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Jimmy Bowen Interview

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*Your insistence on bringing a better sound to those recordings meant that it anticipated the new technology.*

Well, I knew what was coming. In pop music that was all part of it; in country it hadn’t been. So when I started doing down there [in Nashville] what they were already doing in New York, LA, and London, they thought I was crazy. They just didn’t understand. Why would he spend that much money? Why would he take so many hours to mix something? Why? Why? Why? I was trying to reach the same consumer that was buying the other stuff. For the last 10 or 15 years, before I went down there, country music had fallen so far behind times that it didn’t sell albums. It couldn’t reach the people that were buying.

*Nashville the last 20 years is merely LA in the 70s.*

Very much. I said a long long time ago that Nashville was, of course, the songwriting capital of the free world, and that, down the road, it would be one of the biggest music centers. It’s that today because it’s a centralized music community. In New York you don’t have that anymore. New York had it in the ‘40s and ‘50s. And then the West Coast became very hot. It never had all of it, but it was a big music center. A lot of the new music came out of there. And you could see—with people recording in their garages and in their homes and with the studio world falling apart in LA— it was such a large place, there was no closeness anymore. So people didn’t feed off each other. Nashville had that. It still has that.

*That sound you got with Kenny Rogers and the first edition seems to move east almost like a virus.*

That was the only group I ever did for very long. It was great fun, because I was doing all that big orchestra stuff with Sinatra and Martin and Sammy Davis and shit. It was really great fun to work with the kids, because that’s what Kenny and the band were at the time. I didn’t enjoy doing groups. I did the first session with them, and they almost had of this fight over a harmony part, which is typical for groups.

I said, “Kenny, I need to see you at ten o’clock at the house tomorrow morning.”

He came over, and he said, “What did you want to see me about?”

I said, “From now on it’s going to be Kenny Rogers and the First Edition. Otherwise, it doesn’t make sense. You had the hit, ‘Just Dropped In.’ I don’t want a group with four or five lead singers.” Of course, he loved that.

He said, “You going to tell them?”

I said, “No, you’re going to tell them.” He looked at me like, “What?”

I said, “The only way it’s going to stay together is if you can pull it off. If I tell them, the group will last 60 days. If you go tell them, some will stay, some will leave, and you’ll go forward. There’s a good chance they’ll all stay.” And they did. He figured out a way to handle it with them.

*When I replay Ruby in my mind I hear that fadeout with the drums emulating the character walking out the door. Did you bring that sonic concept to the date or did that get worked out in the studio?*

Most of the sound things, I always credit to Eddie Brackett, who was the engineer I used in LA. He was marvelous. I’d ask for something, and he’d come up with something. But things like that, it came out of the musicians.

If you can get a rhythm section, five or six guys, if you can get them hooked together and committed, to be a real unit for three or four days on a project, they’ll come up with those great things for you. That’s really what happens. Well, that’s the way I like it to work. With Kenny and the First Edition, that was when I was starting to switch from the Bacharach approach of production, where you take total responsibility, into helping the artist and learning how to get the musicians into the project. Once you get them into it, they do wonderful stuff.

*When you say the Bacharach approach, was that also what you witnessed with Phil Spector but perhaps to an extreme?*

Yeah, I witnessed that. I used to sit for hours watching him work [in the large studio at Gold Star]. They were his records. It didn’t matter who the singer was. Poor Darlene Love did half of them, and they’d just call them something else. Yes, he was to the extreme. Everything he did was extreme, carrying that gun all the time, firing it off. The gun finally got him. He told me one time… You know, his mother was committed. She was insane at least in part of her life. He was always afraid that he was going to be. He was almost striving for it. Weird. He was brilliant musically, but insane in his approach to it.

*At that time you were observing Spector you were also recording demos with Glen Campbell in the small room at Gold Star. Besides the big, obvious differences, how did your approach to cutting demos differ from your approach to full-scale recordings?*

It’s actually almost like the way I wound up doing productions during the last half of my career. It was staying out of the way of the song and the writer. You have the writer either be there and/or put it down with just their instrument, the guitar or the piano.

With Glen, if he heard it once, he could then walk in and do it. He had the most incredible ear of any musician I’ve ever known. Of course, I knew him so well. We’d get bass, drums, and keyboard, or Jimmy Seals and some of the guys would come by and do different things. Sometimes, you’d make the demo aimed at an artist. You’re going to get one of Snuff Garrett’s artists: going after Johnny Burnette or whomever it is. So then you point that way, but the bad thing is, if you miss, now you’ve got to start over.

Basically, you wanted to go in and put the song down the way the writer or writers, the way it came out of them. Get four or five guys. That got me really wanting to do that. There wasn’t much production there other than the little bit of preproduction. Just go in there, “Bam-bam-bam.” You’re doing them. Then, I’d walk across and watch Spector work on something for eight hours. And I’d say, “Ah huh. That’s the better way.”

He was the first one, as I recall, who made people aware of that particular part of the artform. Snuff Garrett made a lot of hit records, singles. He and Phil were both working at the same time: totally different kinds of stuff. I learned a lot from Phil, sitting around and watching him. He was always very nice to me. One thing I got from Snuff Garrett was Ernie Freeman—the arranger, magnificent! He was a brilliant talent with ego control. You could sit with him and ask for whatever, and he’d come up with it. He hand-held Snuff and me both with those big orchestras things.

