

Al Schmitt on Tracking & Mixing Big Bands—Then and Now

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MIXING JOSEPHINE BEAVER'S *PRIME TIME* AND TRACKING BIG BANDS WITH AL SCHMITT

Al Schmitt is mixing royalty. He has won over twenty Grammy Awards. His list of album credits reads like the history of recorded music: Rosemary Clooney, Henry Mancini, Duke Ellington, Neil Young, Jefferson Airplane, Jackson Brown, Al Jarreau, Ray Charles, Toto, Steely Dan, Diana Krall... How many people can say they've been involved in sessions with Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Frank Sinatra and Paul McCartney?

Al Schmitt is also down to earth, humble, accommodating, and eager to share a wealth of information. The focus of this interview is the sonic reshaping of a big band album of American standards by Josephine Beavers, recorded at Hollywood's Capitol Studios in the mid-1990s and released under the title, *Yesterday Is Now* (1996). Last October, an expanded set from these sessions was released as *Prime Time*, in stunning fidelity. *Prime Time* effortlessly transports the listener back to the great big band era of the 1940s and 1950s. Two significant factors here: Capitol Studios, and Al Schmitt. Naturally, our discussion went off-topic to other, equally fascinating topics, including Al's work on the Al Schmitt Decades SDX drum library for Toontrack (reviewed January 2020)—all these fun tangents made our pages, so enjoy!





Photo Courtesy of Toontrack

Looking back at your discography, I never realized that you engineered three Jefferson Airplane albums in a row—how did you move between worlds like that?

I've been involved in big band stuff all my life. I made all of the [Henri] Mancini albums: *Peter Gunn*, *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, *Hatari...* and then I became a staff producer at RCA in the late 60s, and I was recording Sam Cooke, Jefferson Airplane, Glenn Yarborough, Gail Garnette, you name it. I had to learn to produce all kinds of music, it was a wonderful experience for me.

How has big band recording evolved over the past few decades?

Back then, we didn't have as many inputs on the board, so we couldn't use as many microphones, so we used less. Now, we can just about put a microphone on everything. I use four

mics on the trombones, four on the trumpets and five on the saxophones! This means that today, we can get in on things a little tighter.

Is there anything you miss about the old school?

I love the way we did it back then. There was no mixing involved, everything was recorded live and went right to mono or two-track—there was no fixing anything later. Now, you record in Pro Tools, you have as many tracks as you need, and you can always adjust something later. If I want to bring up the sax solo a little more, I can do that now—back then, I couldn't. Back then, little mistakes would stay in the record. If the take felt good, and the overall performance was great, you didn't mind a little mistake. Today, you fix it.



MIXING JOSEPHINE BEAVER'S *PRIME TIME* AND TRACKING BIG BANDS WITH AL SCHMITT

When you mixed *Prime Time*, where did you start?

I pulled up every track to see how well it was recorded. I don't know who recorded *Prime Time* originally, but they did a good job, which made my job easier.

How many tracks was this project, and how were things set up?

I think it might've been sixteen or twenty-four, but I'm not sure. The bass was on its own track. I think the drums were on three tracks.

What was your vocal chain?

I used an original Fairchild compressor that I use all the time. I just tapped that a little bit. It gives a warmth to the vocal that I really like. Then I used echo chamber four at Capitol, which is my favorite chamber. With the compressor and chamber four, we were able to really bring out her vocals, which sound great. She's such a wonderful singer.

One of my favorite things is the reverb. I was going to ask if that was the real chamber. Especially now that we have the Capitol Chambers plugin from Universal Audio.

[Laughs] I get calls from people all the time, telling me, "Al, I'm using your echo chamber."

For a long time, chambers were out of vogue—it was all plates and reflective rooms, no one was using them.

Nobody but me. Wherever I mix, I always want a live chamber. You gotta use your ears, you don't want to use too much echo, and you don't want to use too little. A little trick that I do is I use chamber four at Capitol, and I blend that with my Bricasti M7 reverb. There's no specific 60/40 or 70/30—it's all in my ear, a little bell goes off in my head and then I know I hit the right spot.

When I'm mixing, I set up eight to ten reverbs—a couple of live chambers, the Bricasti, a Lexicon 480, a TC Electronic M6000, all set to different lengths, like a small room on one—I like the small and medium stage on the 480. Then I adjust them as I'm going along with the mix. I try not to put too many things in any one specific reverb. That way,

things don't wash into one another, and I get more clarity and separation.

Do you add compression to instruments individually or in groups or buses?

I don't use compression much at all, really.

So, everything's kind of wide-open, more or less, except for the Fairchild on the vocals?

Yeah, and that's just a tiny bit, maybe 2 dB on the vocals. I use the Fairchild mostly to get the warmth of the tubes. I love that sound.

Which Capitol studio did you mix this in?

I mixed this in Studio C, which is a really good mix room, and I also like to mix in Studio A. Both rooms have really nice Neve consoles.

Did you do any fixing on this album, like maybe something Josephine didn't like in the original sessions?

No, we didn't have any of those problems, we were just trying to bring it up to date and make it a more contemporary kind of record.

I think it sounds fantastic. I'm a massive fan of big band music from the 30s and 40s—Ellington, Count Basie—I'm a huge Benny Goodman fan.

