

# TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

## LINDA PERRY

*producing P!nk, Christina Aguilera, Dolly Parton*

## HARRY CONNICK JR.

*home alone in his studio*

## STEVEN WILSON

*solo albums, mixing, producing*

## TOM WILSON

*a remembrance*

## GEOFF SWAN

*mixing, Cardi B, Charli XCX*

## NATE SMITH

*drums w/ Paul Simon, Brittany Howard*

## AMON TOBIN

*electronics w/ Figueroa*

## LIAM HAYES

*Plush, solo, studio obsession,  
& 4-track w/Luther Russell*

## MARC JONSON

*songs & studios & stories*

## LEON MICHELS

*keys, Dr. John, Lana Del Rey, Wu-Tang*

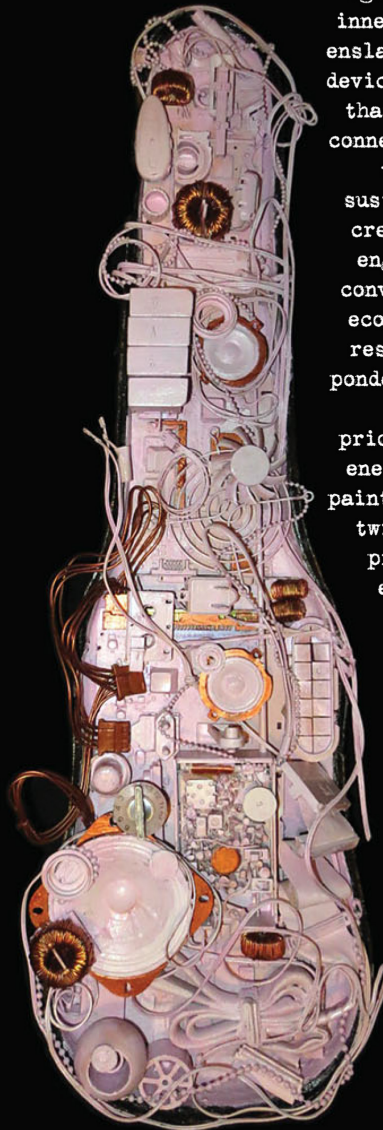
## DAN ALEXANDER

*A Vintage [gear] Odyssey*

## GEAR REVIEWS

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Refuse achieves a rhythm of its own as detail is whittled down and narrative imagery transforms the guts of our digital enablers. The inner workings of our enslaving, labor-saving devices are revealed so that we can make the connection between art, technology, and sustainability. Let's create awareness and engage in a direct conversation about our ecological and social responsibilities, and ponder a greener future.

Detritus harbors a prior, perhaps grounded energy - the metal and paint, the twisted things twisted anew, even the prosaic plastic. While exposing hidden forms, submerged colors, noise, dimension, and modulation are revealed.

In short  
(and to reiterate):  
Reverberation.

# Marc Jonson and his “Closet of Sound”

BY BREN DAVIES | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN T. SILAK



*It is remarkable how I discovered Marc Jonson. Quite randomly, on a Sunday afternoon a few years ago, I found a box of CDs on the sidewalk in my Brooklyn, NY, neighborhood. Being a music lover constantly in search of new albums to inspire my life, I noticed one CD in particular when flipping through the contents of that random box: an original 1992 pressing of Marc’s self-produced home recording, *12 In A Room*. There was a quiet energy about the look and feel of this album – some undefinable aspect that set it apart from the 150 or so other CDs in that box, which compelled me to pop it into my CD player as soon as I got home.*

*I knew after listening to only five seconds of the opening track that there was something very special about this album, and this particular artist. Before the album finished playing that first time, I had already exhausted my internet research about Marc Jonson, masquerading as MarK JoHnson on the cover of the CD. I knew that I wanted to contact him and learn more about his music and career. What I didn’t know was that Marc lived just outside of New York City in suburban New Jersey, and that he would reply to my email that same evening with his cell number for me to contact him directly.*

*I went to Plainfield, NJ, twice to interview Marc. The first was with photographer Brian T. Silak to do a combination photo shoot and 4-hour interview, which proved to be too full of non-*

*chronological (but amazing) stories to streamline into an article. I returned two months later to Marc's home and studio that he shares with photo-realist painter and girlfriend, Maria Mijares, for another interview – this time structured for editing and publication.*

*Known for his incredible “overnight success” discovery story, wherein a 19-year old kid from Long Island takes a train into Manhattan, enters a building with a nine-song reel-to-reel home demo, and leaves with a recording contract from Vanguard Records, Marc's journey is even more interesting. What a lot of people don't know is that he was also courted by RCA Records from that same demo just prior to signing with Vanguard, and that RCA wanted to hire Marc as a full-time staff producer. They also wanted him to produce the band Pure Prairie League as his first major label release! Marc turned down this offer in favor of producing himself as a solo artist on Vanguard, releasing his album, Years, in 1972.*

*Marc went on to self-release several additional albums, and also worked with various other well-known artists over the years. Marc's songs have been recorded and/or performed by Dave Edmunds, Robert Gordon, Paul Butterfield, The Roches, Willie Nile, Richard Barone, Shawn Colvin, Lucy Kaplinsky, Richard Lloyd [Tape Op #56], Steve Forbert, Suzanne Vega, and The Smithereens. Most recently, Marc co-penned and recorded an album with the Spanish rock group Company of Dreams Unlimited.*

*Marc and I spoke about a career trajectory punctuated by many real beginnings and even more false starts; by many smaller successes and many even larger moments of lasting self-sabotage. Though I had to edit out 2/3 of the second raw interview – much of which was a name-dropper's wet dream, considering all of the famous people Marc has known, – I kept all relevant stories about Marc's career arc and about his personal approach to pop music engineering and production.*

**You were in a high school band called the Gay Intruders [named after the 1948 comedy film], and that was your first time going into “a real studio” to cut a song.**

I was the drummer, and I also sang. We got the band together, and we had a guitar player named Bruce DeSousa. His mother happened to work at United Artists in the city in the accounting department. We would go into Manhattan to see her, grab lunch, and then we were in the building. We couldn't get kicked out, because everyone there knew us. In that building, on the second floor, was a little recording studio called Dick Charles Recording – a demo studio. Later on, I found out that Carole King and all the Brill Building people had used that studio to make their demos. I was a kid listening to the radio, getting turned on to music during the '50s and early '60s.

**How old were you, at this point in time?**

About 14-years old. That was the heyday of pop music. Rock 'n' roll was fusing with the pop market, combined with a new feeling coming in from R&B, gospel, country – all mingling, all coming together to make rock 'n' roll happen. There I was, in the midst of the New York center of *that* music! My father and uncle both worked for the phone company. My uncle had a tape recorder that I was fascinated with as a kid, but I didn't get my hands on one myself until I was about 15.

