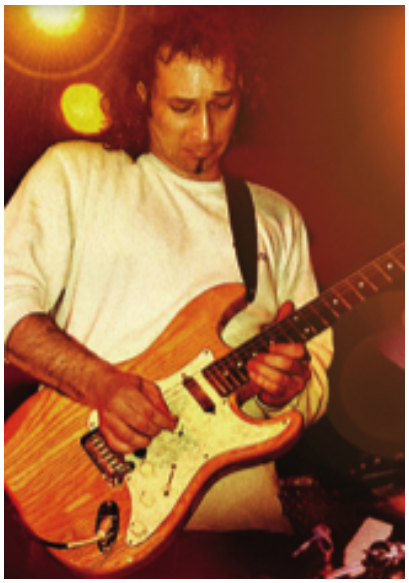

By John McGlasson - GJD

Click here to read Part 1

In part two of this four-part series, we'll look at album production, the misconceptions, and the truths, as I see them.

Album production is no place to cut corners, but you don't have to pay a famous studio and producer to make an amazing album, you just need to share philosophy and work ethic with your producer and band, and there are two schools of though in this arena; authentic vs. artificial.

If, after reading this article, you disagree with my points, then any digital studio will do, and you'll be using simulators, samples, plug-ins, pitch-correction, and cut-and-paste techniques to create an artificial product that'll then sound artificial. If you find a producer that shares my, and hopefully your, philosophy about keeping the authentic signal chain in the recording process, you'll have a much better sounding, better *feeling* album that you're proud of years from now, and that your public will love.

There are plenty of what would be considered low-budget albums that shine above the expensively-produced competition decades later, so it's not necessary to spend heavily, but modern recording techniques are bringing a sterility to recorded music that you must break away from if you want to set yourself apart. I've known several pro musicians who've paid the people they were told they needed to pay to have a great album, but they hate the results, and they don't understand why.

A few months after we'd released Backyard Tire Fire's *Bar Room Semantics* album and started getting reviews and press on the album, I noticed that the album was being positively compared to those released by major indie labels and majors alike in content, but also in sonic quality, many of the great albums from the Beatles, Tom Petty and Neil Young, and newer top Alt-country bands like Wilco, My Morning Jacket, and Drive-By Truckers, that had cost up to 10 times what we'd spent to make Bar Room Semantics. How'd we do it? With the same old gear, and the same old process.

Before our first major release, I'd been secretly worried that our stuff wouldn't have the sonic quality and sophistication of albums we were hoping to compete with, major indie bands in BTF's genre that had spent big bucks on their albums, but in almost every review and article of our album, they'd mention the *warmth* of the album. It rarely got explained beyond that, just that the album had a warm sound, but more importantly, a warm
feeling
. It made them feel warm. I gave Bar Room Semantics to my Dad to get his reaction, and he told me that while the album
sounds
nothing like the Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's album, it gave him the same
feeling
. I began to understand.

I'm going to refrain at this point from starting a debate about analog (tape) vs. digital (hardrive) recording, largely because my friend, producer, analog recording expert, and owner of Oxide Lounge Recording, Tony SanFilippo, will be soon writing an article for GJD on that very subject, and he can explain it infinitely better than can I, but I'll go as far as to say that for some reason, unexplainable by man, and much the way a vacuum tube, when over-driven, has a pleasing sound to the human ear, such is tape. By all logic, what should be an inferior medium when compared to the current digital technology, simply isn't.

That's not to say you can't record amazing albums without using tape, I know people who do it every day, but what they're actually doing is combining analog with digital by only using the digital medium as away to capture the signal, not create or enhance it. The process for them hasn't changed with the digital age, only the means of capturing and storing the tracks, and they still mix with analog boards, and without plug-ins, placing all effects into the signal chain, not into the digital realm.

I believe that digital instrument, speaker/cabinet, microphone simulators and digital recording technology are placing and enhancing frequencies across the sonic spectrum, frequencies our ears don't normally hear, into our recordings, frequencies that sound unnatural to the human ear. For some reason, tape seems to grab from the signal what we want to hear and nothing more, or more accurately, what we actually hear when we hear live music being played, and nothing more. Computers hear more than we can hear, they enhance it across the spectrum, and deliver it back in it's new, too-perfect form, sounding "robotic" to our subconscious ear.

