

Unsung Guitar Heroes

Behind the music of *Guitar Hero* with Eleven and ICON

Every day, in living rooms around the world, Steve Ouimette's killer riffs inspire thousands to unleash their inner air guitarists. But despite receiving arguably more airtime than many top 40 artists, Ouimette can still happily walk down the streets of Scottsdale, Arizona without being mobbed.

A 17-year veteran of the video gaming industry, Ouimette and partner Ryan Greene are responsible for the sounds behind the wildly successful *Guitar Hero*: *Aerosmith* and *Guitar Hero III* games, currently in heavy rotation on Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Nintendo Wii systems. Working on their ICON system at Greene's Crush Studios in Scottsdale, the duo have also produced more than 50 songs for Konami's recently released *Rock Revolution*, as well as soundtracks for Microsoft, HBO, and AOL.

Ouimette's background may sound familiar to many musicians. A record deal in the early 1990s led to disappointment, followed by a series of day jobs to support both a family and his ongoing music habit. But the nature of those day jobs ultimately led to his current gig. "I grew up around computers, and I was working at companies like Creative Labs and Microsoft during the '90s," he explains. "There was an amazing evolution going on in both computer recording and gaming technologies, and I could see the potential for those worlds to converge. Gaming was becoming increasingly sophisticated, and obviously we weren't going to be using eight-bit audio files and MIDI forever."

A combination of inspiration and good timing changed the course of Ouimette's career. "I was at a game developers' conference," he recalls, "and I saw a sign saying that Activision (makers of *Guitar Hero*) was hiring programmers. I figured

they might be looking for content creators too, so I went up and talked to them, and they were open to it. I put together a demo of *School's Out* for them, and that led to a bunch of other stuff. I quit my day job and haven't looked back."

Ouimette tapped longtime friend and colleague Ryan Greene to work with him on the project. Greene, whose resume includes eight years as chief engineer for EMI Music, was a major force behind the southern California pop-punk sound of the late 1990s, mixing seminal albums by bands like Bad Religion, Dishwalla, and NoFX. His Crush Recording Studios in Scottsdale is outfitted with a Pro Tools|HD system and ICON integrated mixing environment; most of the *Guitar Hero* projects originate either here or in Ouimette's home Pro Tools|HD setup.

Recreating vintage tracks for *Guitar Hero* is a painstaking process, and Pro Tools Beat Detective is an invaluable tool in helping to streamline the impossible. "I take the original track and use Beat Detective to make a sub-bar click track," says Ouimette. "Beat Detective enables me to match

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the performance with a tight tempo map. That becomes the foundation for the whole song."

The partners then track live drums on Greene's ICON system. "We work with several different drummers, and try out different drum kits and different mics," says Ouimette. "I do a lot of research on the tracks—I find out as much as I can about what was used



on the original recording, and try to get as close as possible."

For Greene, the process is equally detail-intensive. "I'll solo up the left side of the mix and start by really focusing on the tone of the kick," he says. "In most of those old recordings, the phasing changes from left to right, and those artifacts are a big

(He's gained particular notoriety for his shredding electric guitar version of the Charlie Daniels classic, "The Devil Went Down to Georgia.")

"When we first started, I'd try to get the tracks in one performance, which is great from my perspective as an artist," he says. "But I realized pretty quickly that I needed to approach these tracks a bit more scientifically. You're being scrutinized not on how good of a player you are, but on how close it sounds to the original. Using Pro Tools allows me to focus on a lot more fine detail, and then compile the most authentic performance."

Though more and more of his guitars are recorded direct these days, Ouimette admits to many years of big-room, high-decibel guitar tracking. "I'm a vintage gear fanatic," he says. "I spend lots of time restoring vintage amps, and I'm pretty obsessive about getting the right sound. Until very recently, I haven't found any kind of emulation technology that worked for me."

Ouimette lays down bass and guitar tracks, all the while using Pro Tools to edit and compile the ideal takes.



But recently he's started working with Eleven, Digidesign's amp emulation plug-in. "I absolutely love the amp modeling in Eleven," he says. "It's realistic enough to really use, without having to bury it in the mix. Plus, I now have the option of changing a track when we're mixing. That's just not possible using real amps."

A handful of other plug-ins also figure prominently in achieving authentic-sounding vintage sounds. For example, Digidesign Real Tape Suite is one of Ouimette's go-to plug-ins. "No one wants to actually work with tape anymore, but that tape saturation sound is a lifesaver for us," he says. "We use that on almost every session."

Greene, a self-acknowledged perfectionist, also relies on some of the Waves plug-ins. But he's quick to observe that it all comes down to using your ears. "I feel very fortunate to have grown up when I did," he says. "I used the original gear in the '80s, so I know what it really sounds like. I can take the sound of the original gear, A/B it against my plug-ins, and play with the

sound until I get what I'm looking for. Once you're in the box, the possibilities are endless, and the plug-ins are way more consistently dependable. With all this power at your fingertips, there's no excuse for things not to sound exactly as you want them to."

Once the basic tracks are laid out, a stable of talented singers is standing

While Ouimette tracks guitars and does minor editing on his home Pro Tools|HD setup, most of the serious editing and mixing is done on Greene's 24-fader ICON D-Command system. The ICON, which only recently replaced Crush's long-standing large-format analog console, has marked a sea change in the duo's workflow.



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"The ICON is great for moving projects between our setups," Ouimette agrees. "It's really increased the amount of work we can crank out, and having true total recall is just priceless."

by, waiting to add their parts. "We take the Pro Tools session, bounce it to stems, and send it out to a few different vocalists," says Ouimette. "All of them have an Mbox, 002, or 003 system. Some of them have full HD rigs. They record a vocal and send it back by email. The session files we get back are all nicely laid out, and we do some quick edits and lay them into the track."

"Since we put the ICON in, we've been working exclusively in the box," says Greene. "The difference in our productivity is just incredible. We're usually working on many different projects at the same time, because I no longer have to spend time flipping the console back and forth. Now I just open the files, make my changes, and when I come back to it later it's all there. It feels like a real console, and it sounds great."

"The bottom line is, this is the way people make records now," Greene observes. "This is how people need to work in order to stay competitive in today's industry, and the ICON gives us the power to do that. If I never saw an analog mixer again, I'd be one hundred percent fine with it!"