

## White House: more a recording studio than presidential palace?

While the integrity of the tapes handed over by President Nixon has been laboriously (and inconclusively) debated, audio engineers have been puzzling themselves with one rather more basic question. What, they ask, was the President of the United States doing with a self-bugging system based on *amateur* tape recorders and simple microphones that produced tapes of such poor audio quality that recorded passages are open to various different interpretations?

To many people, the whole concept just hasn't rung true. An article by Ed Sanders in the 2 May issue of the New York newspaper *Village Voice* has crystallised many suspicions by detailing how the White House is wired for, not amateur kit, but highly professional sound recording. This inevitably raises the question of whether the tapes being handed over by the President are the only tapes available, and whether they are original live recordings or edited dubs from professional masters.

Sanders has found himself an ex-employee of the US firm, Scully-Metrotech, who has spilled the beans over just what recording equipment his old employers supplied to the White House and how it is installed there and serviced. Not surprisingly, the source of the leak remains anonymous, but there is a very definite ring of truth in everything he is quoted as saying. It has, for instance, long been known that the White House owns a substantial quantity of Dolby noise reduction equipment. This would clearly be of no use whatsoever on its own! Now it emerges that the White House has no less than 14 professional Scully recorders, together with studio mixing consoles and cassette duplicators.

### One big studio

The nerve centre for recording operations is on the first floor of the Executive Office Building (EOB) near the Oval Office. It is claimed that virtually every room in the White House (with the presumed exception of the President's private quarters) is fitted out with microphones connected to the mixing consoles and recorders via a patch-bay of the type found in all modern recording studios. In fact, the nature of the electronic equipment used makes the White House appear to be exactly like one big recording studio complex.

Scully is one of the world's largest and most respected manufacturers of studio gear. In the US, however, the company is also well known for a very specialised product—a slow-running logging recorder. Machines of this type churn through large reels of tape at the super-low recording speed of 15/16 inch per second and thereby enable radio stations (or Presidents)

to keep a complete record of everything said during the day.

According to the Scully engineer who talked, the machines were installed in the EOB by the White House Communications Agency and included not only mono and stereo machines (which will almost certainly be using conventional 1/4 inch tape) but also both portable and permanently installed eight-track machines. The portable machines are for outside conference work and the permanent machines for White House use. Their cost in the US is in the order of \$12 000 each. Machines of the eight-track format use tape which is 1 inch wide and (regardless of whether they run at studio speeds such as 7.5, 15 or 30 inches per second or logging speeds of 15/16 inches per second) open up whole new vistas of possible skullduggery when used in conjunction with the other type of equipment installed.

### Just like pop

It is, for instance, now an everyday occurrence in modern pop recording for musicians to accompany themselves—by recording on a series of tracks, one after the other—or to play with musicians they have never met—by adding on their tracks at a later date, in the same or even a different studio. But the single most important advantage of multi-track taping is that it enables options to be left open until the last possible moment. For instance, a voice or instrument on one track of a studio recording can either be featured when the multi-track tape is "reduced" (mixed down from its original 32, 24, 16 or 8 separate tracks to the final mono or stereo master) or it can be omitted altogether. It can even be replaced by a fresh recording of the same passage by a different performer. By the same token a multi-track recording of President Nixon discussing matters of state with his aides leaves the options open until the last moment when the time comes to mix-down into mono.

Some idea of the degree of sophistication which modern multi-track music recording has reached can be gleaned from the Ravi Shankar recordings in the Concert for Bangladesh on the Apple record label. Even the most highly trained musical or technical ear is unlikely to detect that, for much of the time, the tabla heard accompanying Shankar during the recording of his evening performance was, in fact, recorded during the afternoon performance. A fault on the microphone covering the tabla in the evening left a gap on the appropriate track of the tape and this gap was subsequently filled with a repair track built up from segments of the tabla track recorded earlier in the day.

There is no reason to suppose that

the Scully equipment reputedly in the White House has ever been used in this way. But clearly it could—and once it is acknowledged that the technical facilities are available for producing mono Nixon tapes from multi-track originals a whole new series of fascinating questions arises. Most significantly, if the equipment was not used in this way, how was it used and why should multi-track equipment be installed if not to leave the mix-down options open? And why did President Nixon install his own amateur Sony system when the building was already fully wired for sound?

It is believed that the professional installation dates back to the Johnson and even Kennedy Administrations but was augmented on Richard Nixon's instructions. The secret Sony system dates back only to President Nixon and the bombshell announcement of its existence did not come until after the Watergate storm clouds were brewing. So was the amateur system ever actually used for live recording? Or could it be conceivably that the tapes made on these amateur Nixon machines were dubbed via jump-leads from a mono Scully, rather than recorded live via microphones? Technically, there is no problem in this—after all every Musicassette in the record shops started life this way—but it is debatable whether the final product would be mistaken for an original live mono recording.

### No comment

In an effort to answer some of the questions, we asked Scully-Metrotech and the White House to comment on whether the reports of Scully equipment in the EOB were correct and on the uses to which any such equipment has been put. At the time of going to press, there was no reply from either source. But when checking with the *Village Voice* to see whether either Scully or the White House had denied any of the original disclosures, the *Voice* replied that it too has heard nothing from either party. It is also worth bearing in mind that Scully recently moved from Connecticut to California and underwent a complete change of staff; this could account for a previously loyal employee suddenly deciding to talk to the Press.

A continual puzzle to date has been the question of where President Nixon could find anyone to doctor his tapes who would be so expert as to make a success of the job, so reliable as to remain silent, so immoral as to have no scruples, and so naive as to believe he would survive afterwards. The answer perhaps is to be found in the ex-Scully engineer's incidental remark that the White House sound studio is manned by Army personnel.

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