



Emitt Rhodes Recorded At Home

by Kevin Ryan

The year was 1970. Hidden away in a London suburb with a Studer 4-track, Paul McCartney was clandestinely recording the songs that would form his first solo album, *McCartney*. 5,000 miles across the Atlantic, in Hawthorne, California, nineteen-year-old Emitt Rhodes was similarly ensconced in his parents' garage, busily crafting - on his Ampex 4-track - the songs that would make up his own self-titled solo debut. The resulting *Emitt Rhodes* was the album Paul *should* have recorded.

It was, simply put, a pop masterpiece. Working within the considerable technical limitations of his little garage studio, Emitt crafted twelve impeccable and intricately arranged tracks, showcasing an inherent gift for melodic structure and illustrating remarkable restraint, never resorting to excessive embellishment. Every song was an exercise in masterful 4-track economy, and it was evident that each part had been laid to tape with loving care and pure intent. Tight performances, tight production, and wonderfully talented songwriting combined to form a textbook of Lennon-McCartney influenced pop know-how.

This sense of melody and form had been honed to perfection by the years he spent in the '60s as a member of the L.A.-based Palace Guard and later as front man of The Merry-Go-Round. Though their two year stint resulted in no more than a pair of regional hits - "Live" and "You're a Very Lovely Woman" - the collective recorded output of the Merry-Go-Round reveals principal songwriter Rhodes to have been a keen student of '60s British pop music and charts his evolution as an increasingly potent practitioner of the form. But, in true rock and roll fashion, infighting and creative differences led Emitt to disband the group in early 1969, allowing him to pursue solo endeavors. After a planned solo offering by A&M records was shelved, Emitt decided to take matters into his own hands. Purchasing an aging second-hand Ampex 4-track machine in late '69, the nineteen-year-old retreated to his parents' garage to construct his masterpiece.

Today there is nothing unusual about a guy with a 4-track machine recording an album in his garage. In 1969, this was extraordinary. That an album like *Emitt Rhodes* should have emerged from such unlikely circumstances has only added to its legend. Upon its release in 1970, many insisted that it *must* be the Beatles. A number of enterprising disc jockeys and record store owners did little to dispel the illusion. And the thing was, it *did* sound a lot like a Beatles album. Wasn't that Paul McCartney singing? And those melodies, surely those melodies could have been drawn by the same hand that gave us "Michelle", "I Will" and "Blackbird". Half of the tracks could easily be snipped out and stitched into the running order of *The White Album* without sounding a bit out of place.

Emitt was quite proud of its domestic origins - the words "Recorded at Home" were actually engraved into the album's vinyl run-out groove by engineer Keith Olsen. Union rules at the time dictated that major label records must be recorded in a proper studio, so a "home recorded" credit couldn't appear on the sleeve. Emitt had even lobbied to have the album titled *Homecooking*, but the record company preferred the self-titled approach. And, happily, *Emitt Rhodes* was received warmly by both critics and the record buying public. *Billboard* called Emitt "one of the finest artists on the music scene today" and would later refer to his debut as one of the "best albums of the decade". The album began climbing the *Billboard* charts, eventually rising to #29, and the single "Fresh As A Daisy" barely missed the Top 40. Indeed, the future looked rosy for Emitt Rhodes, but then the bottom fell out.

Amazing as it may now seem, many recording contracts of the day demanded two albums per year - such was the case with Emitt's contract with ABC/Dunhill. However, the promotional performances required of Emitt, combined with the one-man-band recording approach, simply did not allow him enough time to deliver a second

album six months after the first. His contract was thrown into default and he was actually *sued* by the record company for breach-of-contract - not the most conducive environment for creative pursuits. To add insult to injury, A&M Records decided to cash in on Emitt's newfound solo success with his new label and finally released the long-shelved *American Dream* album, complicating matters by confusing record buyers and detracting from sales of *Emitt Rhodes*. And though Emitt forged ahead, eventually delivering two more respectable albums, the stress of the ordeal had taken its toll on him and the music, and the uncanny pop sensibilities he had displayed on his debut often took a back seat to his disillusionment.

