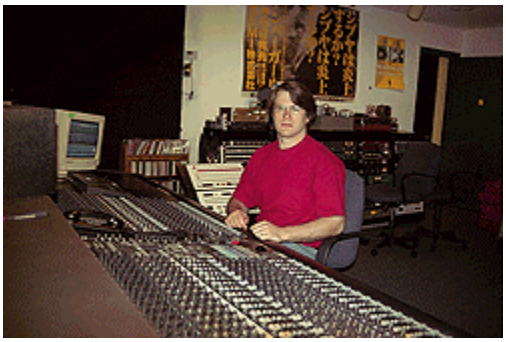
DAVE FRIDMANN • PRODUCING FLAMING LIPS & MERCURY REV



Those who bemoan the lack of invention and experimentation in today's rock music must make an exception for Mercury Rev and the Flaming Lips, two of America's finest and most successful 'alternative' outfits. Their shared producer and engineer Dave Fridmann tells **Sam Inglis** about their unique approaches to recording.

Two of the most innovative and critically acclaimed rock albums of recent years have been Mercury Rev's 1998 CD *Deserter's Songs* and the Flaming Lips' *The Soft Bulletin*, released last year. Both are remarkable for their sheer originality, for their blending of orchestral textures and heavily processed 'rock' instruments, and for their richness of ideas; and both were recorded and co-produced by Dave Fridmann at his Tarbox Road studio in upstate New York.

Fridmann began his music career as an assistant studio engineer, and is now an established producer, but he has also spent a long time on the other side of the desk as a member of Mercury Rev. "I wanted to be in a band or something, but I figured the best way to meet other people in bands that were successful was to be an engineer," he explains. "One of the earliest projects I worked on was Mercury Rev, and I ended up hitching a ride with them. I toured with the group from '91 to '93 — but not any more, which is probably for the best for all of us. I enjoyed it, but once I got to be in a band, I realised that really wasn't all I wanted to do. I didn't want to spend every waking minute working on just one band, or one thing. I wanted a family, I wanted to work with other groups, I wanted to a lot of other things that weren't being in a band. Now it's really good, because when we do get together I can just concentrate on them when they come in, and I can do my other stuff when they're not here."

The 'other stuff' Fridmann has undertaken has covered the whole range of what is sometimes called 'alternative' rock, from the stoner rock of Regular Fries and the grunge of Jane's Addiction to the alt-country of Wheat, the harmony-drenched pop of Weezer and the angular post-rock of Mogwai. A clear experimental bent is evident, and Tarbox Road has also played host to a surprising number of British bands, perhaps a reflection of the greater profile achieved by Mercury Rev and the Flaming Lips in this country than in the US.

Unusual Surroundings

Apart from Mercury Rev, Fridmann's most extensive involvement as a producer has been with long-established art-rock pioneers the Flaming Lips. He co-produced, mixed and mastered their 1990 album *In A Priest Driven Ambulance*, and repeated the same roles for 1995's *Clouds Taste Metallic*, 1997's remarkable *Zaireeka* and *The Soft Bulletin*. The latter actually came about as part of the *Zaireeka* project, one of the most ambitious and unusual rock recordings ever made. Produced in a limited edition of 5,000 *Zaireeka* consists of not one but four CDs, designed to be played simultaneously.

"It's the ultimate in surround sound," laughs Fridmann. "Stereo seems quite boring in comparison. The problem we would always find with both bands, the Lips and Mercury Rev, is that we'd have a hundred ideas, but if you stuck 'em all into two speakers, you had to start cutting and picking and choosing between them all. They couldn't all be reasonably represented and intelligible. So we thought 'well, we want more bass than you could possibly have out of just one CD — so let's fill one whole CD just with bass,' and now the person who's playing *Zaireeka* can say 'I'm going to have the bass up way louder than anything else, and just pick that CD and turn it up.' That's what we were hoping for."

