

Tom Hoelle

Resident: West Chester, Ohio
Musician (Guitar and related instruments),
Singer, Songwriter
Studio: Crabby Toad Studios

Background

Like most guitarists my age, I was heavily influenced by the Beatles. I was the youngest of 4 and my next older brother was at “that age”. I believe it was the Christmas of ’64 when he asked for a guitar for Christmas – me, being 5 years his junior, thought that sounded pretty cool and I asked for one too! He would have been about 12, and that would make me about 7 years old! He would teach me the fundamentals so we could practice together.

By the time I reached High School, I had a number of friends that were starting to play guitar. Since I had a bit of a head start, I was often asked to join in... I ended up forming my first band at the ripe old age of 14. We played at a few small venues (our parents had to drive us there!) Members came and went, and by the age of 16 I was asked to join a somewhat established band (they already had a couple of gigs booked when I joined) called Snowbourn. I stayed with those guys through various roster changes which were accompanied by band name changes (including names such as Pearl and Big Black Smoke).

After high school it was off to college for me. As a musician, I had always envisioned myself as more of a “hobbyist” than a professional and I guess I felt like it was time to get serious about “life”. So I quit the band and hit the books! That’s when “life” started happening! I was married at 20, a homeowner at 21 and a father at 22!

It was around this time (1979) when I bought my first reel-to-reel tape recorder (an Akai) with Sound-on-Sound. This technology was really a “work-around” method to deal with the issue of track alignment when recording 2 tracks at 2 different times. It worked... and it made multi-tracking (of sorts) possible, but it was definitely NOT versatile. But it gave me an option for recording separate bits for my own songs and got me started down the road to home studio multi-tracking.

It was 1983 when I bought my first real multi-track recorder. It was a 4 channel Teac A3440. I bought a small Tascam mixer and used the Akai deck for stereo mix-down. As limited as it was, my home studio was now becoming usable! I spent the next several years experimenting and learning the basics of multi-track recording.

Fast forward to the early 1990’s. That’s when I hooked up with fellow guitarist Rob Hinson. We started performing acoustic sets at parties... then eventually evolved into a full electric classic rock and roll band with the addition of a bass player and drummer.

Then I started thinking about songwriting and recording again. By 1998, there were several new digital workstations being introduced by Roland, Yamaha and Akai. I eventually settled on the Akai dps-12 (later upgrading to it’s bigger brother, the dps-16) and I’ve spent the years since then happily indulging myself in the art of home recording.

What made you choose these two songs you recorded for this comp?

Ramble On – I’ve always liked the interplay between the acoustic guitar and the bass line on this song. On top of that, the vocals during the verse have always seemed so “emotionally appropriate”. At some point, I

started playing around with this song on acoustic and it had become a favorite when entertaining myself around the house. When choosing a song for the compilation, it seemed like a perfect choice, except that the vocals would be such a challenge. I originally planned to do more of an “acoustic” version (the way I play it around the house) and therefore do my own version of the vocals. But as I started working on it... and realizing that all of those various electric guitar parts were just “too cool” to leave out, I knew I’d have to take on that vocal challenge! The result is something in between my original plans and the “unleashed” sound of the original song.

Mr. Soul – If this would be a compilation of the 60’s and 70’s, and Ramble On covered the early 70’s, I needed something from earlier... in the 60’s. Neil Young figured pretty strongly in my early band days and while I had never gotten around to learning this particular song, I felt it would be easy enough to do... and it would represent some of the sounds of my formative years very well. Not to mention the fact that I just thought it would be fun to record!

Can you describe the instrumentation used on your recordings?

All drums are Betamonkey drum loops
Bass is a Fender Prodigy with active electronics

Acoustic guitar on Ramble On – Taylor 614ce

Electric guitars –

Ramble On – (Leads) - Gibson “The Paul” with “Dirty Fingers” humbuckers
(Electric Rhythm) - Fender

Strat Plus with Gold Lace Sensors

Mr. Soul – (all guitars) Fender Strat Plus with Gold Lace Sensors

How about the recording network used?

