing, do you find you're working on more unattended sessions?
I'd say 90% of the work is unattended. All the way through the process I'm sending out work-in-progress mixes. The difference with us is that clients really have to come back to me the same day, because it's not in-the-box.

How do you send mixes fast enough to clients on the old copper telephone lines I saw?
They are overhead wires, but I now have four of them bonded together, it's rather an expensive connection! I looked at microwave transmitters and all sorts of exotic solutions, but this seemed the most practical. There's a special internet router that accepts multiple lines, and gives nearly four times the speed. When I first moved in, my single connection only delivered 250bps as an upload speed. Very scary. Even sending a few mp3s gave me time to go to the pub, have a couple of pints and come back, and it would still be sending!

Where did your beautiful SSL come from?

The SSL came to me via Keith Skerrett of Recycled Audio, he found this desk in Japan. There were two 72 input mixers, the other one was taken by Mark Stent and is in his house. Spike left his at 72 but I had mine cut down to 56. It's a 6000 Series and so has 3 mix buses, it looked virtually immaculate when it arrived from Japan, I also had it completely re-capped. It's incredibly quiet, and it's just nice to work on a classic SSL on which everything functions properly. It's a joy I didn't envisage, it's almost like working on a brand new desk.
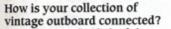
What is a Clariphonic parallel equaliser, and what do you use it for?

It's made by a company called Kush Audio, who are some nutters in New York who have a business taking other people's equipment and souping it up. This is an idea of their own, it's a parallel device to sum different frequencies, they have all sorts of funny names for the frequency points like 'Sheen, Simmer, Silk' and so on. I like it for all sorts of things ... a lot of the time on the mix bus.

Is it your secret weapon?

No, this is my secret weapon: the Analogue Tube AT-101 Fairchild 670 replica. It really is a wonderful device, built by a guy called Simon Saywood (*Resolution* V7.8). He spent years researching how to recreate the Fairchild using exactly the same valve complement including a newly made 6386 remote cutoff triode, and with no PCBs. It sounds better than nearly all the original Fairchilds I've used, which tend to be a bit tired and old, the left and right track properly and of course it's more reliable. It's made to be as far as possible like the original, but with new, mainly British components. It is expensive, but not as much as my Pro Tools rig: I'm going to lose a lot of money on the Pro Tools rig, but somehow I don't think I will lose as much on the AT-101!

How is your collection of vintage outboard connected?

I mainly use the little faders on the SSL to send out to external equipment. I also send back into Pro Tools quite a lot because I use the UAD plug-ins, reverbs and effects. I have all my vintage equipment plugged in all the time, so if I want to try out my Pioneer tape delay or the Echolette I just send out via the different buses. I have two H3000s that are permanently connected, the Bricasti M7 and a PCM 60 which are permanently routed, two old Roland Dimension Ds, my Hiwatt amp ...
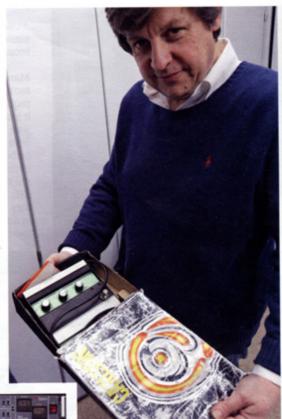
What do you use the Hiwatt for?

Mainly for reamping bass guitar. I will send the DI signal to the Hiwatt to give it a bit of life, a bit of oomph and character. It's often far better than the bass guitar microphone signals I receive — when a bass loudspeaker starts to distort, it can be rather messy. The DI signal is a bit tame, but I've tried several amps and the Hiwatt seems to be made for the job. I go through a Little Labs Redeye to the amplifier, then out of the Hiwatt into a speaker simulator called a Sequis Motherload. They are hand-made in Essex and sound absolutely fantastic. I then bring the signal back through a Little Labs IBP phase adjuster, as there's generally some form of phase delay.

Which instruments get treated by your vintage EQs and compressors?

The drum compressor is normally the Chandler EMI TG12413, and I usually use my two Cartec EQP-1A copies over the bass drum and snare. They're a little bit more hifi than Pultecs, but perhaps that's what Pultecs originally sounded like when they were new! For overheads I use another Pultec-style equaliser, the Summit EQP-200B. My NTI Nightpro EQ3 is a wonderful bit of kit, I tend to use it for piano or strings — anything that needs the top end opening up — without sounding too EQed. Unfortunately the NTI is no longer manufactured, and prices have gone completely berserk now that it's become better known. I'm also a huge fan of the Neve 33609 limiters, I have three of them, I love them for guitars. I actually have three different vintages of 33609, with my favourite being the oldest. I like the SSL console EQ for guitars, but I'm also quite fond of the API plug-in EQ sometimes.

So you're combining digital plug-ins and analogue treatments quite a lot?