The obvious question is why Fridmann and the Lips decided to produce four separate CDs, and hence require four sound systems to be hooked up in the same room to play back *Zaireeka* — complete with four people to start the CDs playing at the same time — rather than mixing to DVD for reproduction on domestic 5.1 surround systems. The answer, as Fridmann explains, is that it was both a practical and an artistic decision. "Although 5.1 might be a standard, I still don't think there's a lot of people with a reasonable setup in their living room that actually does that. On top of that, we wanted it to be more interactive. We keep hearing all this 'interactive' garbage all the time, people keep going on about it. Interactive, my butt — most of the time you just sit there, it happens, and then it's done. This *is* interactive — it's up to you to make it sound good, it's up to you to get it to be in sync or out of sync. It's very difficult for one person to even hear the record: you need to have some people there, it's not something you can passively sit down and do. We hope that people will get more involved in it. You

can just get some boomboxes, a couple of friends, and have a good time. We wanted to make it so that elements of chance music were built in to the whole project, whereas if you put it on a 5.1 or some other basic surround system, it'll just be the same way every time. So we wanted there to be a little less control over it. The hope is that people will sit there and listen and go 'Hmm. Well, it's kind of cool if I start this one 10 seconds later than the other one,' or something."

But are cheap domestic CD players really up to the task of playing back four linked CDs simultaneously? "What we found, to our surprise, is that it's easy to get four CD players to lock up nearly perfectly," remarks Dave. "It's actually easier than we had hoped. When we were initially testing it out and seeing if it would work, we weren't doing it on CDs, we were doing it on DATs, and DATs are very difficult to get to line up, and so we were living under the impression that things would be a lot more crazy and random than they actually turned out to be. Once we actually burned the CDs and started lining them up, it was easy. So it's not really that hard — with four people, it's just 'One, two, three, go!' It works pretty well.

Magnetic Fields

A logo on the back cover of Mercury Rev's *Deserter's Songs* proudly proclaims that the album was 'Mastered to 35mm magnetic film' — an unusual choice in these days of Sonic Solutions and digital mastering processors? "It is now, just because of the expense involved — the recorders are f•••ing gigantic and very expensive — but there was a time when it was common. On old Miles Davis records and stuff like that they would do it, just because at the time it was the best fidelity possible. There's still places you can get the transfers done, and it does something to the sound, so we like to goof around with it when we can afford it. It just has a weird sound to it. It's a sort of mastering process that we use. And the logo looks great. Both these groups for a while now have had a real cinematic bent to them, and it kind of fits in with that."

"We actually mixed each CD separately, to improve our elements of chance. We wanted to have to remember how that mix worked, and how that mix worked, and what we thought would work for the next CD, to combine them all together. We wanted to surprise ourselves too, and sometimes it worked, sometimes it'd be too normal and we'd have to go back and do it again or whatever. We didn't use any overall surround processing at all. When things fly over your head or something, it's because we faded it up on CD number one and faded it back down and then conversely did the same on CD number three, and then it goes up over your head as it goes. And we just had to hope that we'd get the right timing.

"All the elements for all four CDs exist on the same piece of tape, and we could hear them all simultaneously, but it was just a jumble. But for a variety of reasons, once you break it out into the four CDs, or — more to the point — eight speakers, you could actually hear everything a lot more distinctly, it worked a lot better. The ideas do all work simultaneously, but not when they're all coming from the same source. It's too jumbled that way. Once you've identified all the parts, then you can really hear the ridiculous whole that it is.

"At the same time, we were working on *The Soft Bulletin*. Initially, *The Soft Bulletin* was meant to be largely a two-mix version of *Zaireeka*, but then it sort of evolved into something else..."

Soft Sounds

Though his work with both Mercury Rev and Flaming Lips has been experimental, Fridmann is adamant that neither band indulges in experiment for its own sake: "If we're at a fork in the road and one direction seems purposely confrontational, and it seems that people are probably going to like the other one better, we'll take that one. We don't say 'Oh, that's too beautiful. Let's make it horrible so that people won't like it.' It does happen for some people, but not really with these guys."

