Tape Op

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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PHIL RAMONE: A Musician's Ear

Months of email and phone tag pursuit went into the scheduling, rescheduling and subsequent re-rescheduling of this interview with one of my longtime producer-idols, the incredible (and fabulously friendly) Phil Ramone. Phil is one of those guys whose reputation precedes him. Since turning his first knob and sliding his first fader almost 50 years ago, Phil Ramone has virtually defined the history of audio production in this country. Having captured some of the most unforgettable musical moments of the 20th and 21st centuries -from Marilyn Monroe's "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" and Billy Joel's "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant" to the posthumously-released Ray Charles album, *Genius Loves Company* - Phil Ramone truly defines the art of recording, the sublime transcendence achieved by *really* good record production. I was lucky enough to catch up with Phil during a break from a recent Ray Charles mixing session with Frank Filipetti at New York City's Right Track Recording Studio.

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You started your career in music as a child violin prodigy. Obviously from the very beginning, musicianship and a musician's ear were very important concerns to you.

I think that sometimes we're very fortunate to get the basics. By the time I was 11 or 12, I certainly was more versed in classical music. But my passion was to try to play jazz on the violin. I did anything and everything to try to translate to the violin what Les Paul and all those people were doing electronically with overdub recording. I was listening to Charlie Parker and a lot of great artists of the time, and I figured out that if I could learn about what the electronics were, I might have a better shot of trying to make these sounds on the violin. So I started messing with creating an electric violin - or trying to find one that sounded different, using effects. I befriended a guy who was in a recording studio in New York, who was a great engineer. His name was Bill Schwartau - and a guy named Charlie Layton had a little demo studio called JAC. By the time I was in the latter part of my teens, I was already learning how to make demos really fast, how to write string lines, how to engineer, how to cut a disc. So my background was more about understanding the treasure of what the marriage of musicianship and engineering could be.

It's a different approach from what a lot of people are doing today.

Yeah. But we're much better off now in many ways, because there are really good schools like Berklee and Full Sail. In the early '70s, I was part of a studio called A&R Recording. At that studio, we trained our own people. We started our own aural school, so to speak. We took people like Elliot Scheiner and other folks. Everybody has gone on to do great work, but the common denominator was that they all came from bands like Dave Green and David Smith, and the people who came to work for me all had some kind of technical background. I gave a lot of credit to the real high-end technical people who never stopped imagining what could be better, or why it should be better.

As a child working as a fiddle player and getting into studios, by the time I was in my teens, I was playing several sessions a week. When I really got involved in the process, I realized that engineers were separate from us. They treated you a little bit more elusively. They trusted what *they* had to do, but if you messed up or didn't play in the style they were expecting you to, they didn't talk to you. There were also very strict rules. I learned to break all those rules - correctly. I felt that I got the trust of the musicians that I wouldn't have had otherwise - not being rebellious, but understanding what the musician went through and what the mic'ing of that person was, and what it could mean if you had *real* contact with them, if you got their help. I recorded in a room that wasn't really big, but it was big enough. This was at the original A&R, the very first building, which was up the street from where we are right now. It became famous because of the attitude. All of us were so willing to work many, many hours, and the records that were made there - the Bacharach and David records, the Neil Diamond records - quite a few records were made there.

Your discography is astounding! It's my entire record collection.

You can have the discography, but I worry about it. Even now, I think about it. Sometimes it rounds out to be too braggadocio and it's not me.

You didn't just happen to be there while all of this amazing music happened around you?

No. We were the first of a group of independent studios that came out of the workings of the major labels. I think a lot of the great engineers - the Al Schmitts and all - either went to work for RCA or Atlantic like Tommy Dowd, who was a major influence in my life. That's because he had blind faith in me. He saw me do things and he gave me some tricks. His attitude was the key. Many a time we'd be in a nightclub where people might not be comfortable with us recording. It was very crude - there were no trucks. We would bring in equipment and take out a booth. The owner of the club hated you for that - it took out four people at ten bucks minimum. But I got to do all of the late night jazz and R&B dates, and the first rock and roll dates. No sane engineer wanted to deal with some amps blowing out. They didn't want to blow out their ears! They were happy not to do a 7 pm date, a band that took four hours just to get a sound.