In 1973, Emitt bowed out of the role of recording artist, retreating instead to the safety of the engineer's seat, first as a staff engineer/producer/pre-production man for Elektra/Asylum and later opening the doors of his home studio to the public where he continues to work today. In fact, he bought the house directly across the street from his parents' old home where he had locked himself away in the garage all those years ago. Once again, he has converted the garage to a studio (albeit larger and more equipped), and it is here that we met for the following interview. His arrangement with the record company still has never been properly resolved, and getting paid what's due to him has been a long-term struggle. Reluctant to revisit the distant, but still painful, memories of his career as a "pop star", he was nonetheless happy to discuss *how* he recorded those albums so many years ago. Microphones and tape machines he doesn't mind talking about - they don't sue you and withhold royalties.

He still writes and records, but hasn't released a new song since 1973, a lamentable fact considering the formidable genius he displayed even before graduating from his teen years. Talk of a new album has been heard off and on for years, but so far nothing has materialized. Amidst the thirty years of demos accumulating dust in his studio surely lies the makings of another stunning collection of songs. And this time around, if he still so pleases, he *can* title it *Homecooking*.

So, how did you get into recording?

I had two stereo, reel-to-reel tape machines, 1/4".

This was probably around 1966 or so - while I was still in the Merry-Go-Round. I'd set them up side by side, adjacent to each other, and I'd run the tape from the supply reel on one machine to the take-up reel on the other machine. I ran it through the heads of both machines, but what I did was twist the tape in between the first machine and the second.

Ah, yes, so you then were recording simultaneously on both sides of the tape.

Right. Just flip the tape and you've got four channels.

So how did that system work out?

Oh it worked just great! Yeah, it worked fine. Until the machines got moved.

Because if you moved one of the machines even a little bit...

Yeah, that was it. Any tapes you'd recorded would then be out of sync. But while they were in place it worked just great.

Did you record demos with that setup?

I guess I did. I don't think I recorded anything of note on it. Mainly it was just me getting experience with tape machines and overdubbing. And I had four tracks before anyone else on the block!

But when you were officially recording with the Merry-Go-Round, you guys were generally at A&M studios?

Oh, we recorded everywhere. All over town. But, yes, primarily at A&M.

You probably picked up a lot from all those sessions...

Absolutely. I learned how to engineer by being in the studio and watching. So when it came time to do it myself, I was familiar with how things worked. But being in the studio was a wonderful thing, watching the wheels go round and round, the big speakers...

At some point, though, you started buying your own recording gear.

Yeah, well that was after the Merry-Go-Round broke up. I had been kept on at A&M to record a solo album. Actually, it was just bits of leftover stuff, things from the Merry-Go-Round and some things I had done by myself in the studio. But it was all kind of assembled and called an album. Anyway, the album was finished and the label just kind of stuck it on a shelf at first, they didn't release it. So I started buying my own gear so I could record at home. This was around 1969. I bought an old Ampex 4-track machine, a huge washing machine-type thing.

Do you remember what model it was?

It was an Ampex 300 with, I think, 351 electronics. It was strange, a custom job. The electronics were down below rather than on top, where they usually were. And it had some custom cabinet. But it was old. I mean, it was ancient even *then!* Like I said, it looked like a washing machine.

All tube...

Oh, yes. But it was a frustrating machine, I remember, because you couldn't record on adjacent tracks. Like, if I wanted to transfer track 1 to 2, forget it. You couldn't do that. You had to go from 1 to 3, so I had to plan out how to record everything so I could make sure I got it all on the tape. It required a lot of pre-thought.

So did you sketch out exactly what you were going to do on each track and when?

Well, what it meant was that I had to demo everything to see where it would go. Then I'd get serious and do it for real.

What other gear were you using besides the Ampex?

