

**ROB  
FREEMAN**  
ON  
RECORDING  
**RAMONES**





*Rob Freeman (center) recording Ramones at Plaza Sound Studios 1976*

**THIRTY YEARS AGO** *Ramones* collided with a piece of 2" magnetic tape like a downhill semi with no brakes slamming into a brick wall. While many memories of recording the Ramones' first album remain vivid, others, undoubtedly, have dulled or even faded away. This might be due in part to the passing of years, but, moreover, I attribute it to the fact that the entire experience flew through my life at the breakneck speed of one of the band's rapid-fire songs following a heady "One, two, three, four!" Most album recording projects of the day averaged four to six weeks to complete; *Ramones*, with its purported budget of only \$6000, zoomed by in just over a week—start to finish, mixed and remixed.

Much has been documented about the Ramones since their first album rocked the New York punk scene. A Google search of the Internet yields untold numbers of web pages filled with a myriad of Ramones facts and an equal number of fictions. (No, *Ramones* was *not* recorded on the Radio City Music Hall stage as is so widely reported...read on.) But my perspective on recording *Ramones* is unique, and I hope to provide some insight of a different nature. I paint my recollections in broad strokes with the following...

It was snowy and cold as usual in early February 1976. The trek up to Plaza Sound Studios followed its usual path: an escape into the warm refuge of Radio City Music Hall through the stage door entrance, a slow creep up the private elevator to the sixth floor, a trudge up another flight and a half of stairs,—the seventh floor, which housed the recording studio, was suspended on steel springs and cork in order to acoustically isolate it from the great hall below, hence no elevator all the way up—a dizzying meander through a labyrinth of battleship gray corridors, a delightful pass by the Rockettes' dance rehearsal rooms filled with the usual blend of perfume and sweat and the thunderous commotion of a hundred tap-dancing showgirls, and, finally, a disappearance through the black, unmarked door that led to the sanctuary of Plaza Sound's control room. There was the usual sense of anticipation I always felt at the beginning of a new album project. Everything seemed, well, *usual* until...the band arrived.

Although I had previously seen the Ramones perform live at their native haunt, CBGB's, the sight of them trailing into Plaza Sound's control room in single file was arresting. They didn't look like other bands I'd worked with; instead, they each wore a uniform consisting of black shaggy hair,

black leather jacket, white tee shirt, ripped-at-the-knees blue jeans, and well-worn white sneakers. They didn't communicate like other bands either; in fact, at the beginning, they didn't say much at all. I recall an early attempt at bonding with Tommy as we discovered our common Hungarian ancestry. They couldn't—or perhaps wouldn't—communicate on any musical level whatsoever. The most basic of inquiries such as “What key is this in?” or “Can you play that up an octave?” were answered with indifferent shrugs and apathetic grunts. They had a roadie to tune their guitars if a down stroke-weary string slipped its tension and when it came time for Dee Dee to sing a chorus in *unison* with Joey, they referred to this as “harmony.” I sensed I was in for an interesting ride. Dispensing with all formalities, we quickly settled in, and the group, producer Craig Leon, and me at the recording console and tape machine controls set about making *Ramones*.

I'd like to digress and offer a quick overview of some of the technical parameters used in recording *Ramones*. I don't wish to bore anyone with technicalities, but there are some who may find it of interest. The recording console at Plaza Sound was a thirty-two input API (Automated Processes, Inc.), the first one installed in New York City. As I recall, at the time of recording *Ramones*, the studio had just purchased a 24-track head for its 3M 2” multi-track tape machine. Still, for *Ramones*, the producer and I opted to use the semi-obsolete 16-track head as this would theoretically provide “hotter” (louder) recordings on tape. Besides, the band minus its vocalist was an instrumental trio so we saw no real need for twenty-four tracks. Even using an inordinate number of tracks for Tommy's drums, a couple for Dee Dee's bass (direct line plus amp mics), and a couple more for Johnny's rhythm guitar, there would still be plenty of tracks left over for adding guitars, vocals, and whatever else was to go on the record. Recording guitar solos could have consumed lots of tracks, but as the Ramones didn't believe in solos, the 16-track arrangement worked out quite nicely. In an effort to “hit” the tape as hard as possible, I aligned the 2” tape machine to a recording level highly elevated over the standard “zero level.” This caused high frequency saturation and analog tape compression, both desired effects when making loud rock and roll records. Final 2-track mixes were committed to the mix master tapes at the same elevated level as the multi-track tapes. I'll pepper the rest of what I write with a few more techno tidbits, but, for the most part, I'll try to steer clear of them.

