

October 2015

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**DURAN  
DURAN**  
Inside the  
*Paper Gods*  
Studio Sessions

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Duran Duran

**DURAN DURAN**

Once and forever pop stars Duran Duran joined with super-producers Mark Ronson, Nile Rodgers, Josh Blair, and Mr. Hudson, as well as an array of guest artists, to create their 14th album, *Paper Gods*.

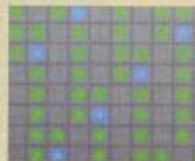
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To record *Paper Gods*, their 14th album, the perennial pop kings brought out the big guns, enlisting super-producers MARK RONSON, NILE RODGERS, JOSH BLAIR, and MR. HUDSON, and collaborating with guest artists ranging from JOHN FRUSCIANTE to JANELLE MONAE.

BY LILY MOAYERI

In their nearly four decades of existence, DURAN DURAN has been largely immune to media commentary—positive or negative—because the band has always had the support of its fans and the admiration of fellow musicians, from pop to dance to hip hop to rock. During its early heyday in the '80s, Duran Duran was so image-centric, showcased in eye-popping music videos shot in exotic locations, that the band fit better in boy band territory than as a group of credible musicians, which is what they were, and are. Both then and now, Duran Duran carves its own musical space, taking note of the present musical climate, but creating something unique within it.

"We came off the 'reinvention' 1960s and 1970s," says Nick Rhodes, the group's synthesizer mastermind. "It made our generation feel we could do whatever we liked, as long as it was original. Our contemporaries on the charts, everyone, sounded entirely different. We all had our own identity and our mandate about what it was we were about. For the lifetime of the band, we're still surprisingly ambitious. Our flexibility has been our greatest strength."

For *Paper Gods*, their 14th studio album, the group brought back producer Mark Ronson (who steered the album before this one, *All You Need Is Now*), with the idea of creating the imaginary follow-up to their seminal 1982 album, *Rio*. They also brought in Ben "Mr. Hudson" McIl Dowie (Kanye West, Jay-Z), who initially came in to help out with lyrics and ended up staying the better part of a year, fully involved with the production. Present throughout the entire two-and-a-half-year process was engineer/co-producer Josh Blair, who previously worked with the group and Ronson on *All You Need Is Now*. *Paper Gods* features guest appearanc-

es by John Frusciante, Janelle Monae, Kiesza, Lindsay Lohan, Jonas Bjerre, and Nile Rodgers, who also stepped in with Ronson for production duties.

The majority of *Paper Gods* was recorded at Studio 2, the band's two-room studio in Battersea Park Studios in southwest London. Studio 2's larger control room comfortably fits all band members and houses mountains of amps, guitars, basses, pianos, keyboards, and outboard equipment. Tracking is done in Pro Tools HDX 11 for ease of pulling up ideas quickly, as the band tends to come up with fresh ones on the spot. The studio, previously used for film, features a 5.1 Dynaudio M4 System, which the band has to continually refrain from overusing, plus smaller secondary monitors. A second, smaller room houses an electric drum kit, an acoustic drum kit, amps, and an acoustic piano; this is where live instrumentation is captured. Rhodes' parts, however, are recorded in the control room, a habit he has had for years.

"I'm very particular about frequencies," says Rhodes. "With synthesizers, you want to hear everything super clear. I like to know precisely where I am. Doing that on headphones or small monitors





Nile Rodgers, Mark Ronson, and Nick Rhodes.



Ronson and John Taylor.



doesn't work for me. I like to dial in my sound listening to everything else; I like to hear where things fit and sit. It comes from my days with Alex Sadkin who produced *Seven And The Ragged Tiger*.

One thing that always stuck with me was: Just because it's stereo, it's left and right, don't think of sound ever as being flat and on one plane; think of it as a cube," Rhodes explains. "Any sound that you have, that you create, you can place it further backward or forward or left or right within that cube. It's a very simple way to look at things, but it opened up my mind to the three-dimensional aspects of what you do with delays and echoes and frequencies and panning left and right."

The members of Duran Duran don't come into a studio session with fully fleshed out songs, neither do they jam in the traditional sense of the word. They come in with basic ideas and build off those, and Blair is ready to capture sounds as they happen, particularly with Simon LeBon's vocals.