**You had your eyes on home recording equipment for eight years before you got to record anything?**

That's an important element to my story. I was building up pressure and steam. This desire, this unobtainable *wanting* to get certain things. Not that my parents were poor, but they were frugal. If I'd asked them for a tape recorder, my father would have said, “You're not getting that. It's too much money!” A tape recorder cost \$79, or whatever it was. Then he would say, “And the cost of the tape – and then you need a microphone? Next, you're going to be asking me for a guitar!” It wasn't going to happen, but it all played into creating the drive in me, and the desire.



MARC'S A-3440

**When you finally got a tape deck, you were exploding with creativity. By the time you had the infamous nine-song demo at age 19, you'd been recording for about four years?**

Yeah, combined with 11 or 12 years of learning to play piano, learning to play guitar, and being surrounded by music. I joined the school band in fourth grade. I was a drummer, because drums excited me.

**By the time you were ready to start showing people your demo recordings as a songwriter, it was a natural extension of what you were already doing when you were visiting the United Artists Building with your friend.** That's the secret. I tell the story that I walked into the city and, in one day, Merna Greenfield sent me to RCA. It was not one day. It was many, many *rehearsals*, over several years. That "one day" was *the show*. The show lasted one hour, and then it was over. An "overnight success" is not an *overnight* success. In my case, I walked into the city with a tape that I had made on a home tape recorder, a TEAC, with nine songs. I walked into 1650 Broadway, and I went up to the fifth floor. Years earlier, I had read the lobby directory card, and I knew what was in that building. I needed *a reason* to be in the building that had something to do *with me*. I'd been in the building before, and people were like, "What are you doing in this building?" I had no answer! With my own nine-song tape, I had an answer. The Dick Cavett Show was in that building. Kama Sutra Records – The Lovin' Spoonful were on that label. There were things going on in this building. Gil Music – they published The Beatles' first sheet music! I'm standing in *that* building! Follow the dots; it's so simple. Go where you are *led* to.

**But eventually, you need to have a reason to be there. Eventually, you had to have your nine-song reel-to-reel tape to show people.**

I didn't know any of that consciously at the time. I recently saw a documentary on Steven Spielberg, about how he came up during those same years. I identified with his story, even though it was about film. He went onto the Universal lot in L.A. and opened up his own office there. Then he came back the next day, and the next day, and the next. If you do things like that, people see you. That's how he did it. You probably can't do this anymore. But that was the same timeframe: the late '60s and early '70s.

**You didn't want to take your master tape with you when you went into the city, so you made a dub of it at a store on Long Island.**

I had no idea how to do it. Getting two tape recorders? I don't think so! One of them was hard enough to get. I knew a girl who had a brother who worked at Newmark & Lewis, an electronics store. I called him up, and I said, "Can I bring a tape over to your store?" There we were, in the store on the shelf, where the tape recorders were displayed.. I made sure that the song order was right. I had a certain order in mind for the nine songs. I probably went into the city the next day. The plan was to go to 1650 Broadway – so I did. I went in and I looked at the lobby directory. For some reason, I said, "I'm not going to go to Kama Sutra Records. I'm not going to go to Buddah Records." I wasn't going to go to these places that I knew. I was going to knock on a different, random door. Now, that's crazy. I don't know what I figured, but that's what happened! I walked in, took the elevator up to the fifth floor.

**Why five?**

It seemed like it was right in the middle of everything. I got off and I made a left. I should have looked. That building was so chock-full of delicious names. There were so many opportunities and options. I walked down the hall, and then I saw this one door and I knocked on it. A woman named Merna Greenfield came out with a tape around her neck that she was editing. She was busy and like, "What do you want?" I said, "I want someone to listen to my tape." She goes, "I don't have time now." I said, "Oh, I'm sorry. Bye!" As I'm walking away, she says, "Wait. Come back. I'll listen." I must have been about five steps away. There was something about the way I didn't argue, or that I didn't bug her a second time, so she let me in. After the third song, she made a phone call. The tape was still going. She called her friend, and she shut the tape off. She only listened to three songs. She said, "Go over to my friend Elliot Horne at RCA Records. He's waiting for you. He should hear your tape. He'll tell you what to do with it." So, I did. I went over there. There I was on the 11th floor of RCA Records *with an appointment*. I had been there before. I had sat there before – looking at the magazines and watching people coming and going. That's why I'm saying that I had been to many record labels and music business offices over the years leading up to this particular day. Why didn't I just take my tape directly to these places? Maybe because I didn't think I would get anywhere, and intuitively I knew that if I went with somebody in the music business who was on a lower level, then maybe I'd have a chance. That might have been what I thought. In the end, it worked out to be a good way to do it. Elliot comes out, and he's a wonderful man. Very warm. I go back into his office, and he puts the tape on, turns in his swivel chair, and looks out the window. All nine songs go by. I can't read his reaction because he's facing away from me. He turns around and goes, "Is this really you?" I said, "Yeah!" Then I thought, "I could have brought anybody's tape in here." Some bootleg tape. He says, "Go home. You're a genius. I'll call you." I went home. I was done. It was my neighborhood. It wasn't like, "Oh, I've got to go back to my list and hit all these other companies." It wasn't like that. It was just like, let's see what happens with this one thing. *This is good enough*. For God's sakes, I had sat in that chair in the lobby of RCA Records before without a prayer of speaking to anyone who could have talked to me. I didn't have anything to show anyone in those days. What did I have in my hand? Nothing. I finally had something, and somebody had heard it. So, I go home and tell my mother, and she tells my father when he gets