The experimental nature of *The Soft Bulletin*, like Mercury Rev's *Deserter's Songs*, is apparent in the fact that almost all of the conventional 'rock' instruments have been heavily processed, often to the point of being completely unrecognisable, and that these parts are then overlaid with complex orchestral arrangements. This unusual combination stems, as Fridmann explains, from a low boredom threshold and from the confidence that comes as a band's career develops: "Mercury Rev and the Flaming Lips, at least since I've been working with both groups, have always had sampled orchestral elements — there are French horn, string, trumpet and timpani samples on the first Mercury Rev record, and there's all those things on the first Flaming Lips record I worked on too, back in 1989. But we used them very sparingly, I think, frankly out of fear — you know, these were rock bands, and to walk around with your violin case instead of your Marshall stack, it doesn't work. But now I think more than ever both the groups are being true to what they want to do, and to the textures and sounds that they want to do. There used to be very literally an element of fear about doing things like that. That element is now completely gone. And I'm sure there are people who would say 'Hey, can we put the genie back in the bottle? Can we have a little more rock and roll here once in a while, instead of all this *soft rock*?' But that's probably not going to happen.

"Both groups have been a part of making enough rock records already. I think some people would think it's cheating to use orchestral stuff, or falsely sappy or manipulative to use orchestral textures but, to us at this point, it feels like cheating to think 'Oh, we know that we can get to this chorus and kick in a bunch of distortion guitars and everyone will turn their lighters on and be happy.' But it's just boring to us, as the people making it. Of course, we want the exact same effect — we want the emotional draw to be there — but to us, the challenge is to come up with those feelings doing it in a different way. We want it to be very similar from song to song, so that each song *kills* you — but it's too boring for us to do it the same way every time."

Tarbox Building

Dave Fridmann's Tarbox Road studio is located in an isolated part of New York State, in a converted timber house. "We built the studio in March of '97, so *Zaireeka* was the first thing we did there," he explains. "I had like a small home studio, and my other main partner in the studio had his own small place, but this is not just a compilation of those two places, it's a whole new entity. It was just a house — we bought this house in the country and made it into a studio."

The design work required to turn the house into a studio was taken on by Dave himself, who felt that the recommendations of a professional studio designer would in any case be beyond his means: "I felt as though I could design whatever was possible within the budget we had anyway. In theory I know what I'm talking about to some degree. I took a lot of classes on it, and I've been in enough studios and seen enough studios built. When people are normally doing acoustical design they're worried about a lot of isolation, and worried about floating floors and cement structures to isolate you from each other. And I was worried about it, but I really couldn't do anything about it, so I didn't worry too much, just did what I could.

"I remember this guy who had this really nice place, but there was no isolation between the rooms or anything. It was just as if you close the door in your house — you'd get something, but not much — and he spent a ton of money and brought in the pros and stuff, and you could still hear the amps in the next room. If you're going to spend all that money and still hear the amps, why bother? I did design stuff like layout and a couple of acoustical touches here and there, but not much."

Soup Kitchen

The Flaming Lips' recording method is about as far as it is possible to get from the 'bang it down live' school of record-making. So many parts are added and discarded in the course of recording that it seems wrong even to describe the process as 'overdubbing': the finished track can bear almost no resemblance to the starting point. "Normally they've demo'd things to some degree," explains Fridmann. "Normally Wayne has a vocal melody, and they've been playing along with a piano or something like that, so we'll just listen to that, figure out a click track or something, and just go. We'll say 'Well, OK, what do we know we want to do?' and just start adding things until it's soup.

"The songs evolve so much as they are recorded. For instance, one of the big things that theoretically never happens in the recording studio is that you never overdub the drums. You never cut together the drums and stuff — which of course is becoming less true with all the technology available — but Steven [*Drozd, the Flaming Lips' drummer*] can just play along perfectly to anything. So we'll go in, we'll do some drums, and we'll say 'Well, that's nice, but what about this?' and then we'll redo the drums and maybe keep some of the first ones,

maybe not. We endlessly redo things, over and over. We'll fill up the first 24 tracks and then say 'OK, let's keep track 22 and number eight,' and then go over everything else and do it again. We just keep going and going."

In more conventional rock recordings, huge track counts tend to be racked up by engineers' predeliction for close-miking everything in sight, particularly when recording drums. With the Lips, by contrast, Fridmann is quite content to record Drozd's drums in the most basic, old-fashioned manner: "A lot of the songs on that record are just two mics and Steven. And there's nothing I could do to make it better or make it worse, it's just because of what Steven does and how he does it. Of course we goof around endlessly, but it's never the same thing twice."

