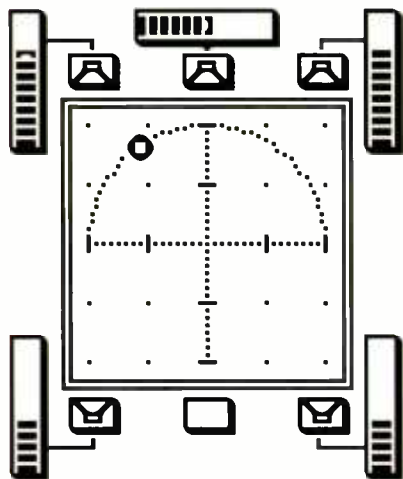


# Art, science and politics

Surround sound was around before DVD, but the new medium is set to make it big in audio recording. **Dan Daley** studies the art, science and politics of surround sound

**A** LOT OF PEOPLE are betting on the future of surround audio as a viable replacement for stereo. But it's a crowded race, with few odds-on favourites, and the racing analogy does not do justice to the complexity of the issue.

Born out of the evolution of film sound, surround audio's first uncertain steps have produced a lot of enthusiasm. Major record labels are slowly preparing to address it, hoping that it might recreate some of the



Once the domain of post, multichannel sound has arrived for music

economic thunder that the introduction of the CD did when it induced millions of people to go out and buy their entire record collections all over again. New labels have emerged from the mist surrounding surround audio. Both parties hope that the new format will provide the edge needed to introduce new recording artists' careers and kick-start extant, but economically morbid ones in a crowded entertainment market. Engineers and producers, meantime, see surround as, perhaps, the greatest innovation in audio since the introduction of stereo, or the introduction of records, for that matter, and new careers that

might otherwise not have come about will be launched for those who prove themselves artistically and technically adept.

Yet things aren't always what they appear. While these forces propel surround audio on the surface, beneath the format a very high-stakes business game is being played out, with its own strategies and tactics that rival actual wars. Corporations large and small have made significant investments in surround, and are jockeying for their piece of what many consider to be the last real audio gold mine of the 20th century.

'This is a whole new world for music. Once people hear this, they'll never settle for stereo again,' pronounces Robert Margouleff, whose long and notable oeuvre as an engineer and producer ranges from Stevie Wonder to Boyz II Men.

'This is a great medium for music, far more special than stereo,' says Chuck Ainley, an engineer now Nashville-based but whose roster of clients there and in Los Angeles is long and eclectic, and includes Mark Knopfler solo and with Dire Straits. 'It opens up the creative palette of musical colours a zillion-fold.'

'It makes music sound the way it sounds when you first hear it in your head,' observes Tony Brown, producer for Wynonna, Reba McEntire, Vince Gill and who also heads MCA Records' Nashville division. The endorsements for surround mixing—and the soon-to-come surround music recording—are growing plentiful and they are quite sincere. But those who have played with the surround format—either the various matrixes and discrete technologies of Dolby or the discrete six channels of DTS—quickly become aware that they are working in what is essentially a new medium.

'There are no rules—yet,' says Ainley. If there are to be rules for surround audio mixing, they are being made up as it goes along. Where

stereo offered the illusion of left-centre-right via placing information into both speakers to form a phantom centre, surround can deliver a true centre as well as the surround channels themselves. Where to put what has become an artistic and aesthetic question of far larger proportions than it was when it was fettered by the constraints of mere stereo.

'I mix for the song,' says Ainley, who along with Tony Brown remixed Vince Gill's *High Lonesome Sound* recording in Nashville using DTS for that company's own label (or, alternatively, part of its marketing strategy). Ainley stresses that he is aware that the use of six channels requires as much constraint as it does imagination.

One song off the record seems to have a lot of centre-channel information; on another, in Ainley's own words, 'The guitars are flying across the speakers'.

'Each song is a learning experience,' he explains. 'I came into the remix with certain preconceived notions of which songs would get more of the surround treatment, and those proved pretty much correct as we **page 62 >**



Marvin Gaye's *Forever Yours* has been remixed for 5.1 surround