home from work. They're going to some retirement dinner that night. My mother and father go there, and they sit down with this woman. My parents are charming, and they are talking about their lives with this woman they had never met before. They were seated at this table. My father braggingly says, "Well, my son's a musician." At the end of the evening, he says, "My son was talking about something to do with RCA Records." The woman says, "Whoa! What did you just say?" My father says, "Why?" She says, "My brother is Rocco Laginestra, the President of RCA Records. I'm going to call my brother in the morning and tell him to look for your son's tape." My father comes home, and he doesn't even tell me that this happened! I get up in the morning, and he goes to work. My mother didn't even say anything about it. I get a phone call from Elliot at the end of that day, and he says, "You really stepped in it!" I said, "What do you mean, 'I stepped in it?'" He says, "I took your tape to Mort Hoffman, and he goes, 'Who is this guy, Marc Jonson? I've been hearing about him all morning from Rocco.'" Mort Hoffman is the Vice President of the label. Elliot took the tape to Mort Hoffman. He didn't even take it to Rocco. Elliot Horne, the guy who heard my tape, was head of the jazz label. He wasn't the pop guy, so he needed to take it to somebody. I went into the city the next day to Mort Hoffman's office. Big smiles, and he's like, "What do you want?" "Well," I said, "I want to make a record." He said, "Like the one we heard?" I said, "Better!" He said, "We want you to do that too. But we can't believe the *sounds* you got. You did this at home?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Can you imagine what you could do in a big studio?" I said, "Sure, I can imagine. Let's go!" He said, "We want you to produce some other people. We want you to be a *producer* for the label." I said, "Well, can I still make my own records?" "Yes! You can make as many records as you want. And we'll give you your own office and help you find an apartment, so you don't have to commute." It was a good deal. They wanted me to produce a band named Pure Prairie League, which was signed to RCA at the time. Merna Greenfield heard of the offer. She told Elliot that she was my manager and she wanted a percentage. Elliot asked me, "Is she your manager?" I said, "No. I never met her before that first day." He got mad at her, then she got mad at him, and then she started wining and dining me. I didn't know what was happening, but because of the interest, all of a sudden, I was a hot commodity! She had this lawyer friend, and he was all big on taking my tape to Midem, this music conference held in France every year. "Let's put the RCA people on hold," he tells me. He calls me from France. I get this phone call from the overseas operator at my house. He said, "I'm getting the best reaction from anybody's tape I've ever shopped. We're going to sign with Vanguard Records." Little did I know that he represented Vanguard as their legal counsel! The whole thing was a bluff. He gets back, and he convinces me. He says to me, "Do you really want to be a producer, or do you want to make your own records?" I said, "No, I want to make my own records." He said, "If you sign with RCA, you're going to be tied down. They're going to work you. You're going to get a salary, but you're going to be working a lot in a studio with other people, giving your secrets away." I didn't foresee myself in an office for the next year working on other peoples' records, and, since I had another option – I guess I could have said to RCA, "I don't want to be a producer! Let me make an album for you." But, after that first meeting and Mort Hoffman's enthusiasm about me as a producer, I didn't want to let him down. I didn't want to be an artist on a label who refused to be a producer.

**Here you are as a 19-year-old, with an artist deal on a significant label and unlimited studio time. What was it like going from home recording and that brief taste of Dick Charles studio time to suddenly having full access to a big studio with lots of instruments?**

Well, I think the biggest thing that was obvious to me was that there was another person now. I had an engineer who ran the sessions. It wasn't a personal space for me anymore – it was a shared space. My engineer was named Jeff Zaraya. He was a great guy. He lived on a houseboat in Manhattan, and he was quirky – which was good. And the label was quirky. It wasn't a fully corporate label like RCA might have been. Jeff and I started working together. That was the biggest difference: not only the machinery with more tracks and much more availability of instruments, but now I was having to communicate through an engineer instead of me doing everything myself. It took a little time to get

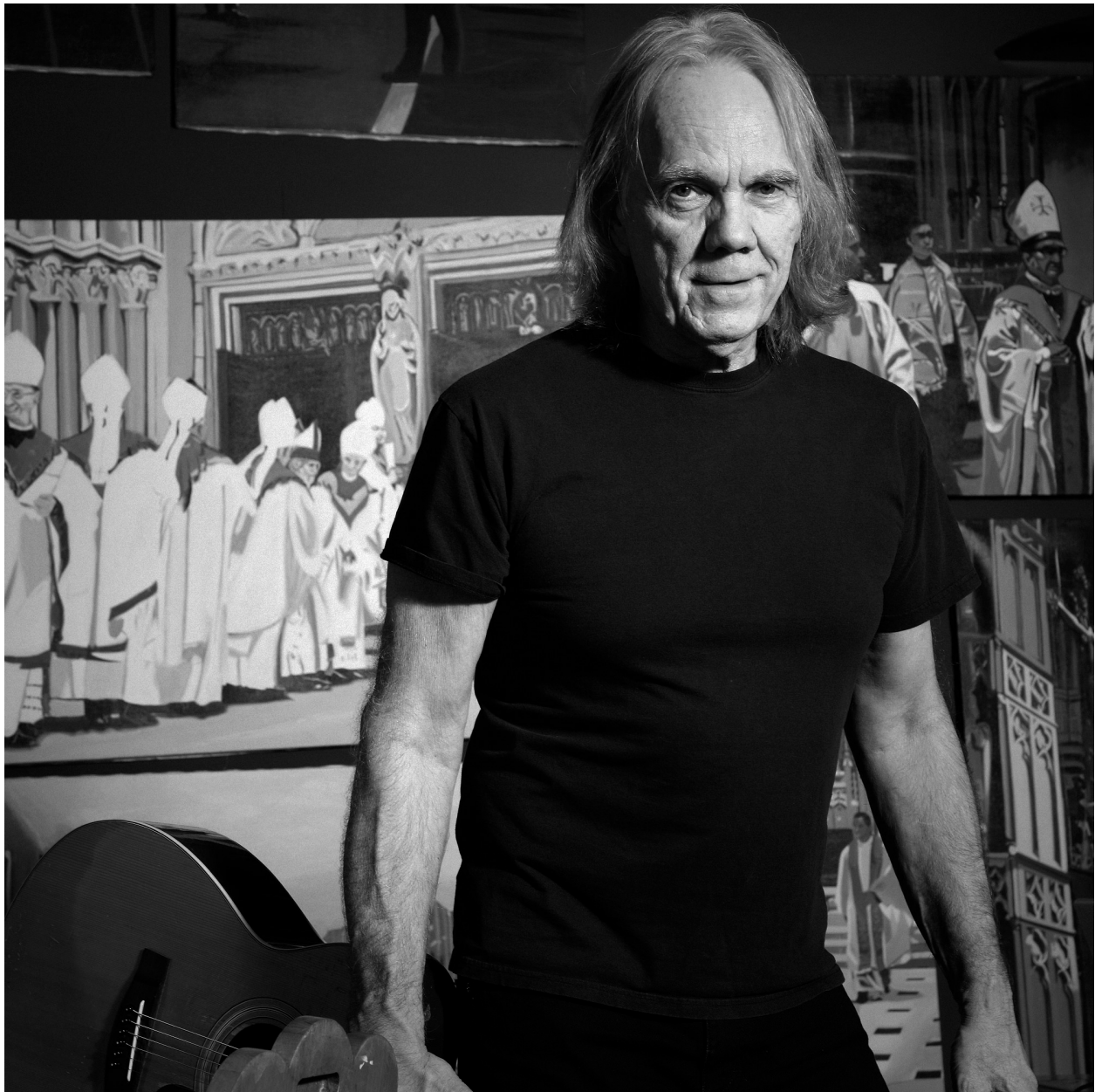
up and running with Jeff so that he could read me, I could read him, and I could communicate to him. Of course, now that I was in a bigger studio, I would be more demanding. Not personality-wise, but more demanding of myself regarding what I wanted. Now that I was there at Vanguard, I would push and say, “Can we use that? Can we open this up? Can we put the mic 30 feet away from the piano and record the way *that* sounds? Because I can’t do that at my house!” We started off on 8-track, because Jeff was thinking, “Eh, he’s a singer/songwriter. We’re not going to use more than eight tracks.” Boy, did he not know who I was! We transferred the 8-track to a 16-track pronto, because it became obvious this was not going to be an 8-track album. To give you an example, the song “Mary” from my debut album *Years*, was started on 8-track, thinking it was going to be a simple song. As the song progressed, I would walk in and see a harpsichord left over from the night before, when Vanguard had recorded a classical session. I asked, “Can we use it?” Jeff said, “Yeah. Bill’s Rental comes at 3 o’clock.” I think, at one point, I even called up Bill’s Rental and asked them to please put us at the end of their collection run. We were having too much fun using his instruments. He didn’t care. I think Vanguard said to themselves, “Throw him in the studio with Jeff Zaraya. All we’re doing is paying Jeff’s salary. Let the kid do whatever he wants.” I’m in there going, “Well, they’re letting me be in here, and Jeff is taking me seriously. He’s got the key to the door, and he’s letting me come in here every day!”

