

## PRODUCER



Almie Colbeck

# ALAN PARSONS

One of rock's true sonic pioneers shares valuable lessons

By Howard Massey

WHEN THE CLANGING CACOPHONY OF ALARM CLOCKS that announces the beginning of Pink Floyd's "Time" was first heard in 1973, the world woke up to the true value of a talented studio engineer. The man who recorded those clattering clocks, Alan Parsons, helped to shape the Floyd's album *The Dark Side of the Moon* into a masterpiece of sonic innovation—and in doing so turned the science of engineering into high art.

By that time, Parsons had already racked up an impressive résumé with his work at the world-famous EMI Studios on Abbey Road in London; among the very first albums he assisted on were the Beatles' *Let It Be* and *Abbey Road*. Within a few short years he was engineering for acts like the Hollies and Paul McCartney, as well as producing chart-topping records for top 1970s British artists like Pilot, Cockney Rebel and Al Stewart.

But Parsons' vision extended well beyond the board. A gifted keyboardist, bass player, guitarist and flautist, his multifaceted talents attracted the attention of fellow producer and songwriter

Eric Woolfson. In 1975 the two formed the Alan Parsons Project, in which the designated "star" was not some flashy guitarist or singer but Parsons' exceptional sonic skills. During its 15-year run, the Project crafted moody hits like "Eye in the Sky," "Don't Answer Me" and the instrumental "Sirius," which is still played frequently at professional sporting events. Casual fans of the group are often surprised to learn that Parsons rarely sang with the group; vocal duties were shared by Woolfson (who passed away in December) and a constantly changing roster of guest singers.

Following the Project's dissolution, Parsons embarked on a solo career and took a serious interest in surround-sound remixing. In 2008 he began an ambitious project entitled *Art and Science of Sound Recording*, a comprehensive series of instructional videos covering every aspect of making quality recordings (available at [artandscienceofsound.com](http://artandscienceofsound.com)). He also recently released a concert on DVD and CD, *Eye 2 Eye: Live in Madrid*. We spoke with Parsons, 61, about his ever-evolving relationship with the world of sound.

**'I'm not one of those people who longs for the old analog sounds.'**

### What was the genesis of *Art and Science of Sound Recording*?

It all started from a conversation I was having one day with my friend Julian Colbeck. Julian is an author, music journalist and former musician who made a series of instructional videos about audio recording back in the late 1980s. We were talking about how much technology has advanced since then, and we both kind of said, "Well, maybe it's time to try it again." Our eyes lit up at the possibilities. We knew we could combine high-definition video with high-quality audio, and we decided also to make it very, very in-depth—almost encyclopedic—with lots of interviews with musicians, engineers and producers to expand the scope. That's how things got started. Julian ended up becoming very involved in *ASSR*, serving as co-producer and co-writer with me.

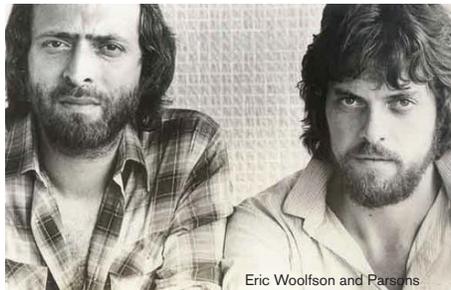
## 'I absolutely hate using compression when mixing. I much prefer using equalization in creative ways.'

### How do you feel about how it's turned out?

I'm thrilled with the results of our efforts. I'm especially pleased at my time of life to be giving something back to the industry that gave so much to me. I'm not as busy as I used to be, so this seemed like a really good use of my time. It just seems like a great time for a project like this, given that everybody now has the capability of making a hit record in their bedroom using GarageBand and tools like that.

### Did you learn anything yourself from doing *ASSR*?

I learned a lot, actually. [Producer and engineer] Sylvia Massy, who I interviewed for the project, told me about one of Rick Rubin's favorite techniques, which he calls "slippery fader." It's quite simple: He just takes the main stereo bus master fader and pushes it up a dB on every chorus. That way, you don't actually hear a difference in the sound, but you feel an increase in intensity.



Eric Woolfson and Parsons

I thought that was a really cool idea. And I learned which of my favorite engineers like to compress, and which don't. As many people know by now, I absolutely hate using compression when mixing. I recognize that it has a sound, and that it's become quite fashionable, but it's an effect I just don't care for. I much prefer using equalization in creative ways.

### How did the *Eye 2 Eye* CD and DVD come about?

It was originally recorded for a Spanish TV special. It was all recorded in Pro Tools, thank goodness, and it came out really nicely. I'm quite proud of it sonically.

### You say "thank goodness" for Pro Tools, but I know that you've also recently used Steinberg's Nuendo software.

Well, we've been dubbing the *ASSR* audio in Cubase, so I'll go with whatever software works best in the situation. It doesn't matter to me a whole lot, because in recent years—ever since the whole computer revolution—I've always worked with an engineer. I'm just not very good at mixing with a mouse, so I'm taking a more traditional production role these days.

