

interview kipper

RECORDING STING

dream ticket

KIPPER: PRODUCING STING'S *BRAND NEW DAY*

Most jobbing producers would regard jetting off to exotic locations to spend a year recording with one of the most famous artists in the world as a fantasy. For programmer and producer Kipper, however, the dream became reality - thanks to Sting. **Tom Flint** caught up with Kipper in his Surrey home studio.



There can be few people who are not familiar with the musical work of Sting, from his rise to fame in seminal white reggae band The Police during the late '70s and early '80s, to his colossal success as a solo artist. Sting has become a legend in the industry, but it's probably safe to say that the name of Kipper has been less familiar. Now, however, he has a co-production credit on Sting's latest album *Brand New Day*, as well as a number of co-songwriting credits. So how did this relatively unknown producer land the job of co-producing an international megastar?

As you might expect, Kipper's break into the big time was in fact preceded by many years of work in other roles in the music industry. With the encouragement of his father, who would utter sentences like "You don't need to do a normal job, I earn as much money playing in bands at weekends as I do for a whole week in the army and it's all brilliant fun," Kipper was always destined for a career in the music industry. During his teens, he joined his father's covers band with the intention of eventually becoming a session guitar player, but soon began to focus more of his energy on writing songs, forming bands of his own and recording. By the late '80s Kipper was lead guitarist and singer in the band One Nation. The band signed to IRS Records, which allowed them to make two albums and embark on numerous tours. "As a band we opened for Jeff Beck, Tanita Tikaram, Elvis Costello and did our own tours. It was an amazing experience but it didn't quite get us over the hill of success. There weren't big enough budgets to promote the band, so we had to get great musicians to do things for 50 quid a week. We did the whole thing without the pay-off at the end." Kipper left One Nation after their second album to go on tour as Gary Numan's guitarist, eventually co-producing his 1991 album *Machine And Soul*. He followed that with a stint as guitarist for Curtis Stigers, supporting the likes of Rod Stewart.



Kipper: "I didn't really know what my role was going to be - with Sting it's just like throwing dice up in the air and seeing what happens. I realised I had a totally free rein to do whatever I wanted."

In more recent years, Kipper has composed and produced music for TV and radio advertisement as well as score work on feature films, including *Titanic Town*, *The Mighty* and recent

blockbuster *Notting Hill*. The move into ad work came when a demo, sent by his manager, found its way into the hands of Jeff Wayne's advertising music company. "They got this huge contract in to write pop songs for McDonalds, and Jeff said 'Do you think you can do it?' I told him I'd love to, more for the financial reason than a creative one. That was the start of me doing adverts which lasted about a year and a half. I did loads of ads, from McDonalds to Toblerone, Gossard bras to Kelloggs. It was the first time the music became like a real job. Part of me liked the formality of it, where you start at this time and it has to be delivered tomorrow. Also the budgets you get are fantastic - I was using orchestras, and if I wanted to use some great session players in London, I could. I just saw it as developing and honing my production skills."

With so many strings to his bow, Kipper was soon head-hunted to work for film music composer Trevor Jones. "They wanted someone who could do a bit of guitar and bit of programming. It was an extension of the advert thing, but you're doing feature films for Hollywood and working to picture. Working with Trevor was an incredible learning curve, He's done it for 20 years, so it was like going to a masterclass every day."

The Mighty Sting

It was Kipper's film music work which eventually led to his meeting with Sting. The Trevor Jones underscore team were commissioned to produce a soundtrack for the film *The Mighty*, and Sting was one of the artists asked to contribute a pop song for the soundtrack. "We, the underscore team went down to see Sting record the song. All the boys were there, Manu Katche on drums, Dave Hartley playing keyboards, and Dominic Miller on guitar. Towards the end of the day Sting was doing his vocals and was getting a bit tired. There were a couple of film people there saying 'I think you should do this man', and you could tell he was a little bit pissed off and not getting any proper feedback. So I just held my breath and said 'Why don't you try doing this harmony, and maybe not do that?' He said 'That's a good idea, we'll try that.' I guess that was the first time we had any connection."