If you look at classic albums that have been "digitally remastered", there's almost always a disclaimer somewhere that states that you're going to hear pops, pings, noises, and imperfections that the digital process *brings out* and *enhances* from the original analog recording. Why would we want that? If an album is a classic, if it's being remastered and rereleased, it's not only because people like the songs, it's because the album was right to begin with! And it never would've been such had there been pops, pings, and noises that stuck out to the point of being a distraction, which may well happen after digital enhancement. The pleasing nature of tube, tape and vinyl together make the perfect listening experience for the *human ear*

. Not a computer's ear.

There's no way to simulate the process, it must remain authentic! Plugging your digital guitar-modeling device directly into an interface, regardless of how much you tweak the mic and speaker sims, is *never going to sound like a good tube amp, a good speaker, and a well-placed quality mic, into a good preamp* , period. That's it. That's the secret. Breaking this chain of authenticity is what has led to the downfall of recording quality since the inception of guitar simulation devices. Maintaining the authentic signal chain alone will infinitely increase the quality of your guitar tracks, your bass tracks, and your keyboard tracks. And it works with more than just guitars and basses, try running your synth through a great tube guitar amp with an organ sound, mic it, and record it. Now A/B that against a direct track through your best preamp with the same sound. Night and day in every aspect. And never, ever use a drum machine on an album of you want to be taken seriously as a musician.

Your album is the foundation of your entire plan, it's the statement you make as a musician, it's the lasting record of you that you leave, and the listening public couldn't care less how much or how little you spent to produce it, if it sounds band, it sounds bad. And there are many digital traps artists are falling into, that, regardless of how much you spent, what studio you used, what producer you paid, it may all end up sounding like shit anyway, in the mastering studio. But just as often, it's happening before it ever gets there.

If you've seen the recent drama between Metallica and their mastering engineer, Ted Jensen of Sterling Sound, who, along with the band's fanbase, is publicly denouncing the new album Death Magnetic, as so sonically over-the-top that it actually distorts on any stereo and any volume level, and is unlistenable, you'll see that the "Volume Wars" are finally coming to a head.

Albums have continually been mixed louder and louder into oblivion over the last few years. Ted Jensen posted on an online forum where the mastering of the album had repeatedly been blamed for the album's poor sound; "I'm certainly sympathetic to your reaction, I get to slam my head against that brick wall every day…In this case the mixes were brick-walled before they arrived at my place. Suffice to say, I would never be pushed to overdrive things as far as they are here. Believe me, I'm not proud to be associated with this one, and we can only hope that some good will come from this in some form of backlash against volume above all else."

Now just try to imagine what Metallica must have spent on this album, and it sounds horrible, the fans hate it. The mastering engineer, a Grammy winner, and the man who mastered Norah Jones' brilliant "Come Away With Me" is even breaking protocol and going public with his disgust before his business is affected.

The sooner you get away from the misconceptions of digital recording, the better your stuff will sound. Study what it means to "master" a recording, then apply it. The meaning has come to signify "making my album as loud as possible across the spectrum", and mastering studios, while simultaneously complaining about it, are often the ones telling artists and producers they have to do it to sound "consistent" with other modern recordings. Escape this trap. Go back in time, listen to great vinyl albums from the 70's and 80's, regardless of genre, and reference

those, not modern recordings.

Before there was FM radio, all music radio was an AM mono signal, yet people's home stereos were incredible 500w vacuum-tubed, component affairs that rivaled the studio monitor setups used to mix the albums in the first place. Now how the hell were engineers supposed to provide labels something that sounded great on these home stereos, *and* on AM radio? Mastering. They crammed the entire album into a sensible wavelength that sounds good on *any* stereo, *any* radio. That's what mastering is. If your album sounds great on a great stereo, but terrible on a terrible one, your album's been poorly mastered.

The number one way bands that are starting to make headway screw up is in the thinking that they have to hire the same high-dollar studios and producers as their peers, or their heroes, to make a great album that'll be taken seriously, but the truth is this country is dotted with great studios and producers who know how to make great albums, they just haven't had one hit the mainstream, and probably never will. Don't discount the talent and desire of these people to create great art. If you team up with one of these producers, chances are they'll work with you on the rate, or sell you a block of time at an even better price, some will even make the album in exchange for a percentage of sales down the road, but you'd have to have a promising future to negotiate that deal.

Everyone's in the same boat in this biz right now, so improvise, adapt, and overcome. Team up with those in your area to make something happen for all of you. Music can be delivered with 1's and 0's, but it can't be created that way.

Next time, Part III, Manufacturing! Thanks for reading!

I welcome all comments and questions john@guitarjamdaily.com