All recording was done on an Akai dps-16 DAW set at 16 bit/44 khz

All vocals were recorded with a Neumann TLM103 Large Diaphragm condenser mic – running through a Focusrite Voicemaster Channel Strip (pre-amp)

Acoustic on Ramble On was recorded with a Neumann km184 small diaphragm condenser mic – running through a Focusrite Voicemaster Channel Strip (pre-amp) and a separate direct line from the built in Fishman system – mixed to taste

All electrics were recorded running through an Art Tube mp pre-amp, into a Pod amp simulator

Basses were recorded running through an Art Tube mp pre-amp, then direct into the recorder

How do you go about recording the songs?

I started with drums... in this case, I used Betamonkey drum loops and assembled the complete songs in Cakewalk Home Recorder software before doing anything else. The finished drum tracks were then transferred into the Akai DAW.

Next I recorded a scratch guitar track and a scratch vocal track – just to keep track of things as I moved forward.

Ramble On – in my mind, the acoustic track really carries this song – and that’s where I went next. This was next followed by the bass line. When I mixed these, I had the basis for the song complete. From here, I started experimenting with electric sounds and tracks. Each section had a slightly different sound and I recorded them individually, with multiple guitar lines as appropriate. Finally came the vocals. I knew these would be a challenge, but would also be the defining tracks for this song. I went through and recorded 3 or 4 versions of the vocals, and then picked the best from

them. The multi-voiced background vocals behind the chorus were essentially done the same way. I decided that these backing vocals could carry the last chorus while the main vocal line steps out to “ad lib” a bit on its own. I tracked these backing parts repeatedly until I came up with a good “matching” combination. With a healthy dose of compression and Delay, they came together nicely!

Mr. Soul – I decided to treat this as a more “traditional” rock and roll song. The electric guitar and vocals would carry the song and there would be an intro and solo section for spice. Listening to the original, I couldn’t help noticing the multiple guitar solos, and I tried to emulate that in my recording. I used 3 different guitar sounds and had them playing off of each other in an attempt to give the illusion of 3 different players in performance. For vocals, again considering the original, I wanted the main voice to sound a bit “course” with the backing vocals strong and showing a lot of polish.

Any unique recording techniques used?

For both of these songs I wanted a fat, yet defined bass. After having picked up a few ideas from the Saxon group on muting bass strings I decided to try it for these songs. I recorded the bass parts twice – once as normal, the second time with a soft polishing cloth rolled up under the strings near the bridge as a mute. Then I blended the two sounds together and it gave me exactly the sound I was looking for!

How do you approach the mix?

I have a tendency to mix as I add new parts. I’ll typically start with drums and as I add bass and rhythm instruments, the mixing begins. This is not “standard practice” for most studios I’m sure, but for me it gives me a “sense” early in the process of where the mix is going and what the final outcome will

sound like. As for specific sounds for these songs, I’m sure I was influenced by the originals as I found myself laying the effects like reverb and delay on a little heavier than I normally would have.

How were the songs mastered?

I copy my mixes and bring them to my pc, where I have a copy of Sound Forge 8. With that, I typically run some “standard” effects such as an Enhancer, a Stereo Expander, and various mild compression schemes. My goal is to obtain a balanced sound without being obviously processed.

Any tips for the home recordist?

Don’t get caught up in the G.A.S. trap (Gear Acquisition Syndrome) Don’t just buy a bunch of stuff to fill your racks with flashing lights. Make sure you know what it is you’re buying and then spend ample time learning to properly use it. When you buy a mic, consider it as though you’re buying an instrument (guitar, or whatever). Buy the best you can afford, but also do your homework and buy what seems to suit you and your specific needs.

When tracking, take your time and just focus on capturing a good performance. If it’s “close” – then re-do it... you’re going to live with that recording from here on out.

When mixing, try to give the individual instruments some space. Don’t let midrange-y instruments like rhythm guitars dominate the mix – nothing else will be able to breathe in there if you do.

Lastly – have fun! ...experiment a little. Don’t take yourself or your music too seriously...