

Frank Northcutt

Resident: Lowell, MA

Musician: Sort of. The proverbial jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Studio: Blue Heron Studio

Background

Two pencils and a book - as a kid I would put a record on the turntable (remember those things?) and start banging away. My early interest in the Beatles soon gave way to “the dark side”. I was listening to Hendrix, Cream, The Stones, and Steppenwolf. At 16, my parents allowed me to buy a set of drums from Sears, and I immediately joined a garage band; playing Hendrix, Credence, The Animals, etc. ...as if we had a clue.

By the time I finished high school, my taste in music had diversified somewhat. My “sensitive side” was blooming. I was listening to Jackson Browne and James Taylor; and buying the occasional classical album – Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. After my first band dissolved, due to lack of interest, I joined a band that actually played “gigs” – some of the best biker bars in the Kingston, NY area. During that time I met a guitar player who introduced me to jazz. I had always hated jazz! But I guess it’s like anything else, the more you understand it, the more you appreciate it. He was in an eight piece horn band, playing Chicago, BS&T, etc. When that band split, we formed a short lived horn band, a short lived rock band, and a cheesy lounge band. It was now the beginning of the disco era.

We then tried an experimental approach – taking variety to an extreme. The new band would actually play Antonio Carlos Jobim and Uriah Heep at the same gig. Needless to say, it didn’t meet with great critical acclaim. It soon evolved into another eight piece horn band; playing Doobies, Steely Dan, and Tower of Power type stuff. After a few months, everyone was getting real serious about their music (except me), and I was politely asked to leave.

After bouncing around with a couple more failed attempts at bands, I teamed up with my old guitar player friend once again. Back to the lounge and wedding scene we went; complete with matching outfits, and a female singer (we’re talking 1978, mind you); playing everything from “Pennies from Heaven” to “Stairway to Heaven”. I departed after an eight year run, in the late 80’s.

I gave it all up for a few years. But after my wife and I moved to Massachusetts in 1993, I got the bug again, and joined another band. It was with this band that I first started playing some keyboards and guitar, after one of the guitarists left. I knew some chords, and the guys had heard me fooling around a bit at rehearsal... but they let me play anyway.

After a few years, I’d had enough. But now, armed with a guitar, a keyboard, a microphone, and a Yamaha DD-55, I was determined to emulate Todd Rundgren. I purchased the cheapest digital multi-track recorder I could find (a Boss BR-532), and set up a miniature “studio” in the basement. Over time, I added more instruments to my arsenal, and upgraded my recorder to a BR-864. After many starts and stops, I completed my first CD, “Native Son”, in 2004; a collection of cover tunes. Songwriting is my next mountain to climb.

What made you chose the two songs you recorded for this comp?

So many songs; so little time. I can’t remember how many times I changed my mind. As I mentioned, I’ve always liked James Taylor. He’s one of my favorite songwriters – versatile, complex, and with a very expressive voice. “Mexico” is one of his lesser known songs, but I like the Caribbean feel, and it’s one of the few of his songs that I felt I could actually play. I’m not a finger-picker, so I’m indebted to Farrell Jackson for providing the great acoustic guitar intro.

I really enjoyed the prog rock sound in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s – Yes, Kansas, Tubes, early ELP. “Nantucket Sleighride” was rather complex for it’s time. It was kind of in the vanguard of that movement. I knew it would be a challenge. Besides, living in Massachusetts, it was a natural.

In both cases, the main reason was... I liked the song!

Can you describe the instrumentation used on your recordings?

On “Mexico”, I opted for the light, single wound pickup sound of my Jay Turser faux-strat for both guitars, played clean. I used my Casio keyboard for both the marimba and the lazy synthesizer used during the instrumental. Drums were performed on my trusty Yamaha DD-55. I used an old Yamaha PSR keyboard for the gourd, claves, and cabasa. The bass is a cheap Squire P-bass, with Duncan pickups.

On “Nantucket Sleighride”, I used my Ibanez GAX-30, customized with Duncan humbuckers, processed through a Boss Compressor/Sustainer and Overdrive, to get that thick ‘70’s tone. The harpsichord is a Yamaha P-80 digital piano, and the synth on the chorus is the Casio. I had just purchased a kit of Roland electronic drums, and they worked great for this tune. The bass was my Squire, of course.