As I was setting up microphones around the band's equipment, I noticed the “double stack” amps (one head with two speaker cabinets) for the guitar and for the bass. These guys were going to be loud! This presented an acoustical challenge: how best to give each instrument and its



corresponding microphones sufficient room to breathe while minimizing “leakage” (sound spillage) from one instrument into another instrument's microphones. That was the classic rock and roll recording battle. Minimizing leakage is essential to retaining individual control over sounds for later processing and balancing. But Plaza Sound was up to the challenge, and I devised a solution that adequately addressed the dual issues of maximizing instrument ambient space and minimizing leakage.



The main Plaza Sound recording room was a whopping hundred feet by sixty-five feet with thirty-foot ceilings, and superb acoustics throughout. This spectacular room was originally built by NBC as a rehearsal space for Arturo Toscanini and his symphony orchestra in the 1930's at a cost of over \$500,000. It was later used as an NBC broadcast studio and as a rehearsal space for the Radio City Music Hall organist when a three manual Wurlitzer pipe organ was installed there. No one could have foreseen that one day that wondrous instrument would grace a song by the likes of the Ramones...but more on that later. Eventually the room was turned into a recording studio. Being very large, the room was prone to leakage of the type mentioned above, especially if the sound sources were as loud as a couple of double stack amplifiers. Rolling acoustic baffles of all sizes were available, but they couldn't stop the power of the Ramones' amps from spilling into the numerous mics hanging over the drums and elsewhere in the studio. To establish acoustic control, drastic measures had to be taken. Several isolation booths had been constructed at Plaza Sound for separating instruments. One such "iso" booth, measuring about twenty feet by ten feet, was carpeted and had hardwood walls and an acoustic tile ceiling. It featured a large glass window for viewing out into the main room. The booth was small but "live" enough to cut drum tracks in, so this was where Tommy and his drum kit were placed. The downside was that the booth was located at the opposite end of the studio from the control room, so Tommy had to walk about a hundred and thirty feet each time he wanted to come in for a playback. I don't think he liked being in that booth. Johnny's Marshall amp and speakers were hauled down the hallway into one of the Rockettes' dance rehearsal rooms, a huge space about sixty feet by forty feet with twenty-foot ceilings. This room had a hardwood dance floor throughout and one wall completely mirrored, giving it a very "lively" acoustic property. Johnny's amp screamed in there! By default, Plaza Sound's main studio floor became home to Dee Dee and his Ampeg bass amp. Johnny's guitar cord was run back down the hall into the main studio room so he could stand near Dee Dee. The three Ramones could now see each other and hear each other (in headphones). Each had his own unique acoustic environment while maintaining complete acoustic isolation.



Plaza Sound had an arsenal of outboard equipment that included some vintage vacuum tube limiters (Teletronix LA-2A) and wonderful old Pultec tube equalizers. These, together with the API's distinctive equalizers (still in demand to this day), were used liberally throughout the recording of *Ramones* on bass, guitars, vocals, the final mix...everything. But in all honesty, the real key to the *Ramones* guitar and bass sounds was the way Johnny and Dee Dee set their amps. There was no finesse here; they just cranked the volumes *all* the way up. It was just like the "These go to 11!" scene in *This Is Spinal Tap*. The Ramones' guitars were loud but restrained when played. It was when the band *stopped* playing that things became difficult. Due to the sheer volume, whenever they lifted their hands from their instruments, explosions of uncontrolled, squealing feedback would erupt. This deafening noise would blast at us each time they were about to play a song and immediately after each song had ended; I would dive for the volume knob to keep from blowing out speakers—or my ears! The band could barely be heard speaking through the earsplitting din, and our communications under those conditions were quite chaotic. A rather subdued example of this feedback can be heard during Dee Dee's count off to "Today Your Love, Tomorrow the World."

The first step in the process of making the album was to record "basic tracks" (the first layer of recording). These consisted of drums, bass, and rhythm guitar. For some reason, Joey didn't sing

“scratch” (reference) vocals along with the basic tracks. Even without vocals to guide them, the band knew the songs so well that once I got a working balance on the microphones, we managed to record all fourteen basic tracks in just two days. The tracks went down so quickly that there wasn’t time to properly notate song titles on the recording logs. So for the first two days of the project, the songs were identified merely as “Untitled 3,” “Untitled 10,” and so on. Imagine trying to distinguish between those similar-sounding tracks without vocals or song titles...yet another *Ramones* challenge.

By the third day, all the basic tracks had their song titles, and the process of “overdubbing” (adding tracks *over* the basic tracks) began. One intriguing technical note about the overdub sessions: producer Craig Leon was admittedly hard of hearing in one ear, so he favored using “EQ” (equalization) that emphasized the high and mid-range frequencies, those that cut like knives through the range of human hearing. Before we began overdubbing, Craig asked that the basic tracks be hyped with heavy EQ so he could hear them as they might sound when we finished mixing the album. That was fine, but it meant that the tracks we were about to add would sound somewhat dull and lifeless by comparison unless they, too, were hyped with EQ. A never-ending tug of war ensued in which each day’s overdubs were recorded with more and more EQ added.



