

Snake's Take

We track down the Snake in his natural habitat



World-renowned saxophone player and all round nice guy Snake Davis gives us an industry insight into the way music recording has changed over the years. Don't forget, all of those sounds you listen to on a daily basis have to be recorded meticulously!

In November last year, I was honoured to spend most of a day in the company of one of the most inspiring professional musicians I have ever met – that is quite a list actually!

Snake first came to our attention via FOUR MASTER Source Sounds in Sheffield who had installed what turns out to be a blinding system in his Audi A6. You can read all about that elsewhere in this issue. Snake has had a long and illustrious career that continues apace with absolutely no sign of letting up. Having come to prominence as a professional musician with M People, he still tours and records with a myriad of huge names in the music industry. His CV reads like a who's who of popular music from the 80's to present day including artists such as: Van Morrison, Paul Carrack, The Eurhythmics, Lisa Stansfield, Take That, and literally hundreds more.

To offer an insight into the great man's audiophile provenance, I have reproduced the contents of an initial email Snake penned for me in response to me asking him why he had decided to have his car audio upgraded. I think it says it all really.

"Initially I considered upgrading my home stereo system. I'm never there with listening time though. So, it seemed obvious to upgrade my car, where I spend 100 plus hours each month.

It is an A6 and I first auditioned the top of the range Audi upgrade. I was not 100% convinced. I found Paul at Source Sounds with a Google search and after a chat, he convinced me to go custom and said I should spec the car with the basic system in."

"Sound is my world and a huge part of my life. I'm working on my sax tone everyday. I like studio engineers who will have a good ole listen before they even place a microphone.

The differences between speakers, amplifiers etc. is so subtle. Like comparing bronze/silver/gold-plated saxophones. I want MY sound to be produced, I don't want the instrument itself to colour the sound. Similarly it's



not the car audio system itself that sounds so amazing of course, it's the music that sounds amazing, and a brilliant system such as the one Source Sounds installed allows the music to breathe through the system, the system itself becomes invisible.

I like music to sound and feel natural, like the day it was recorded. Some of my most inspiring experiences have been in recording studios actually listening as the music is played or listening back to takes. (Listen to the organ part on 'Bring it on Home' on my Snakebites CD as an example.)

James Jamerson, bass player on Stevie Wonder's "For Once in My Life" helped me choose my Hertz sub by proxy and to realise what a great choice I had made.

Proof-of-the-pudding: Having a system of this quality makes listening hugely enjoyable, emotional, and immediate. You really do hear bits you never knew existed, or had never appreciated, a triangle or string line or a subtle backing vocal line.

With those old Stevie Wonder tracks it's the bass and drums that I enjoy most with the new system. I feel like I'm in Detroit sat in the studio with the dudes.

When choosing speakers and headphones for my recording studio it's critical that they are neutral, I don't want kit that 'fattens up the bass' or 'adds sizzle to the high end.' Same with the car stereo, I want to hear the recordings the way they were made, I'm happy to go with the decisions on tone equalisation and placement etc. that the record producer and recording engineer made in the studio.

Of course with a vehicle system there are major challenges due to the compromises on speaker position relative to the driver's ears, and engine and road noise. That's where great kit like Audison and Hertz and great technicians like Paul work their magic to overcome those hurdles.

The end result is a system that reminds me on every journey how much I love music and puts a big smile on my face."

DS: Where was your first pro recording session?

SD: It was for a fella in Liverpool called 'Hambi'. I had been playing sax a year at the most. The session was released as a 7" single. I played a sax solo on it. It was an amazing



feeling receiving a copy. I wonder if I still have it in a shoebox somewhere?

DS: Is the set up at Echo Studios (where we met) fairly typical of what you see in studios now?
SD: Yes.

DS: When thinking about the dramatic change in equipment over your career, do you miss the old days?

SD: Big time! I have a huge affection for and mourn the increasing scarcity of 2" tape, big analogue mixing desks, valve compressors etc. Some rare examples remain. Google Chiswick Reach Studios for instance.

DS: Are there things about the sound that have changed? Are producers and engineers more or less exacting than previously?

SD: Despite rapid equipment evolution, not that much has changed when it comes to 'getting a good sound'. Most engineers still plonk (lovingly place Snake?) a Neumann U77 or similar in front of me, and even though the result ends up as zeros and ones, the sound will go through a lovely analogue microphone pre-amp first. In my own studio I record onto pro-tools but I have a microphone preamp out of an old Neve desk in line between my Neumann and the Analogue to Digital convertor (ADC).

In answer to 'more or less exacting', many producers and engineers are a little more so, largely because the technology allows them to be so. This is particularly true in areas like pitch correction, timing correction, the compiling of a 'master take' from multiple takes. Often a cleaner, neater, more precise performance is "created" from a rougher one. Most modern music is made this way, i.e. more 'perfect'. Would you and I agree this makes it any better? I don't think so!!! (Very astute Snake and right on the button)

DS: What is the most famous studio you have recorded in?

SD: It is always a great thrill to record at Abbey Road, the history, the huge rooms, the platinum discs! I get a similar buzz at George Martin's Air Studios, previous and present. Peter Gabriel's Real World is my favourite though.

DS: I remember you speaking about working with Tony Visconti - are there other producers that you have enjoyed working with?

SD: George Martin was fab, what a charming gentleman. Dan Hartman was a fave, sooo passionate about his art. Chris Porter is a genius and lovely man. Paul McCartney, Jeff Lynne.

DS: Who are the most competent musicians you have recorded with?

SD: This is a huge list! To name a few; Hamish Stewart, Nathan East, Simon Goulding, Paul Carrack, Ian Devaney, Paul Birchall, Dave Stewart.



DS: Do you feel the standard of musicianship has improved or otherwise over your years in the business?

SD: The standard remains sky high. I have sometimes feared that technology and fashion and the decline of the music industry would lead to a decline in musicianship but so far I am pleased to say, there are still great new young players coming through.

DS: When you listen to music for pleasure? Are you able to remove yourself from the recording process?

SD: Very, very luckily, I am pleased to say yes!! I seem to be able to easily and without thinking pop on a different set of ears and listen like a 'normal person'

DS: Do you think the quality of music reproduction will improve? Is the general public interested in better quality?

SD: Yes, at the moment. I detect a bit of a backlash against the decline in quality from low-res mp3's and people listening on laptop speakers. It is not only retired middle-class folk getting back into vinyl and buying 'better than CD quality' 24bit 96kHz files, my own teenage daughter has nicked my record deck, vinyl, and got me to set up proper amp and speakers in her student house!

DS: Who is your favourite saxophone player?

SD: Deceased, King Curtis. Alive, Kirk Whalum

DS: Are you seeing or hearing of studios mastering to HD music formats? (24bit 96kHz files for HD tracks etc.)

SD: Yes, I've heard of this and had some discussions with Linn about working with them. I was keen but nothing came of it.

DS: Are there specific techniques used to record saxophone today that were not prevalent before?

SD: Nope, as mentioned previously, place a decent microphone in a sensible position, press record, don't mess with compression or equalisation too much and try and make it sound like it does in a good room. Some things never change!

Huge thanks go to Snake for taking time out of a busy professional life to offer his working view of the world of playing and recording. I would really recommend you go and see him and his band. Having heard him play in a studio setting as well as standing by his car near Stowe School in Buckingham, on the road was a true high point in my life. Get details here: www.snakedavis.rocks

I would also like to thank Jamie at Echo Studios in Buckingham for allowing us to intrude and steal pictures of all of his lovely equipment! (www.echostudios.org.uk) as well as AJ Rococo, the incumbent "turn" of the day! ☐