Many of the drum parts on *The Soft Bulletin* are, however, heavily processed. Indeed, the first track, 'Race For The Prize' — also featured on *Zaireeka* — kicks off with possibly the loudest, most distorted drum sound ever committed to CD. "That was one of the first songs we did for both records, so that actually has a bunch of microphones on it and stuff. I think the main thing on that was overloading one of the console inputs."

All Kinds Of Everything

To cope with the Lips' evolutionary approach to creating their recordings, it's hardly surprising that Fridmann needs to be able to call on a huge number of potential tracks to record onto. Tarbox Road boasts almost every conceivable variety of multitrack recorder, including an Otari 24-track analogue reel-to-reel, an Otari RADAR hard disk multitrack, a Pro Tools system, and an Alesis ADAT digital 8-track tape recorder; and on a project like Flaming Lips these, as Fridmann explains, will all be used together: "They're pretty much all on all the time. There's crazy plug-ins available now that do things that are incomprehensible, effectively breaking the laws of physics because once you've digitised your audio, you can look ahead and back in time and make decisions based upon what's going to happen in the future. So I'll need Pro Tools for a sound like that, and then I'll need the analogue to get this extra overdriven analogue sound, and then I'll need the digital because that track is inherently so quiet that if I put it on the analogue it'll be too noisy. It's all this totally weird bunch of tools to use for different situations."

The tracks laid to analogue and digital multitrack are supplemented, at least on Mercury Rev and Flaming Lips recordings, by the orchestral material, which is recorded as MIDI parts to be triggered from samplers and sound modules. The MIDI sequencer effectively provides Fridmann with yet more tracks to play with: "We use a sequencer, but I wouldn't call the result a sequence. We do MIDI parts, but whoever's playing them just plays them live. So it's easier until we're sure of what the parts are going to be to just chuck it into the sequencer, instead of laying it down on tape. It makes it easy if you make a mistake, or if you run out of tracks, or dumb stuff like that. It's not really like we're going 'This drum loop's going to go here,' and 'That's going to happen then'. We just use it like a recorder.

"The thing is, with both those groups, we don't know what we're doing until it's done. So to have somebody come in, pay them a ton of money to put down a part that three weeks from now you're going to change the timing of by an eighth note — forget about it. Then you're going to have them come back in and pay them another thousand dollars? No. So it's really because of the creative process for the groups. This time, with the new Mercury Rev record that's under way now, we are trying more real instruments, because of the breadth of the sound. We've gotten to a point where tweaking the samples and tweaking the sound modules is not worth the amount of time. It is actually cheaper and more cost-effective to have humans doing it. So we are doing a lot more real stuff this time, but there's very little on the previous records. There might be some live timpani, and I've got chimes, and of course I've got pianos and stuff, but all the strings and stuff are MIDI'd.

"A lot of the MIDI stuff we do is orchestral, and the way those sounds work is that you have to play the MIDI instruments so that the sounds actually end up in time — I don't mean just because of MIDI delay, I mean because it takes a while for the swell to happen, but if you want it to be at full volume by the downbeat, you've got to start substantially beforehand. So you can't program it in step time, or quantise it; that doesn't work. You have to play it live, just so it lines up correctly."

Your Friendly Local Producer...

Setting up your own commercial studio can be a risky venture for any producer, particularly when studio and producer are as individual as Tarbox Road and Dave Fridmann, but Fridmann's current busy schedule reflects the high regard in which his work with Mercury Rev and the Flaming Lips is held, particularly in this country. "Most of the rest of the year I've got booked out just doing Mercury Rev and Mogwai, and because of the amount of time that those groups want, it doesn't really matter who calls — until next February I can't really do anything," he explains. "So the next guy who calls me up and says 'OK, I want February and March', that'll probably be who I end up working with. I really don't pick the people. A lot of it sort of falls into place in the manner that you have no choice, just due to schedules and when people want things done by and stuff like that."