### Would you prefer to still be working in analog?

No. I certainly like the incredible flexibility that DAWs [digital audio workstations] allow, and I'm not one of those people who longs for the old analog sounds. I actually feel that some digital sounds are superior to analog, especially when you're talking about transient things like drums. To my ears, digital recordings of drums are closer to reality than analog recordings. Kick drums, especially, have a punch in digital that analog tape had never been able to capture. Analog purists may argue that it's that slight tape compression that makes the

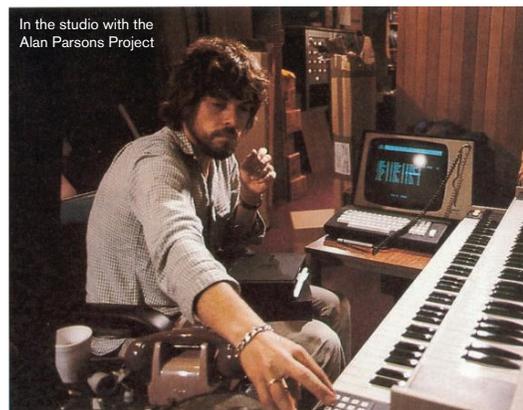
sound they like, but I always found it to be a nuisance that you would lose that punch. And, of course, the converters have improved dramatically over the last few years, as has our understanding of what problems exist and how to best deal with them. It has to be said that, in the grand scheme of things, digital recording is still quite a young technology.

### Where do you think digital is headed?

I'm quite sure that digital recording will eventually get to the point where you can get it to sound any way you want it to sound. If you want it to sound like an analog tape recorder running at 30 ips with an NAB [equalization] curve, you'll be able to do that through emulation plug-ins and the like. Of course, the purists will argue, "But it's digital, so it can't ever sound *exactly* like that." I guess it all depends on how you look at things ... or, more accurately, how you hear things. Still, one day I think people will look back and laugh at themselves. "Why did we ever have a problem with digital recording?" they'll ask. "What's wrong with it, anyway?" I think our ears have improved with age, same as the technology has—we know what to listen for. We didn't know that in the early days, but now we do.

### It sounds as if you're more of a pragmatist than a purist.

I think so—whatever works. I've actually always been that way. In every project, you'll have a given artist to work with, a given console to use, a given set of microphones that are available. You have to somehow find a way to make that particular combination work the best way it can. You can't take the position of, "I refuse to do this session because there's no SSL console."



In the studio with the Alan Parsons Project

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Parsons at work in the 1970s



With drummer Simon Phillips, guitarist Tim Pierce and bass player Nathan East

### What do you believe is the most important part of the signal chain in recording?

I'm torn between microphone and speaker, but I think I'd have to say microphone, really. That's because the speaker only imparts the perception of the sound, whereas the microphone is critical to the creation of the sound. It's true that you can't record accurately through inaccurate speakers—but then again, how do you define "accurate"? One man's accurate is another man's bass-heavy.

### It's interesting that the two components you identified are at the beginning and end of the chain.

Well, you can always attach a power amplifier to a speaker, and a microphone preamp to a mic—but where do you stop? I think the raw sound of a great condenser microphone is the best place to begin. If you have that as your starting point, you're unlikely to have any major trouble making a good recording.

### What has been the highlight of your career to date?

I remember being extremely elated in 1975 when I had two No. 1 records in the UK back to back. The first was with the group Pilot—it was a song called "January." That topped the charts for about three weeks,

and then the next No. 1 was another record I produced for Cockney Rebel ["Make Me Smile (Come Up and See Me)"]. That marked a level of professional achievement I've never duplicated since.

### What's been your biggest regret?

Fortunately, I've had very few disappointments in my career. Certainly, not being asked to do the [2003] surround sound remix of *Dark Side of the Moon* was a big one. [Latter-day Floyd engineer James Guthrie was tapped instead.] That absolutely infuriated me, though the upside of it is that there's now a pretty large following of my original quadraphonic mix, which has been heavily bootlegged. I also think I've made one or two good albums that didn't achieve the commercial success they deserved, and that's always disappointing. I thought *Stereotomy* [1985] was a really good album, even though it didn't sell nearly as many copies as some other Alan Parsons Project records. As I think every engineer or producer will tell you, there are always some regrets on every record you make: mistakes that you wished you'd spotted, notes that were slightly out of tune, vocals you wish you'd mixed slightly louder, things like that. That's why it's always nice when you get the opportunity to remix an album years after the event.

### Is there anyone you wish you'd had the opportunity to work with?

I would have to say the Who, especially when Keith Moon was alive, or even just Pete Townshend on his own. I've always been the group's No. 1 fan, and I still believe Townshend to be the greatest living songwriter of all time. If I ever had the opportunity to work with him, I would absolutely jump at it.

### What's your favorite Who album sonically?

*Who's Next*, although I don't think that was necessarily [co-producer] Glyn Johns' finest hour with the band, much as I like his work. I would love to have the chance to remix *Who's Next* in surround—I think that's an album that would lend itself well to the 5.1 treatment. "Won't Get Fooled Again," for example, deserves to have a huge reverb on it, which it doesn't have at the moment. So Pete, if you're reading this, please get in touch!

### Do you have plans to record another solo album?

I have to say, I think I have one more album left in me! Actually, we've already recorded one track of that album as part of the process of making *ASSR*. And not only did I write this new song, called "All Our Yesterdays," I actually sang the lead vocal on it.

## ESSENTIAL PARSONS

Alan Parsons has been making great records for more than 35 years. To get a flavor of his distinctively "clean" sound, check out these seminal works featuring Parsons as artist, producer or engineer:

- Jeff Beck, *Beck-Ola* (1969)
- Pink Floyd, *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973)
- Paul McCartney and Wings, *Red Rose Speedway* (1973)
- Pilot, *Pilot (From the Album of the Same Name)* (1974)
- Al Stewart, *The Year of the Cat* (1976)
- The Alan Parsons Project, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (1976)
- The Alan Parsons Project, *Eye in the Sky* (1982)
- Alan Parsons, *A Valid Path* (2007)