I had two little Shure mic mixers. Actually, they're still right here in my rack! I've kept them. They still work. They're Shure M67 mixers - real basic things.

I think they were originally made for news reporters and journalists to use while in the field.

Oh yeah, real rudimentary things. But they've got knobs and a meter and if you want to go stereo you've got two of them. Of course, at that time I wasn't doing any real stereo stuff, but we did simulate some stereo during mixdown.

Were you using any compressors or limiters at this time?

No, I had none of that stuff. Really, on that first album, all I had was the Ampex, the little Shure mixers and three microphones.

What mics were you using?

I had two RE-15s and one RE-16, - Electro-Voice mics. That's all the microphones I used on that first album to record the *instruments*. When it came time to record vocals, I believe it was Keith [Olsen] who suggested I rent a Neumann, which is what I did. I later bought two of them, but for that first album I just rented one, a U-87.



Wow, I didn't realize that! And what a mismatch in gear - this expensive Neumann U-87 into a cheap little Shure M67 mixer...

Yeah, but if you open those things, you know that old technology. It's got big resistors, big capacitors. I mean, the components were big! You know, now it's all on a little chip. But those things had a big circuit card with real components soldered on. But, sometimes I would go right into the tape machine, bypass the mixer altogether and use the machine as a mixer.

Did you do that a lot?

Yeah, I did. I'd just run the Neumann right into the tape machine. But only the vocals were recorded with the Neumann. Everything else was recorded with the Electro-Voices, the dynamics. I still have them too. Well, one of them walked out the door, but I have the other two.

But all the instruments were recorded with a combination of those three Electro-Voice mics? I've always wondered how you were recording drums, because I've always loved the sound you got.

Well, it was a pretty basic setup. I basically had two overheads, one left and one right. Those sort of took care of the high hat, crash, ride, toms. Then I put the third mic on the kick drum. The snare sort of came through as leakage. It was pretty much a jazz setup.

So, no mic dedicated to the snare?

Nope, but it came through all right. It was all a matter of mic placement. I would rehearse the drums, record a take, listen to it, and make adjustments. "Oh, I got too much toms that time." So I'd move the mics around until I had a good balance between everything. Then it all went down to one track, mono.

What kind of drums were you using at the time?

Slingerlands and Zildjians.

How about the piano you were using? How did you record that?

It was a Gulbransen upright, which I still have. Pop open the lid, stick a mic inside. Simple as that.



I think I've seen photos of you using the RE-16 to record it.

That's probably right. I just angled it down inside.

But no compression.

Nope. It was all real basic. I just tried to get as much level on the tape as I could.

What about guitars?

I had the Gibson 335 and a Fender Twin Reverb amp. My acoustic was a Martin D28. And my bass was a [Fender] Precision.

That was all you had on the first album?

Yeah.

I've seen later photos where it looks like you were building up quite a collection.

Yeah, I went through a lot of them eventually.

Did you record any of your guitars direct? Sometimes it sounds a little like it, but it's hard to tell.

It's hard for me to remember. I don't think so. I'm pretty sure it was all through an amp, but I can't be positive. I think I always used an amp. I may have recorded the bass direct some, but I can't be certain about that either. It was so long ago. For as long as I can remember I've recorded bass direct, but I'm trying to remember if I did back then. I just can't be sure.

What were you using for monitors at the time?

Well, for the first record I put my own monitors together. I just went out to the electronics store and picked up some Jensen speakers, bought some empty cabinets and put them together. Wired up some crossovers and capacitors. Just cheap stuff. I actually had four speakers on the wall, one for each track! [laughs]

You did?

Yes! I mean, I had no real mixer. Everything was real makeshift. So I had one speaker for each track.

You just ran straight out of the tape machine outputs and into a speaker?

Yeah, straight out of each output on the 4-track, into an amp and into a speaker. Actually there were a couple of amps, I guess. But, yeah, one speaker for each of the four tracks.

So, let's walk through your recording process on that first album. Where would you begin?