**You were recording everything and then doing subtractive mixing as opposed to additive mixing. Would you say that approach subsequently became your modus operandi?**

Yeah, that’s the way I work. I was more frugal when I had only TEAC 4-tracks to work with in the ‘80s. I had to make decisions, like, “What’s going to go on this next track?” But then I got a little mic mixer, so I could play my guitar, sing, and play a bass drum – and put all of that on one track. Then I could have another guy do that same thing through my mixer at home. We made some tapes like that where we got four people on two tracks. I realized *that* was where I was heading. When I recorded at Vanguard and got more tracks, it was a relief. But it wasn’t being worked out with a band at a rehearsal studio; it was instead being sculpted by me, by myself in the recording studio. Lots of things were tried and then discarded. When I’m looking at how to arrange a song, I throw something in there. If, the next day when I come back and hear it, or an hour later I come back, and hear it, and go, “What was I thinking? Why would I put a piano part over that bridge?” Well, I thought it was a good idea at the time... I need to get objectivity and distance to see what I’m really creating. How is this song talking to me? The song talks to the arranger/producer, and then the arranger/producer speaks to the song – so you need to have a conversation with the song. When you’re in a band with other people, you create a song, and then another guy knows where to make changes, or how to make his part work for the whole.

**What happened with your record, *Years*? It wasn’t promoted very well by Vanguard. It’s a very eclectic album and they probably didn’t know what to do with it.**

I was nearing the end, finishing the album after about nine months. I’m sitting in the Vanguard office one day, and I’m thinking... I was a big Cat Stevens fan. His record production, his songwriting. I’m sitting in the office, and I realize, “Wait a minute. I’m in the offices of Vanguard Records! I guess I’m an employee of Vanguard Records. I’m producing my own album, and I have my own little office.” I call up A&M Records, which is Cat Stevens’ label. I asked, “Who manages Cat Stevens? My name is Marc Jonson. I’m at Vanguard.” The lady says, “His name is Barry Krost.” I said, “Can you give me his phone number?” She goes, “Oh, by the way, he happens to be in New York right now! He’s at the Sherry-Netherland Hotel.” Click. I hang up and call up the Sherry-Netherland Hotel. I ask for Barry Krost. Now I’m talking to Cat Stevens’ manager. It’s that simple! I told him what I had been doing – I had been working on this album for around nine months. “Can I bring it over and have you listen to it?” He said, “Yeah, sure!” I go over there, and I put the tape on. I remember him saying, “Interesting. Come back tomorrow. I’m having some people over, and we’ll continue.” I went home. Next day I go into the city, go back to the Sherry-



Netherland, knock on the door, and Carly Simon answers. I come in, and there is this little grouping of people: there's James Taylor, Nat Weiss (the Beatles' American lawyer), Paul Samwell-Smith – the producer of the Cat Stevens' records that I love, and Barry Krost. That was the little party. We're all having potato chips, and dip, and wine. Barry introduces me and says in his British accent, "Marc's a very talented young man. Very promising." They all know each other, and I'm the new kid at this party. They're like, "Yeah. We want to hear your record!" I remember getting Nat Weiss's card, and I remember going over to Nat Weiss's office a couple days later and talking to him. I was now in a position of starting to move my business forward, like I should have done in the beginning. I didn't get signed to a management company. I didn't have any ducks in a row. I just had me. I had made and produced this record. There wasn't even a publisher, or a producer involved. There was nothing. It was just one guy – I didn't even have a band!



**And yet you had an album on Vanguard Records.**

I had an album that was finished and ready to be released – so I was scurrying to get help! I didn't want some sleazeball manager who would rip me off. I went to the top of the food chain and I was glad to do so. Certainly, walking into that party proved that to me. Over the next couple of days, Barry and I talked. I went in again and we listened to the record. He showed me this album by Colin Blunstone who he's working with, lead singer of The Zombies, called *One Year*. My album's called *Years*. He goes, "It's going to be a little confusing right now, if I'm working on these two records." Maybe he gave me the names of some of his friends or something. I was very disappointed. I thought that would have been the greatest thing for me. It didn't happen. The record came out. Vanguard released it. I did a couple of shows in New York with Larry Coryell and a band called Clean Living. They were also on Vanguard. We did a week of shows together. My parents came. I played an acoustic guitar with Larry Coryell, who was a big jazz legend. I would see ads in the *Village Voice* for my record and shows at The Gaslight and at Cafe Au Go Go. There was a little bit of a buzz happening, but it dwindled without a manager in the mix.

**And, without interviews and performances – without publicity...**

I did interview on the radio, on WLIR. The record company *did* arrange that – they did *some* stuff. I'm proud of the record. It was an incredible experience, to have manufactured this reality out of nothing. In '72, I sublet an apartment in the city. And then, in '73, I was hitchhiking around and bumming around the city, and didn't have a place. I was crashing on peoples' couches all winter of '73 – crashing on people's floors. End of '73, beginning of '74, I met Maggie and Terre Roche [of The Roches], and we became inseparable. We did everything together. They took me with them on the college coffeehouse circuit. They had just finished up a record called *Seductive Reasoning*. There weren't a lot of people in The Village then who had records out. We did. George Gerdes showed up in The Village, and he had a record out – so we became this grouping of people. Then Steve Forbert showed up, and my friend Willie Nile showed up. We started a community, a scene. More and more people showed up. This guy, Jack Hardy, showed up. Cliff Eberhardt showed up. Rod MacDonald, David Massengill – a whole bunch of folk people. This was '75, '76, '77. The scene was starting to coagulate.