Me too, I grew up with big bands. My uncle Harry Smith had a studio in New York City, and he recorded the Benny Goodman *Sing, Sing, Sing* record.

Now that's cool!

I've been around studios since I was eight years old. I saved my money when I was eleven, and the first record I ever bought was by Jimmie Lunceford. Woody Herman was one of my all-time favorites along with Harry James. I did five or six albums with Harry James and Duke Ellington. I've been blessed from



Photo by George DeLoach



Photo by George DeLoach

the very beginning, to grow up around people who really knew how to make and record this kind of music.

What was the technology like?

They did everything in mono, and it was all done on 16-inch transcription discs, not tape. They had to catch it on the fly, and there was no editing, no fixing. You really had to know what you were doing back then.

When you record big band sessions, do you have favorite go-to mics or setups?

I do something a little bit different than a lot of guys. I put the five saxophones to the left of the rhythm section, then the four trombones and the trumpets behind them to the right. The other thing I do is, I put all the microphones on the saxes and the trumpets in an omni pattern. On the trombones, I use Royer ribbon mics, which are bi-directional, so I get a lot of leakage, and I like that—I embrace it. That's what makes it sound big, wide and deep. That's my secret.

What about the electric guitar on a big band session? Do you isolate the amp or keep it in the room with everything else?

If it's like a Freddie Green thing, [Count Basie's famous guitarist -Ed.] or if it's more acoustic, then I'll mic the guitar or the amp and just put a couple of gobos up to keep a little separation. You need to get a great balance between the rhythm section—the drums, bass, guitar and keyboards, and then make sure that the saxes, trombones, and trumpets can all hear it really well. You need a really good headphone mix.

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MIXING JOSEPHINE BEAVER'S *PRIME TIME* AND TRACKING BIG BANDS WITH AL SCHMITT

I like how present the upright bass is on the *Prime Time* record—a sound often lost on vintage big band recordings.

Back in those days, even when they started using six, maybe eight microphones on a session, the upright bass and the acoustic guitar were on the same mic. Sometimes even the piano lid would be open, and the upright bass would be on a riser by it with one mic between the two. We'd move the bass player around to get the right balance, and that was it.

How do you track upright bass now?

I use two mics. I put one on the f-hole and one on the fingerboard. I've been using a pair of Neumann M149 mics. The bass is my favorite instrument to record—it's one of the most difficult things in the world to record really well, but I'm a bass freak, so I know when I've got the bass sounding great. I'm in good shape.

Do you compress bass at all when you're recording or mixing it?

Yes, I do. I take both M149 mics, and I put them into a Summit TLA-100A tube compressor, and I just tap it for one dB of compression, mostly again to get the warmth of the tubes for a nice, rich low end.

I love the wide stereo spread on the album, I assume you had room mics to work with?

I think there might have been one stereo room mic, maybe two, I can't remember, but there were some room mics to work with.

Do you use a lot of room mics in a session, or do you just use the bleed from the close mics?

When I'm doing a big band, I use one set of room mics set up over the conductor, so I'm hearing the room blend he is hearing. Sometimes I'll put one room mic in front of the saxes and another in front of the brass, and I'll blend that in too.

Do you use an actual stereo mic, or multiple mono mics in stereo?

Usually mono, but I'll keep them in omni.

You're a big omni fan.

Oh, yeah, absolutely. If I'm in a good room, I want to capture that room, and Capital A is an amazing room. In New York, the old Power Station, which is now owned by Berkeley, is another great room. I always go out on the first rundown and stand next to the conductor or arranger to hear exactly what they're hearing. Then my job is to go into the control room and capture that. The way the conductor hears it is how I hear it.



I want to kind of switch gears a little bit. A couple of months ago, I reviewed your Toontrack Decades collection.

What did you think?

It sounds great, and it's like a history lesson. I love getting to use these rare drums.

That's cool, thanks!

Was it fun to work on?

It's boring as hell! [both laugh] [copy editor laughs]. Totally boring because the guy hits the kick drum, and then you wait. And then he kicks it again, and you wait, and there's like 20 or 30 of those. Next, there's the high-hat, and you hit it 20 or 30 times. Especially when he goes to the cymbals, you hit the cymbal, you've got to let it ring out.

It does sound boring as hell!

But then Mattias Eklund [Toontrack co-founder and head sound designer -Ed.] and I had a good time putting it all back together and stuff. That was really, really cool. It takes three weeks to do something like that, and God bless the drummer, he just sits out there with the stick and hits the drum, and then he has to wait, and then we nod, and then he hits the drum again, and he has to hit each drum and cymbal 20, 25 times.

You did the setup and miking.

Yes, I picked the mics and placed them exactly where I would put them in a typical session when recording a kit.



Did you have a favorite?

Not really. They all sounded so good, and each kit is so different, which of course was the point. I talk to people all the time who are doing demos or recording songwriters or whatever. They tell me how much they love the fact that they can use different sounding drums on different sounding songs so easily without having to hire a different drummer or rent different kits—they have it all right there.

As a drummer myself, I like how easily I can do drum replacement in Decades. This just opens up a new level of creativity, so great job on that!

Thanks, I loved working with Mattias and the Toontrack guys; those people are so much fun to work with, and it was great.

I appreciate you taking the time to talk!

I'm happy to do it. 🙌

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