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The Creative Music Recording Magazine

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does he really need an introduction???

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RICHARD BARONE
Beginning with The Bongos...

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Band, studio, movies, surfboards, more...

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It's all about the bottom end...

JOHN STEPHENS
In Behind the Gear

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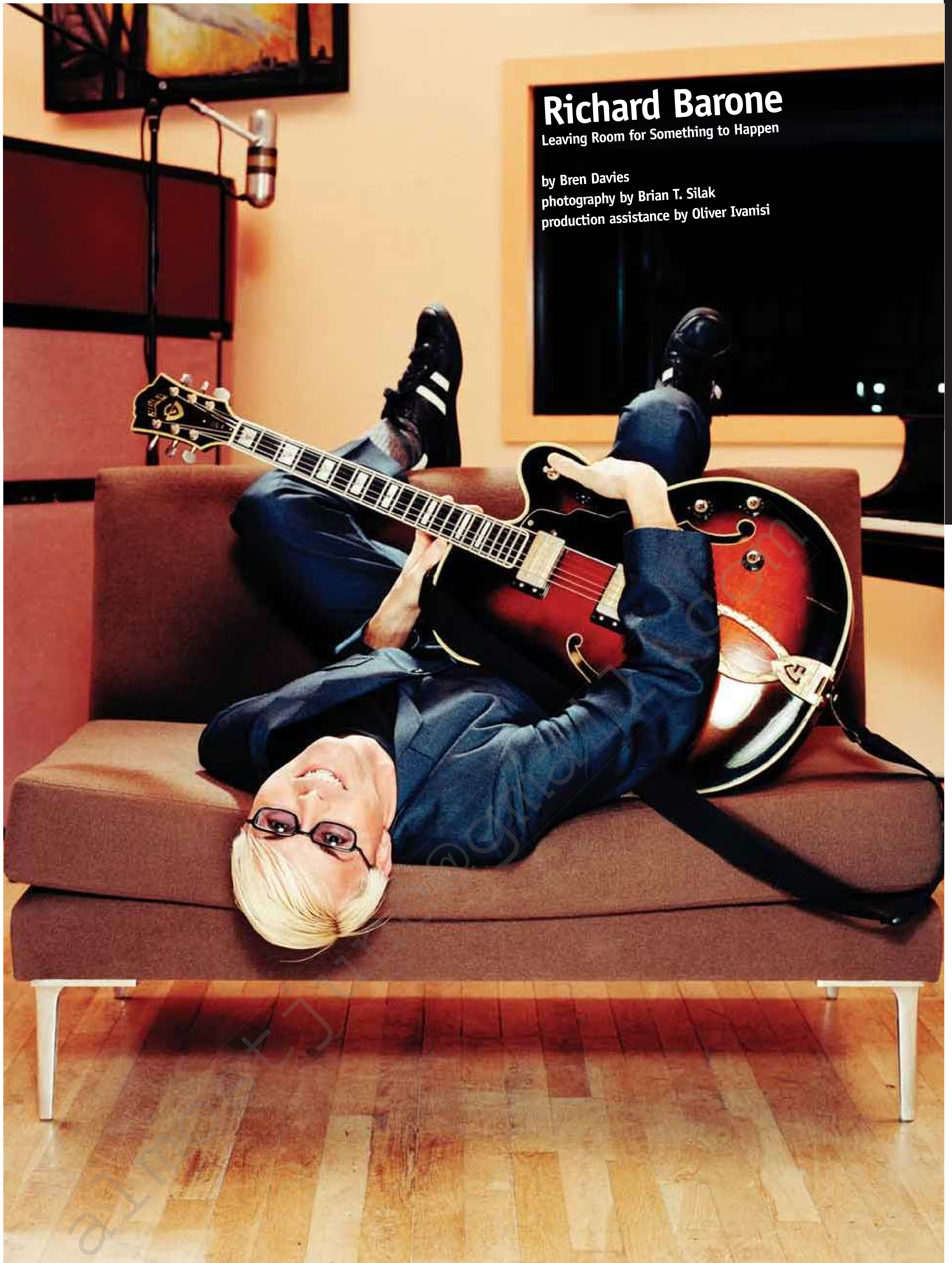


Richard Barone

Leaving Room for Something to Happen

by Bren Davies
photography by Brian T. Silak
production assistance by Oliver Ivanisi

Contemplating the fullness of his schedule and the richness of his life in music, Richard Barone posits the notion that "a producer's work is never done." From his childhood days in Florida as The Littlest DJ on local AM radio, through his teen years and into his twenties as guitarist/singer/songwriter for the Hoboken, NJ-based pop band, The Bongos (who enjoyed early successes on MTV and FM radio as well as worldwide tour exposure), on to his present day juggling of event and album production, as well as his continued efforts as a recording artist, Richard has a lot on his plate. Currently producing Jolie Jones (Quincy's daughter) on her debut children's album, *Little Kisses*, The Analogues on their debut CD and British pop sensation Sophie Ellis-Bextor (whose album includes a selection of songs co-written by Richard and Fred Schneider of the B-52s), Mr. Barone somehow still finds time to work on his own album project, co-written with and produced by *Tape Op* favorite Tony Visconti. Recent production credits have included Johnny Rodgers' debut album, *Box of Photographs*, just released on PS Classics, as well as New York-based pianist/singer/songwriter Tracy Stark, her album to be released in 2006. In addition to all of this, Richard is also writing his first book, tentatively entitled *How to Be Richard Barone*, to be published by Backbeat Books in 2006.

