He’s spent decades as a mastering and live sound engineer – giving countless indie bands a head start in music and clocking up more than 2500 live mixes on the road. He’s also a seasoned ProTools HD systems installer, so he knows a thing or two about hard disk recording.

But more recently Blicka has been happy to just be a guitarist and songwriter in a local band… perhaps it poses a greater challenge. Either way, it’s been a welcome break from what he calls “the politics of recording”.

Then suddenly, out of the blue, he received a call he just couldn’t ignore.

The Brewster Brothers – founders of the Angels, whose music has spanned three decades and influenced just about every rocker worth their salt (including Guns N’ Roses) – needed a hand with their first album as a duo.

What initially began as a call for help with their HD system, turned into mixing and mastering two years’ worth of home, studio and live recordings. Suddenly, Blicka was back behind the desk. But to his surprise it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

Here’s what happened…

**BREWSTER BOOSTER**

**Gavin Hammond:** We know the Brewster Brothers – Rick [keyboard/electric guitar/vocals], and John [vocals/guitar/harmonica] – as legendary rockers, but this album’s a bit different. What style is it?

**Blicka:** That’s always a hard question, sort of like asking ‘what colour is that portrait?’ My stab at it would be ‘beautifully arranged, acoustic ballad rock’.

**GH:** How did the project come about for you?

**Blicka:** The Brewster Brothers asked me to go to Flash Studios [home to legendary producer Harry Vanda] in Sydney to give them a couple of night’s training on using ProTools. At this stage they had virtually completed all the tracking.

Several times, when showing them the implementation of various parts of the ProTools mixing layer and plug-ins, they commented on the improvement in the mix itself. On the second evening they asked if I would mix some of the tracks on the album. Many months later I’d mixed nearly all the tracks as well as mastered the final product.

**GH:** What was your mixing setup?

**Blicka:** We used a ProTools LE system on a Pentium 3GHz computer. That was loaded with Digirack plug-ins supplied with a Factory Bundle along with the Focusrite d2/d3 EQ and dynamics suite. Digidesign had recently released their EQIII and DynamicsIII suites of free plug-ins, and I have to say they certainly were more than adequate for what we were doing.

We used a pair of baby Genelec monitors, and I can tell you they are the most accurate nearfield monitors I’ve ever used. It is a testament to their design that you can pull a sound like we did in a space with virtually no consideration given to the acoustics.

At this point I feel I need to point out that I have come through recording since before multi-track machines even had DBX noise reduction. Using a digital system released in the last five years is generally always satisfying due to the total lack of hiss and the fact that you can cut, paste and undo.

While I love top-end equipment and software, I am more than happy to use whatever is on offer when making the bucks for the bread and butter. Basically, if the client is happy and they pay on time, then why should I moan about whether I have the ‘XYZ1000 Super Sample Relator’ plug-in that every else might be using?

**GH:** Any favourite treatments that define your sound?
“Too many engineers have their favourite techniques so well rehearsed that they seem to be squeezing every band through the same glossy toothpaste tube”

Blicka: Not really. This album is about real and raw sounds used to express very well-written musical ‘suites’. The most inspiring feature of the loft we were mixing in was the fact that it had a large window that overlooked the dreary Iron Cove Bridge at peak hour. I think the constant reminder that I wasn't in the peak hour traffic did more to improve the sound than any amount of extra software!

GH: Can you run through a typical mix?

Blicka: The musicians had good board mixes prepared. They had all the crap taken out of most of the tracks, and had done all the comping. I would then go through and tidy up the mutes around the parts, mainly the vocals. At the same time, I found I needed to carefully check the comping for any clicks that had occurred at the edit points.

One great thing about digital software systems is the ability to very accurately remove all unwanted sounds. It takes a bit of patience, but it sure cleans up the mixes. This especially applies to mysterious bumps and thumps which are out of time with the music.

While doing the edits I would get an understanding of the EQ and spatial depth I wanted to apply to each song. At the same time I would find out what the artists’ intentions were for the instrumentation in the arrangements: i.e., ‘are the strings driving this section or is it the rhythm in the guitar strumming that you want to promote?’; ‘do you want that backing vocal to ‘punch out’ or just embellish the main vocal?’; etc.

Generally, I don't see mixing as a straight line; it's more like rounding up sheep, whereby you find one bit sorts itself out at the expense of the other side of the mob. Eventually, if you have enough experience, you'll get the whole lot into the paddock. At this point, leave it alone – it is what it is!

GH: What's your approach to applying artificial ambience? Are you more of a reverb man or a delay man, for example?

Blicka: Answers about reverb versus delay just don’t come easy. I choose the space I want to create as I go along. I never know quite how it will pan out until I hit on it. What I can say is that I spend quite a bit of time shaping my ambient structures. The high-cut and frequency roll-off controls on reverbs are great for ‘describing’ the space into which you put a sound source.

Try to imagine whether the singer is in a dark cramped space, or yelling his lungs out into a huge valley. Based on this, with a bit of thought, you can make the reverb and/or delay muffled and short or very long and a bit nasal.

I even recommend placing EQ and compression inserts before the reverb and delay plug-ins on your effects path. This way a voice might be able to stay bright but a compressor and EQ before the reverb path may allow a huge ambience over that voice to exist without annoying chirrups and essing. If your reverb doesn’t have the right colour, it is very hard to turn it up loud enough in the mix.

GH: And your attitude towards analogue versus digital processing?

