



# 'WESTERN' WINDS OF CHANGE

He's one man behind the console who's only too well-known. Eric Pillai has engineered hits such as Aashiqui 2 that recently won him a GiMA Award is a personality in the film industry who has seen highs, lows, and surprises in his journey to the top. But above all Pillai has changed the face of sound studios, the mastering/mixing industry and revolutionised audio technology in India to deliver quality music that we love to hear. In a freewheeling interview with Divya Naik, he openly discusses the dynamics of sound design and more

**H**ow surprising is the statement, "I never wanted to be a sound engineer"? Well, that's the first thing that Eric Pillai says when we ask him to narrate his furtive journey into this industry. "I was 10 when I wanted to play the guitar. My uncle Tony used to come over on Sundays and we used to watch a VHS tape of compilation of all the hits by The Police which my aunt had got me in 1986. That was the only day we got to do this routine. That's how my interest in music was cultivated," he narrates. Pillai's interest in sound started with a video titled Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic. It had an SSL console and his uncle enlightened him about the gear saying it was a mixer. Banks' father used to run a studio called 4D in Worli at Century Bhavan; equipped with a Mackie and Pillai ended up going there only to realise this was his calling, very early on.

## BRIDGES TO LONDON

Lucky as he almost always was, Eric Pillai got his first expensive nylon stringed guitar, a Gibson F-cut at the age of 11. Pillai's aunt lived in London where he used to go for vacations. A true fan, one of the first few songs that he was taught were of The Police and Elton John. "This happened in 1988 and the guitar was bought from Chapel Music Store on Bond Street. But it was only when I started going to school that I felt like

pursuing music fulltime. I decided to drop out as I was anyway travelling every year to London. I frequently visited W H Smith - the book store as well as the Town Hall library and read magazines - you have a lot of access to information which isn't the case here."

Back in India, Pillai's interactions with his uncle were consistent and knowledge started to creep in with questioning and educating each other. However, his resolve was firm and London called him back as he enrolled for guitar classes at an institute as also taking lessons with John Mizarolli who had a band named Atomic Rooster. "Sound was a part of the music making process - it was one entity as my focus however was only playing the guitar," he shares.

Mizarolli had a huge set up - a workshop and a studio. After lessons Pillai used to help him with work in the studio. "They were already working with MIDI on computers - this was 1993. We were working on 2 inch tapes and though Illyaraja had Pro Tools, the import rules were not great."

Mizarolli asked him what he did in his free time after visiting to Acton once a week to which Pillai didn't have a concrete answer. He was suggested to get into engineering as he was good with technology and SAE Institute of Technology came into the picture. What drew Pillai to SAE after receiving the brochure from the institute was an SSL console. But

then after getting average reviews about the faculty from others, the idea was dropped. "I could not afford it either," he reasons. "And luckily since I used to read audio media, I spotted the City Of Westminster College which had sound engineering and lighting courses. I enrolled there but since it was run by the government, there was a screening process. I got through, despite being nervous!"

## WAY BACK HOME

It started from there. Eric frequented studio and did covers with fellow students who had their own band- punk versions of Spanish and Portuguese songs. The college had Session 8 and Cakewalk but they were still taught to edit on tape which according to him was a great starting point. "DAWs are easy to work with; they also had the locking machine which isn't available right now in the market. We visited real studios as a part of our internship. I assisted in live shows as well and the course got over in '96," he avers.

Post college, Pillai spent time in the British Music Archive opposite the Imperial College where I lived. One could access music from any part of the world - audio, video, cassettes, CDs, vinyls out there which became an educational process for him. Watching instructional videos and concerts, one day, he chanced upon a picture of Famous Studios, touted to be one of the best on the cover of



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the magazine Audio Media. "I took down the contact information and I wrote a letter to them requesting to hire me as their assistant. That was in February '96. It was brand new back then and is now owned by Anant Roongta. The chief engineer of Galactica A was Farhad K Dadyburjor who today has his own set up." Famous studios was designed by Andy Munroe and Pillai got a reply after three weeks where he was told to go to Munroe Acoustics for an interview. "Amber Naqvi who was the designer and consultant for the studio interviewed me. I was hired for a salary of Rs. 10,000."

