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Dan the Automator

ICON Keeps Pace with Dan the Automator's Busy Schedule

The world of dropping beats is a fickle place, where trends change so quickly that most people's 15 minutes of fame are over in five. But for Dan Nakamura—better known as Dan the Automator—the secret to not getting swallowed up by the next trend is to never sit still long enough to be pigeonholed.

Since exploding onto the San Francisco hip hop scene in early 1990s, Dan the Automator has amassed a discography that's as eclectic as it is extensive. His projects transverse the musical map, mashing together genres and unlikely performance pairings that defy commercial boundaries. His prolific output runs the gamut, including musical collaborations with Kasabian, Gorillaz, Kool Keith, Galactic and Dr. Octagon, remixes for Redman, Primal Scream, Air and Stereolab, movie and video game soundtracks including *NBA 2K7*, cartoons and even a recent Adidas ad campaign.

"I love music first and foremost, and if I could, I'd probably spend most of my time making records," Nakamura says from behind his ICON D-Command® ES console in his Pro Tools|HD®-equipped studio. "But I like to keep busy. Doing different types of projects pushes me to approach things differently and think about different audiences. And that keeps things fresh."

A self-professed analog freak, his personal studio is home to a diverse mix of modern and vintage esoteric technologies. It's the place he does most of his work, tracking and mixing with assistant Tim Carter. "The majority of the projects we do are at least started in my studio," Nakamura says. "Most of them end up getting mixed here too."



While his love for analog remains strong, the realities of today's music business call for modern solutions. He sums up his recent decision to add the D-Command in a single word: "Recall. I already have a full analog console and a two-inch tape machine, and that's great for a certain sound. But that's a really organic way of mixing, and once you're done with a mix and on to something else, that mix is gone."

It's a methodology that's unsustainable in the busy world Nakamura now inhabits. "These days, most of the time I'm bouncing between a bunch of different projects at the same time," he says. "There are always little last-minute changes, people will come back a few days or a few weeks later and want some really specific tweaks, like "that mix is perfect, but can I get 3 dB's more bass on that track?". And in the analog world, you just can't do that. There's just no way I can recreate the exact same mix I had a few days ago. Because a large percentage of the people I work with make these kinds of specific requests, I knew that I had to figure out how to deal with it. To that end I decided I had to get a digital board. I knew I didn't want to get some half-baked thing - I wanted a desk that was integrated into Pro Tools - so I decided to go with the D-Command. With the D-Command, I just pull the mix up and everything's right where I left it."

Nakamura's approach is very much hands-on. "Ever since I started out, I've always gravitated toward doing it myself," he says. "When I did go into a big studio, it sounded a bit better, but that always just made me want to work to improve my own mixes. I was never really one of those people who was down on digital, but I still really like the imperfections of esoteric old analog gear. So I invested in a lot of vintage compressors and preamps - but I also invested in a lot of interfaces. The cool thing with HD is that it allows me to scale out as much I/O as I need to integrate my racks of vintage gear into Pro Tools, with zero latency. With my setup, I can use as much of that analog gear as I want, only now it's all easily accessible in Pro Tools and integrated right into my D-Command. I've got all my analog processing, but with digital recall."

The D-Command console's deep integration with Pro Tools|HD is well suited for Nakamura and Carter's fast-paced production schedule. "We cut most of our tracks live to get the sound we want, and cut it up in Pro Tools to make our own loops," says Carter. "We work pretty quickly, and we try not to fall into the fix-it-later trap. It's really easy to get caught up in that and spend more time fixing something than it would to just play it again."

Carter is a multi-instrumentalist who honed his Pro Tools® chops on his own Mbox-based Pro Tools LE®-based system. "When I started doing sessions, a lot of times I'd lay down a drum track and then go into the control room and help the engineer chop it up in Pro Tools," he recalls. "For me, it was really helpful to know what was going on in the recording process too."

Carter's Pro Tools skills are what helped open the door to a full-time position with Dan the Automator. Dan has worked with many session musicians over the years, but it was Carter's familiarity with Pro Tools that enabled him to step up his involvement to a deeper level. "I started working with Dan on editing loops and putting tracks together," Carter recalls. "I knew Pro Tools well enough that I was able to do more than just come in and track my parts. Other than the track count, the stuff I learned on my LE system was pretty much the same as the HD system we have here, so it was an easy transition."

For Dan the Automator, adding the D-Command to his Pro Tools setup really connected the dots. "The D-Command has really opened up my mind to how I want to mix," he says, "Knowing I can pull a mix back up means I can work on more than one thing at a time. Instead of mixing a song, start to finish, now sometimes I'll rough out several tracks, go out and hear them in the car, and come back and tweak them."

"It's still a bit of a learning experience, and I'm still figuring out how to make it work best for me. But there's something nice and organic about pulling faders up and down instead of grabbing a mouse. The D-Command has really changed my workflow—it's just a great piece of gear."

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