From that, the briefest of collaborations, Kipper soon took a call from Sting asking him if he'd want to work on the single version of the song at Sting's Lake House studio. "He phoned up and said he was a bit stuck for ideas, and asked me to go to Lake House with my gear and help him out. It's a big Jacobean mansion he's got down in Salisbury. There's a massive dining room with a set of XLRs in the wall so you can connect up to another part of

the house. It's idyllic and not like a studio; we were recording drums in there with the fire going! Sting just let me do what I wanted to do. I did quite a lot of work beyond just programming, so he gave me a co-production credit."

Having impressed Sting with his work, Kipper was invited to help contribute to Sting's next album project, by spending a few weeks programming and jamming at his Italian abode in Tuscany. Kipper describes the venue. "He's got this place called Il Palagio, which is literally a palace with 300 acres of olive groves and vineyards. He bought that about a year and a half ago and has been getting it up to scratch. He's only lived there for the period of time we were working on this album. He wanted to be in a different environment for the summer, and it's beautiful in Tuscany."



Relocating the studio to Il Palagio for the project was not a problem. Sting had invested in his own mobile studio for the *Ten Summoner's Tales* album, comprising an SSL 4000-series console and two Sony PCM3348HR 48-track digital recorders. The entire studio, designed to pack down into flightcases, was flown out to Italy for installation in Il Palagio's granary, an open room with olive presses and a wine cellar below. On hand to set up the studio and engineer the album was Simon Osborne, whose long association with Sting had begun as engineer on the 1991 album *Soul Cages*.

The recording sessions began with Sting and Kipper simply jamming ideas in demo form, and recording the results onto the Sony 48-track machines. Kipper explains the method. "We would jam every evening for about four or five hours and experiment. We did that for about four weeks, and then each morning we'd listen to the work we'd done the night before and write down the timecode of where we thought there was something good. Then we'd work that bit out and develop it to the next level."

These early jamming sessions proved to be the basis of an ongoing experimental recording process which would continue for the entire project. The working principle set by Sting meant that all recordings were in a constant state of 'work in progress'. Kipper explains the theory: "Even three or four months in, we were just doing demos. Of course, in the back of your mind, you know you're making a record, but you free yourself from the pressure of having to make something amazing. It's a really valuable approach for Sting, because obviously there is a lot of pressure on Sting to write another hit song and do something that's better than *Ten Summoner's Tales*, or *The Police*."

To provide a basis upon which to work and draw inspiration, Kipper, began programming sequences and loops within Emagic's *Logic Audio* sequencer. As he explains, however, even his initial working role as programmer had no formal definition. "Going out there, I didn't really know what my role was going to be - with Sting it's just like throwing dice up in the air and seeing what happens. I realised I had a totally free rein to do whatever I wanted. I'd spend a couple

Herring Aids: Kipper's Gear

Back in his own studio in Haslemere, I asked Kipper about his favourite equipment and how he'd made use of it on *Brand New Day*.

MAIN DESK

- Tascam M4524.

RECORDER

- Tascam MSR16 reel-to-reel.

SAMPLERS

- Akai S3200.
- Akai S3000.
- Akai S6000.

SYNTHS & SOUND MODULES

- Alesis DM5 drum module.

of hours before the evening sessions programming some grooves, loops, and wacky stuff in *Logic Audio* and time them all up so I'd have four ideas at different tempos, and set up in a way where I could either play bass or a keyboard line or a bit of guitar. I'd have 10 or 12 tracks in *Logic* and would switch them in and out manually to see how Sting reacted to them.

"Sting had a couple of ideas from before which we developed. The first one was in 9/4 time which was a nightmare. I'm not really a jazz musician at all, and Sting wanted me to program some bass and drums. I was thinking 'Please don't let it all be jazz in weird time signatures', but it turned out great. That track became 'Big Life, Small World'."

With Kipper providing the computer-based backing, Sting made use of the early sessions to experiment with guitar and melody ideas. Kipper: "For the first lot of stuff, Sting didn't even play bass, I did all synth bass, and it would be him just la-ing some melodies and playing guitar. He played the Roland VG8 endlessly, it's an incredible instrument for a guitar player - you can make virtual guitars, change all the tunings to say, open D tuning, play in different octaves, move the pickups as if they're halfway up the neck or have four pickups on a guitar. You're not really playing the guitar, you're playing the VG8. He was well into that."