You started out as The Littlest DJ in Florida. You were seven years old.

I used to listen to a transistor radio under my pillow at night when I was about that age and younger. I got to know all the pop hits really well, but as much as the songs themselves, the sounds of the records appealed to me as a young child. I would notice the compression on drums, for example.

As a child?!

Yeah. I would notice that on all the British records and the records that were imitating [them], there was a lot of compression on the drums. Everything was pumping and I thought, wow that's really cool!

What kind of kid pays attention to the compression on a record?!

I also used to question things. When I was five or six years old, I used to wonder if, during the choruses of a song, similar sections were copied and pasted. I used to wonder how the records were made, in other words. I was obsessed with recording. Soon my parents bought me a little tape recorder - a reel-to-reel Norelco. The first thing I did was to cut off the erase head so that I could overdub. My radio obsession was going on for a few years when one Sunday, we were going to the beach. In Florida, you go to the beach a lot. They were doing a live broadcast, called *Beach Party*. I marched over to the DJ and said, "I wanna be a DJ." He said, "Well, you can announce the next record." I really liked announcing the record, and he seemed to enjoy it, so he let me announce the next song. Pretty soon I had a weekly gig doing *Beach Party*. "Live From Municipal Beach," every Sunday, I was The Littlest DJ.

What artists did you play on your radio show?

It was a top 40 station, but my favorites were some of the artists that I still like today, like Donovan. "Hurdy Gurdy Man" was one of my favorite records in '68. Cream. Of course, I liked anything by the Beatles. There was a west coast band called the Beau Brummels. I liked pop hits and I looked at who produced those records. Micky Most was a big producer in England at the time. Soon, I noticed the T. Rex records, and I would see Tony Visconti's name. I was very pleased to see that his name was Italian. I loved and still love the sound of T. Rex records. In a way, Tony was updating the Beatles' sound, and he carried on the tradition of the well-constructed pop tune with well-constructed production and well-constructed arrangements. The *sound* of the music has always been as important to me as the writing of the song itself. There was something about the sound of particular records, which really appealed to me as a child. . .

The first band you produced was your own in Florida, called The Snails, which you have described as "proto New Wave." How old were you?

Late teens. We were a guitar band, a sort of power trio.

Did you ever record anything with The Snails?

We recorded a lot. The whole idea of Snails was to give me an excuse to get into the recording studio. We used to book into a studio called Rec-Nac in Tampa. All they had for recording equipment was a primitive mixer and two Teac 1/4" 4-tracks. We'd mix to the other machine and then bounce back and forth. I learned a lot about recording there. The sounds we got were pretty good, considering. Songs with titles like "Shopping Mall Queen", "Poodle Party", "Turn Your House into a Donut Shop". In the studio, we used a Fender Rhodes with heavy distortion, played through a big Marshall stack to create a wall of sound. The Snails had a bit of the early Ramones' punk energy, and there was a humorous aspect to the music that we did. This was my time to learn how to get the sounds that I wanted.

You moved to New York City with the intention of going to NYU Film School to study film music. You wound up meeting the guys who would become The Bongos.

I started going to CBGB's and all the clubs, and soon met a lot of musicians. I met the guys who would become The Bongos on that scene. We were at a B52s show when we decided to start a band. I said, "What should we call the band?" Our drummer said, "The Bongos," because Cindy of the B52s was sitting on the floor at CBGB's that evening, playing bongos. We got signed fairly fast. I sort of forgot about film school. The Bongos signed to a British label called Fetish Records, and soon we were recording and touring.

How did that happen?

We were playing a show at Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey. Rod Pierce, who was also very young - he was like 21 himself and starting this label in London - happened to see us and really liked what we were doing, so he signed us. Our first recording was done here in the states at Mix-o-lydian Studios in New Jersey. "Glow in the Dark" / "Telephoto Lens." The concept was to only make singles. The single is a certain style of writing. When I was The Littlest DJ, listening to those pop sounds of the late '60s, I fell in love with the "compression" of a pop single. When I speak about singles, I don't just mean "compression" as we would talk about it technically - as processing tool or effect. I mean the compression of a song into a three-minute statement. Our songs were small and concise, often exactly two minutes long. We never intended to make an album. It was just, keep cranking out these 7" and 12" vinyl singles. In America we got signed to a label called PVC Records. They wanted a full album. We finally agreed to compile all the singles, and that was *Drums Along the Hudson*. We got signed to RCA Records because of the success of *Drums Along the Hudson*. Once we put out that album, I felt that we had accomplished that goal - so the next project we did was entirely different. The Bongos evolved.

