



Steve Power

Robbie Williams is about as inconspicuous as a dancing skeleton at a roller disco. Little wonder, then, that it has taken a remarkable recording and mix engineer (with a name capable of instant induction into the Superfriends' Hall of Justice) to turn the Williams' swagger into platinum sales. Christopher Holder believes Steve Power has ever reason to 'Sing When You're Winning'.

Robbie Williams: what a lad eh? If you could bottle him, he'd be the aftershave every lad would want to splash on. If he could be reprinted, he'd be the laddish magazine every lad would want to take to the bog. If he was 'blister-packable', he'd be the designer drug every lad would want to drop before a big night out on the sauce. Yep, if you could squeeze the essence of Robbie into a pump pack, he'd be far more handy to the average lad than that hokum chick-magnet pheromone you can buy from the back of dodgy magazines.

Ironic, then, that Robbie enjoyed his first major solo break with the song *Angels* – a sentimental, lighter-waving ballad which gave Robbie the broadest of broad appeals. Two albums later and Robbie has maintained the winning formula. The enduring Williams recording triumvirate combines the vocal talent and song-writing abilities of the lad himself, the production powers of Guy Chambers and the engineering, production and mixing prowess of Steve Power.

Christopher Holder: How was the latest album written Steve?

Steve Power: When the band was touring, Rob and Guy Chambers would often write songs together. Rob's a real livewire – he gets bored quickly – but one of the things he enjoys doing more than anything is actually writing songs with Guy. So whenever he's bored he'll often grab Guy and say, "let's write a song". Fortunately, Guy's got the musical skills to keep up with Rob's flow of ideas. Then on a day off in the tour they'll head along to a studio and record those ideas. So we ended up with about 25 to 30 songs from those demos before the album was recorded proper, and I think about seven of those were selected for the final release. But it was recognised that we needed something a little more obviously radio-friendly, so songs like *Rock DJ*, *Love Supreme*, *Love Calling Earth*, and *Knutsford City Limits* were written in the studio. Which was a good idea... I mean, they haven't stopped playing *Rock DJ* in the UK for months.

CH: How much of the original demos were used in the final recordings?

SP: We sampled bits and pieces from the demos, but fundamentally we recorded from scratch. We went into Masterrock Studios and booked out the two rooms there. One of the rooms is quite large – big enough for recording drums and

Recording

Robbie Williams

putting the whole band in – the other room is mainly a mix room. On top of that we had another smaller room which was more for programming and ProTools work.

Mouthing Off

CH: *I want to question you on how you recorded and mixed Robbie's vocal, because that's one real stand-out feature of the album – the vocals are incredibly present and up front.*

SP: Most of the vocals were recorded with the new DPA [Type 3541 large diaphragm] mic, which really suits him. Getting the right mic was quite important. I had in mind that there was a song on the second album where some of the vocal was ruined because of Rob's extreme loud/soft dynamics, and you could never predict when he's going to belt it out – no matter where I set up the mic, it would often distort. The DPA sounds open, and when he yells, it can handle it... it doesn't distort before you get to the mic pre.

CH: *So guide us through the vocal signal path.*

SP: More often than not the DPA would go into its own mic amp, from there into a Fairchild compressor, and then straight to tape. Some of the other vocals were recorded with other mics like a Neumann M149, into a Prism mic preamp, and then to tape. I used the Prism mic pre a lot on the album – on most of the guitars, the bass guitar and the like.