Metronome. I always put down a metronome on one track of the 4-track. You know, as a click track to play along with. That would later get erased, but I always started out with it. Then, if it was a piano song, I would lay down piano, if it was a guitar sound I'd lay down guitar. And I'd continue to lay down parts and bounce them down. Like I said, I had to figure out the order of the overdubs ahead of time.

Yeah, and if you couldn't bounce down to adjacent tracks, you had to really plan it out. What did you do, put the metronome on track 2, record on 3 and 4 and mix down to track 1?

Sort of. But I worked it so I was always only going down one generation. So I would record one track, and while I was transferring that to another track I would play a second part live. So, say I recorded bass on track 1. While I was mixing that down to track 4, I would play rhythm guitar along with it and they would both end up on track 4. Then only the bass was down a generation. I just had to make sure I had the balance right. But, I never mixed down two pre-recorded tracks - too much [tape] noise.

Ah, I see. I didn't realize you were going about it that way. So how many overdubs were you able to pull off that way?

I think it was about six. And at the end of filling up the four tracks I was only down a generation on two things. Typically it would work something like: record the metronome on track 3 - record piano on track 2 - record drums on track 1 - transfer the drums on track 1 to track 4 while playing tambourine - record bass on track 1, wiping out the old solo drum track - bounce that down to track 3 while playing rhythm guitar - that pass wiped out the metronome, but it was okay because I now had the drum track - and last, record lead guitar on track 1, or whatever else was needed. Whatever the primary instrument was of the song remained on its own track.

Okay, I see what you were doing.

Yeah, and I would mix high-end things with low-end things so that later I could fudge it a little. So, like, bass guitar always got combined with rhythm guitar, drums with percussion instruments. If I wanted more bass guitar I could turn up the bass level on that track, if I wanted more rhythm guitar I could turn up the treble. That kind of thing. It was limited, but it gave you a little room. You just had to make sure there was a good balance between things in the first place when bouncing down.

Right. Now, that scenario doesn't take into account the vocals. Where did they come in?

Well, I transferred those four instrumental tracks to an 8-track machine. I eventually bought one, but for that first album I just rented one.

Do you remember what kind it was?

It was a 3M. I bought a Scully 8-track later, but it was a 3M on that first album. I brought it home and

transferred the 4-track over to four tracks on the 8-track. There again, that's two generations down for some of the instruments. But anyway, I was left with four empty tracks on the 8-track to record lead and backing vocals.

It should also be pointed out that you were recording in a shed basically, right?

Yes, pretty much. It was really a storage room my father had added to the garage to keep all his tools and stuff in. I think I actually bought him a little tool shed to move all the tools into and he let me take over this little addition on the back of the garage.

How big was it?

It was twenty feet long and ten feet wide. Not real big. I built a little room in the corner of this space for the tape machine. You know, it had a door and I kept the machine in there. The drums were set up over in the corner and I set the little Shure mixers up just outside of the little machine room so I could sit at the drums and see the meters. I'd set my microphones up and run them to the mixers. Then I would watch the meters as I played and set the levels. And then I'd run in there, press the record button, run back out, put the headphones on and then play. And that was kind of how it worked.

That's great. And after you finished recording all the songs, the tapes were taken to a different studio for mixdown...

Right. Sound City. Keith Olsen and Curt Boettcher mixed the album. I was good friends with Keith. He taught me everything I know about recording. Well, almost everything!

What do you remember about the mixing sessions? Were you around or was it something they did alone?

No, no - I was around. I hung out, smoked a lot of dope and made sure I was happy with what was happening. And I learned a great deal in the process. You know, we'd split the drums into multi-signals in order to be able to process and use certain elements. We could bring up the kick drum by bringing up the signal that represented the low end of the drum track and bring up the cymbals by bringing up the high one. We'd EQ, make it stereo, add echo, pan it to one side or the other. That kind of stuff. There was a lot of creating on the console.