What was the first thing that you engineered that you consider to be part of your catalog?

There were several things that happened to me - the big jazz band stuff, like Count Basie, and watching Bill Schwartau and other people engineer. I never let up because he would be like the pilot who would say, "Take over." That's when you learn, because you've watched and watched. I feel like I've trained a lot of people, because if you're paying attention you see what's going on in the room, if you're not reading comic books or *Tape Op*. [laughs] And it's important not to be afraid ego-wise to share your information. A lot of people won't. I don't ask to have your secrets, but why are they secrets? If it's art, there should be no secrets.

And just because you tell someone what equipment you use or how you do something...

It doesn't mean anything. I have a son who just graduated college. He's also a producer. I told him, "One lesson you're going to learn about picking up where someone else has left off on a project is that they do not write down, nor are they going to share the information that you really need." He said, "I can't figure out where the edits were and why they're so bad, but I need to fix them." There's no documentation because the previous guy probably thought he was going to do this forever.

Was this destructive or non-destructive editing?

He can go back, but there's just no information. So he doesn't know where the edits are. You don't know which take it is. You're not allowing yourself to have a trail. You'd never do that! It's got nothing to do with digital. It's got to do with *you*! I make this speech all the time, wherever I go. You are only part of the wheel. It's like a car being assembled. Parts come from Japan and some of it comes from North Dakota, and somebody puts it all together. Documentation is more than just what you write down. It's also information that I say to somebody. I was on the phone yesterday with someone from L.A. We're up-putting stuff on an FTP site - a track that I'm working on here, but actually made in L.A. I had made it in two keys. Well, the guy in L.A. who dubbed it didn't look to see that one said "Male" and one said "Female". The track was for two people, depending on who we land on this particular job. So the bookkeeping besides mine has to be immaculate, as I keep saying to them! We did a date with Al Schmitt in California. We did three songs in two days, and we came here and did six or seven songs. It'll end up in Al Schmitt's hands as a finish, but between now and then Anita Baker will be Detroit. Vanessa Williams will be in New York. So when I send the track to them, it's important that they know, "Where is that lick that he played? The guitar lick? Which one? Guitar player one, two, three?" The acoustic. It's on track 16. "Well it doesn't show up on 16 because my Pro Tools, in the transfer, sent it to the back." That's like saying it's stored in a trunk in the back of your garage somewhere in your home. It's there. It's on the hard disk somewhere, but *where*? We've lost contact with the very essence of what one had to do, not that we only had four tracks, or three tracks when I started. It wasn't too hard to keep track of it then, but believe me, if we erased it or copied it and then combined it, if you didn't write it down the guy would say, "Go back a generation and then fix it." Today you have an endless non-destruct, which is a whole other world. People skid into a punch. They skid out of a punch. They're late. The hardest part, to get back to your original question about being a musician-engineer, is understanding how good you had to be if you ran the tape machine. You could only hear the rewind and the fast-forward. If you were smart, you'd put a little chalk mark where the verses were and where the choruses were. The clock that ran on the tape machine had nothing to do with anything. It was just giving you a tach on a motor. If you're going to punch, and you're inside of a song and it's in this tempo [snaps a moderately fast bpm], it's a big difference from something that's a ballad. But if you punched in and you erased some of the breath, those were crucial errors.

There are a lot of those missed punches on the early Motown stuff.

There a lot of them missing on everybody's records. But either you were able to fix it or you took the time and you copied a piece of breath and then you cut it into that bar. The people who survived, the ones who became real engineers, actually understood that you got yelled at a lot and you didn't get to work with the senior engineers until you went through practices. The way we worked at A&R, Saturdays and Sundays were devoted to training people who were working for us. We'd give the artist free goods. We'd hold the tape for them for three or six months (depending), and they were allowed a copy to go sell their wares elsewhere. But the engineer was allowed to make mistakes. That was the condition - so if he punched in and erased your most famous vocal, tough. It had

to be. It's not like a surgeon who is working on a cadaver. You're working on a live person, otherwise you don't have the stress. You take the essence of what you have to learn, and that essence is two things. One is the musicianship in front of you - good, bad, not as experienced. A person who, on the other side of the glass is not necessarily totally trained for levels, for how to handle a mic - it's up to you to make sure that they are not yelled at, but shown the way. Don't minimalize what they do. Don't minimalize their ability to hear what they want. If you realize what digital recording is now, a lot of it has to do with just filling the gas tank to its fullest so that you can mix it afterwards - the exact opposite of what real music is about.