CH: *I can't imagine Robbie being one for hours of vocal overdubs?*

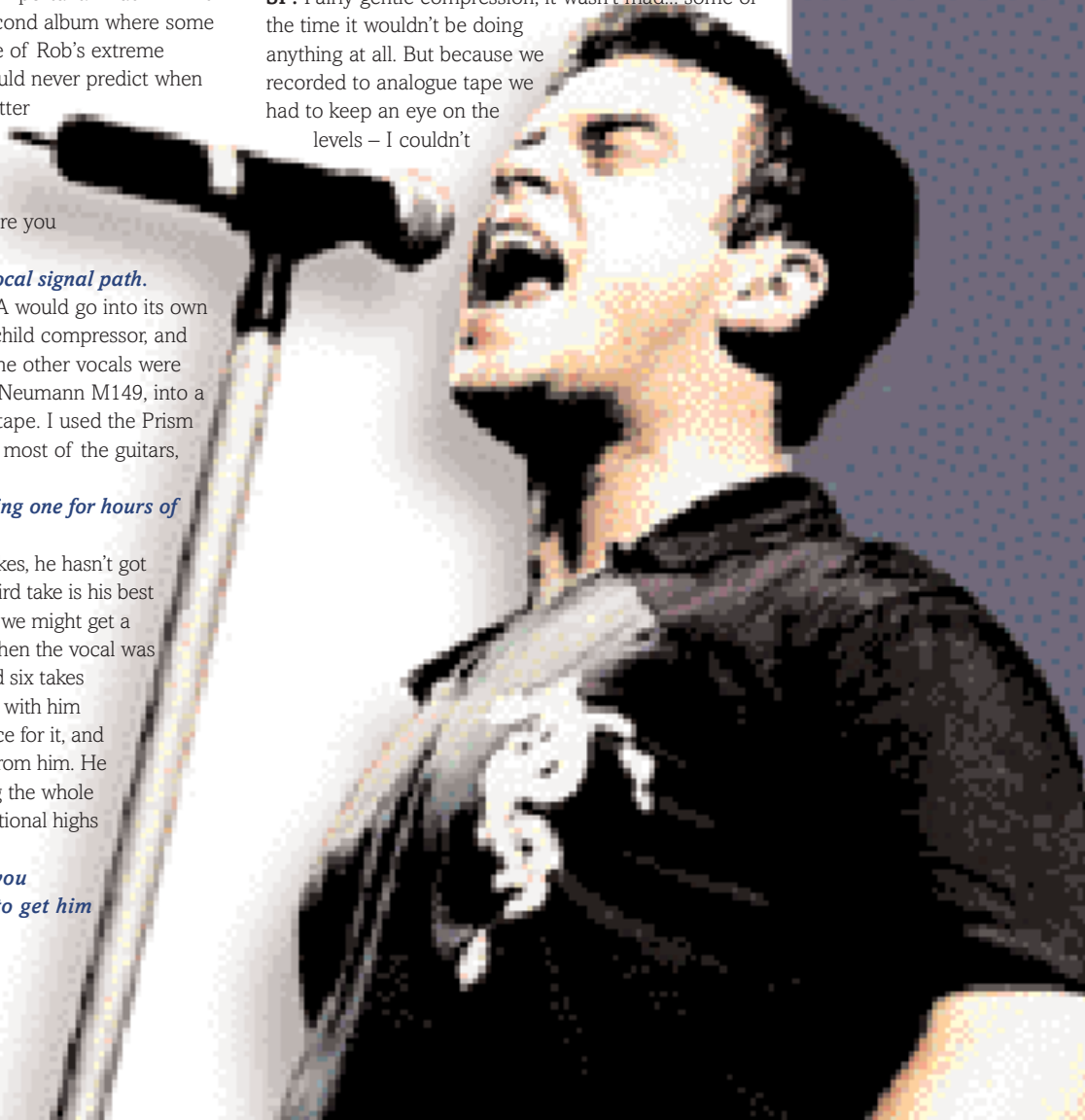
SP: No, he'll never do a lot of takes, he hasn't got the concentration. Usually the third take is his best and, depending on how he feels, we might get a couple more takes out of him. Then the vocal was comp'ed from between three and six takes generally. We never did drop-ins with him because he hasn't got the patience for it, and you don't get the right emotion from him. He needs to be performing – singing the whole song – to really get into the emotional highs and lows.

