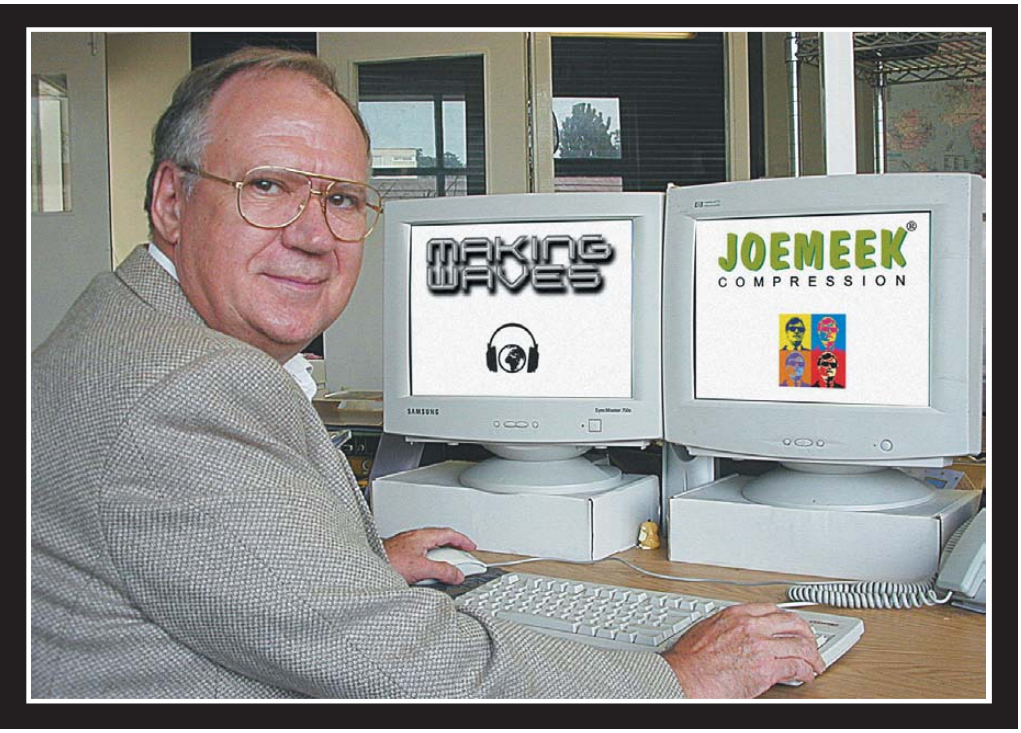
you wish



What do you wish you'd thought of? Joemeek design supremo and industry veteran, TED FLETCHER, says that for him it's noise suppression and EQ.

AT A youthful 63, Ted Fletcher is a qualified civil engineer, writes music, plays piano, guitar, reeds and violin ('very badly,' he says), and formed Alice Mixers in 1969 in Windsor. He sold out in the early 1980s to build voice communication systems for the financial markets in New York and London and set up the Joemeek company in 1994 to bring back optical compression. Ted currently operates from Torquay, UK where he designs, markets and sells microphones, mic amplifiers, compressors and equalisers world-wide. He has been married to Barbara for 43 years and has three grown up, successful, sons.

'I'm hardly an "if only" person,' says Ted. 'The music business has been kind to the Fletcher family over the years. From the time that we first met Alan Hawkshaw* at Butlins in 1962, and he offered to introduce our singing trio (brother Guy**, Barbara and myself) to a man called Joe Meek, life has been full for all of us. I was designing and building sound equipment even then. A tape recorder in 1956 led to microphone amplifiers and mixers, and, once Joe had introduced me to the wonders of compression during our recording sessions (just listen to 'Johnny remember me'), I was addicted to dynamics believing that anything was possible with good design.

'Through the days of early Alice mixers, film sound stage mixers, radio production studios and the first "bedroom studio" mixers, I hugely enjoyed developing circuits and techniques that were sometimes lateral and sometimes plain off the wall. Those were exciting days surrounded by exciting people. I was working with circuit designers like Steve Dove, Mike Law, Mike Sells, Barry Porter and many more, and bouncing our ideas off established figures in the business like Yes, The Who, and Jethro Tull. There are two landmark electronic ideas that I sometimes think about and smile because they were so pivotal to the whole music industry.'

Q. You're talking about reducing noise rather than creating it.

'That wonderful idea, dreamed up by Ray Dolby, was back when even I was in short trousers; the concept of noise masking. From that single idea — that a musical signal will mask background noise occurring at similar frequencies — a whole industry was born.'

Q. Was it a conceptual leap or a creative leap?

'I think it was both; and that's the whole wonder of the idea. In historic hindsight, it's easy to see how musical signals can mask out noise. The music is what the brain is listening to; the noise is an irrelevance and should be ignored. That was the conception. The creative leap was the part where there will be a requirement to get rid of the noise physically. From a 21st century viewpoint, it actually doesn't make too much sense; we don't have a noise problem nowadays. But that could well be a result of Dolby's work!'

Q. A good idea then?

'Although I would not dream of offering any detraction from the brilliance of the concept, I must suggest that Ray never dreamed at the time, that the idea would hold such an important place in the industry in the 20th century. And yet I can truthfully say that I have no envy whatsoever. Ray's future was ordained from that moment; he was glued to his path and his management was impeccable. If I had developed this idea, I would have missed the challenges that hit me in the more general equipment business: the cul-de-sacs, the wild dreams, the excitement of never knowing where the next idea would lead.'

Q. Tell me about your second wish.

'It came from a very different person. He was an academic working for a large company in London. His name is Peter Baxendall and I expect that many readers will raise an eyebrow trying to think why they vaguely know the name.'

Q. An unsung hero?

'I think that Peter Baxendall is the most important unsung hero of the whole sound industry world-wide. That's a bold statement, but this is why. In the mid 1950s during the development of record players, EMI recognised that the sound from the loudspeaker could be improved in some circumstances, through the use of "equalisation". Up until then, equalisers had been either expensive professional filter devices used in film production and recording studios, or very simple tone controls that gave bass boost or top cut to domestic record players. Peter Baxendall took a lateral look at feedback amplifier design, and came up with a circuit that offered high levels of both boost and cut, but with phase compensation effects that mimicked nature.

'In an amazingly short time the simplicity and brilliance of the technique was grabbed by everyone in the industry, myself included. Peter, as he told me in a letter many years later, never profited from his design; he didn't earn a penny from it but I think there may have been a couple of lunches! Now in the 21st century, his idea is just as valid as it was 50 years ago. His circuit ideas are used everywhere that sound is reproduced. The finest digital equalisers emulate the effects and pay homage to his original thinking all those years ago.

'Once again, I have no envy but lots of admiration. It's an idea that would have given anyone a continuing tingle of pleasure, and, I think, pride.

As designers, we can easily lose sight of the *raison-d'etre* of our business; we can become immersed in technology and glorify electronics when really it's the music that matters. I'm constantly delighted that I have been able to produce equipment upon which wonderful sounds are made. I admire many of my contemporaries, yet I would not change for a moment what continues to be a voyage of adventure for me, a partnership of technical and musical effort.' □

Footnote

*Alan Hawkshaw played keyboards with The Original Checkmates with Emil Ford. He went on to become an established session player, and writer of TV and film scores.

**Brother, Guy Fletcher, (not to be confused with son, Guy Fletcher - keyboards with Dire Straits) became a spectacularly successful songwriter, and is now engrossed in music publishing, copyright and royalty law, and music business company administration.