

# Gear

## Handcrafted

Latin legends like Julio Iglesias and Alejandro Sanz call on Carlos Alvarez for his analog arsenal



**Name:** Carlos Alvarez

**Hometown:** Miami

**Foot in the door:** Trevor Fletcher, GM of the Hit Factory (then called Criteria), asked Alvarez to help with vocals on a Julio Iglesias album, as the assistant on hand didn't speak English. "He gave me my big break and put me directly into the fire," Alvarez says. "After that, Julio said, 'You're coming with me.'"

**Memories:** "We would often go to Julio's house for dinner after sessions. On one evening in 1990, Julio had his staff prep three candy-apple-red Camaros in his driveway. As we pulled up, he handed each of us the keys with a big smile. He had brought his production team convertibles. It was a thank you for the history books."

**Current projects:** Mixing tracks for Jorge Villamizar (formerly of Bacilos); just finished new albums by Olga Tañón, Concha Buika and Marc Anthony.

When Carlos Alvarez goes to the studio, he always takes a broad-rimmed straw hat that he places on top of his customized outboard-gear rack.

"It's my good luck thing," the engineer says. "Sometimes I'll put it on. It's 'in' all of my records."

The hat, which belonged to his grandfather, a Cuban farmer, can be seen as a metaphor for Alvarez himself: In a world of Pro Tools and plug-ins, the three-time Grammy Award and seven-time Latin Grammy winner is an analog-effects master who delicately molds the sound of every voice and instrument he mixes.

Alvarez works mostly out of Miami Hit Masters, the Little Havana studio owned by Cuban chanteuse Albita, which he shares with producers Mario Aracil and Guianko Gomez. The studio boasts a recording room big enough to accommodate an orchestra, in addition to such eye candy as doors papered with sheet music and a bathroom tiled to evoke a swimming pool.

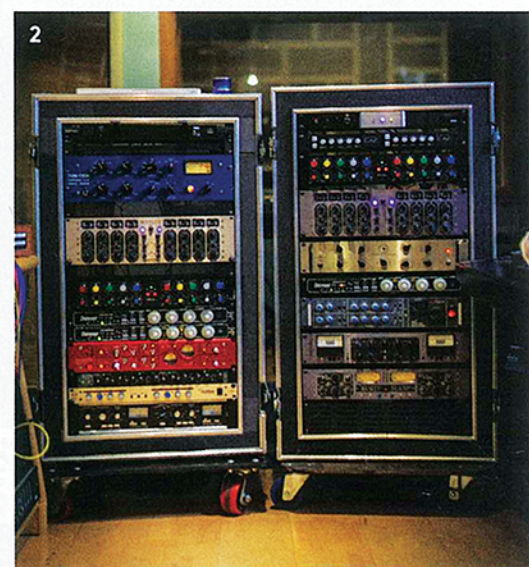


But Alvarez's main arsenal is portable. Wherever he goes, whether in Miami or across the country, he brings two massive racks of outboard gear. "I call them Fatty and Skinny—El Gordo y La Flaca—although actually it's El Gordo and El Mas Gordo [Fatty and Fattier]," Alvarez says affectionately.

The processors on these racks have become part of Alvarez's signature sound. "Most people come to me because they like the way I balance, and part of getting that balance is using these tools," he says. "I process tracks through my outboard gear and print them back to the original session. This establishes a sort of 'souped up' version of the instruments. Adding this stage is kind of unique to me and makes a big difference in the overall depth of my mixes."

Alvarez began building his racks in the '80s as an assistant in the many small studios that bordered the fabled Criteria in North Miami. He got his big break working with Julio Iglesias, and since then has finessed albums by an eclectic mix of names, including Juan Luis Guerra, Alejandro Sanz and Kelly Clarkson. For each collaborator, Alvarez found the right tool in his twin toolboxes. "Julio Iglesias' *La Carretera* album went through this Focus compressor," he says. For Marc Anthony's latest, *3.0*, Alvarez "knew the percussion would sound one way through a Manley equalizer, and I knew Marc would sound great through the GML 8200 EQ."

Alvarez treats his gear like old friends, but that doesn't mean he isn't in the market for new ones. "Engineers are like art collectors in a way," he says. "You're amassing gear that you'll always use." —Leila Cobo



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1. Alvarez recently expanded into mastering, for which he uses a 1986 Neve console purchased from engineer Vlado Meller. "It allows me to give an extra 10% juice to the mixes," he says.

2. Fatty (left) and Skinny (right) are Alvarez's left and right hands in the studio. He takes the 300-lb. customized gear racks everywhere he goes.

3. "This is a crucial unit. Pretty much every vocal I've touched in the past three years has run through this Tube-Tech [compressor]. It's very transparent-sounding."