

SOLUTIONS

MARK NEEDHAM

A MIXER WHO, LIKE HIS NEW SLATE PRO AUDIO RAVEN MTX CONSOLE, COVERS ALL THE BASES



Mark Needham figured out a long time ago that it's not just about the gear. Needham has been working as an engineer, mixer, educator, producer and studio owner for the better part of the last four decades. From the French doors that open out on a patio behind the 38'x25' control room that occupies what was once a ballroom in the 1927 mansion that houses his studio (known as "The Ballroom") in the Griffith Park neighborhood, his view of downtown L.A. is stunning. But appearances and elegant cityscapes aside, what we're really looking at is a self-taught self-starter who moved to the Bay Area in the 1970s (after graduating early from high school) and started building studios, consoles, tape machines, processors and more. He essentially created his own building blocks for what's become a more-than-respectable career – one with a discography that's a telling mix of classic bands and brands, newly established successes and worthy up-and-comers – the kind of diversity that bolsters career longevity in an industry where tastes change quickly. It was his work mixing Fleetwood Mac's *Say You Will* LP in 2003, at the behest of producer and Warner Bros. label executive Rob Cavallo, that first brought Needham to L.A. Before that, he'd been building his resume with mixes and engineering for artists including Chris Isaak, Cake, Bruce Hornsby, John Hiatt, Rickie Lee Jones and Taj Mahal (whom he credits as his "first big (paying) client" on his website).

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"After about a year living in the hotel down here, I figured it might be time to find a real place to live," he says with a laugh. Since then, his list has grown only longer and more diverse, including work with artists such as O.A.R., Pink, Robert Cray and Shakira. There are several other notable names on the list – notable not only for Needham's work in the studio with them, but also for the way they represent an entrepreneurial bent that's become increasingly necessary in the music industry. The Killers, Neon Trees and Imagine Dragons are all now-successful artists that Needham, along with his manager Andrew Brightman, became involved with at the developmental level, before each had signed with major labels.

"Working with artists still in their developing stage has always been a part of the way we work," says Needham, who almost always uses "we" when referring to his projects, underscoring success as a team effort, from management to accounting to the support his assistant Will Brierre provides in the studio. "Working with developing artists is a way to really help influence who they become creatively, and it's also a way to participate in [royalty] revenue streams into the future. That's something you always have to keep in mind these days."

Needham says he almost always has about a half-dozen artists in various stages of progress underway, and he keeps his financial participation diversified through co-ventures with labels and his M.A.N. Entertainment production company, and co-publishing through his joint venture with Peer Music. In the case of The Killers, he says he helped shop the band, saw them through their signing to Island/Universal in 2004 and mixed their debut EP and selections from their first full-length, *Hot Fuss*, which *Rolling Stone* lists as number 43 on its 100 Best Albums of the Decade list.

What Needham is doing is not only creating a presence for the artists he works with, but for himself as a brand, as well. "I try to be part of what happens on the business side with the artists," he says. "I go to the meetings, I'm there in the offices with them. We're partnering with the artists, but I'm also making the people in the offices aware of me, to be someone they'll call in the future for production work. But I want my involvement on the business end to be limited; I'm best when I'm working with the artists in the studio."

Needham intentionally keeps his genres well-mixed, too, looking for artists in all categories, from rock to folk. "There was a time I was doing 40 to 50 records in a year for a jazz label, another 40 or 50 for a ragtime guitar label," he recalls. "I never wanted to get pigeon-holed as the guy who has just one sound. It's a lot of work this way – I start days at 7 a.m. and work through till 6 p.m., six days a week. But I love what I do."

Needham designed "The Ballroom" studio himself, and it reflects him: eclectic yet focused on his work. A former billiard room behind the ballroom-turned-control room now houses his guitar and amplifier collection and occasionally serves as an iso booth for recording guitars or drums. (For big tracking dates, he'll drive a short distance to EastWest Studios, the former Cello Studios where he's tracked Walk The Moon, Chris Isaak and others.) "The Ballroom" studio may have once been the scene of many a wild party in the legendary pre-war era of Los Angeles, but today Needham has it running like an efficient machine, with effective workflow as a guiding principle. To that end, he acquired a Slate Pro Audio RAVEN MTX console for the studio earlier this year, purchased through GC Pro, the exclusive dealer for the mixer.

"While I grew up working on big consoles and tape machines, I've also become a lot more comfortable using a mouse and a screen these days," he says of his transition to digital. "I was using a top-of-the-line digital console for years, but I found that I was using the faders less and less and using the mouse more. Then I saw the Slate console at the NAIMM Show last year, and it was awesome. The touchscreens have really helped me refine my workflow, I can put anything anywhere I want on the board; I can apply the same EQ across multiple tracks with the swipe of a finger. I've gotten rid of most of my old outboard equipment and now I'm mostly using plug-ins, because certain manufacturers have just gotten so good at modeling that you don't need the original equipment anymore. The RAVEN works well with all of the leading plug-ins, and I can make them as big as I want on screen and make them easier to see and work with."

When Needham says the RAVEN has enhanced his workflow, he's not kidding – he estimates that in the three months since the desk was installed in August, he's mixed over 200 songs on it. Projects in progress include records for James Durbin, Iratation, Grizfolk and American Authors. "I expect that we'll do as many as 400 to 500 songs a year through here, and that just wouldn't be possible without a console like this," he says. "What this kind of interface does for your workflow is what you need to increase your output."

As touchscreens become more ubiquitous, the tabletization of pro audio interfaces becomes more inevitable, he predicts. "We're seeing other manufacturers follow RAVEN's example and begin to include touchscreens in their console products," he notes. "In the next three to five years I think we'll see them almost everywhere."