*Producing those big pop albums: the massive hits you had with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. Did that condition you – and position you – almost perfectly for what you would do in Nashville?*

Production is just like life in that every project, every artist was another page or two of knowledge, of how to handle the next situation. That taught me it was their music, not mine. There was no question about who was the artist. Was it Sinatra, Martin, Sammy, or me? It was them. Now, they were pros. They showed up, and they knew their songs, and everything else was left up to me: to get the arranger, the arrangement, the musicians, who to use, dada, dada. But it was still always their record. Some producers back then forgot that occasionally and some still do.

If you see somebody with one hit with an artist, they haven’t learned that yet. There’s always a freaky one-hit situation. That little girl I signed before I quit down there, Deana Carter, that had “Strawberry Wine,” a huge record, and could not follow. It gives me cold chills—if that’s your line of work. I would’ve died if I couldn’t have followed that—my ego. And what it does to that artist is awful. But obviously, there was no connection between producer and artist. It happened, but it wasn’t the right way.

*What were other ways that you enabled artists to seize control of their own music?*

One of the things I did, with some artists, I made them a co-producer. I made them understand how important that part of the process was. I insisted that their part of preproduction was, mainly, songs. If you don’t know what you want to sing, you’re probably not going to last long. If you can’t listen to 40 songs and pick out the ones you like, which means you want to do them, you’re not going to last long. With Martin and Sinatra, I could walk in with 20 songs, and they would pick the 10 they wanted, boom-boom-boom. Of course, they knew who they were. And they were in their second time around.

When I got with George Strait, it was the old Nashville: “Here are 12 songs. We’ll cut next week, and use the best 10.” I had a meeting with him, and I explained how that’s terrible. It’s not going to sell albums. I said, “I want you to be a coproducer, but you have to be the final say in songs. If there’s a song I think is wonderful, and you don’t feel it, then that’s that. It’s your record, your music.” George grabbed it and loved it. Hank [Williams, Jr.] wrote it. Those are the most fun because, then, you’re helping someone document their life.

*When you first produced Merle Haggard he was ready for that, right?*

I caught Merle right on that cusp, like when I had Dean and Frank and them. The age was right. He’d already done to death what he’d done. You don’t need big, but you need slight changes. With Haggard, he’s just documenting his life. One of my favorite albums is *Back to the Barrooms* with “I Think I’ll Just Stay Here and Drink.” That project was great fun. I had such great musicians to work with down there.

What I did, I went out and got one of the live albums of Haggard’s. I had the band there a couple of hours before Merle. We just sat and listened to him and the Strangers. I said, “This week, you’re going to be the Strangers, but you guys aren’t the Strangers. You’re not that old.” Reggie Young could play country guitar like… He knew everyone that ever lived. He knew how to play like them. He knew how to do it. We finished that album… Merle brought the band in, and old Roy Nichols, his guitar player, sitting on the couch, listening to the playback, he turned to one of the other guys and said, “Damn, I don’t remember us doing that.” He thought it was him! That’s how good Reggie was. That’s the way that whole album was done. With Merle, it was just that project and a couple of other things. There never was a full-time thing that went on there.

*Story in the autobiography about Haggard in Anaheim looping the live track.*

It was an album he was doing, and he asked me to mix it for him. He had cut live in Fort Worth, and he had cut live in Anaheim Stadium. I really liked Merle. He so distrusted anybody in Nashville, but I wasn’t from Nashville. Maybe that helped. We just got along good. I mixed several things for him. I didn’t get paid for it. I wasn’t the producer. I just mixed them, put them together for him. That Anaheim Stadium thing was fun. He’d so love it when he got it right.

*Speaking of being distrustful of Nashville, fortune was working on your side when you fell in with Tompall Glaser. He was about the only non-Nashville guy in Nashville.*

That was it. There were no others. When I was running MGM—of course he and his brothers were on the country side of MGM when I was running MGM in LA— that’s when I got to know him. I served on the CMA board, when I was out in LA. I didn’t do it because I was going to go to Nashville. I never in the world thought I was going to go to Nashville. But as the head of the label, you should participate in all your genres. So I got to know that whole situation down there.

Tompall was the only one… He had a studio, he had this great knowledge of the history of country music—musically and politically. When I went down there, shit, I lived there for year. I’d do some country instrument, banjo and one or two fiddles, and Tompall would come upstairs. He’d be in the back listening. I’d finish, and he’d say, “Let’s go downstairs and have a drink.” Then he’d say, “Let me play you how that ought to sound.” And he would. He’d play me some famous, old country guy, who I didn’t know anything about. I didn’t know the history of country music. I was coming in in the middle of it, I guess, from what it was to what it is now.

He and I we had such a great time together. He enjoyed that, teaching me. And I enjoyed learning it. Plus, he laid out the town for me—the politics. So even the ones I didn’t know, I didn’t do.

I talked to him a few months ago. He’s like me. He’s under repair. He sounded terrible. I don’t think he’s well at all. He knows how important he was, how I felt about him. But he wasn’t just important to me. He was important to what I was able to do down there, and to what happened to country music. He believed it could be big.

