


on the cover

Getting to Know **Guy Chambers**

*Songwriter, producer, studio owner
with a penchant for vintage sound
takes delivery of the first new
Sound Techniques desk in 45 years*

By Steve Harvey

PHOTO: Mark Damisk



Guy Chambers, one of the U.K.'s most successful living songwriters, has a discerning eye to go with a dependable ear for melody. He also has an ear for audio quality, as demonstrated by the vintage and modern outboard gear and instruments arrayed around the mix position in Studio 1 at Sleeper Sounds, his production facility in West London.

“There are a lot of beautiful things in my studio; a lot of beautiful instruments, guitars and keyboards, and works of art and photos,” Chambers says.

Now there is one more aesthetically—and sonically—pleasing object in the room: a 16-channel ZR analog mixing desk from Sound Techniques, the first of its kind in the world. “I wanted something very simple and that looks beautiful. I also wanted to find something with a history,” he adds.

History is important to Chambers, certainly. The new console replaces a vintage EMI TG12345 that was in Studio 3 at Abbey Road Studios before being outfitted with wheels to become part of a mobile rig that visited the country's churches and halls to record orchestral music. “One of the reasons I bought it was that my dad, a flute player, was in the London Philharmonic,” says Chambers, adding that he most likely was recorded through that very desk.

Modern console options were considered, including several of the usual suspects. “I also

looked at vintage desks,” he explains. “But to me, this Sound Techniques desk has all the qualities of a vintage desk without any of the headaches. So I thought, ‘Why not get a new desk?’ Part of the consideration for me was the fact that Sound Techniques has backup in England.”

VINTAGE BECOMES NEW

You could be forgiven for thinking that Sound Techniques is a vintage brand. The company first emerged back in 1965, when Geoff Frost and John Wood, former staff engineers at Levy's Sound Studio in London, hand-built a one-of-a-kind mixing console at their new studio, Sound Techniques, in an old dairy near King's Road in Chelsea.

Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Fairport Convention, Nick Drake and many others flocked to the studio, attracted by the sound quality of the productions coming out of the facility. As word spread, other London studios, including Trident and De Lane Lea, clamored to buy their own Sound Techniques A Range desks, as they were named, and a brand was born.

After a pretty good run, the Sound Techniques studio and manufacturing operation closed in 1976 when Frost and Wood were unable to renew the lease on their building, which was soon taken over by Olympic Studios. No functioning A Range consoles remain in operation today, so the Sound Techniques name might easily have faded away.

Guy Chambers at the 16-channel Sound Techniques ZR xxxxxxxxxx console in Studio 1 at his own Sleeper Sounds production facility, West London.



Classic Telefunken and Pyle compressors sit atop Studio 1's wrap-around racks, which are stocked with an array of vintage and modern equipment. The ceiling clouds were inspired by the acoustic treatment at London's Royal Albert Hall, Chambers' favorite venue in the world for classical music.

PHOTO: Mark Danisik

Then in 2015, U.S. studio owner and English console aficionado Danny White and partners acquired the company and the associated intellectual property directly from Frost. White, based in Southern California, has re-engineered the mechanical aspects of the desk and, with the help of a number of veteran U.K.-based audio designers, is producing a faithful, modern reproduction with updated electronics that improve its operational efficiency, maintenance demands and product longevity.

White heralded the return of the brand at the 2018 NAMM Show by displaying a huge 48-input ZR prototype board. A number of 8-channel demo desks have also been made, but Sleeper Sounds' ZR is essentially the first production model to come off the line. The historical significance is not lost on Chambers—45 years after manufacturing closed down, a Sound Techniques desk is back in the city, barely four miles from its ancestral home in southwest London.



Drums are typically set up in one corner of the room, but Chambers is thinking of building a drum booth.

PHOTO: Mark Danisik

STARTING WITH SONGS

Although Chambers has worked with a long list of artists, including Rufus Wainwright, Carole King, Hillary Duff, Kylie Minogue, Diana Ross, Tom Jones and dozens of others, his name is not that well known in the United States. Elsewhere, Chambers came to prominence primarily through his collaborations with Robbie Williams, a former member of U.K. pop superstars Take That. Williams and Chambers first worked together in 1997 on the singer's debut solo album, *Life Thru a Lens*, which went to Number 1 in the U.K. powered by the singles "Angels" and "Let Me Entertain You."

While recognition in the U.S. has largely eluded Williams, too, his next four albums—all collaborations with Chambers—also hit the top spot in the U.K. and variously charted at Number 1 in Ireland, France, Germany, Austria, Sweden, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand. Those first five albums are among the six Williams releases listed in the Top 100 best-selling U.K. albums of all time.