The overdubbed tracks were mostly subtle touches that were designed not to detract from the raw, live feel of the basic tracks: a cowbell on “Havana Affair,” tubular chimes and a tambourine on “I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend,” and handclaps on “Judy Is a Punk” and “Listen to My Heart.” Craig played a snappy keyboard part on the Wurlitzer pipe organ on “Let’s Dance.” (Listen carefully toward the end.) In lieu of solos, there were a few tasteful guitar lines added here and there. Tommy played the bulk of the percussion parts while Craig chimed in on tubular chimes and a few other bits. The band clapped hands. Some overdubs were not so subtle...like when an actual chain saw was brought in to the studio, powered up, and recorded for the intro of “Chain Saw.” The overdubbing went on for about two days.

On day five of this fast-paced project, we finally got around to putting vocals on the tape. I set Joey up on a vintage Neumann U47 tube microphone, standing him right in the middle of the open studio with no blankets on the floor or baffles around him to deaden the room sound. As it turned out, Joey’s vocal renditions of each song were nearly identical from one “take” (performance) to another, as I discovered by bringing up two different vocal tracks at the same time. Normally, when a singer wishes to “double” (sing along with himself), he performs while listening to a previously recorded take. This can be tricky, and not every singer does it well. Joey managed to double himself perfectly without even trying (or even knowing, for that matter) because of his uncanny consistency. This innovation resulted in the doubled vocals heard throughout the album. The background vocal parts consisted mainly of Dee Dee’s “harmony” and occasional other parts. But when it came to recording the background vocal parts for their first single, “I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend,” Dee Dee’s failed attempts at finding the correct notes grew wearisome for all of us waiting patiently in the control room. So, in an effort to keep things moving forward, I volunteered to sing the parts



and went out to the microphone to lay down the track. Yes, I sang the “Oo...ah” and “Oooh...I wanna be your boyfriend” parts, and, along with a touch of Dee Dee’s vocal track mixed in, it is my voice that is prominently heard. I think I also hear my voice on “Judy Is a Punk” and “Chain Saw,” but I don’t actually remember singing on those tracks—maybe I did. In any case, as a result of my vocal interventions, Craig and the band quipped that my name in the liner notes should be changed to “Robbie Ramone.” I had arrived!

The lyrics throughout the album were pretty irreverent. “Beat on the brat with a baseball bat?” Just part of the charm, I figured. As the recording engineer, I normally wouldn’t comment much on lyrics; however, when I heard Joey singing the words “I’m a blue-eyed Nazi baby,” I turned to Craig and voiced an objection, asking, “Is *that* really necessary?” Craig’s first response was to say “It’s OK...it’s cute.” But after a while he recanted, and, upon discussing it with the band, the line “I’m a shock trooper in a stupor” was adopted. Perhaps this episode was responsible for the rescinding of my short-lived status as Robbie Ramone.

The mixing of a completed album’s tracks is an involved and complex process that can take weeks to accomplish. Mixing this album was different. It was mixed in just two days—*Ramones* style! And it’s not that we mixed half the album one day and the other half the next; no, we mixed the entire album the first day, took a copy home, discussed it over the phone in the middle of the night, and then came back the next day and remixed the entire album. I can’t recall what the objection to the first mixes actually was; maybe the vocals were buried a bit or the guitar was too bright or the bass was too loud. I guess we’ll never know. Craig’s concept for mixing *Ramones* was for the album to resemble an early Beatles record, and, as I was a big Beatles fan (and still am!), I embraced the idea. The early UK Beatles records were all mixed in mono while their American counterparts were released in a bizarre pseudo-stereo which often had the backing tracks on one side (usually the left) and isolated vocals with maybe a tambourine on the other side. (If you’ve never experienced this, put on your *Beatles 1* CD and adjust the balance on your stereo all the way to the left or right; you’ll be in for a real treat.) In our case, the bass was mixed to the left side, the guitar to the right, the drums were split with the high hat on the left, and everything else was distributed across the stereo field. Lead vocals occupied the center or, when



doubled, were split left and right. Once the basic mix was set up, the album pretty much flowed through the mix process from one song to the next with a minimum of variation. There were a few little mix tricks—like “flanging” the high hat cymbals—employed throughout the album, but these, like the overdubs, were intended to be subtle and not to stick out. One exception to this rule can be heard during the fade of “Chain Saw” where I processed Joey’s voice through a Harmonizer (pitch shifter) which gave his “Oh yeah” a high/low alternating effect.