He was the original. He was a true outlaw. Waylon [Jennings] fell into it and developed into it, and so did Willie. But Tompall just was. Everywhere in his life, I’ll bet he was an outlaw.

*On that topic, why do you think cocaine was such a lure to musicians in Nashville and much less so, marijuana?*

I wondered about that immediately. Their first thing was booze, as it was in California and New York. Then, the pills came into play. Pop acts go out and do a tour. These people were on the road all the time. They’ve got 500 miles to make, leaving at one in the morning for the next gig. So they had the pills: the LA turnaround pill. They used to joke about it. You could drive to LA and back on this one little pill. That’s speed. All you’ve got to do with a guy who does pills is give him some cocaine, and you get the same effect, although of the two the pills are better for you. But booze was the base. You add cocaine to it, and it made sense. It didn’t make sense to smoke a joint and lay back. You certainly couldn’t do that and try to get down the road.

*I’m thinking that at some deep sociological level it has something to do with that old-South Protestant work ethic. You take that stuff, and you can work real hard like your ancestors didn’t, but thought you should.*

Paycheck called me one time. He had been up six days. He said, “Bowen, I want to come over there with you.”

I said, “Johnny, I’d love to have you. Have your lawyer call me. I’ll see if we can work it out.”

His New York lawyer called me, and he said “Hell, Bowen, he owes five more albums to Columbia.”

I said, “Why don’t you call and explain that to your client, please.”

Paycheck called me back in a little while. He said, “Bowen, that’s bullshit. I can deliver all of those albums by Christmas.” There’s your cocaine working.

*I’m surprised he didn’t call you up at Christmas and say, “Bowen, I’m really sorry. I was only able to get four albums done.”*

END OF FIRST INTERVIEW

That’s the way I’ve always explained it to people. Everybody has an idea of what a director does. They see it in the movies. They see it in the trailers, and they see the director working with the camera people, the lighting people, and being involved. They understand that the producer is the money guy. So I started using that analogy, even in the ‘60s in California, because the average person doesn’t have any idea what a record producer does.

You have one type of producer who is heavy, heavy-handed. Heavy-handed sounds negative. It’s not meant that way. I use Burt Bacharach as an example, because he and his lyricist, Hal David, wrote the song, he selected the musicians, he did the arrangement, and he told Dionne Warwick how he wanted her to do the song. He was very definite. That’s one kind of producer. I did that a lot in the ‘60s in California with pop artists.

When I started working with Kenny Rogers, it started to dawn on me that there was another way. That was to help an artist to do their music, and to do everything you can to make it better. Fill in only when needed, and try never to insert your own thing. One thing I did learn from working with Sinatra: it was his music, not mine, even though with Frank I had to find the songs, get the arrangements and the musicians and all that. There was never any question about whose record it was when it was finished. With Phil Spector, those were his records. He was the artist and the producer. It didn’t really matter who sang the songs.

*Why has there been nothing analogous in American music to auteur theory in film studies? Why is the producer so invisible?*

The creative process is a very quiet event compared to that of making a movie. The money is a lot smaller. The number of people used is a lot smaller. We don’t change locations based on the story. Occasionally, you go somewhere to get a certain kind of musician like Muscle Shoals or different places. But there’s a huge difference in the size of the production of the two. That’s part of it.

Secondly, everything that’s involved in movies and now, of course, in television is in the national media. The music business has its own publications and, I guess, almost total media now. But *Billboard* magazine is only, for the most part, in the homes of those that have something to do with the music business or the music industry. I think it’s just a different thing. You’ll notice, however, that in the last few years the rappers became producers and label owners. I think there’s a lot more in the national media now, especially in pop music—in those eight or nine genres we’ve got now in the charts and so forth. Young people know figures in hip-hop both as artists and as producers because it’s mentioned in the national media.

*I think of visitors on the set while a movie is being made, but in your autobiography there is a photograph of you and Frank Sinatra and the arranger in the background there’s Leo Derocher. It may be wonder about rules you had about who was able to attend recording sessions. More like a church or a circus?*

He was visiting Frank for a few days. I had dinner at Frank’s house while he was there. It was fascinating if you like baseball stories. Well, just hearing the man talk. He had some the greatest stories.

Occasionally, there would be special times when there would be people. Don’t forget, out in California in those days we had a full orchestra. Ninety-percent of the record was made live that night. They were a different kind of event. Those kinds of artists have vast arrays of friends, an awful lot of them from movies, show business, and the sports world. So there’s a bigger chance of that.

I remember in Nashville I turned around once and looked, and there was a State Senator sitting in the back of the studio. He was a friend of one of the artists I was working with. I didn’t know him. So I said, “Who are you?” But it was very rare because we weren’t near Hollywood or a movie or television center. Sports wasn’t that big in Nashville, when I was there. And the recording process now takes a much longer period of time. I could do a Dean Martin album in a week: three or four nights of recording, some mix down and mastering, and you’re off and rocking. The process now is the basic tracks with the rhythm section and the vocal, and then some overdubs of instruments and background vocals or vocal overdubs. For me in Nashville, it took 30 days to do an album. I don’t mean a month. I mean 30 days. I never took off weekends. If I’d ever stopped on a Friday night at midnight or at two in the morning and hadn’t gotten back until Monday, I wouldn’t have known where in the hell I was. I wanted to do my own sound. So I just went straight through until we were finished.