With as many as 16 programmed songs produced by Kipper and Sting, the first of numerous top session musicians was introduced to the project to, as Kipper puts it, "get everything a bit looser and a bit more real." Mino Cinelu was brought in to add some percussion to Kipper's loops, and keyboard player Dave Hartley to provide some Hammond and piano. This method of gradually adding musicians was a way of working used by Sting as long ago as 1985 on the *Dream Of The Blue Turtles* album, and would continue throughout the whole *Brand New Day* project. Kipper: "Sting's attention span is quite short; he likes to get an idea and move on. Back then, he would normally work with his Synclavier, do some really rough sequencing and then get his band in. They would learn the track and play it live, but still keep stuff from his original demo. They weren't composing it; it was always his music. He's a great programmer but he doesn't really enjoy it; these days, he wants to be free to be a songwriter."

In October 1998, Sting declared a work break and headed off to India for a month to develop some lyrical ideas, leaving Kipper and Simon Osborne to edit the

- Emu Audity 2000.

"I haven't really touched its capability but I love it for having lots of weird sounds. It doesn't sound like any other synth, it's got lots of weird kinds of filtering, you can put distortion on it and it really does blow the speakers up! I use it for processing drums."

- Korg O1/W.

"It's been in my rack for years but I've only recently rediscovered it. I've started using it to add to classic analogue-type pads on quite a few tracks, You can access various partials within a sound and get rid of the musical part to leave loads of weird effecty background noises - that gave everything a bit of a twist. I use it for some strings as well."

- Korg TR-Rack.
- Roland JP8000.

"It's my favourite and I used that extensively. It's great because you can interact with it via the knobs and sliders all the time, as opposed to all these things with multi-menus. You can experiment and have accidents. I'm using one of those live."

- Novation Supernova.

"It was used quite a bit on the Sting album. I wasn't trying to use gear for gear's sake, I was always working for the song, so I might have only used six or seven sounds. It's great for modern dance-y things and we've used it for a few sounds you might consider dance, but we had to make it a bit more mellow - it's not a Chemical Brothers record. My fear was making Sting sound like he's trying to be ultra-modern."

- Roland JV1080.
- Roland JV2080.
- Roland VG8 guitar processor.

"Sting is going to use it live. He's got a pickup fitted to his bass and he's going to play a couple of melodies either on his bass or a VG8 converted guitar."

- Rhodes Electric Piano

backing material already recorded. Sonic Solutions' SonicStudio HD system had been chosen by Osborne for audio editing duties, and work began on making Mino's live percussion sit with Kipper's loop-based programming. Kipper describes the method: "We used Sonic Solutions to move stuff to be in time. If we wanted it to be a bit more programmed we'd move the percussion; if we wanted the opposite, we'd loosen up all the programmed stuff to be more with the percussionist." Since each of the Sony 3348 machines had only a single AES-EBU port, only snare drum, bass drum, percussion and timecode could be exported into SonicStudio HD at once. Once edited, the audio was recorded back on to the Sony machines. At the same time, Kipper supplied any further *Logic* sequenced parts in WAV file format for Simon to load into SonicStudio HD for waveform editing.

"That's my mother keyboard. I bought one because it's the closest to a real Fender you can get electronically without having to worry about tuning it or having one sound. It's got a phaser on it so you can get an early '70s traditional sound. I use that for writing."

- Yamaha TG77.
- Yamaha TX81Z.

EFFECTS & PROCESSORS

- Alesis Midiverb II multi-effects.
- Behringer Composer compressor.
- Dbx 163A & 163X compressor.
- Yamaha SPX900 & SPX90S multi-effects.

Keeping Track

Besides the job of time-shifting the percussion in Sonic Solutions system, there was also the considerable task of cutting and shifting tracks between the Sony machines, undertaken again by Osborne. Kipper explains: "Simon is a master at off-setting these machines and flying in different bits from different sections of the song. We had a click track on each machine, then we'd get the two click tracks to phase, and once they're phase-locked we'd know they'd be perfectly in time. I'd say let's have the percussion track from say chorus four, take six in on our new master track, so Simon would locate it and fly it in, we did that right up until the end of the album. It's quite an antiquated process but it's a perfect way of working, you know that everything is in, nothing's going to crash, you've got the tapes and it's all archived."

