

New York City, B.C.

Although not exactly prehistoric, Martin Bisi's B.C. Studio uses old standards and a New York attitude to create new sounds.



Photography Lazaro Gomez Carilles

MARTIN BISI'S STUDIO didn't start out as a recording space; he originally rented it as a place to live and as a rehearsal room for a number of bands for whom he was stage manager. The business in front of his building is bustling; huge trucks roar outside, delivery men shout to each other, horns honk with a New York urgency. The truth is, he probably wouldn't have chosen this particular location if he had known it would eventually become a 24-track recording facility.

But B.C. Studio has become a well-known spot to the downtown bands who
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are emerging on New York's club scene. In case you haven't heard, there's a music boom going on in what used to be called the lower East Side – a renaissance, if you will, of club bands with truly devoted followers who go out of their way to catch all the performances and buy every album they can get their hands on. Martin Bisi is an integral part of that wave.

Bisi's early work with Bill Laswell contributed a great deal to his attitude toward the studio and music. Laswell was the founding member of the chameleon-like avant jazz/funk group Material in the early '70s. Material eventually evolved from a band into a production company, with the Bisi/Laswell/Michael Beinhorn

crew having to their credit Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock*, and Laswell going on to produce such artists as Laurie

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Anderson and Mick Jagger. For a time, Bisi and Laswell split – while Laswell drifted toward the majors, Bisi developed his "downtown" sound. Now the two are once again combining their talents, most recently on Iggy Pop's new album, and a ►

► rap record with artist Rammell Zee for the Island label.

H&SR (Deborah Parisi): *Let's start at the beginning. How did you start out in music?*

MB (Martin Bisi): "Well, nothing was particularly planned out. I was in high school and was not a musician, per se, but was hanging out with all the musicians. When everyone started to do gigs, it just ended up I would help out in whatever way I could – mainly carrying equipment. When it finally grew out of the school environment, some of the people I knew hooked up with Bill Laswell, and they started doing gigs in town (New York) and touring the country. And then they went to France, and basically I just ended up going along, because I could be helpful as a stage manager."

H&SR: *Was it because of your involvement with Laswell and the local bands that you started B.C. Studios?*

MB: "Well, I got this place after the tour of France, I guess around 1979 – it just seemed like the thing to do. I didn't expect this to be a recording studio, though. It

bands in here and it seemed like the right thing to do for that.

"When I finally started doing recording in here, I put in a wood floor because it was better to work with for drums. As a matter of fact, though, now the main recording area for drums is over yonder. It's another room with an 18ft ceiling, a big wide open room that's really bright and live, with a wood floor, brick walls – just perfect for drums. It probably would be too live for an entire band to play in, and I can't cut vocals in there because you might be able to hear noises from outside, but just for drums it's cool."

H&SR: *Did you have to rework the drum room as well?*

MB: "No, no special treatment. All I did was the floor. I didn't want to make it absorbent. That room, fixed up like that, is only about seven months old. I used it a long, long time ago on *Memory Serves*, one of the first Material records. And then recently on the Last Exit record (Bill Laswell's band). And I'm using it for a lot of the (local) bands now, like Live Skull and Blind Idiot God. I've (also) done

but I think I captured a lot of the feel."

H&SR: *How do you recreate that sound? What kind of outboard gear do you use?*

MB: "Well, as I said, I use reverb. I may use one that's cheaper, with just a long kind of ambience, and add another that's more expensive, with a real nice tight room sound. Another unit will be more of a mechanical gated sound. I'll try different amounts of those three things (together). In a lot of high-level productions, it's nice to create things that defy the 'Oh, yes, I've heard that reverb sound a million times.' That's why I'm leaning away from using a lot of keyboards even, because I'm finding that a lot of those sounds are so recognizable. You have to get away from that."

H&SR: *Don't you use pitch shifters quite a bit in your productions?*

MB: "Sure. It really helps sometimes to mix in a detuned version of something, although it rarely works on voice. It's really nice on mono string parts or something, whenever you want to make something a little lushier. I would never do it on a live drummer, but with a rap thing using a harmonizer just on a little tom tom part will give it a kind of shady quality. It's always to your advantage to get a little tricky. Mix up things that don't necessarily fit together."