"[LeBon] gets really excited; he likes to vibe with everyone and have his vocal on the speakers in the room," says Blair. "When you write the first time, there's that connection you have with the lyric. You're never going to get that back. You're not reinterpreting or rereading. You've got the exact feeling and the emotional train of thought you were on when you wrote it, and you sing it absolutely perfect."

Blair set LeBon up with a handheld Neumann KMS 105 microphone. "Normally you would stick a Shure SM57 or 58 in front of him and half the time you can't use that, because it doesn't marry with a Neumann U87," he says. "If there's a sound he's delivered perfectly in the demo vocal, you get him to sing into the KMS 105 and it's a lot easier to make those two sounds marry. We had a 58 on the last album and I was really depressed at times because I thought the performance was so much better but the sound wasn't as good, so we always had to go with the new version. I think we lost a couple of great vocal moments in that. We also have a Telefunken ELA M 251, which is the workhorse of the studio. Most of the time it's going through an SPL mic pre into a Pultec EQP-1A3 and then into a Summit Audio TLA-100A compressor. On the output side, it's always going into a Universal Audio U176."

Mr. Hudson comes with his own vocal chain, which includes a BAE 1073, which he also uses for instruments when he's going for present and bright sounds.

"DI guitars can be so horrible," he says. "You have to really bully guitars on the way in. I'll commit to loads of gain and compression on a guitar. I still use the RME Babyface Pro 24-channel 192. I like the fact that the monitor out is XLR. It just feels like the slightly grown-up version of Apogee Electronics Duet. I'm not looking for things that necessarily color my sound; sometimes you just want equipment that doesn't get in the way of the process."

Frusciante recorded his guitar himself, in his home studio. He and Blair sent his "Northern Lights" solo track through an EMS Synthi analog synth; through experimentation, they were able to send external audio signals into the keyboard but use all the filters on the keyboard, which also houses a reverb tank. The Synthi filter responded to guitar levels, which allowed them to tweak it to the right spot, then put it through a ping-pong delay on the output. This "opposite" trick resulted in a swelling, space-y effect coming from all over.

"When the thing was oscillating, at times it felt like the guitar was feeding back, which it couldn't because it was already recorded," says Blair. "The resonance on the oscillator was teetering on the edge of soft oscillating. So depending on how loud Frusciante played, it was leading off into self-oscillation and coming back again."

Blair also experimented with feeding instruments' headphone outputs back into their external inputs to create huge bass sounds, using a Voyager on "Last Night in the City" and a Jupiter-8 on "Kill Me With Silence."

Blair works around the Rhodes electric piano's stereo output—which in practice is mono—by recording things twice to create true stereo. "Those keyboards do some weird upper and lower splitting of the sound that's not really stereo," says Blair. "A lot of the times, especially with the Jupiter-8, I'll record that twice. Because it's an analog oscillator, it's never the same. Even if you've got the exact same notes playing, it's still slightly different enough that if you pan hard left and hard right, it's stereo. For all the parts we played throughout the entire song, we didn't just record the verse and then paste in all the verses."

The majority of the drum parts—the fingerprints for the songs—were written on the Roland TD30 electronic kit, which worked as a great writing tool for the band. Toms were sent through the Eventide H3000d/SE for a flange effect. The acoustic drums are from a cut-down kit with kick, snare, hi-hat, and crash. For the sessions with Ronson in his studio, three kits were used: a Ludwig five-piece, the cut-down, and the electric, all recorded to a Studer 24-track (to capture some natural compression)—which Blair took straight to Pro Tools as a precaution.

"As much as I love tape sound, I always want to keep a version that doesn't have the tape compression on it, just in case it didn't work. Sometimes we went back and forth; I use the tape machine as a color palette choice," says Blair. "Soundtoys Decapitator for me is one of the greatest things there is because I

love distortion," he adds. "I also have external boxes. I have a custom-made one that is like a Soundtoys Altec mic pre, but it's wired in a way that I can use it as a mic pre or as just a custom dry distortion unit and put everything through that, just to make it different, because no one else has that box. As far as plug-in distortion goes, the little green Altec 1567A plug-in—that's the little mini-distortion factory."

