

Man in black

JONATHAN MILLER visits synth pop pioneer Gary Numan's new private studio

Back in 1979 Gary Numan was on top of the world. By chalking up two number one albums (*Replicas* and *The Pleasure Principal*) and two number one singles (*Are 'Friends' Electric?* and *Cars*) over a three-month period, he became the UK's fastest-rising star since The Beatles, arguably opening the floodgates for the early '80s wave of synthesizer-based acts to follow. Clearly, the boy made good.

Numan invested wisely; in 1980 he took the then unusual step of buying a professional recording studio, Rock City, sited in the infamous Shepperton film studio complex. "It was my dad's idea," recalled Numan. "He sensibly thought if your money primarily comes from one source, it puts you in a very precarious position. So, as the money was coming in, we invested in different businesses. Rock City was already a successful commercial studio when we took it over."

Numan confirmed that Rock City was well stocked from the outset: "It had a 3M multitrack when I first went there, but by the time I bought into it they'd already gone for a Studer — an 820, I think. It had quarter-inch, half-inch and two-inch tape machines down one wall; a big Trident desk; a piano room, with a gorgeous Bösendorfer grand, and a live room. There were huge JBL monitors which I later kept and used for rehearsals. Sadly, I had to burn them a couple of weeks ago; rats got to them in another storage shed! The AMS reverb and delay units in here also date back to the Rock City days."

So what went wrong? It's safe to say that Numan's rapid decline from millionaire superstar status began when he opted to 'retire' from the rigmarole of touring in 1981 with a series of visually spectacular, yet

financially crippling, sell-out shows at London's Wembley Arena — immediately alienating his substantial overseas following in the process. Matters worsened when BBC Radio One subsequently refused to playlist Numan's music from 1983 to the present day, corresponding with his departure from Beggars Banquet to set up his own independent label, Numa Records, which spawned a series of releases, but ultimately proved futile: "The record company thing didn't work out," Numan concurred, "and that had been one of the things encouraging us to keep Rock City going. That studio cost me a lot of money at the end of the day. It stopped being successful when the SSL desks and a whole load of other technology came along. We just couldn't afford to keep up with that."

For several years Numan worked closely with Mike Smith and Ian Herren (a.k.a. 'The Wave Team') and their colossal PPG Wave — Germany's all-singing, all-dancing, overdraft-inducing 'übersynth', about which Numan lamented: "The PPG had become the main studio tool, sound-wise. I woke up one morning and it dawned on me that, without Ian and Mike, I couldn't make another record; I didn't know how sequencing worked!"

Clearly something had to give: "Realising I wouldn't be able to do another album without Mike and Ian freaked me out," Numan continued, "so I went out and bought a simple little sampler — a Roland S10 — and a Yamaha CX5M Music Computer which, for the few months before I moved over to Atari, was enough to start making me think in terms of sequencing. I also bought a little four-track portastudio. Having got 'Mickey Mouse' versions of all the gear and spending a few months getting



Gary Numan 'cosy' in his new studio.

to grips with it, I then went out and bought an Akai S900 sampler, two bigger, 12-track Akais, which you could link together — MG1214s, I think they were called — and an Atari running Steinberg Pro24. I wrote *Metal Rhythm* on that in 1988."

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studio to a level more befitting a professional recording artist — albeit one whose purse strings were severely tightened: "I went out and bought a decent desk — a Soundtracs CM4400 — and an Otari MX80 two-inch. I blew about £30,000 in the end, but had to rummage around and borrow it from a variety of sources to get it all together!"

Fast forward to 1997: Numan's fortunes were about to undergo an unforeseen role reversal as music industry insiders finally sat up and took note. In August Numan signed to Eagle Records, a newly formed, London-based independent who subsequently worked hard at securing lucrative worldwide licensing deals, making that year's *Exile* album his first truly international release since 1991.

Triumph over his fiscal demons freed Numan into realising a long-held dream, completing a new private recording studio in a former storage outbuilding within a stone's throw of his Essex countryside home. Numan and his father bravely undertook much of the studio conversion work themselves. Construction complete, Numan set about acquiring some new kit, including an Otari RADAR hard-disk recorder and dual screen, Jaz and Zip drive-endowed 266MHz PowerMac G3, running Emagic Logic Audio and Digidesign Pro Tools. Casting an eager eye around his digital domain, computers evidently play a major role in the current Numan modus operandi: "As well as the studio gear, I've also moved my artwork computer stuff in here. The other end of the room is where I now do my Internet stuff. It's very much made for one man — everything's within arm's reach, but it's the set-up I've always wanted. Every aspect of what I do — not just the music — has been significantly improved. And it's so cosy, when I close the curtains at night-time I don't want to leave!" □

www.numan.co.uk



The new studio is based around an Otari RADAR system.