**Around that time, you moved into the Greenwich Village apartment where you later recorded *12 In A Room* – the apartment which became the hangout spot for that entire music scene.**

I got it in '75. Maggie and Terre and I lived there, and then Maggie and I moved in together in my place and lived together. Then she moved out and got her own place. That was about the time that I started building the home studio, in '76 or '77. That was when I started recording myself *for real*.

**When you say "building the studio," what did that involve in this apartment?**

At first it was just a 4-track TEAC sitting on a desk. I had a cassette deck and a microphone that I had gotten from another Sony cassette deck. It was plastic with a plastic grille. It was the cheapest mic in the world, but it had this unbelievable sound. I recorded "Love Radiates Around" from *12 In A Room* with that microphone. After recording like that for a while, Terre Roche had gone out and bought a little 4-track board, which I somehow inherited because she lost interest in recording. I borrowed her board and added it to my system. Then, at one point, I decided to really go gung-ho. I had a loft bed in my apartment, and under the loft bed, I built this little studio area where the TEAC was tilted at an angle in its own frame with a patchbay under it – with a built-in place for this single dbx 161 compressor/limiter that I still use here at my current studio, and a place for the cassette deck. I made it so that you couldn't see any of the wires, and it looked like a workstation. I think that was '77 or '78.

[At this point, Marc spoke at length about the 1980s, which was a lost decade for him in many ways. On the one hand, Marc had major music industry players requesting in person, face-to-face auditions and meetings – the likes of Clive Davis, Jerry Wexler, the list went on. On the other hand,

because of Marc's alcoholism during that decade, which he discussed candidly,, he sabotaged his many chances at that time. These were fascinating stories, with many important lessons and many famous names mentioned. Alas, these interludes were outside the scope of this article and its orientation toward music recording and production.]

**Your next album release was 1992's *12 In A Room*, which you recorded and produced at home, playing most of the instruments yourself. I'm fascinated by this album, and I've come to think of it truly as a lost power pop masterpiece. What are some of the engineering and production decisions that went into the making of this album?**

On 4-tracks, you start off with a drum track or a click track. You don't have to – on the very early tapes I didn't have a click track. I would just record the acoustic guitar and the vocal on one mic that was lying on a table, singing into the mic so that it would pick up the guitar and most of the resonance of my voice. Then I would add another guitar. Instead of a drum kit, I used to play on the New York City phone book. It was a thick phone book! [*laughter*] If you put a little reverb on it, it would sound interesting, as long as it didn't "boing" too much. I took a reverb with silver springs in it from a guitar amp and I hooked that up to wires – and then I connected the output as a return on one of the other tracks on the TEAC to boost the signal – I made my own little spring reverb unit. A lot of my early recordings had guitar and vocal on one track, and then the reverb would be on its own track. Then there would be phone book and maybe another guitar or a bass. That became the sound of my tapes of that period. I was recording at Cornelia Street in NYC's Greenwich Village. It was the winter, and it was really cold. I had all the equipment lined up where my bed was. I had a loft bed up top and a couch under the loft bed, but the bed foam had all deteriorated, so I put the recording equipment where the bed was, and I slept on the floor. This was like a Van Gogh story. There was something about it being an on-the-fly thing; about me being cold and hungry, and the only place where reality existed for me, at that time, was inside these headphones where I was writing, singing, and recording songs. I wrote "Love Radiates Around" there.

**There's definitely a '60s pop garage sensibility to *12 In A Room*. It's a completely different direction than the songwriting on your 1972 Vanguard album, *Years*.**

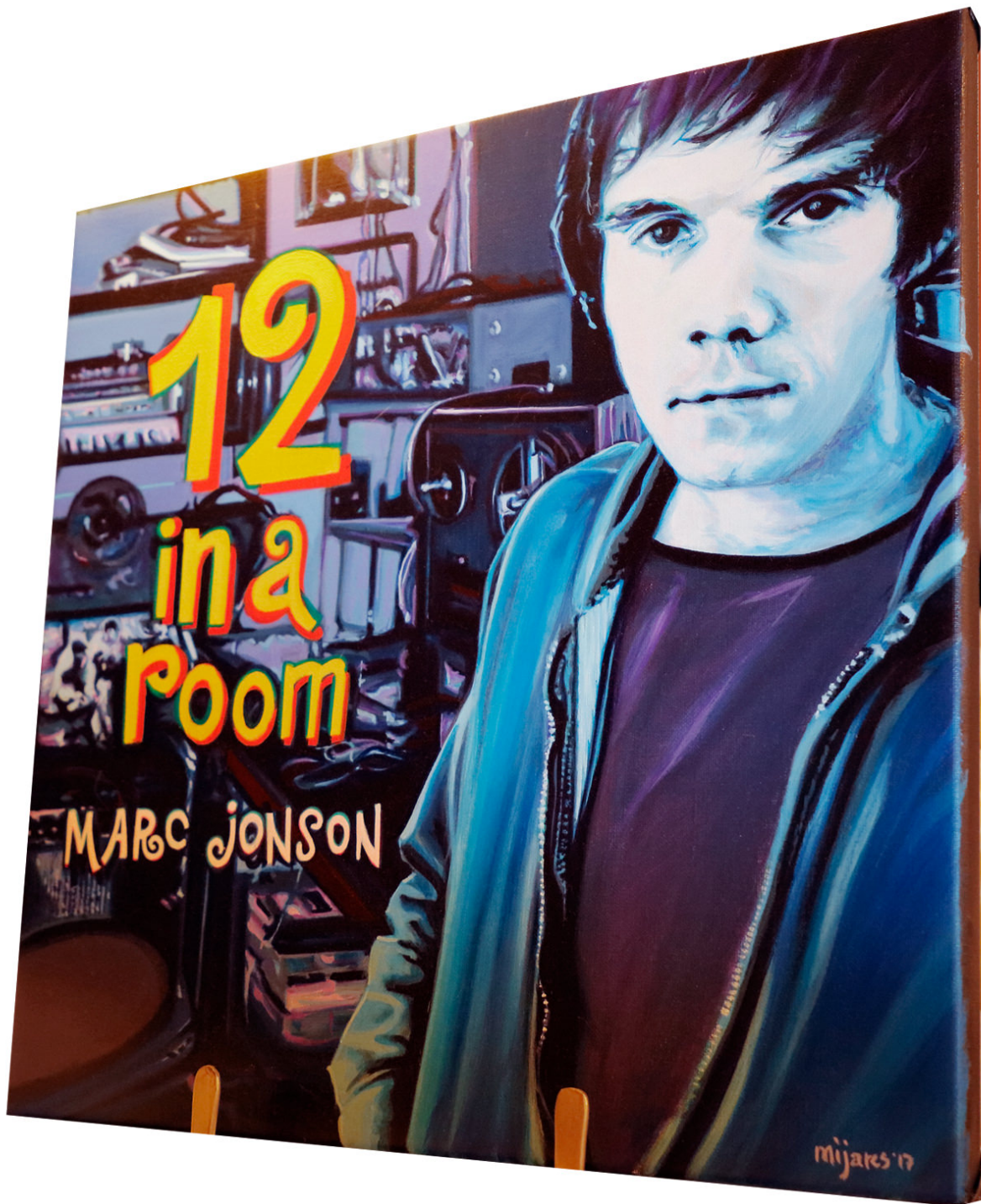
The recordings that got me signed – the ones that RCA and Vanguard heard – were more poppy than *Years*. They were closer to the songs on *12 In A Room*.