Rock and roll producers have always wanted their records to be the loudest ones on the radio and on people’s stereo systems. But there were limitations to vinyl, the medium that *Ramones* was originally released on. In the days of vinyl discs, recording engineers had to pay close attention to total running time, peak and average volume, and frequency distribution of the material that was going to be put on the disc. The longer the album was, the less volume could be committed to vinyl. Making it too loud might cause distortion or keep the disc from playing properly on some record players. Additionally, the stereo distribution of low frequencies, found notably in the bass guitar, was a big consideration. Low frequencies cut the widest grooves in the vinyl, and placing too many “lows” on one side or the other could make the needle jump right off

the disc. As a result, bass tracks were almost always placed in or near the center of the stereo spectrum. Not so for *Ramones*! Recall that the mix had the bass on the left side and the guitar on the right. Also, the alignment level of the mix master tapes was elevated to the extreme, way past “normal.” When confronted with *Ramones*, Greg Calbi, the mastering engineer responsible for transferring the album from tape to vinyl, was aghast and suggested we go back and “remix it properly.” We stood our ground, and what eventually saved the album from disaster in the vinyl phase of its life was twofold. First, the massive amounts of dynamic compression that had been poured on like syrup prevented any significant volume peaks and left the whole album with but one average volume, *loud*! Second, although the album contained fourteen songs, most of them clocked in under two minutes so its total running time was just shy of thirty minutes. Most albums tended to run forty to fifty minutes, more or less. Because of the short length of *Ramones*, less material had to be crammed into the grooves. That opened up some space for the wider bass grooves on the left side and enabled the relative volume of the record to remain fairly high. Still, it was a close call as to whether *Ramones* would translate successfully from tape to vinyl.

On the surface, the *Ramones* project was simply that of a fledgling band making its debut album. But from what I observed in the control room, there was surely something more going on. The band’s manager, media mogul Danny Fields, spent his days fielding calls from Europe and elsewhere and answering questions about the band, the recording, and upcoming tour plans. Photographers streamed in and out and assembly-line phone interviews with band members were conducted throughout the days and late into the nights. I once overheard the band talking among themselves about how one day they would make records with legendary producer Phil Spector...and we know what happened when that fantasy met reality four years later. For me, *Ramones* was an exciting and challenging recording project. But for the Ramones, it was not so much about making their first record as it was about taking their first step toward world domination!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

**BETWEEN 1974 AND 1979**, I was head engineer and part owner of Plaza Sound Studios, a privately operated recording facility situated high atop Radio City Music Hall in New York City. My years at Plaza Sound coincided with the advent and growth of the New York punk rock scene. Trolling downtown for new artists to record, I made contacts at CBGB's, the epicenter of the scene, and managed to position myself in the middle of it all. I was privileged to be the recording engineer on such seminal albums as the Ramones' *Ramones*, Blondie's *Blondie* and *Plastic Letters*, and Richard Hell and the Voidoids' *Blank Generation*. Throughout my Plaza Sound years, I made records with a diverse array of artists including KISS, Ace Frehley, Rupert Holmes, Twisted Sister, Salsoul Orchestra, Robert Gordon, Link Wray, Martha Velez, Sunny Fortune, Genya Ravan, John Miles, and The Laughing Dogs.

In 1979 the Rockefeller Foundation sold Radio City to the Disney Corporation, and Plaza Sound Studios closed its doors. So began the free-lance chapter of my career that continues to this day. Early free-lance projects had me recording albums with KISS, Julie Brown, and the Elektrics and mixing a Top 40 single for Agnetha Faltskog of Abba. In time, I made the jump from engineer to producer, and, over the decade that ensued, produced singles, EPs and/or albums for Twisted Sister, Lawrence Gowan, Tim Moore, Jailbait, Single Bullet Theory, Regina Richards, The Go, Surgin', and Queen City Kids, among others, and co-produced, engineered and mixed the debut album by the Go-Go's, *Beauty and the Beat*. This notable album went multi-platinum around the world, topped the US Billboard album charts at #1 for six weeks, spawned two hit singles, was the first #1 album by an all-girl group who wrote their own songs and played their own instruments, and, incredibly, was crowned the CMJ (College Music Journal) top album of the decade, 1980-1990.

My efforts over those busy years have garnered me a variety of acclamations and awards such as *Billboard's* Top 15 Producer of the Year (1982), *Pro Sound News's* Engineer of the Year (1983), *Pro Sound News's* 2nd Runner-up Producer of the Year (1983), eight Ampex Golden Reels, two BPI (UK) Gold Albums, one CRIA (Canada) Gold Album, one CRIA (Canada) Platinum Album, one RIAA (US) Gold Single, two RIAA (US) Gold Albums, and two RIAA (US) Platinum Albums.

Today I reside in Florida where I have refocused my sound production skills to include recording for feature films, broadcast television, commercials, and documentaries.

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