What It Is!

'70s Analog Funk

Premium Collection
2CD·24bit

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A conversation with What It Is! `70s Analog Funk producer Mark Whitcomb.

This title made it to the Premium Collection tier, and not without good reasons. We had great talent and a great studio, but the technological cornerstone is that we had a 100% analog source recording made on the Otari 24-track. How's that Otari been treating you?

Mark: It's been a workhorse. We had a minor issue halfway through the project—we had to replace the pinch rollers—but other than that she's a solid piece of machinery. We had the heads relapped this year. It was an older machine when I bought it. I didn't know what the head life was on it. We checked it out and sure enough—John French relapped it. It's old, from the early 1980s.

My understanding is that there's not a single manufacturer today that makes 2" multitrack machines.

Mark: It's like having an antique car—you're not going to take it to a mechanic every time something goes wrong. I've learned a lot about it, (like) disassembling the head stack. These aren't extremely difficult things to do. It's definitely not like digital. The maintenance on digital gear is pretty minimal.

You make records for a living. You record, produce, whatever it takes to get the job done. How many of your clients want to work in analog?

Mark: I would say about one in five. The cost is negligible because we always end up in the digital realm anyway. We're hitting the tape, using it as a processor. Instantaneous compression, some saturation, we just hit it and then drop it into the computer, digitize it, then move on from there.

This project was recorded on the Otari and then transferred to 24-bit digital for editing.

Mark: Yeah, we pushed the tape pretty hard on the way to the computer.

The loops sound fantastic. The tape saturation is beautiful, but there's more. The width of the stereo field and the broad frequency spectrum make for an amazingly open sound. Is this a characteristic of the Otari machine?

Mark: The medium didn't have as much to do with that as the mixing. Once we did all the editing and tightened things up, we went out through our Apogee converters into the analog console for mixing. So I think a lot of that widening came from the console mix, which sounds better than internal digital crunching. The stereo drum mix got some Manley Variable Mu compression and Mini Massive EQ. That was our stereo bus compression and EQ chain. Some of the drums got Distressed as well, (and) the horns got some Distressor. All the instruments got their own individual treatments using various outboard compression units, like the Summits and so forth. Just tickling the stereo mixes with the Manley is what I call the icing on the cake.

The analog sound is really the edge. The sound changes considerably when it hits tape. It's like having the best, most instantaneous compression, instantaneous attack, and instantaneous release. So it sculpts the sound just a little bit. It's heartwarming. One of my interns said, "I don't know what it is, but it just feels good right here," and he pointed to his heart. There's a physical continuity to those electrons!

The cost of making these machines have priced them out of the market right now. I don't think that they're going to return, so it'll be up to the analog freaks and geeks to keep it going.

On to the microphones.

Mark: For the drums I kept it minimal because that's the retro sound. You can get by recording a funk drum set with one microphone. You kind of mess around a bit, find a spot you like. But flying without a net wasn't an option so we did throw some other mics on the drums just in case (laughs). The mic that got used the most was maybe the Peluso 2247 LE. It has a nice roundish and cool sound for kick. Shure SM57 on the snare, and then another SM57 as an overhead. I didn't compress the overhead at all. I just hit the tape really hard with it. You'll hear a little bit of crunch there! Scott Beardsley has a background in funky drumming. He's a studio cat and he's been our house drummer for four or five years now. He's a great drummer.

We have a lot of vintage-sounding keys here—you have some very nice Rhodes and clavinet instruments in your studio.

Mark: That was the most fun! Growing up listening to Stevie Wonder, the clav—*that's* funk to me. Sixty-six strings in that clav. We hadn't used it in a while. We broke it out and started playing it, and four strings broke right off the bat. It takes about an hour for me to change one of those strings. We put some new strings on it and tuned it up. There are anomalies—it doesn't sound like a sampled clav. That's the beauty of it. That's what I love about that stuff. We ran the clav through a Fender amp or direct, depending on the session. Sometimes we had a wah pedal on there—that's the funk. Your booty is gonna shake. My Rhodes has great action, we just reworked it. Mark Siegenthaler taught me the tricks of the trade on getting some smooth action using non-corrosive silicone where the hammer rotates. It's got some great action, and the guys who played, Tim Whalen and Andrew Rohn, they're easy to work with and they really came up with some great stuff on the fly.