Chambers picked up an armful of awards for those early projects with Williams, including three BRITs, three Ivor Novello awards and a Q Classics Songwriter award. One Novello was for "Angels," honored in 2005 as the Song of the Decade. That same year, the British public voted "Angels" as the song they would most like to have played at their funeral. "It comes from a

tradition of hymn writing,” Chambers has said of the composition.

The pair went their separate ways in 2002 but reunited in 2013 and have worked together numerous times since. Williams was one of the first artists to benefit from the new Sound Techniques desk. “I used it on his next album, which hasn’t come out yet, which I produced,” Chambers reveals. “It has a huge number of musicians on it, which was a real joy—everyone playing together and trying out different things. That’s my favorite way of making music, but I don’t often get a chance to do it.”

Dua Lipa used the ZR desk on her new record, he also reports. “She was in my studio for about seven weeks. Sam Fender is in there at the moment, for two months. He started on his own, with different writers, and now he has his band in there with tons of gear and they’re doing it live, too. That’s another good thing about my room, that you can have a band set up and everyone can see everyone else. It works really well, especially when you record drums. That’s when it really comes into its own. The drum sounds I’m getting now are really quite something.”

GUY IN THE STUDIO

His curiosity about all things audio started early in life, his fascination with studios from about the age of 15. His dad’s work as a musician moved the family from London to Liverpool when Chambers was young, and while still a schoolboy he joined a local band, Hambie and the Dance, on keyboards. At various times during the band’s relatively short existence, the lineup also included members of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, China Crisis and The Mission.

The band, signed to Virgin, spent their album advance outfitting The Pink, a now legendary studio that was central to the Liverpool music scene of the day. Opened in the 1980s, the studio hosted early recording sessions by local bands such as Dead or Alive, A Flock of Seagulls and Frankie Goes to Hollywood. The house engineer at The Pink, Steve Power, just three years older than Chambers, became his mentor in the studio. The pair later reunited to co-produce Robbie Williams’ first five solo albums.

It was at London’s Guildhall School of Music, however, where Chambers went to study composition and piano at age 18, that he really honed his production chops. “It was the only academy at that time that had a proper recording

studio,” he recalls. “There were only two of us using the 16-track studio at that time, and I was there for four years, so I got to use it a lot. That’s where I started to learn to produce.”

He’s had many studio setups since. “My first was a Fostex 4-track cassette,” he says. “Then I had an 8-track Tascam with ADATs and Cubase, back in the ‘90s. I think those Tascams are fantastic; I got pretty good results from that.” He still has the Tascam DA-88, he says, but it needs to be repaired.

His work with Williams led to bigger and better production facilities. “Once I got some

success with Robbie Williams, I got a professional studio at Mayfair Studios in Primrose Hill,” which is just north of Regent’s Park in London. “I had my own room there for quite a long time, but sadly that building got sold. Then I moved around the corner to another building in Primrose Hill, opposite Primal Scream’s studio. That’s when I bought the EMI desk. That was a happy time; it was a really nice studio.”

BUILDING SLEEPER SOUNDS

Sleeper Sounds opened nine years ago in a neighborhood Chambers selected for its

AD: Full Compass

Right page

1/2 Island

5" x 7"

Chambers personalized his Sound Techniques ZR (model name) with the inclusion of a compressor, lower left in the desk's center section.



PHOTO: Mark Danišik

Discovering Sound Techniques

Chambers was first hipped to the new ZR desk by English drummer Jeremy Stacey, who had recently come off tour with King Crimson. "Jeremy heard [a demo desk] in Nashville and said, 'If you ever sell the EMI, think about Sound Techniques; I think you'll really like it.' He knows my taste in sonics," Chambers says, adding that Stacey works frequently with producer and engineer Ethan Johns. "And Ethan has heard a lot of good things about [the desk], so he's coming to use my studio and try it out."

Chambers followed Stacey's recommendation and ordered the console before he had even heard it. "I committed to it in January 2021, so I did take a bit of a gamble," he admits. But he knew the gamble had paid off as soon as he received one of the demo ZR sidecars to test-drive. "The sound was exactly what I was hoping it to be—really focused, in your face and flattering. That's what I want from a desk."

He also wanted a bit of personalization, sonically and aesthetically: "I asked for the stereo compressor; that was an add-on. I obviously got involved with the colors, the leather and the type of wood, which is teak. It's really beautiful."



Sleeper Sounds houses a variety of instruments, including a Philips Philicorda organ and a vibraphone.

proximity to other studios and for the community. "I like the area very much. It's one of the few bohemian parts of London left."

The building is a standalone freehold, a rare commodity in London, especially with parking. No one has ever grumbled about the noise. "It doesn't touch any other building, so we've never had a complaint," he says. More importantly, perhaps, "It's got a lot of natural light, which for me is essential, because it can be quite gray here. You can see the sunsets from my studio, which is really nice over West London."