*You famously or infamously slowed down that process. At RCA studio B, in a three-hour session they were cutting four tunes.*

In California, when I first started working out there, they were expecting you to do four songs in the session, at least three. The night I cut “Everybody Loves Somebody” I had twenty minutes left before I got it right—and quickly did some of the sides that we used as the B side of the single.

When I got to Nashville, it was like, “Damn, I’m starting over again.” It was financial. They weren’t selling records. You can only spend X if you’re selling X. Plus, that’s why the music tended to get stale and to repeat itself way too much. You’re in a hurry. Before I actually moved there, I used to go to Nashville to visit and look for songs. I’d go into the studio, sit in the back, and watch what was happening. One of the musicians would be a session leader. They’d use a number system so they didn’t have a chord sheet—the gospel number system: the 1 chord, 3 chord, 4 chord, whatever. He’d stand up and say, “Four bars of 1, two bars of 2, dada-dada; you take the fills in the first chorus; you take the fills in the second chorus; boom-boom-boom.” They could nail those suckers. They could cut a song every 45 minutes.

But where’s the artist? Where’s the music? Where’s the hook? I came out of pop music. By the first four or five bars, you knew who it was. Every artist had an identifiable sound, even with big orchestras. With Dean, I used those 32nd notes in the strings, and just wore them out. That’s all in there on purpose. You were using a certain kind of sound. They weren’t doing that [in Nashville]. On some of the sessions I saw, the musicians were totally in charge of what the music was going to be. By the time I got there, Chet wasn’t producing any more. Owen wasn’t producing any more. So I don’t know how they did it. I only saw what was there when I got there.

*I’ll give you the story of production in Nashville in three words: Bradley Bowen Brown. That’s the history. That’s all you need to know. I’m curious how you would interpret those three distinct eras in country music.*

When Owen was recording in his studio down there, I went out a couple of times to where he did Conway and Loretta, duets and singles, Patsy Cline, and some of those marvelous records. They didn’ necessarily make marvelous albums—full albums—but they made some great records. The music business back then was a singles business. Nobody sold a lot of albums anywhere. Albums were still $1.98, maybe up to $2.98.

Owen had a group to work with all the time, as we all wind up doing. I’m sure he paid 15 guys that did most of his stuff. When I was in Nashville, I had about 25 or 30 different people to do all our stuff, because I like rhythm sections that work good together. But then, you had to cast the right rhythm section for each individual artist.

When it came to Tony [Brown] and me, to our era, it was totally different. The productions became 30-, 35-, 40-minute projects. I always looked at an album as a concert, as a musical presentation. It needs to open, needs peaks and valleys, and needs to close. It’s difficult to do that because it’s in a short period of time. But I wanted to sell albums. And that’s how you get a following so you sell X whether you have a hit single or not. People are waiting for the next Hank Junior album, or for what David Malloy and Even Steven did with Eddie Rabbit. People were anxious to hear his next album, not just the single. It became quite different in that regard. When Owen was working, of course he didn’t have big budgets. He worked faster; we worked slower.

*Perfect radio show; rules of sequencing; keys?*

No, I never really cared what key they were. You sit out in an audience, and you see a concert: “Did I hear three songs in the same key?” Shit, nobody cared about that. I heard people talk about it. For radio, there were things that might’ve made sense at a certain time: three female vocalists in a row—never do that.

With the process that I used, the first and most important piece of the puzzle was a song hunt, finding the songs. Unless you got lucky, like with Hank Williams Jr., who just writes about his life; that’s great because you won’t have to do six months of hunting songs. Tony Brown will tell you how long it takes to find songs for a George Strait album.

I had a man I grew up with, Don Lanier. His nickname was Dirt. All the musicians in Nashville know Dirt. Dirt’s job was to take the artist to the song, when they had the time and would do it. That was his only job—songs, songs for every artist on the roster. Dirt’s job was to hang out with publishers, hang out with songwriters, and to get the writers and publishers audiences with the artists. And then to try and make the artists understand of getting good songs. Almost all of them could do this, if they didn’t have their own songs. For example, Reba would sit for hours in meeting after meeting to go through songs.

Usually, after three-to-six months, when that process was over, Dirt, the artist, and I would have a meeting. In the case of Reba, they’d play me what they’d found. Every once in a while, a song would come to me, and I would give it to them to listen to. It would be in the pile, but mostly songs were from them. I’d listen to the song, and I’d rate the song from 1 to 10. I rated it in two categories: one was radio; the other category was POB, for “piece of business.” When we got down to the final 12 songs, we needed to have three or four radio songs in there. You need to be on the radio. But the majority of music was what I called the pieces of business, which showed off the artist’s talent. It could be a great song that you could relate to in your life, but it would probably never get on country radio. As we did that, how we got down to the last 12 songs, was to get a mixture of the radio songs and the pieces of business so that there was a 30-, 35-, 40-minute concert there. It would be interesting to listen to the whole thing. It was a lot more involved than just telling it because there was tremendous give-and-take between the artist and me: “Would you open your stage show with this?” That was a huge part of the preproduction, which actually took the most time.

