

# REAL WORLD STUDIOS: A-T 50 SERIES LAUNCH

**There are some locations that have the wow factor, and Real World Studios is one of them. Located in the sleepy village of Box, just outside of Bath, this facility is world famous, and owned by Genesis founder, Peter Gabriel. Commercially, it's as active as it's ever been, and the facility's client roster is right out the top drawer: Alicia Keys, Beyoncé, Tom Jones, Guy Garvey, and Paolo Nutini have all made records here recently, just to name a few. For 24 hours only, I'm a resident at this epic studio (room 6, four-poster bed, and my own sink), and along with 50 plus media and studio owners from around the globe, it's going to be a day of fitting between Real World's Big Room (control) and Wood Room (live) to listen to Audio-Technica's 50 Series microphones. So let's dive in.**

**Words Paul Watson**

**T**HE SUN IS SHINING, THE SETTING COULDN'T be better, and after I drag myself away from the mesmerising waterfall adjacent to the Big Room, we are underway with a bit of a meet and greet, followed by a very nice lunch (albeit vegetarian). People have travelled from all over the world to be here today for the 50 Series launch. For the most part, we'll be based in the Big Room, which boasts Real World's legendary SSL console as its centrepiece, accompanied by oodles of analogue outboard.

The 50 Series comprises three high end studio microphones, the AT5040 studio vocal microphone, the AT5045 instrument condenser, and the latest member of the family, the flagship AT5047, which may look just like the AT5040, but there's a bit more to it than that, as we'll soon find out.

After a welcome to the company, and a video message from Audio-Technica's Kazuo Matsushita (whose father founded the company back in the '60s), it's time for

the first live performance in the studio's Wood Room. We are ushered to the room's balcony area, so we're looking down on the musicians; and you can tell instantly that it's a beautifully treated room with a great acoustic, so we're going to be in for a bit of a treat.

Furthermore, Real World's resident engineer, Oli Jacobs, is at the helm when it comes to mic placement and audio capture, so he'll treat this just like any other Real World session, giving us as transparent an opinion as he can of the kit. Just another day to him, which is just what we want.

First up is Kweku Mainoo, who's recently returned from a musical trip across Africa. Oli has positioned an AT5047 on vocals, and an AT5040 on Kweku's acoustic guitar. I notice the artist is a little further away from the source than I'd like, but who am I to argue?

As Kweku starts doing his thing, it also becomes apparent he's pretty light on the strings (no pick in sight), and his voice is







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pretty gentle. It'll be interesting to see how this sounds back in the Big Room later on.

For his next song, Kweku moves onto the African harp, which looks equally as difficult to play as a regular harp! Oli has miked this up with a clip-on ATM350a and an AT5045 instrument condenser. We admire his playing, a round of applause erupts, and we return to the Big Room to hear the results.

### **Back In the Room**

As Oli pulls up the first track – guitar and vocals – he explains that he is playing it to us as recorded, dry as a bone. It sounds incredible. Then, he tells us he's *slightly* lied, and admits he couldn't resist a tickle of compression on the vocal, courtesy of an LA2. But so what.

First impressions? Wow. As we listen through, it's just incredibly warm, and extremely honest sounding. I really can't believe the tone of the guitar, especially considering how Kweku hardly seemed to touch it. It's still right in your face. I wonder what it sounds like strummed? Epic, presumably.

Oli A/Bs the vocal and the guitar for us, and despite the inevitable spillage between the two – as is the nature of any live recording – there is still a separation of sorts. Oli seems very impressed, too, and I get the feeling if he wasn't,

he would tell us!

Next, he pulls up the African harp recording, first just the ATM350a signal, which, being a clip-on, comes with a bit of noise, which Oli admits he 'kind of likes'. Then he plays us the AT5045 signal, which is as true and pure as you could hope for. Again, it's terrific audio capture, and Oli seems equally as impressed as I am.

Next, we are given a brief history of A-T, from its humble beginnings back in 1962, all the way up to present day. What's particularly interesting is the presentation by Edward Forth on artist relations – an eclectic roster of bands and artists ranging from Royal Blood and Enter Shikari, to sound artist and composer, Nick Ryan, Hungarian piano prodigy, Peter Bence, and Italian sound artist, Chiara Luzzana, all rely on A-T kit for their workflow. Also, James Bay and his production manager provide a short video interview on how key the company's AE5400 mic has been since he and his band started out. Fascinating stuff.

