

Launching a Dolby Atmos Music-Centric Label

Michael James is not one to slow down. While he's worked with acts like New Radicals, Hole, Eric Church, Jane's Addiction, Chicago, Edwin McCain and others over the years—with the ensuing gold and platinum awards to show for it—these days he mixes upwards of 250 songs a year for acts around the world, working from his home base in Petaluma, CA. When COVID lockdowns brought the music industry to a standstill last year, James characteristically kept moving, tracking a guitarist he hadn't worked with in a while: himself. The result was a pandemic-year concept album, *Shelter in Place*; due out September 24, it is also serving as the trial run for his newly revived artist development label, Alternator Records.

Founded in the Nineties and now reinvented for the Twenties, Alternator releases every song with a 2.0 stereo mix, an immersive Dolby Atmos Music mix and often a discrete 5.1 mix as well. All those versions are created in James' 600-square-foot control room, where his PSI Audio A25M speakers, used for stereo mixing, are joined by A14M monitors with an ESI subwoofer when it comes time for 5.1 surround monitoring and Atmos Music mixes.

James brings a certain philosophy to Dolby

Atmos Music work: "My immersive mixes focus on telling a story, so I don't do a bunch of unnecessary crazy panning. I just put things where they want to be to open up space and direct your attention in the right place—and then yeah, I move them around if it creates a special moment."

There's plenty of those moments on his album, as each song's arrangement was conceived with Atmos Music mixes in mind. Most tracks were recorded using analog equipment from Dangerous Music, Manley Labs, Phoenix Audio, Avalon Designs, Eventide, Purple Audio, Tonelux and Empirical Labs, while Avid Pro Tools Ultimate HDX handled recording, automation and editing, and SoundToys, iZotope, LiquidSonics, Oeksound, Zynaptiq, Leapwing Audio, MDW and Rare Signals did the heavy plug-in lifting.

When it came time to mix, James' workflow started with creating and finalizing a song's

stereo mix before moving on to Atmos. Drawing from groundwork done with the stereo mixes, he developed submixes to print in real-time, resulting in up to 30 stereo stems with time-based effects embedded. Those stems were then imported into a new Pro Tools session, with the HDX playback engine being replaced by the Dolby Audio Bridge to communicate with Dolby Renderer. Creating a foundation, James printed a discrete 5.1 surround mix using only the bed channels in two dimensions. "I wanted to ensure that stereo listeners would hear a discrete 2.0 mix as intended, not a downmix; same thing for the many 5.1 listeners out there," he says. The 7.1.2 mix was the final step, adding height and objects to take full advantage of Atmos' ability to scale. Working ITB was convenient for revising mixes or reprinting them at the desired target LKFS. "Dolby found the sweet spot to be -19 to -23 dB LKFS, which is quieter than I print stereo mixes, so a VCA Master Trim fader is my new best friend in the Atmos world."

Videos for tracks from *Shelter in Place* will be released well into 2022, drawing attention not only to the album but Alternator as well. James wants the label to curate a diverse range of artists across different musical genres, ethnic backgrounds and gender communities: "It's just 'let's do something together and make it really cool'—and I'll make the mix sound great." ■



Producer/engineer Michael James is relaunching his artist development label, Alternator Records.



Outfitted for Dolby Atmos Music mixing, James' private facility sports a selection of monitors from PSI Audio.