At this point, other bands began to approach Richard Barone as a producer.

I was especially open to that from the beginning. The first outside productions I did at this time were for Coyote Records, a Hoboken label. Steve Almaas, formerly of the Suicide Commandos, had been playing with The Bongos as an auxiliary member for a bit and when he wanted to do an EP, he asked me to produce it. He called it Beat Rodeo, and it was the blueprint for his new band of the same name. The EP was a sort of stylized take on rockabilly. We went down to North Carolina to do that, with Mitch Easter as engineer and drummer.

Of early REM fame.

Yes. Mitch was soon to produce REM. In fact, I think he may have already produced their first single and given it to me when we did this record. With Beat Rodeo, we really tried to capture *a sound* with the analog gear that we had, including an old Echoplex. We used a lot of different kinds of tape delay devices, including one bizarre unit that Mitch had picked up a church sale. We also experimented with making gigantic tape loops, one surrounding the entire control room. We used a loop as the main drums on a couple of songs. It was an interesting way to have an old rockabilly thing going on, but at the same time do something new. We came up with some really nice sounds - enough so that it got Steve signed to IRS to do his next record. The Phosphenes, another group I produced at the time, was a big wall of sound. It was pre-grunge, but it had a grunge element to it with washes of guitar. Then I made a record with one of the future Bongos - James Mastro. We went back down to North Carolina and recorded a record called *Nuts and Bolts*, just the two of us. It was also done at Mitch Easter's studio, which was actually his parents' garage - Drive-In Studios. He had a 3M 16-track machine and a good console. We made a very nice record - sort of sweetly primitive.

 (continued on page 32)

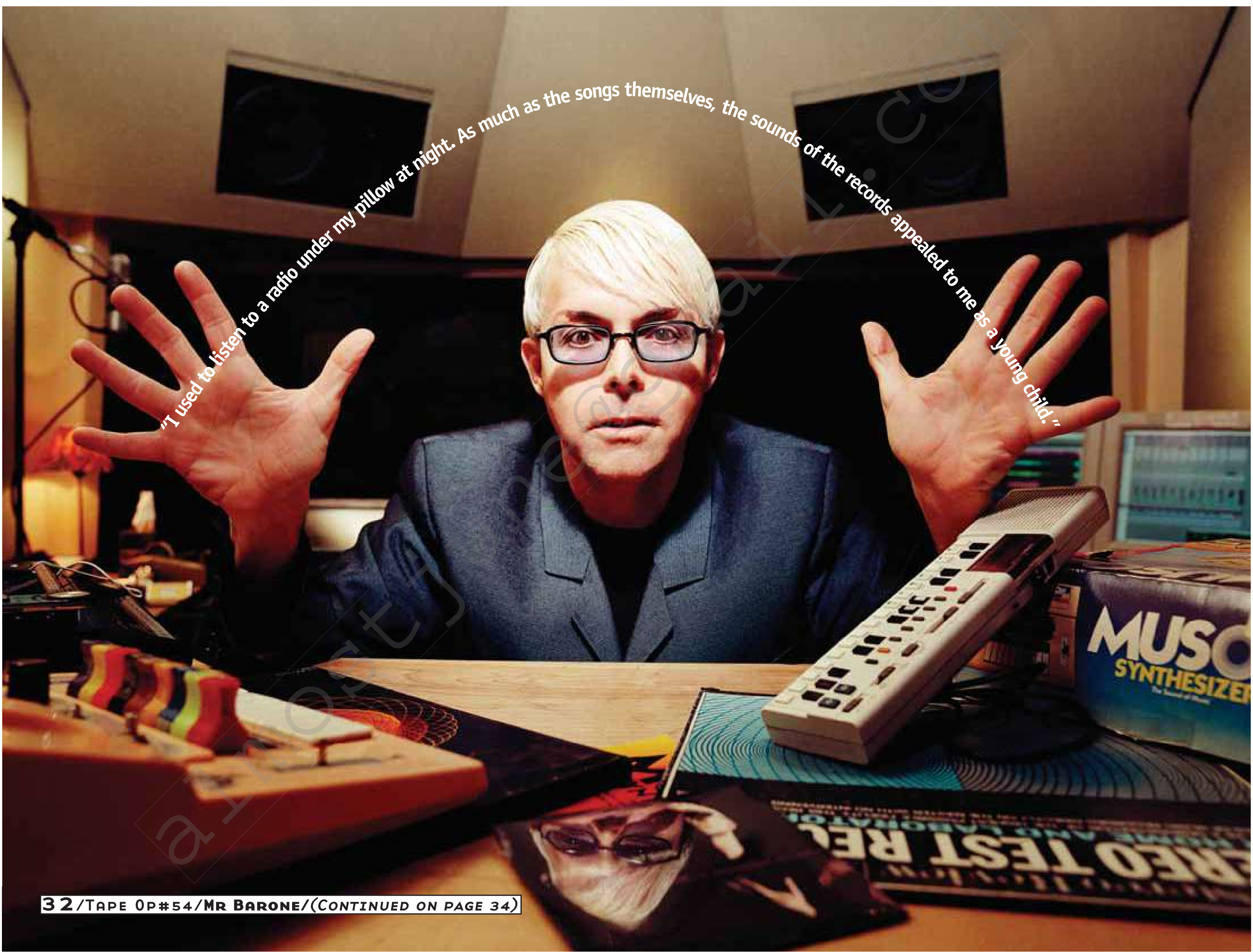
Nuts and Bolts was an appropriate name for that. It was all about, "Hey, guys - let's build a record!" We experimented with drum sounds, particularly using room mics and gating things as far as we could. I remember recording the guitar amp in a place where Mitch kept his dog food cans, so that the cans would rattle a certain way when the guitar amp was loud. We played around with the sounds, and we played around with the fact that we were recording in a garage. I'm still very pleased with that one.