**So, *Years* was a departure for you, stylistically?**

It was me trying to utilize the studio in a new way, by myself. I didn't have a studio band coming in like Brian Wilson or The Wrecking Crew. I was just building these little soundscapes that were interesting. There are only nine songs on *Years*. They're long songs, and that was what took precedence for me over the three-minute pop song at that time. I think that, looking at the other artists of the day, I wanted not to just get in line with them, but instead try to make *Years* happen organically: my interpretation of recording in a big studio by myself. If you're going to have a studio, let's really use it and put something different out into the world.

**Let's talk about this body of songs from the sessions for *12 In A Room*. There are five additional CDs of songs from this period of time, from this Greenwich Village home studio, that you have made available through your website. When you produced *12 In A Room* in 1992, how did you select 12 out of over 100 songs?**

By tempo. Because of the tempo of each song, I know where it belongs. A couple in the front that are up-tempo, then you slow it down. You don't want a real slow one right away – although on Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, he starts out with a slow one. Sometimes that can work. It depends on what you want to do. In my case, I thought, "Well, let's start off with good energy and then keep the energy at that level." The second song is "When a Heart Breaks Down," and from that it goes to "Desperate," which a lot of people thought should have been first. The song order feels right to me, though. You have all of these songs in your basket, and you go, "All right. Give me a half-tempo



one. Give me a mid-tempo.” Then “Desperate” ends, and what happens after “Desperate”? “Cold Weather” comes on. “Coming through the door.” It’s very sparsely produced. It doesn’t have drums. Then, let’s bring the listener back up. Let’s put “When I Fall.” And then “Numbers” – very melodic. It’s got a great guitar solo at the end. It went on like that. I knew what would work. Other

things *could* work, or *might* work. I think, for the most part, getting that balance of fast and slow is what's most important.

**There were some good additional songs that didn't make it onto *12 In A Room*.**

At the time I was making *12 In A Room*, I had put together a little team, including my friend Richard Lloyd from the band Television. Richard helped me mix the album. You're making a record – you want to put your best foot forward. I had favorites. I wasn't thinking as much about how they'd play against each other, in an album sense. I wanted the best favorites to be on *12 In A Room*. I had met Steve Addabbo [*Tape Op* #121] around 1971, when Steve was in a band called Arbuckle, with Ron Fierstein [future manager of Suzanne Vega and Shawn Colvin] and my friend, Jan Flato. *Years* came out and I did some shows with them around NYC in 1973. Skip forward almost 20 years when Richard Lloyd and I mixed *12 In A Room* at Steve's New York City studio, Shelter Island Sound, in 1992. This gave *12 In A Room* a major lift sonically, since it was originally recorded on two TEAC 3440 tape recorders.

**Following *12 In A Room*, you released *Last Night on the Roller Coaster*, also recorded at home.**

That was in 2000. I had moved to L.A. at that point. I was putting it together, and I lived in this little guest house. Most of the tracks were recorded at the Cornelia Street apartment back in New York, but there was some that I did in L.A. There's one song called "Coney Island Night." I recorded that one in L.A. It was a new song, and I wanted to include it on that album.

**Were these still 4-track reel to reel recordings?**

No. "Coney Island Night" was done on a 4-track cassette recorder, but it sounds great. It was fun to put that album together. I kept thinking of the feeling of being at an amusement park – so for every song, I wanted to capture that flavor.

**Your next release after this was *Wild Alligators*, which is a collection of various record label and production demos from the '80s. These were originally recorded during the period in your life that was cut from this interview, when you were almost signed to several major label deals and were struggling with some personal issues.**

It was just historic for fans who were interested. It's on a very small label called Applehead, and digitally, it's getting a lot of attention right now, on the internet – a lot of streams and hits.

**Tell me about what you're working on right now.**

I did a tour in Spain in 2018 with Ramirez Exposure and Richard Lloyd. It was set up by Ramirez Exposure's management. The three of us did our own separate sets, and then, in the third set, we all did three or four songs together, which happened to be my songs. After that tour, there wasn't much going on – we had the whole summer ahead of us. I knew I was going to be in Spain for the rest of the summer, and I wanted something to do. Well, earlier that year, I had seen that my buddy, Willie Nile, was going to play in Santander, Spain, at this venue where I had played two years earlier. I went to see Willie, which was the night before I was supposed to leave on my tour with Ramirez Exposure and Richard Lloyd. I'm in Willie's dressing room with him and he shows me the set list. He says, "You're going to sing on this, and this, and this." That's something we've always offered – if I'm playing and he's in the audience or vice versa. He calls me up, and I get on stage. There are 200 or 300 people there. He introduces me and I sing. I do the songs we agreed upon and then he wouldn't let me get off stage, so we finished the set together. It was a great way for the music scene in Santander, Spain, to be introduced to me as a performer and recording artist. There was a journalist there who had seen all of this go down, and he wanted to know about me. He wrote a review of Willie's show and mentioned me. When we got back from the tour later on with Ramirez Exposure and Richard Lloyd, I said to my girlfriend, Maria, that we've got to get something happening. We had met this guy at Willie's show who happened to be a guitar player. When we got

back from the tour, I called the guy, thinking maybe I could start a band with him. “Well,” he says, “I don’t have time to be in a band right now, but I know of these three guys who are a band already, and they would be a great band for you. They’re playing tonight at the same venue where Willie played.” It turns out that they had won a battle of the bands, and they were performing that night. I said to Maria, “Have them come over. I want to meet them.” They came running over, because one of them had seen me play with Willie and I guess that made them think, “Oh, this guy is another good American musician we should know.” I played a couple of songs in the apartment acoustically, and they liked my vibe, so they said, “Come over to our apartment tonight.” I went over to see them and in two seconds I loved them. They were great showmen. New bands have a certain way of performing; they had that energy and were very good, very dramatic. I asked Munster Records, which had just rereleased *12 In A Room* and *Years* on vinyl, if they wanted to make an album with me and this young rock group, Marc Jonson & Compañía De Sueños Ilimitada [Company of Dreams Unlimited]. The President of Munster had grown up near where we were in Santander, so he came and hung out with us and went to a band practice. He greenlit an album and a single. We picked a bunch of songs to record together. To save time, I worked out the arrangements, first with the drummer – and then the bass player came in, and then the guitar player. Compañía de Sueños Ilimitada came to the U.S. last February and we played a few shows – one at The Bitter End in NYC and one with Willie Nile at The Hopewell Theater in Hopewell, New Jersey. While they were here, we stopped in again at Steve Addabbo’s studio to record a single for Munster Records called “The Building,” about the Brill Building. Right now, we are waiting for a release date. Munster wants a tour before releasing anything.