## CHAPTER ONE: GALACTICA

Eric reached India and commenced work without any break. However, his very first day turned out to be the worst one as he stayed on till late, missed his train and went back to the studio to stay there till 4 am. "Surprisingly, I was told off saying that no one is paid that kind of money and my pay was reduced." The studio was brilliant, with great gear and an amazing vibe. But the pressure and environment made his stint to be only of eight months.

Aur Pyaar Ho Gaya starring Aishwarya Rai for the first time and with music by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and arrangement by Amar Haldipur had gone to the floors. Eric had no idea of how to work with Indian instruments as he had been trained abroad. Owing to his limited knowledge, he was ragged and singled out. Also, since the studio was flashy it was very expensive to be hired. The charges, Pillai says included Rs 2,700 per hour plus operational taxes and also Farhad's fees as well which costed Rs 3,000 per session. As time passed, Eric wished to quit the business. He even almost ended up doing that by going for an interview of a travel agent but destiny had otherwise in store for him.

While taking a bus back home, I noticed a lot of musicians hanging around the premises of the studio Spectral Harmony and

wondered what the fuss was all about. "I wrote to the chief engineer Bishwadeep Chatterjee asking him for a job but did not hear from them at all. One day, I was introduced to Chatterjee by a friend at an even and I gradually got a call from him to join them for the same offering." Spectral Harmony was designed by Daman Sood.

## CHAPTER TWO: GRADUATION TO A RECORDIST

"I used to assist Bishwadeep and at night had access to all the gear. There was 24 track two inch tape, Otari MTR90 II or 3 plus, two 16 track D88s and ADATS. We also had the eight track recorded for CD. So everything was on tape and they used to give it on 16 track bus out D88s to go for film mixing and backup. I practiced mixing and mastering out there.

Then Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam came to the studio for mixing and mastering and Eric rightly terms this as a landmark project since "Sanjay Leela Bhansali changed many things with this film." They had done the tracking and Bhansali wanted more in terms of premixing. I said, "Why do you need to do so when we have a clock generator?" There was a MIDI man where one can convert timecodes (SMPTE or FSK) to MIDI clock. That way one can send out either MTC or Clock

*Mithoon works on Logic Audio and we have an identical set-up. He does not export MIDI and he sends me his entire session with all the instruments as MIDI, unless someone has programmed a beat - that is sent as a WAV file. So I mix all his stuff on Logic.*

and lock any other piece of gear that he wished to. "Then why should one pre-mix? I said that I could lock everything in an hour. I did multi-tracking where you could lock as many devices as you want to - and that is where my education came in. Always the rule was to click on channel one to record on the two inch tape to give musicians. Number 24 was your FSK which was the Roland SMPTE generator or, you record SMPTE."

Eric used to take FSK, put it in his MIDI

man and convert it to SMPTE. He then gave the SMPTE timecodes to his D88s, ADAT and the SADIe. Suddenly the team had 22 tracks of tape, 16 tracks of ADAT and 8 tracks of SADIe which was a lot of material to work with. "After premixing, you are stuck with what you have but with what I did, the team had a lot of tracks and could record at ease. You could record everything separately in a detailed manner. We had a 32 channel console anyway with big and small faders and there was automation."

Since Eric knew about technology, everyone got comfortable with him as they began to see his mettle. Bhansali at times used to change arrangements after the recordings were done and though he was called crazy Eric believes that he paved the path to the future. And to make things easier, the team started backing up tapes and kept them separately for the purpose of re-recording. "It was not bar and beats but we took things back at times onto SADIe.

*I think people learn on their own, you cannot teach anyone to do anything. People have to be here with me to learn, I have never had a student.*

Dholi Taro that you hear is the fourth version that went on to become the final one. This happened with all the songs."

But if you listen to the album even now, you can hear a lot of detailing. It was elaborate arrangement making it an amazing piece of work. There was a lot of time invested in the project and it won an award as well. Eric ended up working fulltime without going home. Chatterjee had left the entire project on Eric's shoulders for recording and there were 54 tracks to be done by him and this made him a recording engineer.

## CHAPTER THREE: DOING THE DUET

In 1999, Spectral Harmony got a call saying that Euphoria wanted to record their second album Phir Dhoom. By then Pillai was recording everything and Bishwadeep came in only for mixing. The band came in with multi FX pedals and Pillai was flabbergasted, "Are you going to record like this? We need guitar amps and mics." That caused him to step in as a co-producer. He got a lot of amps - Fender twins, JC Roland 120 and so on and told them to track. "We did 4X4 tracks of layering and even though Palash Sen was in Delhi he was being informed about what was happening. When he came in for the recording, I realised that he was someone who would sing in a single take." Pillai told him to do certain parts again.