When Sting returned from India with the lyrical ideas he'd been working on, it was time to begin recording the vocals. Sting's long-time collaborators Vinnie Coliuta and Dominic Miller were also brought in at this stage on drums and guitar respectively. "Vinnie put some drum tracks down, Dominic put some guitar tracks down and that brought everything to life. Then Sting started putting some real bass on. I was out of the equation for guitar, Sting had put on most of the guitar as guide and Dominic would do his thing either over the top of the guide or in place of it. We were adding musicians one at a time in order not to lose the excitement we had from our original jams - keeping the loops going, but getting the drummer to play with the loops. It's a very messy, complicated way of working but it is exciting. We would be working with an original sequence from the first day with a vocal Sting had just finished and the percussion Simon and I had moved about. You're never actually starting again."

Who Are Sonic Solutions?

Some readers of *Sound On Sound* may not be familiar with the name Sonic Solutions. The company was founded in San Francisco back in 1986, first making their name providing the high-end noise reduction software *NoNoise* for mastering applications. Today, Sonic Solutions' two major products lines are DVD production systems and digital audio workstations. SonicStudio HD, as used on the *Brand New Day* album, is a hard disk multi-channel digital audio editing system. It provides eight tracks of 24-bit, 96kHz audio with I/O sample rates of

It was only at this fairly advanced stage of recording that it became clear that Kipper's role had grown beyond that of a simple loop programmer and now encompassed production duties too. "He's always used Hugh

up to 192KHz. The concept is rather like Pro Tools in that Sonic provide signal-processing hardware and software which utilise the Apple Macintosh as a front-end interface. The SonicStudio system has proved particularly popular for films and TV commercial post-production where dialogue and music need to be edited and mixed to picture.

Padgham in the past, and I think he thought Hugh might come in to produce at some stage, but when he started doing vocals and coming up with vocal arrangements, I was

helping with that and being a sounding board - so I fulfilled a new role. I'd worked with it to that point doing the programming, making the tracks sound full and finished, so I just stayed with it."

Because so much material was recorded, and so many ideas were tried out, the recording process needed some sort of housekeeping. Kipper explains how the team kept tabs on everything. "If we could improve on what we had then we would, if not then we'd stick with what we had, but we were always up for trying again. Sting might try doing a vocal on this song today, and my role would be to say that the one we did last month had more of a vibe. The old version would be on a copy of the multitrack. Every time we did something new we did a copy of the multitrack and say this is July the 10th's multitrack, and everything up to July 10th would then be stored. On the copy we would add the next thing and try the new vocal. We'd obviously be making some decisions as we went, so at the end of a particular week we'd say, 'OK, the composite of this vocal is that from that take' and we'd then make yet another copy. We ended up with 65 reels of tape, and when you consider that each reel of tape has an hour of music on it..."

Ideas sparked off yet more ideas, and so new musicians were brought in to add their styles to the multitracks: "Dave Hartley returned and played a bit of Hammond and keyboard on a couple of songs. We then got Manu Catche to give us a different flavour drumming-wise so it wasn't all Vinnie, and a guy called Donny B came from New York to audition as a live keyboard player. He was an amazing Hammond player and had played with James Brown. He plays on a couple of tracks including the single. We were just keeping all our options open, still saying it's a demo even though we were six months and probably 400 grand into the album!"

Another addition to the tapes was a string session recorded at Air Lyndhurst studios, London, originally composed by Kipper and then arranged for strings by Dave Hartley. Kipper: "I did all the strings as guides, a bit like I would with films and ads [see '*Music & Picture*' box]. I used the JV1080 orchestral card and a Peter Siedlaczek sample CD, which don't really compare to a real orchestra, but they're great for putting down ideas. I did my computer arrangement in *Logic*, playing in individual lines, bass parts, cello, violas, and violins. Then I printed that out for Dave who made it into a proper arrangement for the orchestra. We also gave him a recorded demo version with all the strings up loud for him so he could see what we had done. On a lot of the stuff we kept the guide strings and just moved them to fit with what Dave had done, doubling up the real strings with the synth-based stuff."