We were speaking of "the old way," when people apprenticed at an established studio as they moved up the career ladder towards engineer and producer. Tell me about your apprenticeship before you opened A&R.

I started as a disc maker and engineer in a demo studio. In the demo studio, you copied the tape, you added guitars, you did string parts or you sang harmonies. Generally, the owner would love you to get it all done in 15 minutes. Professional singers would come in. You'd come in with your song. We would take your song and in 15 minutes produce a really good demo.

And this is not an exaggerated timeframe. What a different work pace from today!

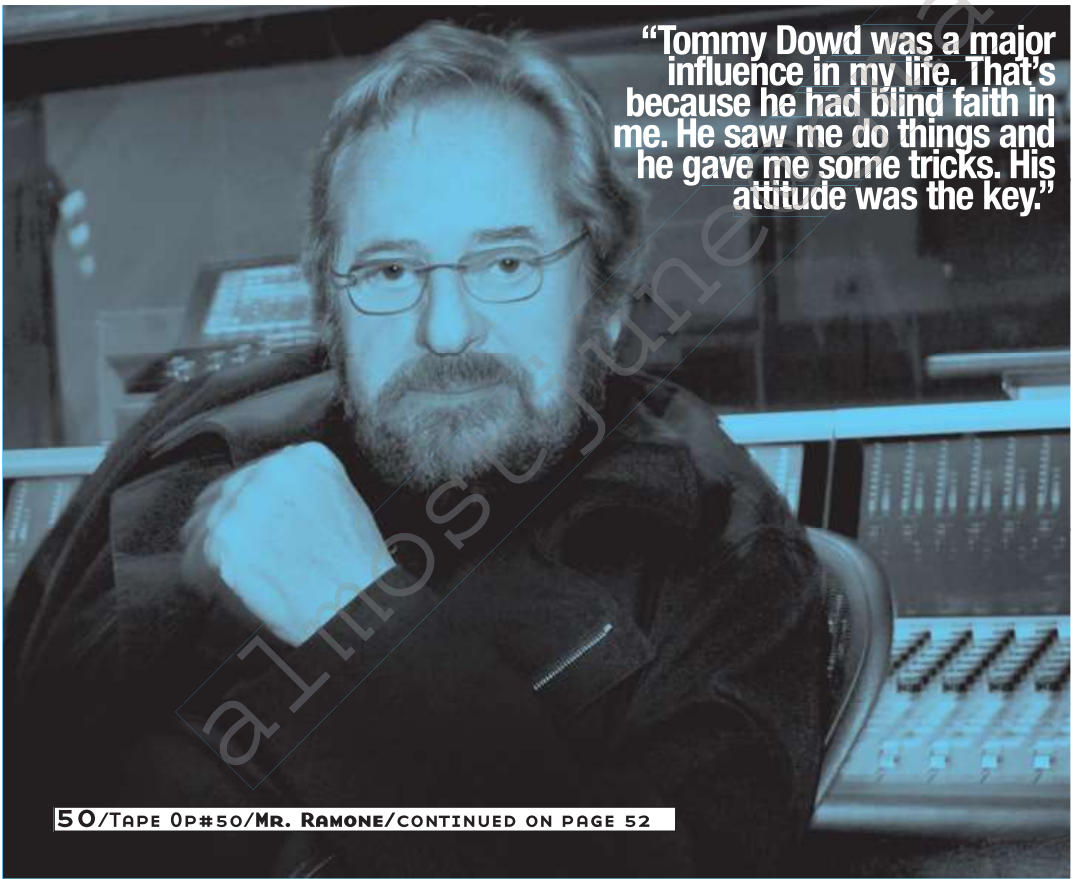
That is the fastest experience there is. What made me want to get into a big studio was the fact that I couldn't stand that we made the demo and then somebody else made the record - and it was *so* close to what we had done, except it sounded better! We had a little living room in an apartment and a couple of mics and that was it. We had a guy who would come in who could overdub very fast. There were some musicians who made their living by charging 15 or 20 bucks every half hour - so they made 40 bucks an hour. In 1959 and '60, that was okay. And the guy would say, "Guitar part three." Dun dun dun. "Okay. Turn it around at the bridge." Dun ding. "Play arpeggiated stuff." If you don't catch onto the game, you're never going to move up. So I moved up fast. And then a guy would come in and do a jingle. Now maybe you got 30 minutes with him instead of 15. But you saw the musicianship! Musicians worked on an hour, and then a 20-minute scale - so every 20 minutes there was a payroll going. The demos for Pepsi, Coke or whatever the product was were so critical that there were probably four or five production houses in competition with each other. So they expected the studio and the engineer to be really good. I got a Pepsi commercial in 1961 or '62 because the guy loved the way the thing *sounded*. There was a guy in town who wound up singing on a Pan Am commercial, and he was the engineer! It was the learning process. I worry about a lot of studios now. There aren't enough live dates. See, if you walked into a session in one of these studios that we're talking about, the ones here in New York - Clinton, the old Power Station, Right Track, where we are now - that was "school." 10 to 1 or whatever would be a jingle date. 2 to 5 would be a record date. 7 to 10 would be another record date. And then there would be vocal overdubs and whatever else. That experience - you take an assistant who pays attention! At A&R, I insisted that everyone learn the library first. That may sound like dumb-dumb stuff. It's like a lot of guys start in the mailroom at the William Morris office. We started everyone in the library, to understand what it was that you were recording and why - why it was important to be able to file a tape and find it. As we sit here now, there are tapes missing from really big stars from really big records that can't be found. They may be found someday. But you would need a crew of people to take stuff off the shelves. It wasn't that long ago that they found all this Elvis rehearsal material.