*After songs were chosen, was there a process for rehearsals so that they could come into the studio ready to record.*

Each artist was different. Reba would take the songs, once they were agreed upon. She had her own band. She’d go learn the songs. One or two of the musicians could work with her as she learned the songs. Sometimes—like with Steve Wariner—artists took their bands into the studio and made demos of songs. They took two or three people and made demos, figuring out how to make it theirs, instead of copying the demo. George would take the songs, live with them, and learn them himself.

Rarely did we ever get to a session and, when we laid it out for the musicians, the artist was there but needed developing. I’d almost force the artist to go out and get with one of those guys—get with the rhythm section. Of course, in country that’s most of the record. But get with the guys doing the basic track and have the artist to comment, “I like this. I don’t like that. That feels good. That doesn’t feel good.” I wanted to make it a thing they all did together. Each artist did that to different degrees.

*The received story has it that Billy Sherrill is laying songs on people with very little warning.*

I never in my life did that: “Okay, here’s your song. Learn it; sing it.” I heard that that was the case, but I never saw that. Don’t forget, Billy Sherrill was like the country Phil Spector. God forbid he ever heard me say that. But when you listen to a Billy Sherrill record, there was just a ton of Billy Sherrill. He probably wrote the song. He wrote great songs. He did the music with the musicians. The person learned it, came in, and sang on the track that was being played. Again, that was a different era. When I got to Nashville, Billy wasn’t doing much recording.

*However it worked, there were great recordings. Charlie Rich was around forever, Sherrill charted a new course for him. Did you feel that your work with Mel Tillis was analogous he’d been around forever to.*

For me with Mel, it was getting him a modern rhythm section. By the time I came into his life, he’d been making records for a long time and writing songs. What I felt he needed was a different rhythm section, with a new energy and a new excitement, working with him and *vice versa*. That was one of the things I needed to do. Mel hardly did anything unless he wrote it and/or his writers wrote it, because Mel was into publishing. When he first got to Nashville, that was what he learned. There’s nothing wrong with it, if you have good writers, and he had some pretty damn-good writers. I needed to get him a new rhythm section and a total new sound. The whole thing of modernizing the sound of country music, for me, when I went down there, would be working with Tompall and a few people over there. Of artists of note, it would’ve been Mel Tillis.

I told you when I spent all that money he nearly had a heart attack.

But it worked. Sales went from like 50-60,000 to 250,000. And he had hits in the album, but he’d had hits in previous albums that hadn’t sold. It proved the album concept makes sense if you want to sell albums.

I’ll tell you a funny story. His music had been the same for ages, and I was changing instruments that I sweetened with. He’d never had any string sections. I put a flute on one ballad he did. I put on saxophones. Instead of one or two fiddles, I had a whole section on a couple of things—different stuff.

Somewhere in the third year, Mel asked me to come by the studio. He was taking his band in and recording some stuff for, I forget now what it was, a TV show or something. I got down there, and it was a decent size studio, but it was crammed full. I looked around, and I said, “Damn Tillis, how many buses you got on the road?” I think he had three buses on the road. Every time I put something new on one of his records, all those strings, he added some strings, or a flute player. He didn’t know you could get a keyboard player to simulate all of that.

He said, “Bowen, by the way, don’t put any new fucking things on my records. You’re breaking me!” Because every time I added anybody, he hired somebody else for the road! Oh God, he was the funniest man that I worked with Nashville. I used to laugh at him so much.

*You wrote that microphones were, what I would call, gendered. They were designed for males, with the male voice in mind. He recorded a number of female artists. How did you compensate for that?*

I could never prove that. Any time I first worked with an artist—well, the first thing was to see them in person—but in the studio the first thing you do, you go in with just the artist—maybe with one of their musicians or with one of yours—and try all the microphones that you can find. Different voices came across better on different microphones. With Waylon Jennings… You ever hear that big old baritone voice sometimes—big and huge? If you stood next to him, he was singing soft. The microphone enhanced what he had.

But I found with women, mostly they sang higher for one thing. Many of the microphones that worked great for the male artists, didn’t complement the female voice: could not stand the dynamics, sometimes, when it was way high and smaller and more piercing. You had to work and work until you found the best microphone that did the best job. It’s like being in an operating room. After a while, over time, you keep breaking everything down so that it went quicker and better. That’s one of the things I ran into early. In California I didn’t do many female artists, but I did enough to realized, “Uh oh, there’s got to be a better sound for her than that.”

*Did you pull singers closer to the mike?*

For me, how close to the mic you could work depended, first of all, on the microphone. There were some artists, if you got too close, Ts and Ps would pop terrible. There was no way back in that era to deal with that effectively. Today, you can deal with it, of course. Secondly, and this is not in any order of importance, but if you got too close to some microphones with some voices, it started turning into a negative. There was a spot where it was right. But since the artist is wearing the earphones, they hear when it’s right, and they hear when it’s wrong. They move themselves forward and backward 90% of the time. When they didn’t do that—maybe they couldn’t tell or maybe they had their phones set wrong—you’d record a song and have them change their position with the mic all during the song. Then, bring them into the booth and play it for them.

They’d go, “That’s the one I want.”

“That’s when you were six inches away.”