**Let’s talk about your songwriting and production influences. You’ve mentioned Van Morrison and Love.**

The arrangements on Love’s album *Forever Changes* are interesting. It sounds a lot bigger than it really is. The motions and movements that album goes through – it’s got a lot of elements. It’s theatrical at some points, while at the same time it’s tongue-in-cheek. Love was a real punk band to me. Not *Forever Changes*, but their earlier record, *Da Capo*, was very edgy and punky. It had a real sense of expression, and it wasn’t put on for effect. Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks* is also a very authentic-sounding album to me.

**You and I have discussed Phil Spector, The Beach Boys, and The Beatles. Who else influenced you, production-wise?**

I’m a big fan of Leonard Cohen’s production. I love the sparseness of it; the eeriness of it. I think there’s one album where he has a jaw harp in every song – and that’s very strange! I like things that are unusual... different, but not too different. Not too avant-garde.

**Would you say that because of when you grew up, you deliberately brought a ‘60s pop/garage sensibility into your ‘80s and early ‘90s songwriting on *12 In A Room*? Or was it simply a reflection of what you like musically?**

It’s always about what you love. It’s what you love and what spoke to you when you were growing up as a kid. If those songs become the backdrop for your life – and, in my case, they became even more important than that. They became some kind of chance, of hope. I loved the songs from that period when I was a kid, in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s. Back in those days, there was no “United States of Rock.” It’s become so homogenized now. It’s all like GarageBand on a Mac. Everything sounds the same. Back then, there were all these different people, from all over the country who were contributing to the pop music scene. In the course of an hour listening to the radio, you heard all of these different sounds emptying out into a single-speaker. You heard all of these very different influences, and that’s what made it interesting.

**You've produced yourself since the very beginning, and you've jokingly referred to your version of Phil Spector's "Wall of Sound" as a "Closet of Sound" that you achieved at your Cornelia Street apartment. Do you approach song arrangement from more of a songwriting angle, or from a production and engineering angle?**

The short answer is that it varies from song to song. I read that ABBA originally put "Dancing Queen" together as just the music without lyrics, without a melody. Just the chord changes. Maybe they had a little melody for the chorus or one of the verses. Then they listened to what they'd created and said, "What is this about? Where should the melody go? What should the lyric be?" That's one way to do it. A lot of times, I'll get a great idea for a melody, and it'll be at a certain tempo, and I'll know that I want to make it bigger than it sounds right now. The Spector music had a huge influence on me. When I hear that kind of production, I understand it. It creates a circus calliope sound, like when you're on a merry-go-round. It's like the earth – music as the earth is turning. That's what Phil Spector did. He made a big merry-go-round of sound, all the time. Just about everything he did was that. It was amusement park music...it was the sound of life!

**How do you feel about the production on some of the cover versions of your songs, versus what you might have done yourself had you been the one to produce or arrange those recordings?**

When Dave Edmunds recorded my song, "King of Love," he had just produced the Stray Cats, a definite rockabilly novelty. They were using a '50s genre to promote '80s music. It worked great and made the band and the songs very fashionable. But Dave recorded "King of Love" during a time when rap and hip-hop was beginning to be played on the radio. Rap and hip-hop have basically dry vocals. When Dave recorded "King of Love," he put a '50s slapback echo on his vocal, because the song has a rockabilly feel. I would have pulled back on it and not pushed the echo so much. The commercial way is to push it. That's what the song is going to be. "That's what the song is most like, so let's dress it up that way and push it." I don't necessarily do that. Sometimes, if you go against type and you dress a song in a different way, it adds another dimension to it. My version of the same song doesn't have that slap on it, and it works fine. My personal approach would have been, because of what was on the radio at the time, to have not made the production of that song so specifically rockabilly. His production made the song sound dated, like it was out of fashion. It didn't sound contemporary when it was released. If the vocal had been drier, I think it might have fit better into radio at that time. When you release a record, you're going into radioland – at least back then you were, anyway. I don't know whether a drier vocal would have made it a bigger hit. Who knows?

**A lot of other artists have recorded your songs, including my friend and fellow Tape Op writer, producer/artist Richard Barone. How did you meet Richard?**

Richard Barone was another whiz kid I crossed paths with. I used to see Richard on 48th Street in Manhattan, where all of the music stores used to be – this was before I knew him. I always wanted to go up and introduce myself. I finally got the chance when Maggie Roche and I took a river cruise around New York that Richard was also on, sometime around 1992 or early 1993. Richard was so full of information about songs and music. We wound up working together on his album, *Clouds Over Eden*. I showed Richard a few songs I had started that were unfinished until he tied a bow around them and made them work by adding musical bridges and lyrics. His voice is so strong and emotional. My thoughts on all of the various versions of my songs that other artists have recorded, or on songs that I have co-written with other artists like Richard, are all positive. Great versions and all unique. I wrote a song with Maggie Roche for an EP called "No Trespassing." She had the music track without any melody line or lyrics. As she played it to me one night, I heard a staccato rhythm that would work well against the track's lush musical arrangement, so I started to sing against the music in jabs: "This sign says no trespassing." Over and over, to show her how I heard the melody for the chorus. She didn't like the words I came up with at first – until I added "unless it's you." She suddenly perked up, threw me out of her house, and wrote the rest of the song herself.

**Let's talk a little bit about the recent reissues of your albums, *Years* and *12 In A Room*, as well as a resurgence of interest in your earlier music. This is a very exciting time to be you.**

I think that everybody cares about their work when they make an album. It comes out and has this life for a while, and then the sales die off. It's a great thing when something's rediscovered for no reason. In my case, a forgotten record that's suddenly found again – it's very satisfying! There's an interesting story that is beyond the scope of this interview, but I'll mention it briefly – because it is, again, all about being in the right place, at the right time. At a record label level, the renewed interest in my album *Years* and its subsequent rerelease on both CD and vinyl all came about because of a fan, a collector, who contacted me to discuss my album. We had a series of nice phone conversations, and it turned out that he lived nearby in New Jersey. He took an original 1972 vinyl pressing of my album to a record label that wanted to release it out into the world again. That deal didn't work out for various reasons, but it was out there – this idea, this energy to put the album out again. Eventually, Munster Records in Spain did re-release that album (as well as *12 In A Room*) on vinyl – and what a great job they've done! Regarding the CD reissue and the deal that fell through, Welk Music had purchased the Vanguard catalog around 1990, I think. In 2013, the label Light in the Attic leased *Years* from Welk. But then Welk sold the Vanguard masters to Concord Records in 2014. Things got confusing and Concord wouldn't honor the Welk leasing deal, so Light in the Attic dropped the CD reissue. Pat Thomas, an independent re-issue producer, quickly made a deal with Real Gone Music to buy the artwork and audio master from Light in the Attic's production team, but Real Gone Music only releases CDs – so we made a CD-only deal with them. Munster Records in Spain then made a separate leasing deal with Concord for vinyl-only. Confusing as hell, but that is why the CD reissue of *Years* is on Real Gone Music and the vinyl reissues of both albums are on Munster.