How about the recording network used?

My studio isn’t much, but I try to make the most of it. I use a Boss BR-864, with all instruments recorded direct. Only vocals were recorded acoustically. The ‘864 has all the real time effects I need, and a mastering tool kit, that allows me to massage the final tracks – EQ, multi-band compressor, expander, and various other effects. It helps me cover up some of the mistakes.

How do you go about recording the songs?

I start by determining the tempo I want to use, and program a simple drum track, at that desired tempo, to keep time. I’ll put down either a keyboard or guitar track as a foundation to build on. Then I’ll build the instrumentation, one track at a time. With “Mexico”, for example, I recorded the guitars first, then bass and drums. Marimba, synthesizer, and hand percussion followed. I invariably go back and re-record some tracks, to clean them up, and adjust the EQ and effects. The BR-864 is an eight track device (64 virtual tracks), so after recording the first eight, I have to set levels and panning, adjust the reverb for each track, tweak the EQ, if necessary, and bounce it all to stereo. Vocals are usually added after the instruments are done. With “Mexico”, I recorded the lead vocal first, and then added the harmonies. On “Nantucket Sleighride”, on the other hand, I recorded the chorus vocals first, and the lead vocal last. Just felt better that way. Before the final mix, I may go back and re-record a part, or punch in a correction here and there.

Any unique recording techniques used?

Considering my level of experience, everything is pretty unique to me; but no, not really. The only thing I can think of is how I recorded the chorus on “Nantucket Sleighride”. I wanted a classical chorale feel, a la Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”. It’s three part harmony, doubled up (six voices). I attenuated the low frequencies a bit, added a heavy dose of chorus and reverb, and spread the voices broadly across the field. It was reasonably effective. Also, I knew I wouldn’t be able to pull off the acoustic guitar intro on “Mexico”, so Farrell Jackson volunteered to bail me out, with his great addition to the track. I let him know the key and tempo I was using. He learned the part and e-mailed it to me. All I had to do was mix it in.

How do you approach the mix?

This is probably the most difficult part of the project. I mix in stages, as I go along. As I mentioned earlier, I have to bounce to stereo every six or eight tracks. During that process I’ll establish the reverb level and parameters for each track. I will usually try a number of panning settings to get what I call “balance of content”. As the song flows, instruments come in and out, some loud, some soft, each having its own set of harmonics. I try to find the right combination of levels and frequencies, across the panorama. It might be balanced, it might be unbalanced – whatever works for the particular song.

On “Mexico” the two guitars are of equal value, so I spaced them equally to each side of the field. The same is true for the two lead guitars on “Nantucket Sleighride”. But on “Nantucket” there is a rhythm guitar and a harpsichord. This guitar is slightly left, and the harpsichord is somewhat farther to the right. The synthesizer, on the other hand, is recorded in stereo, panned hard left and right. The chorus vocals on “Nantucket” are evenly distributed across the field, whereas the background singers on “Mexico” are all panned to the same side, as they would be on stage.

How were the songs mastered?

Mastering is still a mystery to me. On “Mexico” it was fully automated. I simply passed the final tracks through a default mastering patch in the BR-864. It just boosts the signal a bit, and tweaks the EQ slightly to add a little brightness. On “Nantucket Sleighride” I attempted to play Mastering Engineer, with little success. My first attempt was a mess – overly compressed, badly EQ’d, and way too hot. Other than that it was fine. After a couple more tries, it became more reasonable. I eased up on the compression, by raising the threshold for each frequency band, and using a soft ratio of 2:1 or 2.5:1.

The mix was bottom heavy, so I cut the low frequencies with a 3dB shelving cut at 140Hz, to cut some of the mud, while boosting the mids and the output level. It was real trial and error, but I certainly learned a lot.

Any tips for the home recordist?

Start small, but experiment. Record simple pieces, and play with them. Whatever equipment you have, learn how everything works, and how everything interacts with each other, i.e. determine your capabilities. Pick up a couple good books on Home Recording. Listen to professional recordings, and see what you like, and what you don't like. Like playing an instrument, you have to learn the language, learn from those who came before you; then develop your own ideas. Try a variety of techniques and develop your own style. Just be creative.