After tracking Eric used to also track the

balance and hand it over to the band for listening and feedback. On the day of mixing, when Chatterjee went to do his job he was told by the band that they wanted Eric to mix the album. "Bishwadeep was confident about my skills, and that was my first job as a mixer," he says, reminiscently.

At the same time, Pritam used to do AVs, voiceover and corporate work at night at the studio. He also did an album which Eric recorded and Bishwadeep mixed. After Phir Dhoom, Pritam started working on the movie Tere Liye by Sanjay Gadhvi. Back then, Pritam-Jeet was a famous duet and the split happened much later. "I recorded it and Bishwadeep was mixing it but Dil Dhapak was the promotional song. Pritam came upto me one night and asked if I could mix it for him. I was taken aback - this was a film and not an album - I was worried if it would hurt Bishwadeep da and told them to go and ask him if it was okay. He came back and told me that Bishwadeep had given the green signal and I did not double-check at all."

The song was mixed and it went on the album. And one day, Bishwadeep questioned, "Pritam, did you mix this song again? It doesn't sound like my mix..." Pritam was fumbling and Bishwadeep guessed only too well that Eric had mixed the track which went on to become the only single from the

album that worked. That was the beginning of Eric Pillai's long-lasting relationship with Pritam that included all the projects that the composer worked on.

The duo then did Mere Yaar Ki Shaadi Hai, a Yash Raj project that was initially mixed on Daman Sood's studio Western Outdoor with Bablu da as the arranger. Yash Raj wanted a promotional song and hence Pritam composed Sharara Sharara with Salim-Sulaiman as the arrangers. He told Gadhvi, the film's director that the mix by Sood was not working and that Pillai must do it. Aditya Chopra was managed to be convinced and they all came to the newly renovated Spectral Harmony Studio that had opened in 2001. Pillai recalls, "I used Bishwadeep's room for recording but otherwise I operated in a small space. Aditya was a little hesitant but then I also ended up working on Hum Dono Jaisa. Asha ji also grew fond of me and started recording everything at my place."

Also, note that Sharara Sharara is not in 440 concert pitch. Eric took the mix, reduced the speed and now if you check the track on a keyboard you will realise that it is detuned. "It is in 438 concert pitch, warmer and sweeter. And from thereon, experimenting of speed started to happen. Then we did Dhoom and all Yash Raj films came to us," he enlightens.

*Now there is so much work that we have started to split things and do a few songs in one album, giving it a different character and colour. We put masters together but the mixes sounds different.*

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MASTER

Pillai then worked with Sajid-Wajid on Mujhse Shaadi Karoge - till then, the duo used to record only in the big studios. He had also met Adnan Sami in 1998 when he was producing an album for Asha ji. So when Sami started work on Tera Chehra, the album came to Eric. "It was an interesting project as it was recorded live," he says. "People started asking where it was recorded since the album sounded so different." The tabla and dholak sound was quantile and was achieved by quantising everything to the programmed rhythm, and that made the songs tight in terms of the reverb - it became a tone that started trending back then. Some people commented, "Tabla dholak ka sound drums jaisa hai..." But then that was the point which was to be established.

Till then, Pillai reached a stage where he rather not have anyone tamper with his work and also started mastering on his own. "You need to do everything since you have

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a greater clarity on it. Yes you do interact with the composer since he has conceived the entire song – then why to involve any third party?”

Chapter Five: Future Sound Of Bombay

The industry went through a slump, a rough period in 2004 where there was no work for anyone. Jeet-Pritam split and they had worked on four movies, three of them being, Mudda, Agneepath, and Fun2shh. Luck beckoned Pillai again and Adnan Sami called him to ask if he'd like to accompany him on a world tour of Tera Chehra. Both of them travelled to Belgium, Africa, and Middle-East.

But again, in 2005 there was a financial crisis and everyone boycotted Spectral Harmony, with the studio eventually burning down to ashes. Pillai reveals, "Nobody had been paid for 11 months. People lost songs – the little hope of getting some money was all gone. I promised everyone to stand by me and that we would work something out."