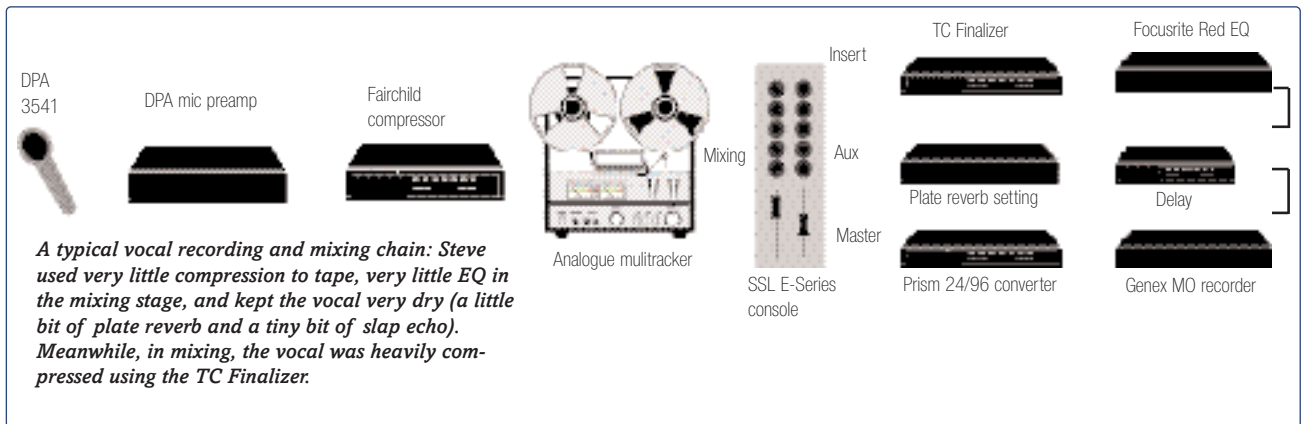
CH: *What sort of mix were you feeding into his headphones to get him 'gee-ed' up?*

SP: He likes his headphones fairly loud, and he had no reverb at all. I put his voice very loud in his mix, so he could hear absolutely every inflection he's making. To keep the level loud, I heavily compressed his vocal in the headphone mix – not to tape, just on the desk. The heavy compression meant that he could very clearly hear the slightest noise he made, and I think that helped him know exactly what he was doing – regardless of whether he's screaming or whispering.

C: *What sort of work was the Fairchild compressor doing before the vocal got to tape?*

SP: Fairly gentle compression, it wasn't mad... some of the time it wouldn't be doing anything at all. But because we recorded to analogue tape we had to keep an eye on the levels – I couldn't





print it too hot – so the compressor had to be there to stop it distorting to tape. It's also worth noting that the Fairchild serves to warm up the vocal a little bit as well. When he's singing hard it smoothes out some of the undesirable mid range frequencies – the valves physically don't allow those certain frequencies through, which tends to warm the voice up a bit.

CH: Will you compress the vocals further in the mix?

SP: I compressed it in the mix... heavily. I used a TC Finalizer. There's a vocal setting in there which will compress and de-ess. I also used some Focusrite Red EQ. I was very sparing with the EQ (a little bit of 1k that sort of thing) – I try to capture basically what's coming out of his mouth – that way you get to hear all the body and warmth of his voice.

Incidentally, the DPA mic has got a lift in itself of around 3dB at about 10k, which gives it a brightness that you don't need to add later with EQ.

CH: What's your aim when you're mixing in the vocals?

SP: I'm thinking that he's the reason why the listener will buy the album, and really the focus of each song is the vocal and the lyrics. When you take the mix down to an Auratone-sized speaker (like most people will be listening to at home or in the car), you realise that there can't be too much going on in the mix before the focus is drawn away from the vocal. I'll make sure there isn't anything detracting from the vocal, and when he stops singing, something else needs to take over that focus.

CH: But is it more than compression that helps place the focus on the vocals?

SP: You need to give the vocals their own space frequency-wise. That'll mean you should EQ the other instruments in the mix to open up that space for the vocals. I found that by clearing out the frequencies competing with the lower mid part of his voice, it would stop his vocal sounding woolly. In fact, by doing that, the vocal sometimes almost sounds artificially brightened, when, in fact, it was more about what I'd taken away from other elements in the mix.

It's actually a psychoacoustic issue, really. You're fooling the listener into believing they're hearing something bigger and brighter than it is. For example, I think people, perhaps, try too hard to get guitars sounding big and fat, which only serves to confuse the vocal sound... that was previously big and fat. Rather than go all

out to boost the 'big' frequencies of the guitar, pull down the frequencies which make it sound small, that way you can make space for the vocal sound, and the guitar will still be interpreted by the listener as sounding big.