H&SR: *Why did you choose the equipment you did?*

MB: "I don't know. You just find the price range you're working in and then get familiar equipment. For instance with speakers – I didn't even feel that I needed to listen to these UREI 809s when I got them, because I was just going by certain standards, and I knew that they were very common speakers in studios, and I knew what size they were so I knew what needs they fulfilled. And that's all I needed to know. You need speakers that other people are familiar with – just standardized."

H&SR: *You seem to have a mixture of expensive and really inexpensive gear.*

MB: "Well, sometimes it's good to buy things that are cheap; you'll find that there's usually one good thing that you can always rely on it for. My Lexicon Prime Time, for instance, is really great for one thing: It has two delay lines, so I can put different delays on either side – typically 110 and 120msec – and slip different slap times in each speaker. That's great for making a voice sound thick. But you have to be selective, because you'd never want to do a stereo split, or create a stereo image, with something that's the principal element in the sound. Not even on a rhythm guitar. But you might want to do it on a synthesizer pad, or you might even on a hi-hat, or the overhead for the drums.

"And you have to watch out for phasing. I had a guy come in here with a demo that he did at home using his Yamaha SPX90

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pretty much started as just a home base for Material, and a lot of the bands would rehearse here. Everyone chipped in for the rent. It wasn't 'til about a year after that it was even considered a studio. Actually, I'm lucky that the space worked out to accommodate a studio at all."

H&SR: *What kind of physical restructuring did you have to do to the rooms?*

MB: "A lot of things in the studio evolved out of necessity. I had a neighbor two flights up, for instance, and I had to do something to dull things out. So I put in a false ceiling, with acoustic tile and insulation. And I lined the walls with cork even before this became a recording studio, simply because we had a lot of

records with Sonic Youth and Elliot Sharp – those are all kind of downtown bands."

H&SR: *Is the intent with those groups to make them sound like they do live?*

MB: "Yes. On one or two of those records I may have even gone too far in trying to make them sound like a live band. Maybe I used too much reverb."

"But in general, I've been successful in using all the outboard gear in my studio creatively to make it sound really good. If I have the time to do it correctly, outboard gear can make a band sound really warm, like the band sounds live. With Sonic Youth, that was the intention. I mean, no way does it sound like I just put two microphones in a room and had them play,

ALLISON RESEARCH'S 'Memory's Little Helper' was one of the first mixdown automation systems available. Since computer memory and disk drives were so expensive back then (mid-'70s), all mix moves were digitally encoded and recorded directly to a track of tape. For overdubbing, the previous pass was read off the tape, merged with the new moves, and recorded onto a second track. There was no need for a timecode track – the moves were recorded directly onto tape alongside the music. Subsequent passes ping-ponged between these two tracks. If

the automation system was unable to get a good reading off the sync head (or if there were feedback problems with recording and playing back on two adjacent tracks), the playback head had to be used to read the previous pass – creating a record-to-playback-head delay for each pass in the mixdown. More overdubs resulted in the earlier moves getting delayed past where they were originally supposed to happen. Some mixes would reach the point where earlier moves became so out of sync with the music that the whole thing became useless. – *Tech Ed.*

on a bass sound. It sounded really wide, psuedo-stereo on the bass. I put his tape up in mono, and it literally disappeared. Totally. I'd read about it in books, but I'd never heard it. And everything else seemed to stay reasonably in place. So you have to watch out."

H&SR: *You didn't start out with 24 tracks, did you? Is this an upgrade?*

MB: "Oh, yeah. First it was 16-track because that was all the money I had. I got a 16-track board for live performance and a 16-track machine, but I ran out of money right after getting those two things. The guys in the bands I was working with really thought I blew it, because they figured that with the money I should have just gotten a complete 8-track setup instead of this half-way 16-track that ended up sitting in the corner. But I did the right thing. Because I would have just had an 8-track setup, and half the gear I wouldn't have been able to use when I upgraded. I'd say about four months were lost, with the equipment just sitting around. But then the opportunity came around to do the Brian Eno record (*On Land*), because he was interested in a lot of the stuff Material was doing, and he supplied the rest of the

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money – which was close to \$10,000. He paid us and said, 'Get whatever else you need to make that 16-track work.' So with that money I got mics, cables, a little bit of outboard, monitors . . . very little, really, but I managed to get enough so that I'd have a working studio."

