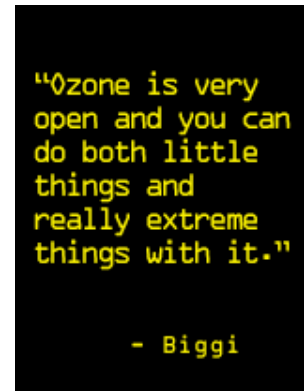


Biggi

Engineer at Sundlaugin Studio talks about recording and mixing Sigur Rós and more



*Iceland is known the world over for an amazingly original and diverse musical output that seems completely out of proportion to its population of just 320,000 people. As engineer at Sigur Rós' Sundlaugin Studio, Birgir Jón Birgisson, known to most simply as "Biggi," has the pleasure of being right at the center of this thriving music scene. We interviewed Biggi to find out about the process of recording Sigur Rós' albums, mixing their film **Heima** in surround, and how Ozone and Trash have become go-to tools when working with live recordings.*



Tell us about how you first got involved with the studio here.

I knew the guys from Sigur Rós before I went to study in London. About the time that I finished there one of them just called me up and offered me a job as manager and engineer here. I'm basically the only one working here. I am really everything from cleaning lady to manager and sound engineer.

How often do you have people coming in, is it a busy studio?

I'd say it's pretty busy. It's one of the three or four proper studios in Iceland. We get a lot of the alternative or indie music in Iceland. So actually a lot of the bands that try to market themselves abroad come in here to do their albums, bands like amiina, Sigur Rós obviously and Mugison.

We visited a store in Reykjavik and were surprised to see a huge local music section. Is there a strong music scene here right now?

There is a really strong music scene actually. In just the Reykjavik area there are only 200,000 people but there are so many bands getting released abroad. A lot of these bands tend to go into this alternative scene. There are not many proper "pop" bands with heavily produced chart music made in Iceland. It's all sort of in the legacy of Björk or Sigur Rós. I think Icelandic bands tend to go that route without necessarily copying those artists. Everyone tries to have their own thing going. You can't use the same tricks as the next person because you might end up meeting them at the bar later that night!

What are some of your favorite things you've been working on here recently?

We just finished the Sin Fang Bous album, which is Seabear's side project. I've been working a lot on the live stuff for Sigur Rós. For the past six months I've been touring a lot with Mugison. Before that we did an album with a guy called Bubbi, who's kind of like the Bruce Springsteen or Bob Dylan of Iceland.

Of course I've been working on a lot of Sigur Rós stuff. Lots of live stuff. We did the film [Heima] and we did some add-ons for the film. Oh, and of course I worked on their album this year, but it just happened so quickly I almost forgot about it! They

usually take about two years to record an album and they did this one in about five months.

That was produced by Flood, right? How was it working with Flood and the band on this album?

It was good. They did most of the drums and bass and all of that stuff in New York, they did all of the groundwork there. Then they came here to do the strings, brass and overdubs. It was really nice working with Flood he's an amazing guy. His approach is really nice. He's a down to earth and calm guy who's up for anything really. The band is really interested in all of the technology and the recording

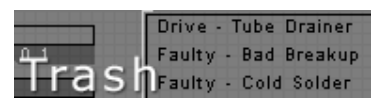
Read Artist Interviews:



Complete Audio Repair.



Precision mastering suite.



64-bit distortion, amp modeling, filters and delay.



Spectral effect processing with morph, pan, delay and filters.



Natural time and pitch control for Logic Pro and Soundtrack Pro.



process. For this album they bought a lot of old mics, Russian LOMOs and RCAs, and tried out different things with gear. I think it made it more fun also to use something that you haven't used before.

I think with Flood it's more really about trying to capture the performance than necessarily using the top quality gear. He would stick an old ribbon mic in front of a cabinet or somewhere out in the room or wherever. It was more about capturing the performance.

Sigur Rós seem to have such a free-form and organic way of making music. Is it difficult to capture that in the studio? Do they come in with set ideas or do you have to spend a lot of time experimenting and help them find what they're looking for?

They're very independent, and as soon as they have the song laid out they have a really strong idea of how it's going to turn out. But a lot of it happens in the studio. They have loads of instruments here that they use like celestes and vibraphones and basically they will try out anything. But the songs, especially for *Takk*, they developed a lot in the studio and it took a long time. Their ideas are really strong and they know when they're finished, they don't stop until it's completely done.

For the last album they just went to a farm here in Iceland and spent a week just writing the songs and basically what they had after that session they went to New York and recorded with Flood and then they wrapped it up after a couple of months here and in Cuba.

In Cuba?

Yeah, they went to record a few vocals in Cuba. They just brought a laptop and a couple of mics, with those small Apogee Duets [audio interfaces] and tried out a few vocals.

That's usually what takes the most amount of time, to do the vocals. They do a lot of layering. I think they did really well to finish it that quickly. It's also Flood's influence, he's a busy guy and helped them to really go for it and finish it.

Going back to *Heima*, how were you involved in the film?

I recorded all of the shows, me and Ken Thomas in a home-made OB truck. We did about ten shows here in Iceland and many of them were outside. I recorded that and then we had about 100 hours of footage that we had to cut up and choose which songs to use. Then we mixed it.

Some of the songs Jonsi did, and then I took over and finished it here in 5.1. Basically what I did was I mixed it in stereo because we wanted to have a really good stereo mix as well, not something just pulled back from 5.1. So when I did all of the stereo mixes, I took the same session then expanded it to 5.1.

It was also fun because we just set up a basic 5.1 setup, we didn't measure anything or do it properly, just had a couple of speakers back here and a sub and when the band came in they got very excited about the whole thing. I think the music lends itself quite well to surround because it's a huge sound, and to be able to put it behind the listener as well really suits the music. It was really good fun.