It wasn't labeled properly?

Maybe. Maybe not. The worst is I have a library out in New Jersey, and we're now going through it. I hadn't been in there in 20 years. Most of my library that was important to me got destroyed in a studio where I had space, but the business/bookkeeping people came in and said, "This is valuable space. Get rid of all those tapes." Not unusual.

My jaw is dropping. They didn't tell you? They just tossed the tapes? Isn't that a lawsuit?

Oh, please! Our government owns lots of tapes willed to them by great artists, at the Smithsonian. George Massenburg and myself and a bunch of people are their advisors on preservation. You bet I've devoted my last 10 or 15 years to working with anybody, from the Grammys to the RIAA, because as the companies have merged there is such a lack of knowledge. "Where is it? Who has it? Is it in the library? And where can it be?" I jokingly said to a very famous gentleman whose company has gone public, "It says 'assets.'" I was teasing him. I said, "God! You have a 50-year history that you've now purchased. Do you know where the tapes are?" He said, "Don't be an idiot. Of course I know where the tapes are!" I said, "Do you? Let's go see them." He said, "You're nuts." I said, "No. I'm not really nuts." He might have the two tracks, and they may have been digitized and maybe they're even on (god forbid) DATs! I talk to people from Microsoft and some of the other companies that I am very interested in about the hard disk and what we're doing. Do you know that the expectancy of the hard drive could be as much as five years, if you're lucky? So think about that - all the masters that are being transferred to hard disk! There is a group of people - Elliot Scheiner and Al Schmitt, and all these guys - who are still putting their surround masters on some form of an 8-track analog tape as a backup. We know that tape has lasted for at least 50 years - 55 years now. With a mechanical drive, if you don't have the motor driven regularly, who says that it will start up or won't jam? So this is a very critical issue. People are starting to look back at Warners and other companies, like Columbia and BMG, who have an incredible 60 or 70 years of music. For instance, I revisited [Dylan's] *Blood on the Tracks*. The reality was that everything was a copy of a copy. It took a long time - Steve Berkowitz and a crew of people at Columbia Records hard-balled until they got Dylan's people. Dylan or one of his people had been nice enough to take out the master and NOT put it back in the library, but leave the copy in the library instead. The proof of it for me is that I know my handwriting, which is horrible, but it's my handwriting. Every note that I made - and trust me, there were notes - I want to see that with the original! I know it's the original. I know by the way that I did things. In transfer, things like tape can run a little bit off speed, so by the time that the second



