



Cranborne Audio

Four ex-Soundcraft staffers going it alone with a new range of 500 series modules — and a rack that offers something a bit extra. **DAVE ROBINSON** reports...

Cranborne Audio: it already sounds like a familiar brand. That's because, if you ever spent any time over the last two decades reading delivery notes or invoices from Soundcraft or Studer, you'll know the 'Cranborne House, Cranborne Industrial Estate, Cranborne Road...' mantra of the old Harman UK address in Potter's Bar in

Hertfordshire. Sean Karpowicz, the 33-year-old MD of the start-up, earned his stripes in that facility, as did his three colleagues: Elliot Thomas the Cranborne product manager; Ed Holmes, the hardware designer/director of engineering; and Andrew Pat, creative director. "We all worked together at Soundcraft on lots of great projects — Si, Signature, Ui series — we

“We all worked together at Soundcraft on lots of projects — Si, Signature, Ui series — we had a great team rapport

had a great team rapport, and we loved the Soundcraft brand,” says Karpowicz. He uses the moniker ‘Sean Craft’ on social media as a reflection of this time with the mixer maker. It's also a lot easier to spell.

Harman decided to close Potter's Bar in April 2016, while moving its manufacturing to more economically tactical factories. When did you leave the company?

I joined in August 2013 as product manager. We were given word of the closure in July 2015. I left Harman ahead of that, in March 2016, and went to work with Ed Holmes at Aston Microphones for a year. I was really proud of the work that I did there. Ed worked under [mixer design legend] Graham Blyth at Soundcraft, and now he's become an unbelievable A1 designer.

But then it was time to live your dream?

We always wanted to do Cranborne Audio — we thought that when we left Soundcraft. But after the Aston [jobs] we thought, we really have to do this ourselves. We wanted to make something we really believed in.

*“Only a handful of times
have I ever been so utterly
impressed by a microphone”*

Jon Thornton, resolution V171
January/February 2018



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/ Karpowicz and Thomas at the company launch at NAMM

What's your background, Sean?

I'm originally from New Jersey; I did a triple major in history, political science and journalism at Rutgers University in the state.

There's a distinct lack of electrical engineering, music or business management there...

I never thought I could make money doing this stuff! So I got a proper job: I taught history for a year, and then got let go of because of budget cuts in New Jersey. I saw a position in the paper for a technical writer for Gemini DJ equipment. While I was there, my eye for products and audio was spotted and I was promoted to product manager. I came to the BPM show, I found my wife there — how about that, eh? — and eventually ended up at Soundcraft.



/ First product is the Camden 500 preamp and signal processor



/ The R8 has garnered a lot of interest and will be available soon

You launched officially at NAMM 2018 in January, though Cranborne Audio was registered as a business in January 2017. What were you thinking back then — other than, let's have cranberry-coloured styling for the brand?

We thought, if we don't do it, we're never going to do it. We'll work it out. You have to take a punt in life. There are always excuses but sometimes you've got to go for it. I find myself walking around shows [like NAMM] and there are lots of [small businesses] like us, and I want to talk to them and find out their experiences. When you see this world of consolidation and this corporatisation of everything, the little guys have got to band together!

You still have the political science mentality then! So, what is Cranborne launching?

The 500R8, 500ADAT, and the Camden 500 preamp. We are a British audio company, we love the British sound! So we started with 500 series products. It's cool, it's a lot of different guys doing a

“The 500 series: it's like a ‘hot-rod’ culture, you can mix and match, you can have your own custom sound

lot of different modules; it's like a ‘hot-rod’ culture, you can do this Neve sound, this API sound, you can mix and match, you can have your own custom sound. And that is what music is about. That's what audio's about.



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/ Sean Karpowicz: "We are a British audio company, we love the British sound!"

The 500R8 has a 'Lunchbox'-style chassis.

Rack chassis, whatever you wanna call it, yes. But it's a lot more. We have a discrete analogue summing bus and control room monitoring, and A-D and D-A conversion built into it too, so it could be an ADAT [interface] expander to USB/Thunderbolt. It's a 500 series eight-slot rack with all the conversion built into it. That's a 26-input, 28-output USB audio interface. This does the job of several boxes. It's a studio in a box.



/ Elliot Thomas: "We don't need to make a vintage sound by cloning 40-year-old circuits."