H&SR: *Quite a rush, for a beginning engineer to be working with Eno.*

MB: "Yeah, it was exciting. In all frankness, I think it was a disappointing experience for him, because I'd never

engineered anything before. I mean it was just a joke, in a sense – I wasn't a serious engineer yet."

H&SR: *I can understand why he was so interested, though. The production on those early Material records was really unique – really in the face, lots of tricks.*

MB: "Most of that wasn't done on purpose. It was just a way of hearing it, and it seemed okay to me, because I wasn't really drawn to a lot of the pop sounds. For instance, the sound of fusion always seemed really distasteful to me. It seemed really smooth, and yet you could hear every single nuance in this really impersonal way. But one of the reasons the productions sound so different is that I wasn't using a lot of outboard gear at the time."

H&SR: *But didn't you use DDLs in some pretty outlandish ways back at the beginning?*

MB: "Yeah, I remember doing a lot of wild stuff with those things that at the time was interesting. But now, I would tend to use those things a little more moderately. Now I tend to use them less for creating musical ideas and more for giving particular sounds power, strength, clarity, thickness. And also to create the sense of another dimension behind the sound – for example, I'll give a voice a subtle repeat delay in the background that you're not going to be quite conscious of, just to give you the sense of another dimension."

"What you want is to really close-mic certain things to get the sound that's right there, but you want to place it in the right environment without muddying it up with the room mic. Delays are good to create those kinds of things while maintaining a certain coarseness to a sound. That's obviously quite different from the early thing of capturing notes and repeating them all over the place."

H&SR: *So time has changed your approach to recording and production quite a bit.*

MB: "In a lot of ways, I feel recording is kind of like cooking. For instance, to have sound quality of the caliber of *Hear No Evil* (Laswell's latest solo release), or

some of the stuff I'm doing with this guy Foetus, aka Jim Thurwell – a lot of that is like a soup in a sense. And I don't mean that the sound comes out sounding like a soup – that's definitely not what I'm ever after. But a lot of the success of those sounds is knowing how to stir up five different things that we're working with."

H&SR: *It's probably to your benefit that you didn't come up by producing the kind of standard pop sound that seems to get cranked out of a lot of the major studios.*

MB: "It's kind of interesting how things have gone around full circle, (how) I'm working again with Bill, who's used to working at The Power Station and used to doing major projects, Jagger or whatever. It's interesting to do stuff with him, still coming from the same background, but not having been trained in the formula kind of approach."

H&SR: *So what's in the future for the studio?*

MB: "I'm thinking that I would like to have . . . a vocal distortion box. I want to get a few more digital delays, SPX90s – I just want more. The SPX does a lot of crucial things – you always need auto panning, a harmonizer, stereo delays. I'd like to get a Neumann mic. I don't think it'd make a tremendous difference, but it'd be nice to have."

"I have an older automation system, from Allison Research [see sidebar]. I wouldn't mind finding an automation system that I can afford where I could do everything from one track, because right now I need two tracks for automation (see sidebar). But the MIDI automation systems don't seem that appealing, because all of the work is done on the computer. And I want to use the faders, I don't want to be mixing with the Mac mouse. That's really cheesy to me. I need to work with faders."

H&SR: *And what about you personally? I heard you have your own album coming out on Celluloid Records, called Creole Mass.*

MB: "Yes. It's kind of funny – all this started, in a sense, because I wasn't a musician, but now, after all this time, I've started developing myself as a musician. My record uses that background; a lot of it was written using sounds as a foundation for composition. I'll find something that's an interesting device sonically, and I'll work out how I can use that and incorporate it into my music."

So Bisi's own evolution as an engineer (and musician) parallels that of his studio, gaining complexity with time, although structured around a fundamental frame of tried and true equipment and methods. But despite the allusion to prehistory, B.C. Studio and Bisi can never be likened to dinosaurs – they're true survivors.

Interview by Deborah Parisi