

## Left-Turn Mutation?

A veteran view on digital consoles

By Dave Natale

Editors Note: Our friend Bruce Jackson shared the following e-mail discussion he received from noted live mixer Dave Natale regarding his use of, and views about, digital consoles.

- Keith Clark

**H**i Bruce. I'm glad you got out to see the Fleetwood Mac show, and I know that the band was especially glad to see you. I will indeed pass along your thanks to the crew for the hospitality.

I believe that my quote you referred to is, "everyone's ears have always been, and will always remain, analog devices." (Barring some sort of left-turn mutation in the species.)

As you're no doubt aware, my

sound comes from "hyper EQ" and level. I shudder to think of what I'm actually doing to waveforms with the sledgehammer EQ tactics that I employ.

However, it seems to be yielding a result that I like, and more importantly, enough other people (professional colleagues, bands and their respective management) like to keep me working. I prefer to think that my drums bear a certain resemblance to Gino Vanelli's *Mardi Gras* from his *Pauper In Paradise* album.

With respect to digital consoles, I've mixed on the (Yamaha) PM1D – you have to these days in order to do any television work, as the front-of-house footprint gets smaller and smaller. The funny part about the receding audio footprint is that although it's infinitely smaller, the overall FOH area remains the same size. There are more and more cameras, along with bigger and bigger teleprompters. (Oh well, you can't fight city hall!)

I've found no problem getting around on the PM1D, due to the fact that there is one whole, conventional looking audio channel on it that is assigned to all of the inputs. I also have no problem getting "my" sound on it, as the EQ, which there is more of (five section parametric?) goes +/- 15 dB. This is my audio criteria, satisfied.

I also use the onboard noise gates – all the dynamics that I ever apply anyway. I think that using analog dynamics with a digital console defeats



Dave Natale taking a break from the road in his home studio.

part of the purpose of the small, self-contained digital footprint. Also, you don't have nearly as much programming to assign more analog outputs and inputs to in order to facilitate external analog audio devices.

Part of the reason that I only use gates is that they're the one dynamics unit I need to control drums, particularly at the levels I prefer to run them. At certain times in a show, I turn the whole kit up by 10 dB. Without gates, I probably would have been driving a forklift soon after my first tour.

## NO REWIND BUTTON

I've seen too many engineers with 20 or more inserts lose channels or have problems as a result of the analog insertion on an audio channel (bad patch cables, bad patches, etc.). It also makes the trouble-shooting process

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longer, and unlike the studio, there is no rewind button.

If you blow it live, it's history in less than a nanosecond. With the digital dynamics, there is no physical interruption of the audio path. Just more code.

Hey – did I just make a case for digital consoles?!

As stated earlier, I have no problem with the PM1D because it resembles an analog console channel. But I like to have a dedicated knob for each function and don't want to have to think about what the encoder is assigned to, for any length of time, during a show. (Reference back to the fact that once live audio passes through the venue, it's history!)

The DiGiCo D5 Live also seems immensely popular. As Peter Radcliffe explained to me, you can record a show and play it back through the console to refine your settings, without the band. That certainly appears to me to be an interesting feature.

However, do the band's ampli-

fiers and monitors also emit audio that contributes to the overall sound as perceived by the audience? Certainly this must be considered in the whole equation! I think that if you need to have more time to tweak things, maybe it's because you're fumbling, looking at the legend on the console to see where the encoder is assigned.

Again, I love the dedicated knob. But that reminds me – I think I'm going to check and see if my knuckles drag on the ground when I walk.

My main aversion to digital consoles is reliability. I'm sorry, but the PC in my house – the one that never leaves its climate controlled and relatively clean environment – crashes.

I know, I know. There are redundant systems. There has to be. Think about an entire show day. First the

console/CPU rolls out of a dirty truck as it's shocked to the "Nth" degree while bumping down the ramp.

Then it's rolled around, hitting other cases and bucking over transitions in the floor surfaces. It's then set up in a dirty arena (or outdoor venue), powered up and sits being inundated with the smoke machines that turn any un-hermetically sealed portion into a dust magnet.

After the show, the console gets packed up, repeating the bump and grind and then drives from, say, Hartford to Long Island on the "fine" interstate highway system.

This is just asking for it. I'm sure that all of these issues can – and will – be overcome, but not soon enough for me.

So, when it's my call, I use a (Yamaha) PM4000 – knuckles, remember?

For example, with Fleetwood Mac last summer, we played the Milwaukee Summerfest, and just as the band moved into the "acoustic" portion of the show, a giant Jack and Coke (no, it

## Dave Natale's (Very) Abridged Resume

Fleetwood Mac, *Say You Will* Tour  
Liza Minelli, *Liza's Back* Tour  
VH-1 Fashion Awards, Music Mixer  
Lenny Kravitz, *World* Tour  
Stevie Nicks, *Trouble In Shangri La* Tour  
Tina Turner, *24/7* World Tour  
Joe Cocker, *No Ordinary* World Tour  
Lionel Richie, *Renaissance US/European* Tour  
Bush, *The Science* Tour  
John Mellencamp, *Rural Electrification* Tour  
MTV Music Awards, Music Mixer  
Boz Scaggs, *Twist Off* Tour  
Stevie Nicks, *Enchanted* Tour  
The Grammy Awards, Music Mixer  
Yes, *Talk* Tour  
Michael W. Smith, *Change Your World* Tour  
Bad Company, *Here Comes Trouble* Tour  
Prince, *Diamonds And Pearls* Tour  
The Waterboys, *Room To Roam*  
Richard Marx, *Repeat Offender* Tour  
Van Halen, *OU812* Tour  
Go West, *Dancing On The Couch* Tour  
38 Special, *Strength In Numbers* Tour  
Mister. Mister, *Welcome To The Real World* Tour  
Asia, *Alpha* Tour  
Olivia Newton-John, *Physical* Tour

wasn't mine) hit the drum/percussion console (PM4000). I quickly tuned it off and proceeded to mop the excess off the surface.

When it was time to turn it on again, I had no choice, and powered it up. No extraneous noises, and I finished the show. The only thing was that the console was sticky.

I'll be damned if I will be the one that tells the band and management that the show has to stop now and there might be a refund situation, in their immediate future. I'll sacrifice quality, flash factor and everything else for reliability. ■

Dave Natale is a long-time engineer who has worked with many of the top touring acts over the past 25 years. Ditto Bruce Jackson, subject of a profile in the March 2003 issue.