Getting back to The Bongos and *Drums Along the Hudson*, "Mambo Sun", a T. Rex cover, was your first Billboard charting 12" single. This did two things for you: It got you on the charts, and Tony Visconti called.

Tony heard our version of "Mambo Sun" and got in touch with us to tell us that he really liked it. Immediately I told him that we wanted him to produce our next record. We were just getting signed to RCA, though, and they wanted us to record in New York - even though we had recently gotten back from London and had done well there. At first they wanted us to use their studios on 6th Avenue and 44th Street, where we had made a great demo for them. Tony's studio was in London at the time [Good Earth Studios], so it wasn't to be. I guess it wasn't time for me to work with Tony just yet. In a way, it was a blessing because we got to work with Richard Gottehrer, whom I also admire. We loved him and he was perfect for the early Bongos stuff - he had a great history, having written songs like "I Want Candy" and "My Boyfriend's Back", and had performed in the '60s with his own band, The Strangeloves. Plus he'd had recent successes with The Go-Go's, who were in a similar pop vein to The Bongos. We recorded *Numbers with Wings* exactly the way we wanted to, with Gottehrer producing. It was an EP, which is another way of working. In this case, we had the exact opposite of the singles mentality. We were making a record where there were two songs on one side and three on the other. The EP - or as RCA called it, the "mini-LP" - was a marketing experiment for the label. It gave us a chance to make a great-sounding record, because when you cut vinyl with so few songs, you can have wider grooves and get much more bass on it! So, there was also expansion sound-wise. The engineer, John Jansen, had some really great drum recording techniques. We recorded at Skyline Studios. There are minimal effects on the drums. It's all mic placement and the building of a 12 foot-long tunnel in front of the bass drum - mic'ed close, of course, and then at the very end of the tunnel. We also put the drums in the precipice of a doorway, right under the frame, facing into the studio. I'll never forget that - because I thought it was the most awkward situation, to have to squeeze by the drums to get into the room each time we wanted to do a take. But the result of positioning the drums in that doorway was incredible.

Let's talk for a moment about the sounds that you have gravitated towards in your productions, beginning with The Bongos.

One of the reasons The Bongos designed our live shows the way that we did and had to add a fourth member was because in my head, I always heard my electric guitar with a certain amount of distortion, doubled by an acoustic guitar as the clear delineator of the chords. The drums were sort of like Donna Summer meets Buddy Holly. The bass drum was always to be like a dance record, but then the top, the guitar strumming, was always like Buddy Holly, like early rock and roll - not particularly heavy, but really groovin'. The kind of distortion I had on my amp [a 1966 Fender Deluxe] - just a bit of it - gave more body to the guitar. It wasn't really there to make it



(Continued on page 34)