The stuff I hear on the radio today, of course country music today has gone very young again. It’s all cyclical, and it’s now very young. Long time ago, it was rock-and-roll tracks with a steel guitar and a country voice. My guess would be that the Jason Aldeans are probably closer to the microphone, more like rock singers. But that’s just a guess from what I’m hearing. There’s so much compression in music today; they’re just mashing the shit out of it. That’s what the digital world is moving through, carrying around something the size of a cigarette pack with 3000 songs in it. That whole process, since I worked, has changed dramatically.

*But you really used 15 microphones on a drum once?*

Oh yeah, I was a fanatic for getting the best sound I could get from every instrument. The better you make the musician sound, the better he or she will play for you. That’s just human nature. That’s one thing. Plus, I wanted the best sound I could get on the drums. I always had the drums come in one hour or an hour-and-a-half ahead of the session. We’d work on the drum sound, each piece the drum—the bass, the kick, the hi-hat, all of cymbals, all the toms. You would use different mics on different parts of the drum.

Some of the people in Nashville thought we were absolutely nuts. When I first got there, hell, they didn’t even use drums on some stuff. For years, they wouldn’t let drums on the Grand Ole Opry. We played there in 1957, and they wouldn’t let our drummer bring his drums into the building. When I moved to Nashville, they had an isolation booth for the drummer. The singer might be out in the room singing. I said, “Wait a minute! This is backwards. I want the drums out here so they can breathe. You can’t stifle them. Let’s put the singer in a room, isolated for obvious reasons.”

Each instrument should be that way. I worked in the earphones. I put the earphone mix together in the earphones. Many engineers would knock themselves out on those big studio speakers while mixing the earphone mix. You can’t relate the two; they’re totally different.

Once I got the drummer sounding right, I had him mixed in the earphones perfect. Then, I added the bass, got him sounding right which is always easiest and quickest, usually. Then, I put him in the mix in the earphones. Then the guitars and keyboards and whatever I was going to have. In the last few years of my career, each musician had an earphone box. One and two were stereo channels. The next six, everybody was on them individually in case anyone wanted a little bit more of somebody. In our sessions you rarely saw those last six used at all; everyone was mixed into the earphone mix. It was almost like a perfect stage mix as we were doing it. I always thought that was terribly important when it came time to do the music.

*Your hands were on the board or were you instructing the engineer?*

When I was in California, I had four or five of the best engineers in the country. As a matter of fact, I had a company out there, Amos Productions, and I started a branch called Amos Engineering. They were all working for studios, being paid crappy salaries. I took five of the best in town over to Amos Engineering and guaranteed them a bottom line. The only profit that Amos Engineering took was to pay for the person who did the booking of the engineers into all the different studios with artists and producers. These guys, then, started making 50 bucks an hour, 60, 75. Engineers started getting paid what they should’ve gotten paid. They were doing the sound.

But I always loved messing with it. As we got to 8-track and to 16-track and, especially, to mixdown, it would be the engineer and myself. We didn’t have enough hands. There was no automation at one point. I loved to be able to do the EQ, instead of trying to talk someone through getting it. I could just do it myself.

When I got to Nashville, I started doing it. I’m not an engineer by any stretch. I always had to have an engineer with me to hook up all that shit. Every time we got a new piece of gear they had to tell me at least 20 times exactly how it worked. I had no retention for that kind of stuff. But I wanted to do the sound on the artists and the instruments myself. I studied the vocal—the sound of that singer. By doing the EQ, I knew what frequencies were their strong points, what frequencies were their weak points, and if the vocal needed any help: adding a bit more in the middle, in the top or the bottom, or in all of the different frequencies we had. Once I got that in my head, then when I was doing the drums—when I did the initial sound of the session of the drums and when we did the mixdown later— if there was anything in the drums that hurt any of the frequencies in the vocal, then I downplayed them in the drums. Therefore, I did not hurt the singer. You want the singer to be the focal point of it all. I loved it. I loved to do it all myself. Every instrument was EQed to be complementary and not negative to singer. I’m sure, that’s what most engineers do. We used to laugh; they had to do all the dirty work. I got to do the sound part and the final mixes, but I had four or five great engineers with me in Nashville the last four or five years.

When I got to Nashville the studios were antiquated. In pop music the studios stayed on top of the development of sound in every aspect: the microphones, the soundproofing in the studio, and the speaker systems that guided you. Nashville had been doing it the same way for years and years. They didn’t have the money to stay with the times like LA and New York. It was a matter of coming to the modern world and all those things inside the studios. There was no one down there doing that. Basically no one could afford to do it.

From the day I got there, it was a slow battle of change, change, change,. I got accused of owning studios because some of the people down there did. That was the most ridiculous thing in the world. First of all, why would you want own the studio? There’s no profit. You get that shit paid off, and it’s out of date. So you go back in debt again. There’s no profit. If you’re in there and something blows up, who are you going to holler at? Yourself? I didn’t want an artist mad me because my goddamn equipment didn’t work. That’s minor, minor, minor money. There’s not much profit in studios.

What I did, I went to the owner of Soundstage, and I said, “If you’ll spend money to modernize your studio, I’ll guarantee you X sessions for X period of time.” I had no risk, and I came out the other end with a more modern studio. I did that with about four studios. I had to have it, because I always had three or four albums going at one time. Actually, the most modern studio in Nashville during that period was Ronnie Milsap’s. But it was just him. It was his studio. He wasn’t booking it out. But I did quite a bit of stuff over there, using his studio. He’d built it in the modern era. I got him?? to build the one studio at Soundstage without a wall between me and the musicians. I loved that studio.