After two weeks Adnan called him again for a world tour to US and UK including 19 shows. At things started to fall in place for everyone. "I was out for 40 days and I had no money in the first week till I was paid advances. By the time I reached London I had about two lakh rupees and that's when I decided to start my own company." Eric went to Turnkey at Charring

Cross road and bought all the gear he needed – the original Logic 7 Pro and the RME. On returning to India, he invested in the Yamaha MSP 5 speakers and made his own computer with a friend Jatin Sharma.

A set-up was put in place in a bedroom's at his friend's place in Malad where he stay put for two months before moving into a MHADA premises in Jogeshwari. "I just had a gadda and it was insane since there were no acoustics. I made two wooden stands to keep the speakers. I had the RME on the ground and the monitor screen in the middle." That only proved that it wasn't a world class set-up that was needed to make good music and with minimal tools as well one could accomplish whatever one wished to. The projects delivered from there were some of the best - d Gangster, Woh Lahme, Pyar Ke Side Effects, Anwar, Bass Ek Pal. The composers were progressive and they didn't care where all this was happening. "I had Nuendo 2.2 since I could not afford Pro Tools; but I also had Logic and Waves. That was the start of Future Sounds Of Bombay."

## THE FINALE

Gangster was the project that changed the industry's future. Pritam and the team had to go to Kolkata to double check everything as it was the first project that they had got from Vishesh films. While hearing

the master at night Pritam said that if the album doesn't work then everybody's careers would be over. But it worked and what's more is that Partner also succeeded for Sajid-Wajid.

Eric asserts, "Everything skyrocketed and then I could quote anything. From thereon, mixing engineers started to make money. They charged Rs 8,000 to 10,000 earlier and now the figure upped to Rs 50,000 or so. Freelancing

was a viable option – mixing engineers had a clientele, a fee and a studio." This was in 2007 where studio engineering became a profitable business. Pillai today charges double of the existing market rate. From a salaried employee studio engineers became managers of their own business and made money.

*People were wondering if we were 'redoing' Aashiqui. But Aashiqui 2 talks about love today. The album was like a cruise, a smooth sail and there was no pressure at all.*

## THE WORKFLOW

There are no rules about how I work – different people have their own style. I have tried templates and they haven't worked for me. I always save my inserts for each song. There is a chain of plug-ins I put and if they sound good I save them. I have an entire list of my settings and it's good as a starting point but it doesn't work always.

The same artist must have played many songs but it doesn't work as each song is different – a different key, a different tempo and hence it doesn't work because the insert starts to differ. The room it was played in, the day and the mood may all be different.

Each day I get 60 to 70 tracks or sessions of WAV files, open 25 to 30 groups, assigning them, naming them, colour coding them, opening FX and thus two hours are spent making the sessions.

Everything comes onto my console, my faders and the 16 channels. I prepare my sessions in that manner. I distribute them neatly into bass, kick drums, solos, harmonies, vocals, vocal effects etc. I might have 25 to 30 sub-groups inside but then I am assigning them to 16. So everything is independent.

Finally, I can either ride my faders or groups that I want to – there could be six guitars clubbed into one, I can either EQ or process individually or by group also. Hence I don't need an assistant.

When it all comes down to 16 stems I have to open the channels and hit record and print it. Plus my stereo two tracks go through the EQ, compressions, and goes into the mastering machine and I track it all. A lot of my processing happens in DAW.

I don't like running Indian percussions through these compressors. The dynamics are messed. I do it in the box by just adding a little EQ. The chain is simple and uncomplicated.

## THE GEAR

The set-up put together is a hybrid – the best of both worlds which would work for me. I made it in 2007 by getting a chain together. I was the first engineer to acquire the Dangerous Falcon, the Crane Song and the IBIS. There were no dealers for them. In 2006 Sajid-Wajid were doing a private album and they wanted to master it in London and we went to Revolution Digital's Naveen Ahmed. That's where I discovered the non-mastering version of IBIS.

I got Royer Ribbon mics and the Adam Speakers despite nobody using them. Shiv Sood got the dealership for them. Then I got Purple Audio and the Manleys as well. People don't use Nick Whitaker has designed the room. He has also designed Palash Sen's studio in Delhi, a club in Kolkata and how he is doing Mithoon's room as well.

I also have the Matrix Mixing Console and since it is modular I can put things the way I wish to, adding things and building a chain. I have a Steinberg 2.2 and I will be upgrading it. I have Nuendo and I use Cubase for mastering.