CH: I notice you mix the vocals very dry.

SP: I hardly use reverb at all. There's a little bit of plate on the voice and there might be a very small amount of echo left and right – in the left hand speaker there might be about a 100ms delay and in the right hand speaker there might be 150ms, so there's a tiny bit of slap going on. There's exceptions to that rule but the vocals mostly stay forward because I'm not using much reverb, in fact, I'm not using much reverb on anything.

Say No To Digital Drums

CH: Are you a die-hard analogue man, when it comes to tracking?

SP: Well, for starters, I always like the sound of real drums which have been recorded to analogue first. It's hard not to appreciate the convenience of Sony's 3348 where you have 48-tracks on the one machine, but if I'm using real drums I'll always record them onto analogue, and then maybe I'll transfer them into ProTools for further manipulation.

CH: So what sort of stuff am I missing out on recording live drums to digital?

SP: The tape compression. When you record them digitally the transients can sound unnatural – even though digital is probably, in actual fact, a more realistic representation. I suppose I like the sound of the drums softened up by the tape, it makes it more ear-friendly – you can turn your record up and the transients won't give you a migraine.

CH: Speaking of drums, what's your favourite drum miking techniques.

SP: For starters, I always use a Neumann U47 on the bass drum. If I've got a choice, I prefer Ludwig bass drums, with a Remo PowerStroke head on the bass drum. I like to put up a couple of ribbon mics as the overheads, like the Coles mics. Then I generally try to keep the number of toms to a minimum, which helps to minimise the sound of ringing around the kit. For the snare, I generally have a Shure SM57 on top, and an AKG 414 at least 15 inches underneath the snare.

CH: That's interesting. Why so far from the bottom of

the shell?

SP: It gives the kit a more open feel. The 414 actually picks up the front head of the bass drum skin as well as the snare. In fact, you can put that mic up and it sounds like a drum kit... it captures a nice natural balance.

CH: *From underneath the snare drum!?*

SP: Yes. You hear the whole kit from that mic. Some people when they're balancing the kit will put up the overheads first and bring in the other mics to help. I'll start from underneath the snare drum. If you brighten up that one 414 a little, you can get a great sound – it just keeps the kit sounding open and real.

\$160,000 For A Sample?

CH: *I've got to ask you about Millennium's James Bond strings sample on Robbie's second album. Was that much bother to secure?*

SP: It wasn't a sample actually. We got an orchestra in and recorded it ourselves. I think it was MGM Films who owned that sample, and they asked for a massive amount of money for it, something like 60,000 pounds [around \$160,000]. Anyway, it only cost 6,000 pounds to re-record.

CH: *There aren't any spectacularly recognisable*

samples on Sing When Your Winning, as far as I can tell?

SP: On *Rock DJ* there's a sample of a Barry White song called *Ecstasy – I Want Your Body Next To Me*. Barry White didn't actually write that song but the writers got a credit because when the original demo was done, a sample of that record was used. We didn't actually use the sample on the recording in the end – we recreated it, changed it a bit...

CH: *So what was the nature of this troublesome sample?*

SP: On the beats of *Rock DJ*, overlaid on top of the kick, is a piano sound, a little bit of a string sound, and a little fragment of a bass sound – that all originally was a sample on the demo. In order to use that tiny fragment – no lyrics, no melody – the writers of that song got a huge amount of money.

CH: *Strings feature quite heavily on Sing When You're Winning.*

SP: There's four songs with orchestration on there. We used an arranger [Nick Ingman], and knocked over all the songs in one four-hour session. That was with a 32-piece string ensemble.

CH: *If you've spent a large wedge on recording an orchestra, is there a temptation to make it more prominent in the mix that you ought?*

SP: You've got to avoid treating the strings with too much respect. The fact the session looked so big when you recorded it and it was so expensive, it shouldn't influence you to turn it up too loud. If you listen to *Rock DJ*, the strings are kept in their place.

CH: *I suppose there's a mixing lesson to be learnt there for everyone – it's almost as important what you leave*

out as what you put in.