*What was the great benefit of that?*

It took away the “them” and “us.” It was just us. I had two big speakers on hydraulic lifts. So you had the same big speakers you’d have in any other studio. But I worked mostly in the earphones. That’s where the music was happening. That’s what I cared about, how it sounded in there. I got each instrument sounding right—you’d do that up on the bigger speakers—but I didn’t need the big speakers. You walk into a session and big speakers are blaring. Guys are out there playing in their little bitty earphones. I always hated that. I wanted to get that wall out of the way. So when technology got to a point where I could, I said, “You build it; I’ll use it. It’s yours. But I want it this way.” When I quit and I went to Maui, I was over there about two months and he called me. He said, “Are you sure you’re not coming back?”

I said, “I’m positive.”

He said, “I need to put a wall up. Nobody else wants to use that damn studio.”

I said, “Well quick, put the wall up for God’s sake.”

*People skills?*

People don’t understand that every person a producer works with in the making of a record is an artist. I didn’t hire sidemen. I hired artists. Reggie Young was an artistic guitar player. He was an artist. Billy Joe Walker, Jr., I never heard a better acoustic guitar player—and he was damn good on electric. Larrie Londin on drums or Eddie Bayers on drums, Leland Sklar on bass, these people were artists. Now, the person paying for it all, of course, is the singer—the artist. But they’re all artists. In some ways, that viewpoint makes it easier, but for some people it makes it more difficult. Still, you’re dealing with an artist with every piece of it, including the second engineer. You either have that ability [people skills] or you don’t. I don’t know where it came from, probably because I learned when I was 26, 27, and 28 from Sinatra, Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., and those people.

When I was in LA, I was using the best musicians in LA. They didn’t know who the hell I was. I had to have people skills. I’ll tell you one quick story. The first time I used a big string section—twenty people just in the string section—I wanted to make a change. I walked over. Ernie Freeman was this great arranger that I worked with. I walked over, and I’m trying to deal with it. And I could hear the Dodger baseball game playing; one cello player had it in his earphone. Then, I heard something else over on the other side of the section.

I thought, “Oh boy, I’ve got to get these people’s respect. I want them to be a part of this. I don’t want them to be here in body, but not in mind and spirit.” Everything had been going really good. Violin sections get tuned so good.

I said, “Alright, let’s take our break.” Everybody sat their instruments down very carefully. I went over to the second violin, not the first, and I detuned him just a little tiny bit, one string—I forget which one now—detuned him a little.

I got them back in. I stood right there where they were, in their section of the room. When they came back in, I was rather demanding. “Okay, quiet, quiet. Absolutely quiet, please.” One guy started to check his tuning. “No no, absolutely quiet. I’ve got this thought. I’ve got to hear the letter B. Let’s go to bar 22. On the downbeat, 1-2-3 and…”

The strings went “reeeeoooowww.”

I said “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold it! Jesus.” I said, “Right over here. Checked the tuning, would you?”

Indignantly, he went, “eeeeaaaah.” He looked so embarrassed. And he brought that baby back up to play.

I said, “Alright guys, let’s try that again.” They ran that one little section again. “Thank you very much.” I turned around, and went back into the booth.

I never had trouble with the string section the rest of my time in LA. They assumed, “If that son-of-a-bitch can hear that good, we’d better listen.” Because I was a kid.

I’d watched Jimmy Webb take hours trying to get what he wanted out of the string section. They knew he was a brilliant-but-crazy artist-guy trying to work with them. These were old guys who did movies and television, anything musical.

That worked. I don’t know why I thought to do that, but it worked.

You had to learn each kind of musician, each individual personality, figure them out. The greatest drummer I ever worked with was Hal Blaine in Los Angeles, and that group they called the Wrecking Crew. Each one of those guys was incredibly talented and each one was an absolute individual. I was more their age—that rhythm-section bunch. I learned how to do it after a while, until it became second nature.

The way I did it with the guys, I didn’t do your normal session. Everybody came 2:00-5:00 and 6:00-9:00, two sessions. But the drummer was really doing three sessions, because he had a session in front to get everything placed right, miked right, sounding right. But everybody came in early, before the actual tune. So they made some money for that. And then I fed them at five o’clock. I didn’t want them, between 5:00 and 6:00, going home, having a fight with their wife, and having a couple of drinks. When I got them together as a unit, I wanted them to stay that way all day. And I paid them double-scale. I caught hell for that. I said, “If Reggie Young isn’t worth double scale, why did they invent it? What’s the deal here? Are we nuts?”

I started it in California, and got in a lot of trouble for it. I was watching Hal Blaine do three sessions a day, and by the time he got to that 8:00-11:00 session at night, he was exhausted. I got called in, because the guys—the money guy—at Reprise, the label, found out that I was paying double scale. He thought he was over me, which would’ve been true in the old hierarchy of record companies. But he wasn’t the head guy; he was the money guy. He was quizzing me.

I asked him, “What did that album sell?”

He said, “What does that have to do with it?”

“If I’m going to answer your questions, you’re going to answer mine. What did that album sell?”

He picked up the intercom and called over. The album sold about 800,000.