What kind of reverb was being used, plate or chamber?

They had the plate reverb there at Sound City. I think they may have also had some chambers. No, maybe that was A&M - they had a thousand chambers. Sound City may have had some chambers too, but I'm not sure.

So, the self-titled album came out and you made a little money. What new stuff did you have heading into the follow-up, the *Mirror* album?

Well, I sold the Ampex and bought the Scully, an 8-track. The 280 I think it was. I bought it from some studio in Torrance. So that was nice. It was then that I finally bought a U-87.

Actually I bought two of them, which I still have. I started using them as overheads on drums at that time, I believe.

I've seen photos of you doing that.

Yeah, I still use them to this day. Really great microphones.

But you also continued to use the Electro-Voices?

Yes, everything was recorded with some combination of those five mics. That's all I had! I also bought a little console, a Langevin. It had eight inputs, EQ, stereo outs, the works. And since I had that, I also bought a stereo Ampex machine so I could do mixes. I've still got that machine as well. It's sitting right there in front of you - an AG-440.

But you no longer have the Langevin?

No, I didn't have any use for that any longer.

Too bad. I think it would fetch a pretty penny...

Oh well. I've got so much stuff around here as it is! I also bought better speakers around the time of *Mirror* - Rogers Sound Labs. But they had some deficiency around 3,000 cycles and a great deal of distortion there that I didn't hear while I was making the records, so I had to get rid of later. That kind of stuff. The speakers I had built for the first album, in reality were better. But I didn't know what I was doing. I was just doing it.

It was around this time that you acquired a compressor as well, wasn't it?

Oh yes. I bought two Urei 1176s, which also still live in my rack today. But I'd never used compression before I got those.

What made you want to get those units - seeing them in use at Sound City? Because Keith and Curt were definitely using them during the mixing of that first album. It's such a great compressed, wadded sound. I really love it.

Yeah, I think I probably saw them there. And I just knew that if I had them I could compress things! So then I got into heavy compression. I was experimenting and overcompressed on occasion.

I can definitely hear more compression and limiting on *Mirror* and maybe a little distortion...

Yeah, I abused it a little. But I was learning. I was using the limiter a lot on *Mirror*. I think I used it less on the third album, though.

The third album was *Farewell to Paradise*. Aptly named, I suppose, considering all the crap you were going through with the label. Was the setup during that album pretty much the same as for *Mirror*?

Yeah, it was pretty much the same. The Scully 8-track, the Urei limiters, the U-87s, the Langevin console. I still had the Electro-Voice mics. The Rogers Sound Labs speakers. I was using all the same stuff.

It's on that album that for the first time we hear a Mellotron on an Emitt Rhodes record.

Yeah, that's right. I bought one. But I can't recall what model it was... I remember replacing the cartridges to change sounds, all that. They were interesting. I mean, it was the equivalent of a sampler, really.

Too bad you didn't hold on to it. They're pretty sought after now.

Well, I don't know where I'd put it! I've got so much stuff.

Yeah, let's run down what you're using today.

It's a pretty basic setup. I've got the Tangent console here, 24 tracks of ADAT.



And analog machines I see there too.

Oh, sure, I've got the analogs too, but I usually use the ADATs these days. And, like I said, I still have the Ureis and I've got Alesis compressors and reverbs, the old Shure mic mixers. All the old mics I used to have. The Electro-Voices and the Neumanns, plus others. The Sennheiser 421 I like to use on kick a lot.

And you still have a lot of the instruments you used to own too...

Oh sure, I've still got the harmonium I used on those albums. And over here, I have the upright piano I used. Actually, I had given it to my mother after I got my grand piano, which I also still have. It sat at her house for thirty years. I just got it back.

It's great that you've kept all this stuff.

Well, I keep what I use. I've got to. I've never been rich enough to be able to go buy all new stuff.

But, this is what I do, for better or worse. Some days are better than others. I'm just taking it one day at a time.

That's all you can do.

Yeah...