If you add up the parts — A-D/D-A, monitor controller, headphone mixer, summing mixer, then the 500 series rack — all that gear, it's a lot of money. Over six grand, easy. The 500R8 will do it for £1,399.

How can you do that and make it in the UK?

It's really simple: from our experience at Soundcraft and with Aston, we got really good on costing things, and breaking down our

material costs. There are certain things that are fixed: mechanics, power supplies. In separate boxes, you are paying for those several times over.

Another example of what makes the R8 special: we are really good at component sourcing. Our switches are 'awesome' — really great quality. You can buy brands which are stupidly expensive; whereas if you are good at sourcing, you can find alternatives that are a fraction of the price. You have to do your research. That's one of the things that has frustrated me with previous employers: we were asked to do impossible things in impossible time frames. Think about it: Good; cheap; fast. Pick any two.

OK: cheap and fast.

Yeah, but it's not going to be good, is it? What we have is good prices for the components we have, because we've put the hours in. The other thing is, we don't use off the shelf components for our analogue design — every analogue part on this box is discrete, developed by Ed [Holmes] using resistors, transistors, and so on. They are unique to us and optimised and tuned to a level that not many people can do. Normally if you buy this chip, you buy that chip, you are paying a lot of margin and you are stuck with that performance. Whereas everything analogue in this box is discrete, designed by us from the ground up. It's cheaper but performs a lot better. It's crazy cost optimisation and engineering, but that's the trick of it: spending money where it counts.

ADAT interfacing seems important to you.

So many interfaces and modules still have ADAT I/O built in. I don't know why people still do it — maybe because everyone else still does it! — but the 500ADAT rack is a really easy way of getting eight channels in and out of expansion boxes.

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/ Ed Holmes, director of engineering: “We’re distilling the best of what has gone before, adding to that the best of modern technology. Maintain the good performance, but add the tone.”

What’s around the back?

The 5000R8 is a fully featured, USB audio interface as well: USB 2.0, 26-input 28-output USB interface; 16 channels of ADAT. MIDI I/O, master reference clock — atomic clock level accuracy! We designed this a new centrepiece to your studio. Our tagline is a modern approach to vintage sound. We love analogue, but there are new ways of working, new workflows, and understanding the way modern producer/engineers work is important.



/ Andrew Pat, creative director: “Going into Cranborne with these people just seemed like a natural fit.”

When are the products rolling out?

We’re on track to go to production late June/ early July on the Camden 500, a 500 series preamp and signal processor. The Camden 500 achieves amazing performance in terms of transparency, low-low-noise, and clarity, but it also features our ‘Mojo’ analogue saturation circuit — a variable and bypassable 100% analogue saturation circuit that can add in that ‘vibe’ as much or as little as you want



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The 500R8 and 500ADAT — the ones that really got people interested at our launch at NAMM in January — are out for production quote now and we anticipate August production.

We’ll see a review model soon then?

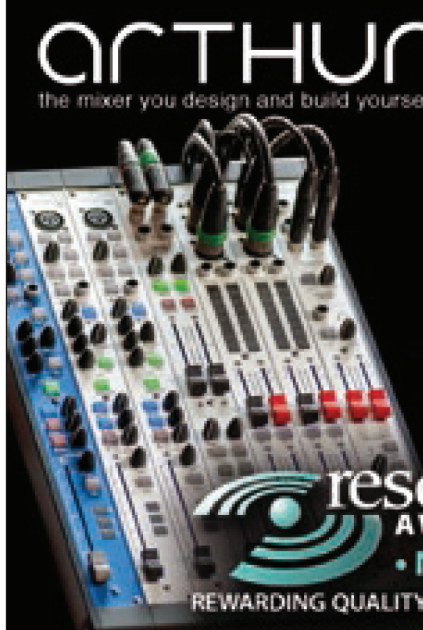
Yes! Manufacturers should be held far more accountable because there is some rubbish out there! If we messed up, tell us — and tell everyone else!

You’re not planning on going back to the USA any time soon then, Sean?

I love Britain, I’ve always been an anglophile, my wife is British. I like the fact that if someone British says something’s “pretty good”, then it’s rubbish, but if it’s “not bad”, then it’s great!

Not bad an observation... 🇬🇧

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