The thing is about guitar compression, I'll only tickle it with the 33609, if I need to do fairly harsh compression, then I tend to do it with a plug-in ... maybe the Waves Chris Lord-Alge plug-in, his 1176 is really useful. Waves have come out with some plug-ins recently that are just astonishing. The Kramer Master Tape plug-in is amazing — it's changed everything for me!

How many channels of Kramer tape might you be using?

I've got about 12 rolling at the moment, I like it on guitars because it does this great slap-back effect: it's the best of any of those sorts of plug-ins I've heard, I think it's the way you have total control over the amount of saturation that's important. The Kramer PYE compressor is also very good, even though I have two hardware originals in the rack. The Helios channel is also very interesting. I think the Waves one-knob plug-ins are awesome as well, especially the reverb. As you change the length setting, it changes the type of reverb that's applied to the sound, you end

up with something that might not have been arrived at with conventional controls. What kind of reverb sounds good on a tambourine? If you ask someone who doesn't do this for a living, an ordinary musician, they wouldn't know. It's only because I've had a whole career to work it out that I know what will sound good on a tambourine or a guitar. With the one-knob plug-ins you can try things instantly, it's great to have a different operational approach from a plug-in.

With such a huge supply of vintage outboard, and the difficulty of resetting knobs for a recall, are the controls on each piece 'locked in place' for the Townshend sound?

I thought it might get to that, but they're not! My assistant Sean has a fantastic program on his laptop called Teaboy, it has a screen picture of every piece of analogue gear we use, the knobs can all be turned to the correct settings and saved together as a single file. There's pictures of just about any piece of audio equipment you could wish for. We sent the programmer who wrote Teaboy a picture of our PYE compressors, which have been modified, and he added the mod in for us. It's quicker for Sean and more accurate for me. Some of the parallel compressors don't change, I just drive them less hard, and with analogue delays, effects or reamping I would print back to Pro Tools, so we would not have to recall them.

Do you work on albums or single track mixes?

I've done single track mixes for acts like The Horrors, Spectre, Emily Sander and Professor Green, but lately I've been working on a lot of albums. I've just mixed half an album for Gaby Young, and I'm just finishing a band called Kensington's album at the moment, I'll be starting another album next week. Moving here has achieved what I wanted: I can charge a reasonable rate and get a lot of album work, whereas when I had my room at Metropolis the work was mostly singles. To be honest, I haven't really stopped since we last spoke (*Resolution* V4.6): there's just a bigger spread of music genres, with a lot of US, Australian and Danish clients, as well as some acts from Japan. It tickles me to mix all these international acts from my shed in Suffolk.

How does an act like Friendly Fires find their way to you?

I'd worked on their first album, at Olympic. I believe they had already mixed their new album in the US and were not that happy with the result, I started by doing one song and ended up mixing five, they're quite particular about the sound they want.

You also mixed Devlin's album — was that a departure for you?

You might think it wouldn't be my style of music, but it has guitars and big choruses! I did feel quite at home doing that, I loved it in fact. The Devlin album came to me through A&R man Ben Mortimer, he looks after Florence & the Machine, whose album I had just mixed. Someone was asking him about mixers and he suggested me. What was an eye opener for me on a record like that was all the people involved with production: there were two different producers on each track — someone doing the music — and Devlin producing his own vocals. He generally would only comment on his vocal arrangement, and the music producer would comment on the instrumentation and beats. Generally there would be four or five vocals, even if you think you can only hear a couple at a time. Devlin was mainly concerned with the attitude in how the vocals come across, and was very hard on himself, sometimes he felt he had to re-do the vocals and send them to me again.

Do you find clients are requesting lots of stems when you mix?

It's very tricky. When you hear: 'we want a complete set of stems' ... nobody really knows what that means. Sometimes I've sent stems and then had a phone call complaining the kick and snare are not separate. To me, that's a multitrack. Contractually, it's a very grey area.

Labels ask for them because they can make so much use of them. The general excuse is that they'll be used by the artist live to back-up stage shows or to do PAs. The true use often turns out to be delivery to a remixer, who will be paid a huge amount of money. The other one that's turned up quite recently is that the band want to make alternative remixes themselves, to give away. Working the way I do on an analogue board, it takes two or three hours to do stems. If we have to do a recall at a later date, it's half a day. Sean was here all night last week doing stems.

And you still think an analogue console is worth it?

Definitely. I'm not going to compromise my sound just because someone in business affairs decides they want stems. The reason most mixers have moved away from analogue has nothing to do with sound, and everything to do with the way other people in the business behave towards them. At the end of the day, when I say 'right, I'm printing the master now', it's closure for everybody, because that process doesn't really exist anymore. With a Pro Tools session it's a never ending journey ... people feel they can flip open a laptop and change the reverb on the hihat ... because they can. When we mix on an analogue board, there's a certain sense of closure that the song is finished. And it sounds great now! ∎