I said, “Okay, what if I told you I’ll go back to single scale, and you sell 400,000. You decide.” I got up and walked out.

Of course, I told his boss. I said, “You either hire him to make the fucking records or me. But I’m not ever going to meet with him again.” Sometimes, you have to make a stand. I knew what I was getting out of these people in California, when they weren’t tired. When I gave them double-scale, they couldn’t do a morning session. It was part of the deal. “Sorry, I want you this afternoon, at the start of the evening.” They loved it.

*Vocal comping on analog tape.*

We never actually had any way to change the tuning. Except with EQ sometimes, you could have your vocal come in on your board on two different tracks. For example, at one word where someone was really flat, you could take some frequencies and kind of exaggerate them [manipulating the pitch]. Then, you threw in that one note, that one word or piece of word [on the corrected track], using what we called fine faders. For example, take the word “forgot.” Well, “for” was great, but “got” was out of tune. So you corrected that second syllable the best you could [using EQ]; then with the faders, when the singer sang “forgot,” you made a very fast switch. You throw in your corrected “got” and, of course, went back to the original track from then on. Then, you could mess with the echo. But it was a real hard thing to do. You could never do it satisfactorily.

The artist was, of course, live. That was usually where the majority of the master tape came from. I’d give the band a break, and have him sing it two more times. Sometimes, with Conway and a few other people, he’d say, “Let me have one more.” So I had three or four vocals to work with. If there was leakage on the live track, you wouldn’t allow leakage on the overdubs. Then, I’d make a best-of those three or four vocals. And again, you go back to that live one where that music is happening, but whatever is wrong, you fix that using one of the other two or three takes: with faders or switches. Nowadays, they just tell a computer, and it does it; they tell it once, and it doesn’t forever. It used to take us hours to do those fixes. But I wanted to max out every piece of the record, and that was the way you did the vocal.

Mel Tillis was the first one I did it with down there. Mel came to one of the sessions where I was comping his vocal. He said, “That’s a ... what’s tha ... How did you do that?” But every time I took a vocal cut and did the combine, as soon as I finished, Mel had it. No matter which take I chose for the final vocal—it was always the best dub—the next time you saw him that’s exactly the way he did it. Sometimes on stage with a live vocal, Mel played with the melody in different places, but not where I’d comped. I went to see him live, and he did it exactly like the comp. It was a win-win for everybody to take the time and spend the money.

Generating ideas.

There are times when something hits you, and you communicate it to a musician. Sometimes it was a feel thing in part of a piece of music, or in all of it. You’d feel real strongly, and you communicated that to the guys. They always tried it. Sometimes it worked; sometimes it didn’t work. But the key for me, to generate ideas, was getting five or six guys—we’re talking about Nashville now where you don’t do the arrangements; the arrangement happens between the musicians for the most part—that’s why I took all that time to get those phones so wonderful to where they could hear what each other was doing. They’d get involved, and the artist was so important for this. Many times I played for them—before the artist ever got there—I played pre-demos when the artist made them. But I played them some things by the artist that I really liked. Sometimes I didn’t have that, but when I did, I’d play it for them. If I had any live tape on an artist, I always played that for them.

When you’ve got great talents in that room—the artist and five or six other artists on the instruments—you’d be amazed where the great stuff comes from. Because they’re not doing what they did this morning with artist X. The way we did it, that artist is clear it out of their head. They’re concentrating on just this artist. They’re working with this artist.

What happens, of course, is a sound develops for Reba McEntire. A sound develops for George Strait. The sound part of it is very subtle, but the arrangement and the musicianship and how it’s done is very apparent. The sound is very important, too, but to the average listener, they don’t go, “Wow man, the bottom end of that guitar sounded good.” They’re absorbing the overall. So it pretty well took care of itself, if you set it up so that it could. It’s almost like you take a bunch of those cones you put out on the highway. You set it up, and you can make cars go anywhere you want. It’s not that simple, but it’s almost.

*In film it would be understood as creating the mise en scène.*

One of my driving thoughts, because I ran companies and did production... Running companies is bullshit and easy. I never did figure out what the president of the label does to be honest with you. That’s why I didn’t go down there, hardly ever. But in music, I figured out that you’re not making a piece of music for now. You’re making it for six, nine, 12 months from now. That’s when it’s going to come out. You must know what’s going on in the world you’re trying to reach.

Country music was easier than pop music because it’s a bit narrower and smaller, especially in Nashville. Not just what radio will play, but who’s turning out to see what kind of music, and what’s happening with the economy, what’s happening socially, what’s happening in the world that is affecting… Music is a mirror of the time. That doesn’t mean you can make music to fit what you’re seeing at the moment. You have to figure out what that’s going to cause us to be like a year from now.

Ever shocked at the fit?

Rarely. For me it was usually just an affirmation. The disappointing part was when you work your butt off on something, it comes out, and you were wrong. It didn’t fit the times. Of course, in that regard, a song you thought was wonderful, a year from now, somebody had already done it twice. There were a lot of things you didn’t have any control over. The good part about doing a lot of product, like I did, was that I didn’t dwell on the negative. I also felt if you used the best there is and you do the best you can, use the proper time on it, once you do that, you really have no control. Once you finish a project, you’re on to the next, on to the next.

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