

David Bottrill
on Mixing Silverchair's
Young Modern Old-School Style



Silverchair (left to right) Ben Gillies, Daniel Johns, Chris Joannou.

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OUT OF THE BOX

by Shane Mehting

When three Australian teenagers topped the charts with their song "Tomorrow," many people considered the band a one-hit wonder. But for the last ten years, Silverchair has silenced critics with Number One records and sold-out shows all over the world. Now, after a five-year hiatus, the band is back with *Young Modern*. David Bottrill—who has worked with bands as varied as Tool, King Crimson, and Muse—was called in to mix the new record, and here he shares some of the techniques he used during the mixdown sessions.

Although you produced the last Silverchair album, you just mixed this one. What are the pros and cons of mixing a record you didn't engineer?

When I produce and mix a project, I have an idea of what I want it to sound like, and I record with that goal in mind so that the mix is a fairly easy process. It's more defined, and I know where I'm going. When I'm just handed a record, it takes two or three songs for me to get into the headspace of the band, and see how they want to sound. I'll mix a couple of songs quickly, and then I'll do some recalls at the end to bring those earlier mixes in line once we're in the groove. And I like doing that. You have more creativity, because you don't have an agenda, and

you aren't attached to anything you've recorded.

Where did you mix the album?

Metalworks in Ontario. I have my favorite studios in each town, and Metalworks has a J series SSL 9080—which I like—and some good outboard equalizers, a few Pultec EQP-1As, and some nice analog compressors, such as Urei 1176s, LA-2As, and LA4s. For monitoring, I use my KRK S-1100s. I've had them for 12 years, and I've grown to love them. I'll be very sad when I can't use them anymore.

How do you start? Do you head straight for the drums?

It depends on the song, but I'll often start with the drums—especially if it's a groove track. I'll get the rhythm section cooking, and then bring in the colors around it. That's when you decide on panning, or if the band wants delays or something added to the groove. It varies song by song. In mixing, there *are* formulas you can use, but it's nice to keep your mind open, and figure out *what you should hang the song on*. Once you discover the foundation, you'll have a good-sounding piece.

Are you pretty likely to throw effects on the drums?

If it's drum loop stuff, a regenerated dotted-eighth-note delay can add a bit to the groove. As for ambience, as long as it's natural sounding, I like that, as well. But unless the track

calls for it, I don't like effects on the drums.

How much compression do you put on the drums?

I love to have the drum kit pumping, so I'll often mix the drum kit through a pair of buses, and put some overall compression on the kit. It's not extreme—you don't want to lose the dynamics of the song. If the parts are played well, and the levels are set well, then some general compression helps things poke out better in the mix.

Where do you like the bass to sit?

Again, it's dependent on the song, but I like the bass to sit underneath the kick drum. You want the bass to carry the bottom of the song, and to provide the warmth and the fatness. You want to be able to *feel* it.

What effects do you like on guitars?

I like Lexicon 480s for general room and reverb sounds, and the Lexicon PCM 80 for a sharper room sound. There were multiple guitar tracks on this project, but they weren't ganged up as a wall of sound. Each part was pretty well defined. I had to pan them to get every part clearly audible, but there weren't so many of them that they were washing over each other.

How much thought are you putting into panning tracks?

The panning will often change section by section. I like symmetry for the most part, so if there's one part on one side, I'll put a complementary part on

the other side. If it's a groovier thing—like the hi-hat and guitar together—I'll put them on opposite sides so they can bounce off each other.

Vocal levels are obviously one of the biggest questions in mixing. Where do you usually set them for a band like Silverchair?

When I do a mix, I'll always do "vocal up" and a "vocal down" versions. There are always three options: Where I think the vocal should sit, a level that's higher than that, and a level that's lower. It really comes down to what feels right to me.

Do you like to keep vocals dry, or do you throw effects on top?

I like both options. Sometimes, I'll have the voice in a cavern, and, other times, I'll put it at the end of your nose. I love to have a bit of echo. It's a little '80s, but it still has that exciting, "we're playing in a stadium and we don't care" sound.

Is there a delay you find yourself going back to?

I like Lexicon PCM 42s, and the Line 6 Echo Farm has some good delays. It depends what's available in the mix. For *Young Modern*, I used mostly PCM 42s. I like to use endless regenerating delays as a trick. You can do it with a PCM 42 really well, but I haven't found that yet inside the box. I haven't found the right combination of plug-in compressor, delay, and feedback.

There are three tracks on the album with orchestration by Van Dyke Parks. How much experience have you had mixing an orchestra?

I've done it a few times—including the last Silverchair record. It's a difficult job, because the orchestra takes up so much space. But when you do carve out the space for it, it's very satisfying. I think it comes down to the arrangements, and Van Dyke Parks writes amazing arrangements that fit really well in the track.

What about effects? Do you go anywhere near the orchestra with them?

I might use a subtle reverb that's not too thick. If the performance of the orchestra isn't very good, you may want to give it some character with flangers and distortion, but if it's a good-sounding orchestra, I love to just hear it.

Is it any easier to mix in the box, as opposed to using a hardware console?

I don't love the sound of mixing in Pro Tools. It sounds like some dimension is missing. I know it's just processing, and that, in the future, everything will get better. But, right now, the math is too elaborate for audio, and there's a certain amount of depth missing. I need a big mixing console in front of me!