Did you find it more challenging that mixing in stereo, or was it easier, or about the same?

I think it is a bit easier because you have a lot more space. It's easier to place things in surround. For the music you also have to take into account that you have the film in front of you so you can't really be throwing things around -- although we did that a bit. You're a bit restricted. We did use surround channels for samplers and reverb and ambience. In one scene we have a marching band coming in. In the concert they went into the crowd and into a circle and back to the stage, so we did that, and it goes in a circle.

Do you think we'll ever get to the point where people release music more readily in surround? I guess as long as we have headphones maybe not...

I think a lot of music tends to go in that direction, people listen more on their computer or in their headphones. In London the other day I saw these guys standing around an iPhone just listening to music on the speakers of the phone! It's so crazy with all of the technology today the playback medium is always getting worse and worse. You had CDs, then we went to MP3 which is a compressed format.

I don't know if people are prepared to set up a proper surround setup in their homes. Even today people that have home theater systems often set them up wrong. You'll have the surround channels under the front channels or whatever. There are always going to be some people that are willing to do it, and really into it, but I think for most people it's going to be stereo at the most. And a lot of people don't even put that up properly. They'll have one speaker in the kitchen and one in the living room.

Or one of them out of phase with the wires hooked up wrong!

Right. I guess surround is a bit too complicated still for the average person. But it adds a lot to the whole experience to have that option.

In the studio here you have a big console, a tape machine and a lot of



Play your loops any way you like.



Virtual drum machine for Mac OS X and Windows.



2,057 new beats for iDrum and Garageband.



Analog modeled vinyl simulator.

outboard gear. So in some ways you have a very traditional setup, not just something controlling Pro Tools.

Yeah we don't even have Pro Tools. I've been a sound engineer for 12 years and I've never used Pro Tools.

What are you using on the computer here?

It's a system called Soundscape, it's Belgian, a TDM-type system similar to Pro Tools. We've used that in the past synced up with a tape machine and we had an automation system fitted to the desk. Up until when we did the film, everything was through the board. We had 32 outputs on Soundscape and brought them up on the desk. But now I've been mixing in Logic. I had to be a bit more portable with the film because I had to finish it in LA. So we decided to do that in the box. Since then I've done a few projects in Logic and I really like it. We may get Pro Tools at some point mainly because customers ask for it and it's an industry standard.

We first started talking to you when you were finishing up *Heima* and you mentioned that Ozone had been used in mastering the audio. How did that play into the project?

We finished the film in LA at a studio called Pop Sound. I was working with Chris the engineer there. We wanted to master the 5.1 sound before we put it to film but we were really running out of time so we had to do it there. And he just brought up Ozone and spread it across all the channels. It turned out really good and added a lot of power. That was the first time I had used it.

I really like Ozone, I've used it quite a lot since. We basically do the mastering process for all of the live stuff and many of the things we have to put online and so on. Ozone is very open and you can do both little things and really extreme things with it.

When you're working on a lot of these live performances what are the kinds of challenges you run up against when you're trying to finalize the audio?

Basically we don't replace anything. I don't get the band into the studio to re-record anything so we have to stick with exactly what's recorded. There isn't a single overdub in the film.

That's pretty amazing considering a lot of it is shot outside.

When we shot outside here it started to rain. I don't mind all of that. Getting wind in the microphones and all of that doesn't bother me at all.

With live recording, because Sigur Rós goes from quiet to really loud, there is a lot of spill on the microphones. And when there is a lot of spill you can't compress as much, so you have to be a bit careful with a lot of the processing. On the albums they use compression as an effect a lot. You can't really go that far with the live recordings. They also use a lot of celeste, harmonium, a lot of very quiet instruments which are mic'd up with condenser mics. Some of the mics pick up more of the other sounds on stage than the actual instruments! It can be a bit tricky. You can't do things like tweaking and pitch correction, because there is so much spill it will mess up everything.

So there is no cheating basically.

I'd love to cheat but you can't really do it with most of the stuff. When we did the film I was trying to isolate everything and get it clean but at some parts I think I went too far. Like when we shot outside here, it was really windy but listening to it you couldn't really hear that it was outside. So we actually added wind and rain. Because you could see the rain but you couldn't really hear it.

Ah, so you did cheat but in the opposite direction!

Yeah. We wanted to make it sound a bit more "live" I guess is the word.

We recorded a couple of shows in London the other week. What we did there is we had a sound field mic which you can record in surround with. Then we had three pairs of other ambience mics. And four of them we just used to capture the PA. And it sounded really amazing. I thought it was going to sound like crap but it ended up coming out quite well.

So basically everything was already mixed coming through the PA so you were capturing what the crowd was hearing?

Yes, just what the front of house engineer was mixing. I used Bruel & Kjaer omni mics to capture it and I was amazed. This was an idea that the band wanted to do. They wanted to really capture how it really was at the concert and use that as the basis. We might throw in other parts of the kick drum or some of the bass or whatever, but we'll probably end up using a lot of the recorded PA.

Any other tricks you want to share?

I've used Trash quite a bit. When I record shows I usually get DI [direct line output] signals from keyboards and bass, and I use it as an amp simulator. It's really cool. I never use the DI signal by itself. The bass always sounds crap! So I use Trash a lot.

Do you blend it in with the microphone?

I usually use the microphone as the primary source then I blend the direct signal with Trash on it to give it more "oomph" or compress it really hard to make it more steady, or give it more crunch.



Visit Sundlaugin Studio at www.sundlaugin.com

© Copyright 2007 iZotope, Inc. All Rights reserved. | Legal and Trademarks | Privacy | 