We are then taken through the microphones in detail: namely the differences between the AT5040 and AT5047. The AT5040 spec is hugely impressive in itself, of course: 5dB self noise, and a staggering signal to noise ratio of 89dB. But to understand why the AT5047 was made, Audio-Technica insists, we need to

understand 'the dark side' of the AT5040.

Sooner or later, when you put a loud signal in front of the AT5040, if your input is not good enough (let's say you don't have a 72-channel SSL, for example), this mic will start to resonate, and will drain too much current, so everything kind of breaks together.

“In other words, it's a diva,” smiles, A-T's product manager, Alex Leppges, a little tongue-in-cheek. “However, what you do get from the 5040 is a very pure signal; you just have to know how to treat her.”

With the AT5047, Audio-Technica has ultimately increased the impedance [to 150 Ohms], and installed a transformer output, which was actually developed in-house. A transformer mic has a different tonality to a non-transformer mic, of course, but the big question is: when should we use an AT5040, and when should we use an AT5047?

In short, pull out the AT5040 when you want to capture in the most natural possible way; and if you want something a little more versatile, grab an AT5047, with the wider dynamic range. The 5047 is slightly more universal; the AT5040 is perhaps more for the purist.

So now it's time for the next live performance of the afternoon, from the Chris Woods Groove Orchestra – and what a band this is. We head



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back to the Wood Room, and this time there are four musicians below us: Chris himself, guitarist; a tabla player; a double bassist, and percussionist on a marimba and a hang drum, the latter of which is a tuned instrument, which looks like it might have been stolen from Area 51. Oli gets the guys to do a quick run through, but he has positioned the 50 Series A-T mics on past experience: what he knows might work well, and where.

“Stabbing in the dark a bit, to be honest,” he tells us, which gets a laugh. From what I can make out, he has an AT5040 on guitar and hang drum, an AT4080 ribbon mic on the marimba, an AT5047 and AT4081 ribbon on the double bass, and a stereo pair of AT5045s on the tablas. He reiterates how beautiful sounding this room is, then disappears back to his console.

### **Final Take**

The band plays for a good 20 minutes, and they are tremendous – to say Chris Woods *feels* this music is a wild understatement, and it’s a genuine privilege to witness him perform. For the finale, Kweku Mainoo joins them for some ad-lib vocal overdubs, which is a nice touch, too.

Back we go for the final time to the Big Room to listen to the results, and first up, we all demand to hear the tabla player’s solo – it was absolutely insane! And the AT5045s do it justice, too. The room responds with rapturous applause, and we move on to the full tracks, of which Oli has created a rough mix for each, again, with just a smidgen of compression, and a touch of reverb, which he dials in and out, to demonstrate pure source sound versus slightly processed.

As an audience, we are all blown away, but when I glance over at Chris Woods and his band, I notice their jaws are almost hitting the floor in unison. Audio-Technica have understandably clocked this, and marketing man, Tim Page, heads over with interview mic in hand to ask them what

they think. The universal response is one of entire shock that what they are hearing is the sound at source, with next to no processing. Like myself, the band are astounded by the warmth and overall tone of the recording.

Kweku Mainoo is particularly enthusiastic:

“I was blown away by the purity of what the 50 Series mics captured. Normally I would request reverb on my vocals, but in this instance, I was happy with the natural sound of my voice. Also, I would normally need four mics to get a clean sound when recording the African harp, but not today. I’ve definitely added these mics to my musical shopping list!”

So, it’s every box ticked, then – and what better way to finish the day off than a dinner and glass of red wine or three in the Real World dining room? Post-meal, a few of us head up to the local pub for a nightcap, where Tim Page summarises the event nicely:

“I wanted to showcase the 50 Series studio microphones in a unique location that captures their natural sound and diversity on a variety of world instruments. The concept was a journey from voice to ear: a behind the scenes look at the mics to understand who the designers are, how the mics are made, and a chance to experience their sonic quality first hand.

“Real World’s history and reputation as the centre of world music recording was perfect for this event. There is a sense of mystery about it in that many high profile artists record there, but not many people have the opportunity to visit, so it was definitely the right place to go.”

I make my way down to breakfast the following morning, and after a coffee or three, I feel it’s safe to get back in the motor. All I can think of on the way home is, ‘how do I blag myself a pair of those AT5047s?’

Watch this space...

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