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heavy or nasty. I thought of the mix as shaped like a pyramid, with the vocal on top, the guitars, and then the drums very fat at the bottom, heavy on the tom toms. I also like hearing the ambient room sound of the studio that I'm in. I got that from listening to Tony Visconti's productions, especially the T. Rex album, *Slider*. I'm always looking for some reflective corner in which to place a room mic. Digital recording eats up a lot of the ambience - Bob Ludwig taught me that. There's no air. It just becomes the signal and you don't really get any space. Even though we were still analog on The Bongos' records, we always made a point to have mics around the room. Recording digitally it's even more important. In the '70s there was, of course, the trend of very dead recordings. One thing I like about that is the control you can have on the drum sound in that setting. It's nice sometimes on certain kinds of records, like the Johnny Rodgers record that I produced this year. On his album, I put the drums in a booth, because you can really hear the skins - especially if the drummer uses calfskins, which I often like them to do. I'm really into drum tuning. The first time I worked with a drummer who knew how to do that was J.D. Daugherty, who is the drummer for the Patti Smith Group. He played on one of my solo albums, *Primal Dream*. He was so meticulous with the drum tuning, you could actually hear the notes of the drums. Ever since then, when someone doesn't tune their drums properly, it really sticks out to me in an annoying way. Tuning the drums to the track, to the song - to the bass especially - gives it a finished production sound. So often I hear records and the drums are just so out of tune - it's funny that people don't realize it. It sounds like a racket. If that's what you're going for, great, but if you're doing a melodic song, the drums have to be in tune.

You liked engineer John Jansen on *Numbers with Wings* so much that you hired him as producer for The Bongos' next album, *Beat Hotel*. Tell me a little bit about the rather extravagant production for that album.

John had worked on Meatloaf's *Bat Out of Hell* and some other, rather "huge" productions. It was a very interesting switch to start working with The Bongos, who were really minimalists. *Beat Hotel* was not a minimalist album at all, though. Everything was doubled or tripled. For every guitar harmony that we did, we'd come up with another - and it was all stacked. John had this bizarre (to me anyway) concept of vertical mixing - in this case, sort of representing the buildings of a city - as opposed to the wide expanse of *Numbers with Wings*, which was a spatial, almost spiritual mix, *Beat Hotel* became a very urban, claustrophobic album. Instead of walls of sound, everything's in your face and it's sort of like skyscrapers of sound. We were stacking guitars and harmonies and EQs, and it was overwhelming. It was certainly our most produced record. I wouldn't say it was our best. It was taking recording techniques to the extreme. We overdubbed so many harmonies on the last song that the oxide of the tape literally started scraping off - and we weren't using a slave reel! We were using the master! I asked the engineer, "What's all that black powder on the Studer?" On close inspection, it was the tape itself coming apart.

After the *Beat Hotel* Tour, you started planning another Bongos record, this time with Chris Blackwell and Island Records. You were going to produce it yourselves. What happened with that project?

Chris Blackwell wanted to bring us over to Island. He had the studio at Compass Point in the Bahamas, but we started to record here in New York - even before we had any kind of contract with Island - and eventually spent some months at Compass Point. E.T. Thorngren, who had just done Talking Heads, The Eurythmics and Robert Palmer, was the co-producer. The album was to be called *Phantom Train*. E.T. was another great engineer, and I learned a lot from him. We never actually finished the album, though. That's one of the stories that will be in my book.

Never released?

Never released. We had some amazing sounds on it. E.T. was great with drums and with triggering sounds - hooking up the Panscan to the hi-hat and using a whole series of gates which would trigger other instruments. It locked in the groove so beautifully - a whole lot of triggering going on - a new sound - and a rather muscular one at that. It would have been a great record! Luckily, we still have the multitracks and mixes, and may issue it in the future.

Tell me about your transition from The Bongos to Richard Barone the solo artist.

After a couple of years of doing 300-show tours and one album after another, I guess The Bongos needed a bit of a break. I started writing some new songs, as I always do. I didn't feel these new tunes needed a backbeat, or a bass or a band for that matter. It was very acoustic. I kept hearing a cello line here and there. I started to get interested in vibes and other percussion. As a side thing, I put together a little group called The Richard Barone Trio. We started playing some dates around town. It was just me, a cellist [Jane Scarpantoni] and an acoustic guitar player [Nick Celeste]. It was really satisfying and fresh for me. I wasn't competing with the snare drum when I was singing. After a while, we added percussionist Valerie Naranjo and I thought, this is an album now. I contacted an indie label called Passport, which was part of the PVC label that had put out *Drums Along the Hudson*. I said, "Look, Marty [Scott] - I'm doing this show at the Bottom Line in New York City. I've got this band that's really interesting. I want to record it." We hired a 24-track truck and recorded two shows - one night - at the Bottom Line. This became the *Cool Blue Halo* album. This was 1987, two years before *MTV Unplugged* aired its first episode. We had symphonic percussion - there was no drum kit. Tympani and some African percussion, symphonic bells and mallet percussion, marimba and vibes - all played by Valerie. And then a cello, an acoustic guitar and me on electric guitar. I switched from my Rickenbacker to a 1968 Guild X500 jazz guitar, and that was the sound. All we had to do was capture it. We took two days to mix it - one day for each side of the record. It's still one of my favorites.

