

Who's The Boss?

By Tal Herzberg

This month, let's pay a visit to two-time Grammy-nominated producer/songwriter John Shanks to discuss the role of DAWs and their operators in the recording process. John's credits include works by Sheryl Crow, Melissa Etheridge, Stevie Nicks, Chris Isaak, and, most recently, Keith Urban.

EQ: When did you start using DAWs as your main production tool?

JOHN SHANKS: As a writer, I always had a studio at my house. I started with a four-track cassette, moved into eight-track reel-to-reel, then to ADATs, and finally to a DAW about five years ago.

How did you start producing?

Many times I found myself disappointed with the results other producers got while working on my songs, so I started working on my own production skills. Once my confidence level and instincts were developed enough, I started demanding from parties who were interested in my songs to let me produce the cuts, and, after some time, things started to come out the way I wanted. I was responsible for the outcome.

Can you describe your typical process of writing a song?

Most of the times I'll start writing a song playing an acoustic guitar, and often I'll play to a rhythm loop playing from the DAW. Melodies and lyrics will emerge, and then it's time to put the basic demo together.

With the sound quality and editing capabilities of DAWs, is there such thing as a "demo" anymore?

My whole theory is to make yourself indispensable, and that means doing the best that you can from the get-go. For me, if properly implemented, there is no reason why a demo shouldn't ultimately become the master. Many times, moments captured while making a demo

can't be re-created in a "real" situation — so I keep it the way it was!

Who operates the DAW for you?

My DAW operator is also my engineer. I think that it's no longer enough to know how to get sounds but not know how to operate a DAW, and vice-versa, so at this point I rely on my engineer to be able to do both. In most productions it's not economical to have two people running the session — one engineering and one running the DAW, but in some occasions I'll have both in the control room, so things can move even faster

of the creation process, I may have an idea, but will have a problem verbalizing it, so I have to know that the person I am working with can follow me as we put the puzzle together. If my pace is too fast for the operator and it slows me down, it becomes a problem for me. As a musician, I communicate in musical terms, so when I say "fly this vocal line to the chorus" or "lay back the kick pattern," I need to know that the operator can think, feel, and respond to such requests. Since this person also takes care of the engineering chores, it's important that he/she can



Producer/songwriter John Shanks discusses the creative process of working with DAW engineers.

and smoother.

What are some of the characteristics that make you want to work with a certain DAW operator?

I like to work really fast, because it keeps things exciting. My main concern with engineers who also operate the DAW for me is that they need to be able to work as fast as me, without me needing to say a lot to them. They need to be able to work off the moment and blindly trust my process. Sometimes, in the heat

also respond to comments such as "this sound is too harsh" or "the bass is too muddy" and react accordingly. From a musical standpoint, it's nice when this person has a viable creative side and taste, but, generally speaking, I do not rely on his/her programming skills, since I program myself. Some of the guys I work with have learned my taste and approach to certain situations, and also learned my arsenal of loops, so they can suggest some good combinations,