

Mike Skeet 1932–2015



Mike Skeet with an unusual mic system that is actually a parabolic reflector with a DIY Jecklin Disc array at the focus (i.e., a binaural set up), and an Olympus handheld recorder built into the handle. (Photo courtesy Ashley Styles of SATURN SOUND Recording Services.)

The British sound recording fraternity contains many eccentrics, but perhaps none more so than Mike Skeet who sadly passed away in December 2015 after a short illness. Mike was an inspiration for a great many of us throughout the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, mostly through his enthusiastic magazine articles on DIY recording equipment and techniques. That passionate and extremely well-informed enthusiasm was even more infectious and compelling for those of us fortunate enough to have spent time in his company.

After serving his National Service in the Army in 1949/50, Mike joined the GPO (General Post Office—the fore-runner of British Telecom) as a telephone engineer and spent 32 years with the organization, eventually becoming an instructor at BT’s training center based at Bletchley Park. In 1961 Mike married Sheena, and the Skeet family expanded over the following years with four sons, Simon, David, Mark, and Jason.

In his spare time Mike was a keen motorbike enthusiast, both as a means of daily transport and as a competitive sportsman, winning a First Class Award in 1957 at the Scottish 6 Days’ Motorbike Trials. Impressively, Mike continued riding motorcycles well into his 70s and, amazingly, he sometimes even managed to carry all his recording equipment to venues on his motorbike. Mike was a lifelong “audio enthusiast” but became seriously interested in music-

recording in the late 1970s, and this passion grew to the extent that he left BT in 1982 to become an independent classical recording engineer.

A helpful “leg-up” onto his new career path came with the gifts of a pair of Quad Electrostatic loudspeakers and an early SoundField mic, while his GPO training enabled him to design and build his own mic preamps, mixers, and other equipment. Mike started advertising his services, and his recording career snowballed quickly; soon he was working as a freelance engineer for commercial classical labels including ASV, Cantoris, Continuum, Faber, and Naxos, and many of his recordings were featured and highly praised by the likes of the BBC and *Gramophone* magazine. Mike also set up several of his own labels, starting with White-tower Records in 1981. Many specialized in niche areas like binaural music recordings, or steam train sound effects, among them Ensemble, The Forties Recording Company, and The British Music Label.

Always favoring “minimal” microphone techniques, Mike rarely moved beyond a sensibly-placed stereo pair, occasionally supplemented with a few “spot” mics when the layout or acoustics made it necessary. He was a strong advocate of both the Mid-Side technique (that had largely been forgotten in the 70s and 80s), and dummy-head/binaural techniques (that he first started using for location recordings in the 1960s). Indeed, Mike was very well-known for his intriguing DIY dummy-head arrays constructed from balsa wood, kitchen sieves, and foam, but they typically contained Schoeps microphones and produced superb recordings. When the discrete-channel surround-sound formats started to interest him by the end of the 1990s, he developed surround-sound and height-capturing versions with five or more capsules, as well.

In fact, all of Mike’s home-made equipment looked incredibly “Heath Robin-

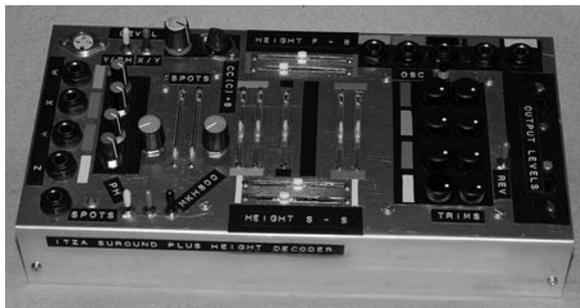
sonish,” it was a recognizable part of his eccentric character. His electronics were typically built into unpainted aluminum boxes plastered with Dymo-Tape control legends, brightly colored labels, and DIN sockets (see image below). However, all of his DIY designs performed to extremely high standards, and his bespoke mic preamps, in particular, comfortably outperformed many commercial products.

As a wide-eyed, teenage recording enthusiast I first came across Mike through his frequent contributions to most of the UK’s recording magazines—professional and hobbyist alike. His many features on mic techniques (especially Mid-Side and Binaural) were keenly lapped up, as were his constructional DIY electronics projects for preamps and mixers. I remember being puzzled, though, over why his hardware designs were always prefixed with the letters ITZA. When I first met Mike years later I asked about this and, with an impish grin, he explained that it came from explaining his weird-looking electronics boxes to curious onlookers at his recording sessions: “It’s a mixer,” or “It’s a mic preamp.”

That mischievous sense of humor is also encapsulated perfectly in Mike’s infamous “Garage Door” recording, which was released on a test CD published by *Hi-Fi News* and *Record Review* magazine in 1985. Mike wanted to demonstrate how the CD format could capture the “dynamic range of real life” and, using a first-generation Sony PCM-F1 digital recorder and a SoundField MkIII microphone, he did just that. I won’t spoil the surprise, but it’s definitely a recording that’s well-worth hearing, although a cautious initial volume setting is advised.

Mike was a brilliant, humorous, and eccentric man; an enthusiastic and ingenious experimenter always seeking new knowledge; a very talented and respected recording engineer; and a man with an unquenchable and infectious passion for all things audio, which he was always happy to share with like-minded people. I doubt we’ll see his type again, and he will be missed.

Hugh Robjohns



ITZA – One of Mike’s distinctive home-built units; this one is a ‘surround-with-height’ controller.