You have referred to your solo albums as your own personal Star Wars Trilogy: *Cool Blue Halo, Primal Dream,* and *Clouds Over Eden.*

Cool Blue Halo, almost being like a musical early adolescence, is my *Star Wars: A New Hope* after The Bongos. And then *The Empire Strikes Back*, a major label release, *Primal Dream*, was really geared towards album-oriented radio - and did well at that. I broke away from my indie roots completely with MCA and *Primal Dream*. It was more of a mainstream sound. *Clouds Over Eden* was my *Return of the Jedi*. It was getting back to my heart's desire to express myself in music, with minimal label intervention. It's so much fun when you're in the music business, especially at a young age, because you get carried away by everything that surrounds you - by MTV and by girls leaving red lipstick kisses all over your tour bus, and by the parties that just go on for years. With *Clouds Over Eden* in 1993, the songs came out of a real emotional place that had nothing to do with the music industry or MTV at all. That album was about expressing myself and my love for a dear friend who had just passed away at the time. I also wanted to experiment with every analog recording technique known to man.

Let's talk about that.

Producer Hugh Jones, who was in London, actually tracked me down to do that album. He had loved *Cool Blue Halo* - loved the idea of a rocker doing an album with cello and tympani. Hugh had produced Echo and the Bunnymen, Pale Saints and a lot of other really cool records that I knew. I met with him and liked him right away. I said, "Hugh, let's do this record, but here are the ground rules: Let's do it from scratch. Let's use no presets and no digital effects. We'll make all our own effects." At this point, digital effects were rapidly overtaking the recording studios. Digital equipment was available to us, but I didn't want to use it yet. I said, "I want to make one last analog statement and I want everything about it to be something that we create. We can use tape delays. We can manipulate it, but no presets - no digital anything." Most of the reverbs on that record - and they were very special - were chambers that we actually created in the basement of the studio, which had recently been vacated by a hat manufacturer. This was at Mix-o-lydian, in New Jersey.

Which is now on a farm.

It's now on a farm, but at the time it was in an industrial area in Boonton, N.J., in a warehouse building with a huge, concrete basement that became our chamber, which we were able to manipulate. We were able to change the microphone placement and move the speakers around to create different reverbs for each song. That was a dream come true, because that's the kind of echo and atmosphere that I have loved since I was The Littlest DJ - and we were able to get THAT sound on the record! Sometimes if we wanted reverb on a guitar solo, I had a very long headphone cable and I would just go down to the basement and play my guitar down there in the chamber! On *Clouds Over Eden*, we tried every technique. Sometimes I didn't use headphones, but instead sang in the control room with two out-of-phase speakers so that I could move around a bit. I had seen this done before with AC/DC, when I was at Compass Point a couple of years earlier. They were doing lead vocals in the control room to out-of-phase speakers. I was shocked,

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 (continued on page 36)

because I thought he would be in some big room screaming his head off, but here he was in a little control room, whispering right next to a pair of NS-10s. He never got louder than a whisper. And yet on the record it sounds like this huge, booming vocal. That's how he did it - that's how he got that sound! He had a lot of power in that whisper. Anyway, back to *Clouds Over Eden*. We even created some of the "snare drum" sounds on that album from scratch. The "snare" on "Between These Walls" is actually me kicking my Fender Deluxe amp, and the sound that the spring reverb made. I had to really kick the amp to get that sound - Fender amps are pretty solid - but that's the sound that we got. The bass drum is a parade drum that someone left behind in the studio - you know, like a big marching drum. We put those two together - the amp and the kick. There were no "samplers" on that album other than my Mellotron.

You are a fan of Amek consoles, and you prefer to work at a studio in New York called Dubway, where we did the photo shoot for this article.

Lately I've done everything at Dubway. I've also done a lot of work at The Magic Shop in New York. Steve Rosenthal runs a fantastic studio there, and he's brilliant. He's got a great Neve setup, and I love his live room. I do have a nostalgic connection to the Amek. The first Bongos record that we did in England, at a studio outside of London called Jacobs, was recorded and mixed on an Amek. I fell in love with that console. It gave us a super-clear, satisfying, crisp recording. It was not overwhelming with the low end, but it gave us enough - and seemed to add a shimmer to the guitars. I was happy that when Dubway Studios moved to their 26th Street location here in New York, they got the same console. It's been like a homecoming for me. After years of working only on Neves, It's been nice to get back to that little Amek [Angela] desk. I've done three albums at Dubway in the last year, as well as other miscellaneous projects. They are all different, but they have all come out great. Also, the Amek is a manageable desk for me. I'm more of a producer of the heart, a producer of the ears, a producer of the mind, so I work closely with my engineers. In particular, I've been working with Jason Marcucci, and we've developed the kind of ESP that is essential for great team. You and I were speaking before about producer-engineers. With Richard Gottehrer, he never touches the console. I like that. When I was working with him, I knew he was listening and wasn't obsessed with where the knobs were positioned. He wasn't even looking at them! He would just say, "I don't hear enough top end on that guitar," or whatever. It takes a special breed to be a producer-engineer, because you have to be able to separate yourself and just be a listener - like a consumer at home. I prefer the role of producer to engineer. There is one record that we have discussed in this interview that was made by an engineer-producer that I feel was my least satisfying record. There was a lot of technology, and a lot of serious engineering going on, but not a lot of awareness of arrangement and the overall big picture. Engineers tend to see the small - the EQ knob - and not necessarily how the record will sound in people's homes, or the emotions or memories that the sounds will stir for the listener. I try to be the guy who is listening to the big picture. That's my job when I produce a record.