As far as Fridmann is concerned, then, he'll work with whoever wants him and his studio. Nevertheless, a project like *Zaireeka*/*The Soft Bulletin* clearly demands an unusually deep understanding between producer and artist, and a shared commitment to experiment. As Fridmann acknowledges, spending the best part of two years in an isolated studio in the wilds of New York State also means that you have to get on as friends: "I've been totally fortunate to work with a lot of great bands and great people, but in some ways, when these people aren't in bands any more, I'd still love to have them come by the house and hang out. Most of the people you end up being good friends with even before the music."

Many thanks to Rob Brown for his help in arranging this feature.

Tarbox Road Gear

The studio contains an extensive array of gear, including not only virtually every type of multitrack recorder but an eclectic selection of effects and sound-processing equipment new and old, high-end and budget: "I'll find a certain processor that's in favour with me for this month, or that period of time, or this record or that record, and then it'll be like 'Oh, I'm sick of that one.' But even with that ridiculous array of gear that's up there, in any given two- or three-month period, it's all gotten used for something. Everything makes an appearance. So I don't feel too bad about all the craziness that's up there. It all finds its way into the mix. There's a bunch of gear up there that only does one thing, but does it well, and if you don't want that, don't even bother trying it out, because it doesn't do anything else. There's so much of it because a lot of it is one-trick pony gear.

"If you knew the order of when things got mixed, you could watch what gear came in to the studio as it came in. Like for the Flaming Lips song 'The Gash' I'd just gotten the phaser: a friend of mine dropped that thing off and left it here and I was like 'This phaser's great, let's put it on the drums.' It's this old Roland phaser, and that's just another great one-trick pony. It's just got mono in, mono out, and that's all it does, that big sweeping phaser sound, but it sure does it good. So I can sit there and listen to the albums, and for every sound I can sit there and go 'CD number four, '35000 Feet Of Despair', the vocal sound is off the Lexicon MPX1' — it's got this weird gating thing that it does in tempo. As long as whatever it's doing it does well, that's good with me.

"I'm incredibly lucky with the gear that's up there. My partner Greg Snow takes great care of everything, so that everything always works all the time. I've been in a million studios where they have the greatest gear in the world, and it doesn't work. That doesn't happen at my place, which is nice. In a lot of other studios, things aren't set up to work together all the time, so that when you bring something in you've got to hook it up and just hope that it works. At my place everything is set up so it'll work together all the time, so there's never a question — you can just add on multitracks or whatever you need, whenever you want."

RECORDING & MONITORING
• Alesis ADAT 8-track digital recorder.
• Auratone monitors.
• KEF 120 monitors.
• Otari Concept Elite mixer with automation and 40 channels of dynamics.
• Otari MTR90 II 24-track analogue reel-to-reel.
• Otari RADAR 24-track tapeless digital recorder.
• Revox A77 MkII quarter-inch 2-Track
• Sony PCMR500 DAT recorders (x2) and TCD D7 portable DAT.
• Studer A80 VUII half-inch and quarter-inch analogue reel-to-reel.
• Tascam TSR8 analogue 8-track with ATS500 SMPTE sync.
• Westlake BBSM10 monitors.
• Yamaha NS10 monitors.
• Yamaha Promix 01 digital mixer.

PROCESSORS & EFFECTS
• AKG BX20 spring reverb.
"This is the reverb I use on almost everything. I don't know why, I just like it."
• Alesis Midiverb II multi-effects and 3630 stereo compressor/gate.
• Altec 1561 mic preamp/compressors (x2) and 1612 preamp/limiters (x2).
• Ampex 3200 custom dual-pentode mic preamp (x2).
• ART Pro VLA stereo compressor.
• ART Dual Levelar stereo compressors (x2).
• ART 8-channel gate.
• Ashly stereo graphic EQ (x2).
• BBE 442 enhancer.
• BK precision oscilloscope.