Music & Picture

Kipper views his experience composing music for adverts and films as essential for developing his skills as a producer. In particular, he values the techniques used to prepare the string arrangements for the Air Lyndhurst sessions gained during his ad days. I asked Kipper how he would prepare for ads and what he'd gained from his film score work: "On a lot of the adverts stuff, I would demo everything up as a sketch using my studio gear as pretend instruments. I would give them the sketch and say 'If you like this, it's going to sound incredible with a 25-piece string section.' To do a demo I use a lot of samplers. I'm a big fan of Akai and I use a CD3000, S3200 and the S6000. Some samples I make myself by recording silly sounds, especially for the adverts because they're specific. You might sample yourself biting a bit of toast or hitting a bit of metal on a door, for example. I've invested heavily in CD-ROMs and I buy most as they come out, figuring that if I use only one or two things on each one it will still pay for itself. That's the great thing with

By the early part of 1999, the 16 songs had been honed to 10 and the order of the tracks had also been decided. "We worked on the album as a concept rather than just a collection of songs - not a concept in Jeff Wayne's terms, but the idea that you've got a feel and direction so the album becomes a whole piece of work done as a single body. If we were working on a particular song we'd listen to the songs running up to that song and the one after, even down to key and tempo, just to see that it all fitted together. It was a luxury to have time to think of it like that, but that was what we got into doing."

At this stage, recording moved to New York's Right Track and Avatar studios for several weeks for some overdubs, including the distinguished harmonica of Stevie Wonder on the single 'Brand New Day' and the vocals of James Taylor on 'Fill Her Up'. As Kipper recalls, "'Brand New Day' had a kind of Stevie Wonder vibe to it from day one, when we added a synth bass which suggested a Stevie Wonder chord sequence. Originally we were just going to send him the tape with a guide harmonica part, but we were in New York recording an 8-piece black vocal choir put together for us by Janice Pendarvis, and it turned out he was there too, so he popped in during the afternoon. 'Brand New Day' is in B major, which is a nightmare for a chromatic harmonica, so even Stevie was struggling for the first 20 minutes, but then it clicked and he got it in two takes."

films and adverts, you only need to use one sound from a CD-ROM and it's paid for itself. There are a couple of ways I might prepare a demo. If I've got the job but they want to have their input, I would hire in a timecode DAT and work to picture. I use an Opcode Studio 4 to sync and I've got a video that can take timecode out. If I'm just pitching for a job then I do it in the old-fashioned way of starting the TV, and then hit start on the sequencer and try and get it to sync.

"The length of time you get to write to film is getting less and less. On some films we did an hour and a half of music in five weeks, from conception to finish, including full orchestral scores with electronics. It's a good discipline because you don't really have time to sit around waiting for inspiration, you have to get on and make music every day. You'd be creating themes for each character to make the scene work. There'd be notes from the director saying such and such's acting wasn't very good and the character is quite weak, and we'd support this character with maybe a strident strong melody. Initially you're thinking it's ridiculous, you don't believe it can work, but gradually you see how you can make a poor actor's character become stronger. You realise how much music subliminally affects films. Watching a film with no music on, which obviously we'd do at the beginning, would seem like four hours - it was so boring!"

One of the most curious songs on the album is the country track 'Fill Her Up', where James Taylor makes a cameo vocal appearance as a big shot arriving at a petrol station on his way to Las Vegas. According to Kipper, the song underwent the full Sting treatment: "'Fill Her Up' had been a problem song. Before I started work on the album, Sting asked me to send him any loops I had as ideas, and said he'd give me credit if he used them. I made up a loop in 4/4 here in Haslemere which he named 'Kipper'; he then had it chopped up into 7/4, and worked on this song. I hated it when I first heard it, I just thought it was a revolting, awkward, lumbering thing, but finally we got over the hump and I loved it - we'd sort of got it finished. Then Sting came in from a walk and said 'I've got this idea, we're going to do it much slower in 4/4, and it's going to be a country song!' It was quite disheartening - I'd thought we'd got a song finished and he'd changed it yet again, which was his way."