Let's talk about Richard *The Artist* versus Richard *The Producer*.

Being an artist first or simultaneously gives you a big advantage to being a good producer, I think. I always wanted to be both. I wanted to be an artist because I write songs and need to express them. And I wanted to be a producer because I love the sound of records - and it doesn't necessarily always have to be me singing. That's why I have always looked for other artists to produce besides myself. I like to work with different types of singers and different types of artists.

Do people ask you whether you prefer being the artist or the producer? Do you even have an answer to that question?

No - I won't answer that question. I like it all. I love all of my artists as if they were friends or lovers. I work closely with them and I spend a lot of time before we go in the studio, just like we are right now - at a dinner table talking. I want to hear what they like, want to sound like, and what they want to project. I take all of that in first - with each of them. All of the records that I produce are very different. There are producers who have their "Sound," and they impose that on all of their artists. To me, that is not the kind of producer I would want to be. With anything that I produce, whether it is a recording or a live show, I have to shift gears completely and understand that it is not about me. It's never about me. It's always about the artist. I try to put myself in the artist's position: their nervousness, the fear of recording - or if it's not fear, then anxiety. I know that kind of pressure, so when an artist comes in to do their first album or their third, I have been there. It's almost like I'm dating them. When I am working with an artist, it's all for them. I dress up for them. I come to the studio for them. A lot of the producer's job is to set up an atmosphere for the artist. I like to do a lot of the work in the rehearsal studio. I need to find out what the artist is trying to do. Sometimes the artist does not know how to articulate that to me, so I have to try to figure it out. Sometimes an artist in a vocal setting won't know how much they're giving during a performance - and how much this is going to affect the recording. What they hear in their head when they are singing is not exactly what is going down on tape, or to Pro Tools. Often, they are holding back way too much, or giving way too much. Part of my thing is to get them to communicate the lyric to me in a meaningful way. I have to let them trust me. Johnny Rodgers, an artist I produce, wrote a song about his family. I had to get him to talk to me like we're sitting here talking right now, and when he sang the lyric, to explain to me what the subject really was. I sometimes have to get myself in the live room, to be sung to. I will do whatever I need to do to get the artist to come out. Sometimes the artist or the songs are very sensual, and the mood of the studio has to change to one of sensuality and sexuality. I will create a mood for the artist to be able to be sensual in the recording studio - which is normally such a clinical situation. It's like being in a laboratory in a way, so you have to create an atmosphere. And I *have to* create the mood - whether it takes candles, incense, or a particular conversation that skirts the subjects we are dealing with in the songs that we're recording. There are always a few currents going on when I am producing a record. I know how I want something to sound - that's a given. But when I know we are going to have to go for a performance later on in the day, I have to start working on that at the same time as well. So that is another track in my brain. One track is thinking, "How am I going to get it to sound the way I want it to sound?" The other is thinking, "How am I going to get him or her to really give me a performance?" I have to start early in the day with loosening up the artist.

It's never too early in the day to start talking about sex.

Pop music is all about sex. We can't deny that. I have tried to deny that, unsuccessfully. The truth is that most pop music has a healthy sexuality to it. It offers a marvelous potential to be sexy in a fun and interesting way - and that gives great life to the moments on a record. I am always trying to bring out the artist's personality all the way. One of the producer's main jobs, in addition to keeping an eye on the style of the mix and the recording itself, is to bring out the best - and not just the best, but *the most* - of the performer. The most Jolie Jones or Johnny Rodgers I can get - so that his record screams, "Johnny Rodgers!" when you hear it. You put it on and it's this person. He's an American singer with a certain personality that will come through on every song, and it's very consistent.

Tell me about working with Tony Visconti.

It's nice to be working with Tony because, as I said at the beginning of this interview, he was a childhood mentor of mine without him even knowing it. Since he and I had spoken during the time that The Bongos had put out "Mambo Sun", I was trying to figure out when we could work together. I wanted to pair the sound of his records that I listened to while growing up, with my music. The fact that he used strings in a certain way and recorded the drums in a certain way, and the way he understood that things have to rock, but can be gorgeously mixed is what I am all about. A lot of production is trust. I trust Tony, and I've never really had that kind of trust with any other producer. As much as I've admired them, I've never felt as at ease with a producer as I do with Tony Visconti. We met and really bonded during work on a T. Rex tribute show. We started talking and I said, "You know, we still have to make that record one of these days." Soon after that, we began to write songs together - not even knowing that we were going to be recording them. With today's technology, you can be sitting in a writing session and just press record.