round of CDs were made, he was up a quarter of a tone. Bob Dylan does not need to be faster than he is already! And you don't need to mess up his sound!

Those pitch issues in the transfers happen all the time.

All the time. As a matter of fact, I bought a bootleg online to get closer to my original mix.

You know, I hear of that a lot - that the people involved in the original sessions will buy studio outtake bootlegs, just to hear what it is that they can't find in the tape library!

It's absolutely true. Every studio had a leak. Every one of them.

I have quite a few of them at home in my CD and vinyl collection.

Of course you do. It's part of the process. Unfortunately, it's not a good process for me. It's not about money. It's about trying to be authentic about what Sinatra sounded like in 1982 in New York. I want to document these folks. I want to be able to go back to the original multitracks. Like a lot of engineers, I engineered stuff on the road - for The Band, for Dylan - a lot of that's just gone. I mean, *where* has it gone? I don't know.

Can you talk about your transition from engineer to producer, and what that meant and still means to you?

First of all, working with good and bad producers is a very important experience. I realized that the strength for an engineer at that time for me was to be the translator. Creed Taylor would give me tons of room. I think he was uncomfortable saying, "I don't like what's being played." So he'd send me out into Jimmy Smith or Wes Montgomery or Kai Winding or JJ Johnson - all of those folks that he let me talk to on his behalf. I learned a lot from him. The mere fact that he would sit there quietly, possibly not saying anything - I was given the responsibility to go out there and say it for him. Somewhere in that period, Burt Bacharach and Hal David did a Broadway show called *Promises, Promises* - that was '69 or '70. I got a co-producer credit on it. At that time, I basically lived on the road. That's the other part of my life that is not always written about. I went out all the time with the artists, a lot of times to learn, to be able to reproduce the sound of what we'd done in the studio.

In other words, you were a consultant for these artists to reproduce live what you captured in the studio and went on the album.

You make your transitions based on somebody having blind faith in you, or just saying, "We have to do this. Can you do it?" It is because of necessity that you become something, and somebody has to lead the way. I don't think there would be pioneers unless somebody said, "I have this pipe dream, and I think it could work."

How have the changes in technology over the course of your career - the recording techniques, the mediums upon which the music has been captured - shaped and changed the artists' approaches to their projects?

I think it's only improvement. It's always improvement. I'm not a believer in looking back at all. I'm not sentimental about things that were, but I have deep respect for what it was. This generation of writer, performer and engineer has 30 or 40 years of technology and music behind him. In 1960 or '64 when the Beatles hit it big here, rock and roll was Elvis and there were only certain R&B artists who were really popular. Because of the race relationships in this country versus other countries where people accepted the music, it took us 40 years to understand that we actually make music here. We have a heritage. CDs help put that heritage in the face of young people so they can learn frames of reference. They talk about Jimi Hendrix like he's *here*, and that's great! There is no separation between past and new and it's all to be discovered at seven or eight years old, instead of 18 or 25. Young people who start up are much better off today than a lot of us were, because we had to go dig to find things out. That's the key to improvement - more information given to more people equals more understanding.

How do you feel that your musicianship approach to engineering and production fits in with the current Pro Tools sampling and looping mentality of the industry? Where do you see really good audio production going in the future?

I just spent the other night with Burt Bacharach, who was working with Dr. Dre. When you hear that, you will die. But it's perfect - you hear the loops and then you hear this gorgeous music!

How has the home and project studio revolution affected what you do? What do you think the role of project studios is and will be, compared to larger production houses?