Paris, Here We Come

Having completed the American overdubs, the team began looking for a suitable studio for mixing the project. Sting had deemed his own SSL facility unsuitable for the job, and a Paris studio called Studio Mega was recommended by Hugh Padgham. The studio seemed ideal, partly due to a great live room, which was a necessity given Sting's tendency to try new ideas at any time. Finishing touches were made to the Air Lyndhurst string sessions and yet more overdubs were added. "We did a bit of extra tracking in Paris. Cheb Mami, the singer on *Desert Rose*, is a French Algerian guy who lives in Paris, so he came out for a

day and started up a few of his bits we'd done with him in Italy. Kathryn Tickell, who's been on a few of Sting's albums, played violin on a couple of tracks. Then we just got into mix mode. Again, the thing that's so incredible about Sting is that the song is never finished, so we'd be just about to put this thing down as a mix, and Sting would be asking if we could just redo the bass, or a pad, or change the chorus. It's always work in progress.

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"We spent a good couple of weeks before we mixed organising and making decisions, trying to consolidate everything and get it down to two 48-tracks; we also transferred all the drums to analogue 2-inch tape, just for them to be warmer. The Sony machines were 16-bit, not 24-bit, and the drums were the only thing that seemed to suffer. Putting them back onto analogue warmed them up and made them a little more organic, which is a bit of a cliché but it actually did when we A/B tested."


With material to be mixed running on the two Sony machines, and the drums on a separate analogue tape, mixing began on Studio Mega's SSL G-Series console. Kipper explains the dynamics of the process. "We'd all talk about what the concept of the mix was going to be, then I'd leave the engineer for about five or six hours to get his rough balance. Then I'd come in and start doing moves and developing a concept of how I'd like it to go. Then after maybe 10 hours Sting would come in and have his input. The next day would comprise us all together working on levels, but again still thinking 'This doesn't have to be the mix now, we can come back to this in a week's time and listen to it with fresh ears', so again, we weren't in that pressure situation. We'd spend about a day and a half on a mix and all in all we did about five or six weeks."

Mastering Change

In the same way that Sting chose Kipper as co-producer instead of Hugh Padgham, Chris Blair was eventually chosen as mastering engineer over Bob Ludwig. Kipper admits, "We felt a bit out on a limb not using Bob Ludwig, so we sent some stuff to him and I went to Abbey Road and did some stuff with Chris Blair. We did some blind testing with Sting and a couple of other people to see which they preferred. Chris's work kept everything very open and very live, while Bob's stuff tended to make it sound very much like a radio transmission already. He compressed it quite a lot and made it sound a bit posh and polite, and we wanted things to jump out more. I thought what Bob did worked, but it wasn't right for this record. We'd spent so long on this record we had a clear vision of how it should and could sound. Can you imagine the amount of rough mixes we'd done? The great thing about Chris' mastering is that he made the tracks work for radio and record without adding his own sound."

By the mastering stage, Sting had returned to Italy, leaving Kipper and Simon Osborne to sit in on Chris Blair's mastering sessions. Surprisingly, major changes were still being made even at this late stage of the process - this time by Kipper. "I'd bought into Sting's way of working where you open yourself up creatively and don't get attached to things, so we put a little additional track in halfway through the album from something we'd lost during the year, as a musical interlude. Then we edited out a chorus and changed the track order of a couple of songs. It was probably the middle to end of July when we decided it was time to stop thinking about the album and move on."

Two days after our interview, Kipper embarked on an 18-month world tour visiting the USA,

Japan and Australia, playing Rhodes piano and triggering loops for Sting. Making the choice between either going on a major international tour for a year and a half or taking time to capitalise on his co-production credit must have been a difficult decision, yet Kipper seems quite clear in his mind. "I want to do this rock & roll thing, because I've never done a tour of this level. It was just too exciting a thing to miss. I'm going to take a little writing setup with me. I'm published by BMG, and they're going to hook me up with different writers in different cities so I can keep writing and making contacts for when I finish the tour. Who knows? If the record is successful I'm sure there'll be people ringing up. But eventually I want to have a project studio here with a RADAR, and not leave Haslemere ever again!" 

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