(Continued on page 38)

Mahajan Says

The studio had a pair of R-121's when we were tracking Yeah Yeah Yeah's in 2002, so I put them on the electric guitars and they stayed there for the whole record. Since then I always use them on guitar amps; they're full and detailed without accentuating the harsh stuff. I'll blend other mics to get some of that hyped attack when I want it, but the R-121 is usually the meat of the guitar sound.

With The National, two 121's on the piano gave me the best piano sound that I've gotten. You can really hear it on "Daughters of the Soho Riots." I'm moving my Royers around a lot now and have gotten great results on just about everything, including cello, vocals and bass amp. They capture sound in a way that fits right into the mix.

Paul Mahajan
(Engineer - Yeah Yeah Yeah's, The National, GMFTPO)

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So we started building an album that way - very slowly. We first did one song, and we'd keep tweaking it, trying different techniques. Pretty soon we had like nine or ten songs going on in different stages of development. I continuously learn from him. How he works with me translates to how I work with other artists that I produce. With Tony, it's all about setting the example, which is how any good mentor should be. He doesn't have to say, "Now you do THIS, and then you do THAT." He just does it, or we do it together - and I remember. The most important thing is how he treats me as the artist when I'm working with him - which is how I try to treat the artists that I am producing: with a tremendous amount of respect for who they are, the sound they make, and what they do. Sometimes if I'm not really letting loose, he'll tell me that I need to be "more Richard" - and I know exactly what he means. You know, it's not about all of the technology. That's the peripheral - that's just the tools, and you can't obsess only about them. The real route to producing a record is the performance, and how you get that performance. There are a lot of records out now that may have some great samples, some super-cool guitar sounds and really good, nasty drum sounds, but if the vocal is not great, or if the song isn't well-written and arranged, who's going to want to hear THAT a year from now? What I've learned from Tony is that the arrangement of a song is the root of a production. When we work on my album, we're really working on the arrangements. It's about when the Mellotron does something and when my guitar does something. Or how little I play on it. On some songs, I'm just playing one occasional bash on the guitar. It's all about him stripping away what I don't need. Sometimes you have to pull things away. With Tony, all of the songs we have recorded together, we have written together. Usually I just bring him the vaguest idea, like a thought or a word - like "Sanctified." He had a phrase for me: "I fell for myself." We wrote a song together based on that idea. It's the arrangement that makes a record sound good. If the arrangement is not good, you can't fix that during mastering. I've tried. On *Nuts and Bolts*, we completely cut up the songs at the mastering stage. It was crazy! I remember the label calling me and saying, "Who do you think you guys are? Queen?!" Mastering is a wonderful tool, but the songwriting, the arrangement, and the performance are really what the production is about.

You are currently producing Quincy Jones' daughter, Jolie's album. Tell me about her project - and about what it's been like working with someone as important to the history of popular music as Quincy Jones.

It actually came about very naturally. Quincy, whom I've admired pretty much all of my life as the quintessential musician/producer, made several landmark albums with Peggy Lee in the early '60s. When I produced two tribute concerts for Peggy at Carnegie Hall and the Hollywood Bowl in 2003 and 2004 (a third was in Chicago), I consulted him about the events and we had some great conversations. His daughter Jolie sang one of Peggy's songs at the Hollywood Bowl concert - very beautifully, I might add - and she and I hit it off as well. Jolie had just written a children's book [*Little Kisses*, Harper-Collins, 2006] and wanted to make a companion CD, which she asked me to produce. It's her debut album, and it has been an absolute pleasure to work on. We've written nearly all the songs together - along with Johnny Rodgers and Jolie's son, Sunny Levine [whose father is jazz producer Stewart Levine]. We've also recorded a lovely version of the Beatles' "I'm Only Sleeping". In addition, David Sanborn has added some exquisite sax lines. Quincy listens and makes his wise and uncannily correct comments on the mixes. I cannot begin to tell you what a thrill it is to have his input - and the fact that I can count *at least two* of the greatest record producers in the world as my mentors is more than I could have hoped for!

Give me some words of wisdom.

I think that at its essence, music is a collaboration, and the best music is collaborative. I also believe that we should have fun. I have found that following what you really love usually will lead you to where you really need to be. Your most successful work is usually when you do it because you really want to do it - and not for any other reason. My love for recording music has triggered a lot of things for me. My most successful records have been ones that I really felt I *had* to do. "Numbers with Wings" is a song that keeps getting airplay, but you know, that came out of a moment - a very natural moment. There was nothing planned about it. You have to be open. You have to always leave room for something to happen. ☮

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Bren Davies is currently recording his first solo album - he hopes to make something of his life. almostjune@optonline.net

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