You know, project studios didn't start last year. There were lawsuits in the '80s and '90s in L.A. There were people working out of homes not paying taxes, and people paying for commercial properties who were paying their taxes. They had a lot of arguments about that. But it's like saying we shouldn't be able to take digital pictures or colorize or Photoshop anything. You will never stop that process, nor should you. And the way to embrace it and find out about it is to encourage people to make better records at home. That's number one. The market never changes. The public is fickle and will be loyal to you if you're really good - and maybe if you're not so good. You're also a passing, overnight fancy. -Pop music is the word "pop." So you have to become lasting because of your talents. Your talent should work for you. I think better preparation, possibly while you're learning how to sing better - you can do that at home. Illustrious budgets were thrown around in the '70s and '80s. Why? Well, there was a lot of sitting around, a lot of booze, a lot of other things that could be distracting - whereas if you go home every night, possibly working around the schedule of your roommate, and you work on your own equipment, you tend to get more done. If you become lazy, it's lazy on your terms - and the person next door to you is making a hell of a record! So it's created a whole secondary level. It's like making film. I have another son who's trying to be a filmmaker. He's making four and six minute films because that's all he can afford to do right now.

That's the start.

We have to have two levels. We just do. We can't all of us get a gig and go out and be on the 20th Century Fox lot or the Warner Brothers lot, and hope to make a feature movie. There are those that do, but we'll have to start somewhere. Why would the home studio be a problem? It's not hurting the big studio. What's hurting the big studio is the budgets. You know, rates haven't gone up that much. They just haven't gone up. What the studios have to be is a haven to put the smaller rooms back in shape, because there's no mastering and stuff in a lot of these studios. So put back the tape copy room and make it an adventurous room. Where I recently came from, at Henson Studios [formerly A&M in Los Angeles], they've leased out a ton of their small rooms to great artists. That's kind of the way A&R lived as well, because great artists will come and feel comfortable - the musician-artists, the producers - both. It's really nice to be able to say, "You know, I want to do a live string date." The guys who make Game Boy and X [Box] Games are realizing that it would be fantastic if they used live orchestras.

Instead of looped, techno-style beats.

Right! It had to come. They get 50 bucks or more for a game, so they can afford a big orchestra. It's all about cultural changes.

You've mentioned that you have a studio at your farmhouse. Do you work in your home studio often? What do you do there?

Absolutely. Prep, and then post - a lot of stuff. We've mixed albums there, when I've felt that it was right. Peter Cincotti's album was mixed there. Prepping things to come down to the big studio - why spend two grand a day when you should be doing your homework at home? I work with Yamaha equipment, on what was to become the DM2000. There is only a certain amount of vintage gear that I'm interested in. I think there are only two kinds of gear that work. One is a great preamp. The other is a limiter. There are a lot of good plug-ins. There are a lot of things that only sound like they do because they were built at a certain time. There is a thing that was built for A&R Recording called the Tape Eliminator, by Marshall. They can't make it again because of the transistors of the time. We're talking about the '70s. I built a lot of what I thought was good about recordings with Billy Joel or Paul Simon off of some very simple thing like a [Small] Stone Phaser. I think they recently brought them out again as sort of an imitation of what they were. That Stone Phaser had made a particular hit record for Billy Joel, or for Paul Simon - like *Still Crazy After All These Years*. Things that had an effect - some of those were $100 items! Price didn't matter. The sound that it created for me was what it was about. So some vintage gear has that. Some of it doesn't. Some of it is purely sentimental. There are things that say they are copies of what Urei or Bill Putnam made - he's one

of my heroes. They are one of the few companies that are still making gear to the original specs. He was a very creative engineer - and he created the gear because he was the guy using it.

Who else were your heroes?

Bob Fine. Tommy Dowd because of certain things. I think Al Schmitt and the current group of veterans - and I'll call them "veterans" because they are. I hated that word for me…

Well, you've transcended that.