Neither Blair nor Rhodes are sold on reverb plug-ins, even though they have Universal Audio's Lexicon 224, the 4A, the M16, and tons of others; they are happy with their Lexicon 224X vintage digital reverb, which Rhodes refers to as "expensive, designer reverb." He adds, "We use frequency analyzing and literally sieve out huge chunks of the sound. I've always loved Neve desks, and I think the digital Neve is very good."

"Just because it's stereo, it's left and right, don't think of sound ever as being flat and on one plane; think of it as a cube."  
—NICK RHODES

"I miss tape," Rhodes continues. "I love seeing tape going around. I love listening to it, and at the end of it, having to rewind it, because it was a process. In reality, I think digital recording is so much more convenient, and the quality of Pro Tools is pretty astounding. And I love the editing capabilities, all the things I was trying to do with samples very early on when I got a Fairlight in 1982. That was the first digital sampler I ever had, and it was a monster machine and a nightmare to control, but it was also beautiful. Now I can sample things in my telephone if I want, and I can take it to the studio and say, 'Put that in the track.' It's pretty remarkable. But there is something about glorious old-school that you can't replace."

"I also miss razor blades," he adds. "When we produced our first album and I learned how to cut tape, to go backward and forward between the two reels, find the bit that you wanted and literally cut





the tape on the block, that was so exciting. It felt dangerous—and it was. The first few times I did it, it wasn't without error."

Duran Duran are open to trying anything in the studio. For drums, they experimented with numerous microphone set-ups but realized that with only three components, all they needed was a Telefunken ELA M 251 overhead and a Sennheiser MD 421-II on the kick.

"But we spent ages on the little bass drum to get it absolutely the right tension for the right sound," says Blair. "We changed six or seven drum heads to get the right dampening and the right note. This tiny kick drum has this massive, chest-pounding sound because we spent so long getting that particular thing right. You can just put a sample over it, but, everyone else has those samples, and no one has that kick drum or that person. It gives you a lot more uniqueness to the sounds when you create them yourself—not to say we don't use samples as well."

Mr. Hudson had the idea to put a fine chain, like the one attached to a plug-hole stopper—which he and drummer Roger Taylor picked up at the hardware store—and dangle that on a cymbal. He and Blair positioned two mics on the cymbal, with a Universal Audio LA-2A at the ready.

"I'm a real bully with EQ, so everything is turned all the way to the right or all the way to the left, just squashed as much as possible," says Mr. Hudson. "I'm trying to get all the sizzle ride cymbal out of that cymbal. And then I do it again in the box. We ended up with the most incredible cymbal sound ever. I got much more excited about that than programming a ride cymbal pattern on my laptop."

As much as Mr. Hudson enjoys out-of-the-box sounds, a lot of his in-the-box wizardry comes into play on *Paper Gods*—including drum

loops he made on the DMI app on his phone on the train on his way to the Duran Duran recording sessions. If he wanted to put sub-bass under John Taylor's bass line, he could play that into an RME Babyface interface into Logic, then out of Logic into Pro Tools. Or he would program some hi-hats to the pattern that Roger Taylor is playing on the drums. Using Logic's EXS24 for drums, Hudson has a set number of drum sounds he draws from, treating them differently, pitching them up and down. His main focus is always on the bottom end, which he also carried into the mixing stage with the master of low end, engineer Mark "Spike" Stent.

"I had an ear on making sure the sonics could sit next to other stuff in 2015," says Mr. Hudson. "I was always thinking, 'Can we throw a sub-note under here, or let's try some big fat 808s, let's make sure the drums are not afraid to compress and distort.' People are making music using mastering plug-ins on the mix bus. I've started doing it, making beats with a multiband compressor just sitting there. A lot of sounds people were making back in the day were being compressed and edited. It was happening in the amplifier; it was happening on the way into a compressor and a limiter. If someone's playing the drums as hard as they can, there's going to be less variation of sound. When we're making beats and compressing things, we're mimicking that feeling of loud, energetic playing in a room. When a band is playing and they're all going hell for leather, you get compression anyway. Music's squashed these days and you've got to be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those records. That was something I was always thinking: If I play a Kendrick Lamar record and I play this, is the bottom end going to sound phat?" ■