



# Roca steady

Founder of LA's Rocasound Studios, Sebastian Arocha Morton has just finished up production work for the Iron Man 2 score. **Rob Hughes** caught up with him to discuss his passions and peeves...

As the CEO, producer, engineer, and songwriter at Burbank-based Rocasound studios, Sebastian Arocha Morton has become one of the most in-demand guys on the LA scene. He and his company offer end-to-end solutions, from brainstorming to mastering, achieving one goal at a time, for one client at a time. The firm's mission statement says that "the endless riddle of balancing art and commerce ends at Rocasound" – it is a company dedicated only to the music and whatever it takes to achieve success in the production of it.

Now well over halfway through his second decade in the business, Morton began his career in Mexico City in the early 90s, touring with various high profile bands as a keyboard player. Gigs as a songwriter followed before he enrolled at Berklee College of Music to study Film Composition and Engineering. After graduating, he honed his craft shadowing engineers such as Rob Jaczko and Eumir Deodato. California beckoned and Morton eventually upped sticks and relocated



to LA where he initially found work with artists connected with a thriving acid jazz scene, such as Chaka Khan, David Sylvian and Ozomatli.

In recent times, Morton has entered the big league, providing his services for the likes of Sting, The Killers and Mary J Blige, among many others. Currently, on the recording side, he has just wrapped up production and mixing work on seven tracks for the new Samantha James album *Subconscious*, which is due out this month on OM Records based in San Francisco. However, as you expect for a man with his talents based in 'the media capital of the world', Burbank, Morton gets his fair share of TV and film work. Lately he has completed sections of the score for *Iron Man 2* and is in the process of composing music for a US TV show called *Terriers*.

Over the years, Morton has increasingly devoted his time to scoring films and is today more involved in this sphere than any other, recently signing to major film composer agency Gorfaine/Schwartz. But no matter what kind of project is on

the table, he just enjoys the basic fact that he gets to work with music – his absolute passion – every day. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that working with music is not always as fun as it seems and there are some jobs that he'd rather avoid, namely the ones that take too much and give too little.

"I feel fortunate to be able to be doing exactly what I set out to do and make a decent living doing it full time," he explains. "But I have learnt to be careful when choosing the projects that I take on to make sure they are in line with my own philosophy. In hindsight, I wish I had been a little bit pickier earlier on in my career when I took certain jobs just because I needed the money. At the end of the day, those jobs ended up paying me the least and taking up most of my time.

"One example was a score for a CGI film. It was a complete disaster because it was an Asian company and the cultural disconnect and language barrier were insane. I think the most annoying thing in this business is unrealistic expectations from amateurs with really low budgets. They basically temped the whole movie with scores from movies like *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *James Bond*. Then, in very bad English, they said they wanted it to sound exactly the same but using synths, just a few musicians and \$30,000 dollars for 70 minutes of fully produced orchestral music. Keep in mind, this was the 90s – we didn't have incredible samplers and libraries like Vienna, EastWest, Kontakt or Altiverb. The best sampler was an Akai S5000 with 512MB of RAM and a bunch of CD Roms. I ended up spending a lot of my own money to get live players and do it right. I've encountered people like this often in this business and I know better than to take the gig now. I can't tell you how many times somebody plays *Thriller* as a reference and says: 'can you make me sound like that for a \$1000 a track, all in?'"

Despite his apparent disillusionment, it speaks volumes that Morton saw this project through and that he even put in the extra time and money that was necessary to make it a success. His reaction to this client was almost one of sympathy, suggesting that, although they wanted a lot for their meagre budget, they were nevertheless just trying to realise their vision of a grand score for their movie and perhaps shared some of his philosophy and passion for sound. It seems that he is prepared to do whatever he can to help people who place the emphasis on the musical outcome as the ultimate goal. Conversely, those who consider only the financial upshot can expect very little of his time.

"It really pisses me off when money and politics get involved and dictate the direction of the music," he adds. "It's disgusting, and at that point I bail. Call me naive, but I think

most genuine musicians get into this business because when they started it was exciting to write songs, perform, make beats, tweak gear and so on. Music is music; marketing and sales are not music. They're business aspects and don't belong in the studio. Nobody picked up an instrument when they were in their teens because they loved reading *Billboard* magazine so much that they couldn't wait to chart when they got older – they just loved music. So when artists start getting all insecure and afraid that they're not going to sell any records because they don't hear a 'radio hit' and managers start causing drama and get the label all worked up, everything amazing about being in a studio becomes hell. From that point on, it's all fear based and all creativity ends. You might as well look at the *Billboard* 200 top three, pick one and do a soundalike, because that's going to end up happening anyway. I don't mean to sound jaded, because I'm not, I've been fortunate to have very few of those experiences, but that's why the radio sounds the same all the time. If Lady Gaga goes multi-platinum and starts making millions and you meet a hot blonde 20-something girl who says she wants to be a singer and loves dance music, take a guess who she wants to sound like."

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**Sebastian Arocha Morton**

Agreeability of gigs notwithstanding, there are aspects of Morton's job that he loves unconditionally and things that make his day no matter who's trying to put a drain on his talent and services.

"The gear and instruments are what I am really interested in," he says without hesitation. "I love sounds. I know most people probably think it's more spiritual to say, 'the songs and artists are why people become producers' and perhaps for some it is, but in truth, for me, it's how much fun it is to create new sounds. I love exploring – even when I do write songs, they need to have a sound attached. I can't stand it when people say write on the piano and guitar; that's been overdone for ages. How about writing on a harmonium going through a space echo and flanger with an eight-bit kit keeping rhythm. It feels different when there's an ambiance. I definitely come from the Brian Eno/Daniel Lanois school of music production."



## The tools and the techniques...

SINCE MORTON and his staff use various third party studios for mixing – Manny Marroquin's SSL suite at Larrabee Studios in LA being a favourite – the setup at Rocasound is a best-of-both-worlds combination of Pro Tools with D-Command control and a comprehensive selection of outboard. This includes 16 channels of SSL XLogic pres and a custom Manley Labs 16 x 16 summing mixer. Morton estimates that 80 per cent of his tracks are routed through outboard gear due to the distinct character that it provides. In order to track these nuances exactly as he hears them, he has also invested heavily on the digital side.

"I strongly believe in great digital conversion and clocking, so I have Apogee and Benchmark converters clocked through Antelope Audio Units. Because of the faith I have in the conversion going both ways in and out of the box, it's very exciting to capture the character of outboard gear properly track by track – everything from exotic pedals to space echos.

"My style of production is to print as I go along. In other words, when I'm digging a sound, I route every track including its plugins out of Pro Tools through a Manley Massive Passive EQ and a UBK Fatso individually. When I get to the mix stage I mostly do levelling, summing, and buss compression and eq, because most of the sounds are already committed, with all the analog goodness, via pristine, no-jitter signals. This makes me feel more like I did in the days when I committed to tape. It just feels good to know your sound won't change if something goes wrong."

The next step for Rocasound is to acquire an SSL AWS900 console, along with the X-patch system. Morton explains that, because he works with so many different genres at once, it's important for him to be able to recall sessions and mixes quickly. For this reason, the newer analog consoles are very appealing to him, though he notes that hardware/software/plugin integration is becoming much warmer than it once was, meaning, I guess, that for now he is happy with his current setup.

One piece of gear, or two actually, that won't be leaving Rocasound are Morton's Mackie HR824 monitors, which, despite a resident pair of Dynaudio Acoustics BM6As, remain his favourite. "My Mackies have never failed me," he says.