Among the classic engineers, meaning Elliot Scheiner, Frank Filipetti, Chuck Ainley, George Massenburg, Al Schmitt and Ed Cherney - everyone, from the Rolling Stones to heavy dance music or whatever was in their purview, has managed to raise the bar every time. When this happens, I say to everybody, "Pay attention to these people because they have golden ears, in the best possible way!" And they have open minds. And they'll work with almost any gear. Oh, they have their favorites. Some of them are stubborn about certain things. But you can't get away from the great mixers, because they have survived the 20 or 25 years of transition - and it's been a huge transition!

What is good music to Phil Ramone?

Music is the most free form of art there is. It's freedom of expression. If you're not a musician and you can turn around and have your body move to something, you feel great.

What is good recording?

I think it is important to stop worrying about the technology and make sure that you capture the event in its primary state. We tend to throw away the rehearsals because we don't record them. I tend to turn the record button on very early. And there are mistakes, both from our point engineering-wise, and also from the musicians. Sometimes you capture early on something that you will never capture later. I have a couple of takes from the other day of Natalie Cole singing out in the room. She said, "I know you'll allow me to do that." I said, "Allow? What is with us? You're the artist! And the band can hear you right there. There's take one and there's take two. Guess what? That's it!" We never went in the booth - she never re-sang it! I never replayed it. The bass player said, "You know, when I got to the chorus, I really felt it on take two, versus take one." I said, "Yeah, but look at what you did in take one! It was almost a rediscovery of the song!" If you accompany the writing, you become a part of what I call *the truth* of what recording is, of capturing and recording the event, the element. And I love what happens live! I've done records with Paul Simon and Billy Joel and other great artists (not to name-drop), and they're all picky. But there are many pre-take ones that are *there* - because it's information that you're looking for.

What is the biggest recording disaster that you've ever been a part of, and how did you handle it?

Temper tantrums by somebody showing up and upsetting the artist just before they record or just as they are going onstage are disasters to me. Always have a backup mic for a live performance. In the days when people like Sinatra were famous for first and second takes, you didn't want to have a technology failure - so to avoid disaster is really the name of the game.

What advice do you have for up and coming engineers and producers?

I think you never, ever can fix a lot of things that people think they can fix. You cannot fix distortion. And it's a disaster to me when somebody starts a date and they say, "We need to do another take because we didn't set the preamp right." Well, go out there with your assistant and scream into the mic. Now the artist comes in and sings at half the level. So you'll have to be a grownup and record it at half the level, because there is all this information you can change. Even tape used to be under-recorded sometimes rather than over-recorded. Over-modulation is something that is not necessary. There is no reason, with a good preamp, that you are not ready for the vocal. There is just no reason. If you don't know certain settings, and there are certain formula settings that go with certain pieces of gear, so much gain, so much limiting - if you are whacking the limiter and it just flattens it out and kills the vocal, better you should let the vocal fly and deal with it later than to start saying, "I need one more take." Play back your first take and it should be great! There is no point in cursing out the manufacturer. They are intent on doing what they do. They are not necessarily ahead of the curve - *you* have to be. I just think that it's more about opening your ears and your mind up and not putting limitations on anything. When you read what some of the veterans say, do it and then put your own personality into it. I think everybody starts with good listening, and looking, and learning. If you have ten records that you think are the best records you've ever heard, sort out what is in them.

You mean take them apart like you would analyze a passage of writing in a college English class?

Exactly. My first round with meeting a new artist is this - "Give me ten songs that you grew up with and love, and let's start from there. You're going to tell me information that I need." You're going to find a common denominator, something in the way the artist recorded. Did he stand on a box? I did some Bono tracks with him standing on top of a couch, with the speakers so loud that you couldn't believe it. So what? And an SM 57! Every time you record, there's got to be something in your back pocket that you know works. And that's really more important to me than any excuse. I hate excuses. You don't have any restrictions. You can stand in a rainstorm and record, you know. It may be pelting on the stage, but you'd be amazed at what you can get!

What aspects of your career have been the most fulfilling?

I think the smiles on the faces of the people in the control room or in the studio during playback are most satisfying, especially when something comes out better than they thought it would. It's a very interesting and dangerously expensive playground if you're not careful. If you put the credit and the ego into two different places, you'll be fine.

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