Blicka: The choice of analogue or digital processing just didn’t come into it. I had Pro Tools LE on an Mbox and that’s that. However, at the very end of the process we arranged to use a Pro Tools HD system to execute the bounce downs. The artists and I agreed that this made for a superior rendering of the material. By moving up to HD at this point we were hearing a noticeable difference in the middle or main body of the mix, which was so much wider.

GH: You mentioned bumps and clicks – any useful techniques for removing them in a LE setup?

Blicka: I like to use the automation of the volume fader. Usually once I have a mix going I will

**HARD DISK ADVICE**

Gavin Hammond: What are the common mistakes or misconceptions about hard disk recording?

Blicka: The most common mistake is, without doubt, investing in a separate hard drive for backups and then actually using it on a regular basis.

The biggest misconception is how long something will take. This includes saving up for the gear, getting it to work, and then actually learning to use it properly. Some of the best advice I could offer is to resist the urge to buy more software and plug-ins than you need. Most professionals I know have very little software; they just push each bit of it to the extreme. If you buy gear just because you like having the latest gizmo to talk about, then I suggest you get a sports car and give up on music.

GH: So what is the best hard drive setup?

Blicka: The best hard drives and memory setup will come down to your system layout. If you use virtual instruments, then try to have a separate hard drive on a separate bus for the sound library. Also, install a lot of RAM, as much as you can afford. If you're struggling with a lack of RAM then don't be afraid to freeze or render tracks.

Personally, I didn't need the fastest computer or gigabytes of RAM as I wasn't running any virtual instruments, while my effects were mostly subbed out to the UAD cards and Powercore. But what I do use is a large array of high-speed SCSI hard drives to allow the system to achieve an extremely high track count. This goes to show that you need to tune your drive and RAM setup to suit the artistic requirements of the system.

**USEFUL LINKS:**

Download a sample medley of the Brewster Brothers album tracks on: www.audiotechnology.com.au (follow the links).

Brewster Brothers: www.brewsterbrothers.com
then use the pencil tool to manually draw a lot of fadeouts between passages. Zooming right in and drawing minute volume dips over clicks, thumps and bumps can really clean things up. It’s not rocket science but it takes a lot of patience.

**GH:** Any favourite mixing techniques?

**Blicka:** Too many engineers have their favourite techniques so well rehearsed that they seem to be squeezing every band through the same glossy toothpaste tube. Often they seem to miss the central meaning of the music altogether. I believe you should try and reach for a new sound balance each time you do a mix. After all, the artists I work with are also striving to be original.

**MASTERING**

**GH:** Can you run through the mastering process?

**Blicka:** It’d been some years since I’d mastered an album, and certainly the first time I’d mastered an album with a computer. My mastering setup:

- It was based on a dual-processor G4 Macintosh with MOTU HD192 PCI audio hardware running MOTU Digital Performer software.
- For extra DSP grunt I had Universal Audio UAD-1 processor cards, and a TC Electronic Powercore processor running over Firewire. For monitoring I had a pair of old Tannoy Little Reds (SRM12b) and a pair of KRK Vos. A Lucid 2496 took care of the D/A conversion while Elemental Audio InspectorXL software helped out with metering.
- The first step was to import the ProTools bounces-downs into the host program. At this point I upsampled to 96k from 48k files. The files were then EQ’d and dynamically controlled from within the MOTU Digital Performer software.
- I would place an EQ from Universal Audio into the insert path. This would be followed by a TC Electronic MasterX multiband dynamics plug-in.
- After the compressor would be another Universal Audio EQ. That’s basically the processing path, apart from dither and DC offset removal at the master software point.

**GH:** Anything out of the ordinary to report during mastering?

**Blicka:** On one song I chose to add some reverb to the whole mix. This can really fix some masters better than EQ and compression alone. In this case, I used the TC Electronic Powercore plug-in, which supposedly packs the famous M5000 algorithms. It has a nice tight smacking sort of sound, but the result is very high quality.

When mastering with the software I found it very easy to bring forward certain passages of music by using discrete movements on the volume pencil. At various times I used the same technique to draw instantaneous lumps in weaker points of the rhythm and this proved especially effective on the back beats within the guitar rhythms of some passages.

Overall loudness was very easy to monitor using the InspectorXL software. I only purchased this application recently but it’s great for checking out all aspects of your final sound. You can see the stereo images, check the various weighted EQ consequences and find tiny areas of improvement in your master dynamics and EQ settings.

**GH:** And what about ‘bigger picture’ mastering issues?

**Blicka:** Once the songs were all prepared I started a new Project in Digital Performer to lay out the entire album. At this point the gaps were set and, after some previewing and test burns, two songs had their dynamic range and EQ altered to make them fit better with the progression of the tracks.

This goes to show that even though the song may sound well mastered on its own, you still need to alter some masters to be more sympathetic to the preceding and proceeding tracks on the record.

**GH:** Any parting advice for recording or producing this kind of music?

**Blicka:** My main advice for any style is this: it’s about the songs, the arrangement and the playing. If you happen to be doing more earthy styles of music – with real acoustic instruments and microphones – try and perceive the placement of the instruments in the musical arrangement and then use microphone distances to help you achieve that depth of field as you’re tracking.

Recording is like taking photos, so concentrate on the subject more and the camera less. A photographer may spend all day getting the lighting and the background correct but it only takes a moment to actually take the photo.