Producer, mixer and sound designer Richard Flack basically built the studio, Chambers acknowledges. "I produced Robbie Williams with him, and he also builds studios. It was Richard's idea for the island in the middle of the room," encircling the mix position and housing much of the recording equipment and keyboards. "He built the vocal booth, and we're thinking of building a drum booth."

The ceiling clouds in the *Country Life*-like interior of Sleeper's spacious Studio 1 control room are not only visually arresting but also acoustically effective, he says. "I've been going to the Royal Albert Hall since I was a kid. It's my favorite venue in the world for classical music. I've always thought the hanging saucers [there] are particularly fantastic, so I thought having a little bit of that in my studio was a nice idea—

and they work really well."

With a long history of putting together personal studios, Chambers has, not surprisingly, amassed quite a collection of audio gear. Just a few of the vintage equipment highlights include Telefunken, Neve and Cadac mic preamps; Neve and PYE compressors; AKG and Great British Spring reverbs; and an enviable selection of mics, including a variety of Neumann U 47 FET, U 87 Ai and U 89 models, as well as examples from Telefunken, Coles and STC.

The instrument list, especially the keyboards, is no less impressive. Chambers replaced an aging Mellotron with a potted plant, he admits, laughing, but there's a new digital Mellotron M4000D available as well as a 1922 Steinway Model D grand piano, a Hammond B3 organ and a Hohner Clavinet D6, among many others.

"I've been collecting for 25 years, and I still look out for stuff now," he says, admitting that there is one unicorn on his list. "I'm always looking for a celeste; they're very, very difficult to find in the U.K."

You might expect that for someone who spends all his time writing and producing with other artists, Chambers would want constant access to such a carefully curated collection of gear, but he is happy to share. "I actually have four rooms in my building," he says. "When Studio 1 is being used I go down to Studio 2.



PHOTO: Mark Danišik

Management By Miloco

Sleeper Sounds Studio's third-party bookings are managed by Miloco, which began as a single London studio in 1984 and now boasts a directory of more than 170 facilities worldwide. The two dozen or so studios that Miloco works with in the U.S. range from Bear Tracks and Blackbird, through EastWest and Jungle City, to Sound Kitchen and Welcome to 1979.

Chambers has been working with Miloco for the past eight years, during which time Sleeper Sounds has hosted a who's-who of music royalty, including Coldplay, Frank Ocean, Ed Sheeran, Nile Rodgers, Annie Lennox and James Blunt, to name a few. "Miloco manages the money," he says. "That, for me, is worth their cut because I don't have to worry about getting money from any of the labels. And quite often they get the money up front. It's been a good relationship."

The Miloco organization also encompasses design and construction division Miloco Builds,

Miloco

new and used equipment seller Miloco Gear, drum sample library expert Drumdrops, and a new producer management division, Miloco Management.

"I used to engineer my sessions when I was a lot younger, but I don't really like doing it now; I like just concentrating on the music. So I also use their engineers quite a lot," Chambers says. "That's very handy for me. I get to meet young, talented people who have fresh ideas and keep me from becoming too set in my ways. I like having the energy of somebody who hasn't got all the baggage that I've got. They're very good at mentoring new talent at Miloco. I like doing that, too; I'm always mentoring people."

So quite often I'm in a small room, but I don't mind; I like sharing my space. I like the fact that it inspires other artists."

WHAT'S NEXT?

After 35 years on the pop merry-go-round, Chambers has been expanding his horizons. "I find the whole co-writing thing now quite dispiriting," he says. "I don't really enjoy it anymore. I'm talking about trying to write a hit that's going to go on the radio in the U.K. That's not something that excites me, and I don't think it plays to my strengths, so I'm at a point in my career where I'm focusing now on musicals.

"I did a musical with Robbie Williams, *Boy in the Dress*," he continues. The show, adapted from the book by David Walliams, co-creator of the BBC's *Little Britain* comedy series, debuted at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 2019. "And I'm working on another one now. I'm more interested in the theater and getting my music out that way."

Songs written and co-written by Chambers have also been featured on TV and in film, from 1997's *Picture Perfect* to 2020's *Ted Lasso*. "I did a film last year called *Christmas Number One*. It did really well in this country," he reports. "It's a Christmas film, but there's a lot of comedy so I could write funny songs as well, which I'm quite good at. That was really good fun."

In short, he says, "I'd rather work on things



PHOTO: Mark Danišik

Movie one-sheets and prints of The Beatles and Serge Gainsbourg look down on the 1922 Steinway Model D concert grand piano in the corner of the room.

Overflow
text