The bassist played a bass that's part of your own guitar collection.

Mark: That's right. It's a '74 Fender Jazz. Plug in direct and play. We just compressed it a bit with the Manley.
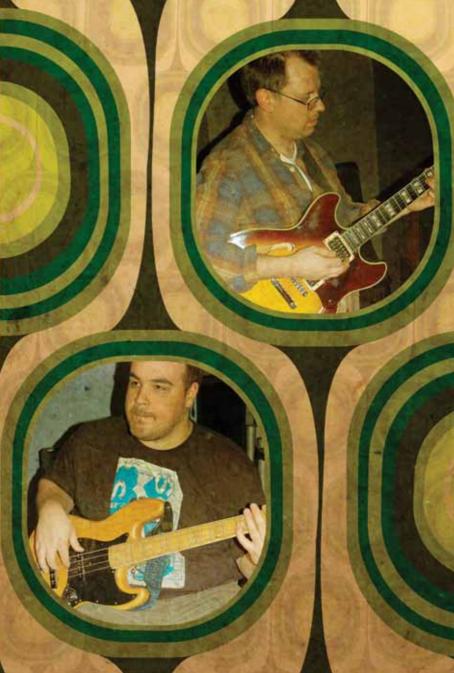
Guitars?

Mark: An old Ibanez hollow body through an amazing vintage Fender black face amp.

While I was visiting a session, all the players except for the drummer were in the control room with you. It's nice to have the space to be able to do that. You could be right there engineering, calling the shots. Nice setting.

Mark: Yeah, we could all hear better and we weren't in headphones. Funk is a feedback loop. You're listening to yourself and how you're interacting with the others. We had a nice big sound in the control room. We just cut loose and came up with ideas.

How was doing this title different from doing a record?

Mark: There's not a whole lot of difference. We did 15 cuts. It's like making a record in that sense. No vocals per se, as in lead vocals. One major difference is, there's *a little bit* more editing involved (laughs). Really though, the records we do make these days, we edit quite a bit. The mentality here transfers into making records more than you might expect.

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You're one of the few people who have built a loop library at this level all by yourself from start to finish. Not everyone out there is aware of how much work that entails.

Mark: Three months of solid work, from start to finish.

How long has DNA been in business? What's it like being a traditional recording studio owner in this economy?

Mark: We're in our eighth year. We have about 4,200 square feet of space. It's a big space. We've done at least 150 records. It's been a little factory for high quality recordings. I haven't noticed a big change due to the economy. A lot of people are making records. Most of our clients are independents, people are funding their work themselves, and so we're not dependent on labels.

How many bands these days are bringing in their own producers? Are you known as a producer as well as an engineer?

Mark: It's been a long time since I've worked with anyone who has brought in their own producer. Yes, I'm known as a producer, definitely. That's part of the draw. That's the lure. I think both of us at DNA, both Brian (Daly) and I are sort of in that same boat. It's just what we like to do. We like helping people make records, and people like getting helped.

How did you come up?

Mark: I studied Communication Arts in college. I was making films and so I learned production in that sense, and then after college I went to a studio to make a record with my own band at Sleepless Nights and then I just ended up working there. I probably made 100 records in the five years I was there.

Brian Daly has worked on many of our libraries in addition to putting out his own (*Black Paint, Hydroponic Hip-Hop, Metarock Visions*). So you had all that background going into this.

Mark: Yes, we're a loop production team. It's cool. I don't know how many teams have this much experience—you could probably count them on a couple of hands.

What advice do you have for people who want to get into this business?