**Talk about the technology that you're using here at your New Jersey home studio. You have a Radar 24 system that you are particularly passionate about.**

I don't like dropdown menus. I don't like to work with a mouse and then, if I want to add reverb, go into a dropdown menu and have to find what I want. It's all fancy pants, all these reverbs up on the screen – and, ooh, the super-duper graphics. It looks cool, but it's too many options for me. Now, maybe if I was just a recording engineer, I would appreciate that, but I'm not. I'm a producer/songwriter/engineer. I want to have access to my echoes and reverbs really fast. I know you can find them and store them in Pro Tools and the other ones – Logic, Nuendo, Reaper, and all that – but there's something about then applying that same stored effect to other projects. It needs to be tweaked again and changed again. I find all of that work very tedious.

**Do you find that editing within the limited parameters of this system enhances your creativity?**

It enhances the sound too. When you have to do sound-on-sound mixes within your project, you're agreeing to not be able to undo what you change. That adds a certain pioneering risk.

**The difference between making decisions and committing to a final decision.**

Look, I'm sure there are people who are going to argue with this, but when you “fix it in the mix,” you might get it right – but is it right? When you make decisions as you record, it has to be right – or you would stop the project, or stop wanting to work on the song. Each time you commit to a recording or mix decision, you're saying, “*This* is my project.” Sometimes you have to add an instrument. Maybe you'll hear something that wasn't right about a decision you made, and then you'll have to add a new instrument, or part to offset something that you find out later isn't quite what you wanted. Now the Pro Tools people will say, “You could have fixed that in the mix!” Well, you could have fixed it, but it wouldn't have the same sound. In other words, when you fix something you don't like that is there, sound-on-sound in the mix, by adding something new to either take the ear off of it or to create a hybrid sound to mask the sound that you don't like, you're creating something new. You're not fixing it. You're creating something new. I don't know. I think

that there are also great things to say about fixing it in the mix and great things to say about DAWs, in general. You can criticize having fewer tracks and fewer options, but I say that it's riskier, and you can have more fun to commit as you go. I have 24-tracks, and I use them up really fast, but there are some things that I record and then take away later on to free up a track. I keep myself to that restriction. On *12 In A Room*, there's a song called "When I Fall." In that song, there are eight or nine tracks of vocals on one track, all sound-on-sound ping-pong bounced. This was 1/4-inch 4-track tape. On the tracks that you're bouncing over, you have to roll off a little high end. Every time you add another sound-on-sound, the electronics – especially on a non-professional machine. If you're a good engineer, you roll a little off the top-end, because that's going to be added in the sound-on-sound bounce. By doing that, you can keep a sonic integrity so that it doesn't come out sounding too tinny at the end. There were eight or nine vocals bounced to one track to make that song. On a 4-track, there was just no way to get all those voices, and I wanted them. So I had to figure out a way to get them to sound like I knew what I was doing. It wasn't just one 4-track; I actually had two 4-tracks. I would fill up one 4-track and bounce it to the second 4-track, and then I'd have the stereo mix and two other tracks left to add a bass or a vocal, maybe double the vocal. That's basically how the Beatles and early Beach Boys went about it too, when they ran out of tracks.

### **Any final thoughts?**

You have to work at mixing. You have to work at making a mix until you believe it. Most of the time, at least in my case, it's taking things out of the mix – not putting more in. You put all this stuff in and then you take things out... and now you can *believe* it. It's a great process. I wish I didn't have to put so much in, but that's the way I am. I think it's a timesaver in the end, because I give myself options. I'll have an organ as a pad over the second verse, and then I'll put a guitar as a pad, or I'll put a stack of voices. Then I'll have them all in there and think, "Yeah, that sounds great!" Then I'll listen to it the next day and say, "That's horrible!" Then, one at a time, I'll listen to all of the parts. Sometimes I won't use any of them, because the song doesn't need it. When you're not doing it with the clock ticking or with paying clients, you can experiment. That's part of the process, and it's a learning process. I'm still learning, and I'm happy to continue to learn. There's no better place to have a studio. I was one of the first people to have a home studio in New York back in the '70s. I've now come full-circle. At one point, when I was at Vanguard, I thought, "Man, would I love to have a 24-track studio in my house!" Now I have one! I never thought I would. I never thought back then that I'd be able to have access to such a place – and in my home! There are so many things that dictate this art form, and there are so many artists who have done such great work. I'm so lucky that I came through that Brill Building period in the '50s and '60s – to have heard those sounds and those arrangements, and how all of *that* made mundane life seem tolerable. That music captured something very special that would have gone unnoticed – and it started me on my adventure.

### **Website + Social Media:**

- [marcjonson.com](http://marcjonson.com)
- [facebook.com/marcwilliamjonson/](https://facebook.com/marcwilliamjonson/)
- [marcjonson.bandcamp.com](http://marcjonson.bandcamp.com)

### **Marc's Official YouTube Channel:**

- [youtube.com/channel/UCAfT4XYbEe9EZUKemKHTc\\_w](https://youtube.com/channel/UCAfT4XYbEe9EZUKemKHTc_w)

### **Music Links (Career/Retrospective Stuff):**

- [Marc's Preferred Playlist of 20+ Songs \(Curated Himself\)](#)



- *Rainy Dues (from Years)*
- *Marc Jonson & The Wild Alligators - Precious Love*
- *Greenwich Village Folk Festival 1993 Marc Jonson with Frankie Lee*
- *Smash (Tribute to Pat Dinizio)*
- *Song for George (George Gerdes)*

**Music Links (Recent/Current Stuff):**

- *My Girlfriend (Doesn't like the Ramones)*
- *Distant Moonlight Sea*
- *The Stripper (with Carl Schmid)*
- *The Ballad of Billy Hayes*
- *Rosario's Balcon*
- *Gloria's Song*
- *A recent rerelease on Munster Records of Marc's first A and B sides 45 single from his 1960s teenage band, The Gay Intruders. Here is the official record label promo video showing a brief unpacking of the deluxe reissue with bio liner notes and photo jacket:*  
*The Gay Intruders - In the Race / It's Not Today (Munster, 2020)*

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