SP: Yes. And this is a lesson a lot of home studio guys can learn in particular – I know, because I can remember from when I was starting out. You can spend a long time recording something, have it up nice and loud when you're working on it, and you've got a sound that you just love listening to on its own. The problem is that it might be completely inappropriate to crank it up in the context of the song and the final mix. You've got to learn to let go, because it might be just nonsense in terms of the whole mix. You've got to listen to the whole and not the bits.

CH: *Do you reference against a variety of nearfield monitors?*

SP: I have a lot of speakers, do you want me to list them?

CH: *Erm... sure.*

G: I've got a pair of Quedest F11s, which are self-powered; another of my favourites are KRKs powered 6000s; I've got a pair of AR18s... The AR18s aren't on the meterbridge, they're on the floor to my right hand side – when they're on the desk they're very bright and fizzy, on the floor you hear their bass response. Which doesn't stop people commenting, "what are you doing with the speakers down there?!". I've also got a pair of JBL Control 1s, which are my ghetto blaster-style speakers. The main monitors are Dynaudio, which I like very much. Then I've got a pair of Dynaudio BM10 nearfields, Celestion SL600s, KRK E8s and the Auratones. I have all these speakers plugged in at once, I can switch between any of them. I tend to work on a set of speakers until I feel like I'm losing inspiration, then I'll switch to something else... keeps

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times where
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me interested.

CH: *have you ever met anyone else who works in this way?*

SP: Err... no. But I recently logged onto Bob Clearmountain's website, and he recommends listening to your mix on as many sets of speakers as possible, which I thought vindicated my stance a little!

CH: *So you're not just a speaker junkie?*

SP: Well, there's been times where I've had more speakers than I can physically plug in, but I've settled down a little and I generally have only six or eight sets on the go now.

C: *good grief...!*

Eye For Magneto-Optical

CH: *Apart from a showroom full of nearfields, what sort of tools do you like to have around you when mixing?*

SP: I always mix on Battery Studio's old E-series SSL. Apart from that I'm a big fan of Prism. I've already mentioned my Prism four-channel mic pre, but in mixing and mastering I've always got my Prism stereo EQ, and my Prism 96k converters. The whole album was mixed

from analogue in 24-bit/96k to my Genex MO (Magneto-Optical) recorder.

CH: MO? That's an interesting choice. Why?

SP: Well, on the second album [*I've Been Expecting You*] I mixed to DAT, to MO and to analogue half-inch. At the mastering stage we [Steve and Metropolis mastering engineer Tony Cousins] compared them and we preferred the MO every time. We were both very impressed with its clarity, particularly in songs where you've got a lot going on in the midrange – the Genex preserved more of the clarity and the separation of the sounds.

CH: What do you put that down to?

SP: I think if you have a reasonably busy mix, it's a lot for the half-inch's little oxide particles to take in. If you go digital, I think you can get better separation of sounds, and with 96k the imaging is still very good – better than DAT. If we'd mastered from the half-inch we would have been tempted to boost the midrange to increase clarity, but off the Genex you don't need to boost as much because the clarity is preserved – it sounds exactly the same as it did coming out of the mixing desk. Obviously you end up dithering down for the final CD master, but I think the longer you keep the mix sounding the way you want it, the better.

Singing Budgie

CH: I know you've done some work on Kylie's latest album and there's the Kylie/Robbie duet Kids Are Alright on Sing When You're Winning, so I'm hoping you can confirm or deny long held suspicions over here about Kylie?

SP: What's that then?

CH: That she can't sing to save her life.

SP: I was amazed how well she could sing. You get her in front of a microphone and you think, 'oh wow, great, no problem, no hard work to do today'. She's got a very good range as well – she can get right up to a top F-sharp. She's an excellent little singer.

CH: Quite the budgie then?

SP: What do you mean?

CH: She's sometimes referred to as the 'Singing Budgie' over here.

SP: I've never heard that [chuckle].

CH: But she's a nice girl then?

SP: A lovely girl. Very cuddly.

CH: Fun size, you could say?

SP: Yes, a real bonsai beauty..

CH: Etc...

SP: Etc...