Mark: Get in there and just *listen*. Hone your listening skills. The key to doing anything in this field is listening. You're in a listening environment, a creative environment, a production environment. If you can't listen at all those levels, you're going to run into issues. Find out what the band wants. Ask questions. Dig in. Learn how to work fast. Finish the projects! Collect the checks! (laughs) Get an instinct for putting the pedal to the metal. If you're stagnated on trying to do one thing that's miniscule in your own mind, if you're stuck in a quagmire, you have to get through it diplomatically. You gotta dive into that pool without making ripples.

At mixdown, how often is the band there?

Mark: I like to kick everybody out. I love getting feedback during the process though. It's hard to mix with five people chatting. You need a sense of quiet to reflect. If there's a party

goin' on, that mix is not going to sound as good. The band can evaluate it at home, in their environment, on their iPods or whatever, and they'll say, "It's perfect, we love it." (laughs) No, they say, "Read this page of notes." And you open it up and say, "Holy…that's a long page of notes!" That's how it's been lately, 90% of the time.

Everybody has some recording capability, everybody's getting into it, everyone knows the lingo. Is that a help or a hindrance?

Mark: It can be both. People aren't just walking in blind anymore. They sort of know certain stuff, but then, if you know a little bit it can get you into a lot of trouble. But in general it's a help. Most of the time people don't have to worry about this stuff, so they're there for my assistance. A lot of people we work with track the drums and bass with me and do some guitars, vocals, and keys at home, then they bring it back here and we mix it. That's happening a lot more. The stuff they come back with is mostly decent. It would be great if we could send everybody home with a nice API Lunchbox or something. "Here, just use this microphone…" A lot of times they end up just using the stock 002 or whatever their interface is.

This is a great title, thanks for making it for us.

Mark: I'm psyched on how it turned out. I had a really good time making this library. Working on the Otari really changed the whole mentality. There was a computer on in the studio, but we just used it as a metronome. We referenced the project extensively—I did a lot of research. I have a friend with a big collection of rare, dirty funk on vinyl, and he was making me mixtapes that we used for inspiration. Some of this stuff was so obscure, just a lot of vintage funk tracks. I'll definitely be using this collection. If you have a jones to start with killer drum loops, you have two Christmases worth in this library—the drums are phenomenal. So just start with a drum loop! You how it works with ACID—you can take this library and mix it with all the other libraries that exist, and you can come up with the coolest stuff. Killer bass lines, I mean these are the building blocks of music, and you can embellish upon it. Some of the keyboard licks, I mean come on! Vintage Wurlitzer, Hammond organ, guitars, a myriad of different bass sounds, a horn section from Chicago, just a great set of guys who composed some great lines. The hip-hop things you can make—if you just need a cool horn line, boom there it is. You've got vocals, some vintage James Brown-style shouts. We didn't even touch on the percussion—there are some phenomenal conga lines, some great tambourines and shakers, some bongos—that stuff goes a long way too. There's a ton to pick from. And for each session, we were very careful to include everything you need to make a finished track: A and B verse parts, intro, endings, it's all there.

Now you're off to a late-night editing session.

Mark: It never stops.

What It Is! '70s Analog Funk
Produced by Mark Whitcomb for DNA Studios
Assistant Engineer and Digital Editing: Scott Lamps
Assistant Engineer: Mike Grabarczyk
Edited and Assembled by Leo Cavallo
Content consultant: Brian Daly

Produced for Sony Creative Software by Mike Scheibinger and Richard Thomas

The Players:
Erik `E-Rok´ Anderson: Keyboards
Scott Beardsley: Drums
Chris Boeger: Bass
Tony Brown: Vocals, Guitars
Jonathon Edwards: Baritone Sax
Vince Jesse: Guitars
Ivan Klipstein: Keyboards, Drums, Percussion
Scott Lamps: Drums, Percussion
Eric Miller: Trombone, Charts
Nick Moran: Bass
Greg Nergaard: Bass
Brendan O' Connell: Guitars
Pauli Ryan: Congas, Bongos, Percussion
Jim Schram: Tenor Sax
Katie Scullin: Vocals
John Smillie: Drums
Andrew Rohn: Keyboards
Tim Whalen: Keyboards
Mark Whitcomb: Guitars