

“Effectively, the only thing I’d do differently if we were to go out again is to take less equipment”

▶ after the last take... so everything we already had from the session was wiped!

“That was the exception that disproved the rule though as, in general, the laptop and all the gear behaved exceptionally. I’d been so scared before we left as everyone kept telling us we couldn’t do it on a laptop, but you can – and we did!”

Were the people they encountered aware of the technology 1 Giant Leap were using? “A lot of it was even new to me. We had some beautiful moments when I got the laptop out in places that hadn’t even seen a television. I had a little Yamaha DJX keyboard modified so I could put the output of the laptop through its internal speakers. When we were working, the people standing around could only hear the person playing the drums or singing, and then when you pulled the headphones out and they could hear the whole track, it was amazing. We’d be sitting recording and half a dozen kids would just be gathered around behind me watching the screen.”

The finished album is an intoxicating fusion of cutting-edge technology and breathtaking vocal and traditional instrument contributions. One question that springs to mind when listening to the album is just how, exactly, can you have so much technology at

the root of everything yet still manage to keep it sounding so ‘organic’?

“Because you’re not limited to sample space now,” comes the succinct reply. “When I started, there was an MC-500 with a second-and-a-half of sample time. Now, the sampler, mixing desk and all my synths are within my computer, which allows me to do stuff I just couldn’t have done before. It helps that you don’t have to have such little bits – if we had a tabla player, we could get him to play for eight minutes, then do another take and we could put, say, the last four minutes of the take at the beginning. The restriction is still locked tempo, but I’m looking for a way around that for the future. So although it’s organic, it is all locked in tempo, and when you’re in Africa working with drummers who work in really strange timings, it’s really difficult for them.

“Soft synths are really beginning to come of age. At the time of the trip I was basically working purely in audio. I made everything into long audio streams and worked with them that way. Final Cut Pro made the whole thing possible. We were using it to edit up little bits of diary footage and music snippets to send back to London for our website. It was really exciting sitting in a hut in Uganda, running off batteries, editing our music and film.”

Let’s go outside

As we sit in our cramped and messy bedrooms/studios, surrounded by sample CDs and culture-growing coffee cups, we can but dream of encountering such dilemmas. That said, 1 Giant Leap are to be commended for not wasting a precious



Duncan (back) works with the Mustapha Tetey Addy drummers

second of the opportunity given them. The results speak for themselves. They’re also to be praised for furthering the cause of the laptop as an infinitely versatile recording workstation. No longer is it necessarily the case that those grids and tempo maps we treasure so dearly have to be slaved over in a darkened room.

And God bless FireWire and USB, for as Duncan points out, “I think they’re totally opening up the laptop’s recording capabilities, particularly as both FireWire and USB devices can be powered from the computer itself. It means that if you have enough juice to power your laptop, the whole system will run from it. That said, you’d really need to have several backup batteries for the laptop if you’re intending to do anything serious. I had five batteries for my laptop, which I kept topped up. I also took the CD-drive out so I could have two batteries in at one time.”

Plans may already be afoot for 1 Giant Leap to make yet more of the world their recording studio in the very near future. As technology continues to converge apace, would Duncan and Jamie do things any differently if and when they set out on another digital musical journey?

“I just heard that, at long last, Apogee are bringing out a mic preamp to digital converter that has a limiter and compressor in it. That’s the only reason I had to take the Roland desk with us. I haven’t seen the full specs yet, but if that were powered from the USB bus it would be incredible. The only thing I’d do differently if we go out again is to take less equipment.”

We hope it’s not too long before Duncan and Jamie are given leave to take their laptop walkabout again. More power to 1 Giant Leap – although after hearing their story, your home recording room may feel a tad drab by comparison.

Kit list

- Mac G3 Lombard laptop
- Final Cut Pro
- Logic Audio
- Yamaha DJX keyboard
- Roland VM3100 digital mixing station
- Roland JV-1010 sound module
- C 1000 and SM58 mics



In some instances, Jamie and Duncan were using their laptop in places where the locals hadn’t even seen a television!