• Boss SE70 and SE50 multi-effects processors.
• Carver H9AV processor.
• CBS Laboratories Audimax III compressor.
• CBS Laboratories 4440 Audimax compressors (1 stereo, 1 mono).
• CBS Laboratories Volumax.
• Collins 26U-1 tube compressor/limiter (x2).
• Dbx 165 compressor, 160A compressor/limiters (x3), 166 dynamics processor, 172 stereo gates (x2), 119 compressor/expander.
• Dbx 120XP subharmonic synthesizer.
• Digitech RDS3.6 digital delay (x3) and RDS1.9 digital delay.
• Digitech RDS8000 Time Machine.
• Digitech IPS33B harmony effects processor.
• Digitech TRS24 multi-effects processors (x2).
• Dolby FM Broadcast 334.
• Dorrough 610 Discriminate Audio Processor FM radio compressor.
• Drawmer DS201 quad gate.
• EMT 140 plate reverb.
• Ensoniq DP4 multi-effects processor.
• Eventide H3000D/SX multi-effects processor (x2).
• Fairchild 602 high-frequency compressor.
• Fairchild 664 EQ.
• Furman RV1 spring reverb.
• Gates SolidStatesman AGC.
• Harris MSP90 stereo dual-band FM limiter.
• Hewlett-Packard 8055 filter set.
• Hughes AK100 SRS processor
• Inovonics 215 (x2) and 220 broadcast compressors.
• Lafayette Instruments Delayed Feedback Recorder.
• Lexicon MPX1 and LXP1 multi-effects processors.
• Lexicon PCM41 digital delay.
• Lexicon Prime Time delay.
• Lexicon Vortex morphing effects processor.
• Maestro USS1 multi-effects processor.
"This is like a compilation of all the Maestro effects pedals in one box. It's cool!"
• Peavey Valverb reverb unit.
• Roland RE301 tape delay.
• Shure Level Loc compressor/limiter.
• Symmetrix 606 delay.
• TC Electronic Finalizer mastering processor.
• TEAC EQA10 EQ/analyser.
• TLA C1 stereo preamp/compressor (x2).
• Toyamura KP12 speech processor.
• UREI 1176 compressors (x2) and LA4 compressor.
• Ursa Major SST282 reverb/delay.
• Yamaha SPX900 and SPX90 II multi-effects processors.
• Yamaha E1010 analogue delay.
• Yamaha REX50 multi-effects.

MICROPHONES
• AKG C414ULS (x3), D112E (x4), C3000 (x2), C409 (x2), 330BT.
• Altec 633 (x3).
• Ampex 2001.
• Astatic J730F (x2).
• Beyer M500N.
• Electrovoice RE27 (x2), ND757 (x3), ND357A (x2), ND408 (x7), ND308B (x2), 911.
• Neumann U47, TLM170 (x2), KM184 (x2).
• RCA 44, 77, 74 (x2), SK46.

• Shure SM57 (x2), SM58, 545D, S45S, 705S, Sonodyne II Series 2, PE57, 664, 636.

COMPUTERS & SOFTWARE
• Apple Macintosh computers (x2), one running Digidesign Pro Tools system.
• Digidesign *Sound Designer 2*.
• BIAS *Deck* 2.5.
• BIAS *Peak* 2.1.
• Jupiter *Infinity* looping tools.
• MOTU *Digital Performer* 2.7 sequencer.
• Opcode *Vision* 4.2.2 sequencer.
• *Sound Edit 16* II.

KEYBOARDS, MIDI & MODULES
• Alesis D4 drum module and HR16 drum machine.
• Alesis MMT8 sequencer.
• Akai S1000 sampler.
• Akai X7000 controller/sampler.
• Casio CZ101 synthesizer.
• Emu Proteus 2000 sound module.
• Ensoniq ASR10 sampler/controller.
• Fender Contempo organ.
• Fender Rhodes electric piano.
• Hammond Porta B organ with Leslie speaker.
• Jax rhythm machine.
• Moog Minimoog synthesizer.
• MOTU MTP AV MIDI patchbay.
• MOTU Micro Express USB MIDI patchbay.
• Maestro rhythm machine.
• Nomad 237 organ.
• RMI electric piano.
• Roland MOC1 orchestral module.
• Roland U220, D110, and SC55 sound modules.
• Roland R8M drum module.
• Sequential Circuits Prophet 5 synthesizer.
• Wurlitzer electric piano.
• Yamaha PS3 home keyboard.