

NILE RODGERS INTERVIEW

by Mike Alleyne

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Nile Rodgers is a composer, arranger, guitarist and producer, and co-founding member of Chic. His production credits include Sister Sledge, David Bowie, Madonna, Diana Ross, Duran Duran and many more. In 1998, Rodgers founded the Sumthing Else Music Works label and Sumthing Distribution, focusing on the production and distribution of video game soundtracks.

Was there a particular point when you saw yourself as a producer or did you start doing it out of necessity?

The answer to that question is yes both ways. Yes, I saw myself as a record producer because I had to produce myself out of necessity. I used to have a band – it was the same band that wound up becoming Chic, but we had a different name at the time and we had been courted by a lot of the hot producers in New York ‘cause we had gotten a really good reputation of being a live band having some pretty good songs. Every time record producers tried to work with us, instead of them enhancing our sound they started to conflict with our sound. Because if you listen to the first Chic album, the compositions are complicated but sound amazingly simple. Try and play a song like “Everybody Dance.” You can be the greatest bass player, you could be Stanley Clarke, try and play “Everybody Dance.”

Who would you say is the most important influence on your record production style?

Bernard Edwards. Both Bernard and I idolised certain types of producers. I happened to be more in line with jazz producers although I didn't quite know what they did, but when I looked on the back of Miles Davis albums and on the back of Wes Montgomery albums, I used to see those names. I only realised after the fact what they were doing but I would see the names as producers. At first I thought they raised the money. I didn't know that they were the equivalent of the director of a film which is basically what a producer is.

What did you learn from Bernard (Edwards) that worked for you?

Everything. Bernard taught me about the art of simplicity. I come from a jazz background. I started out studying classical music, but if I could only do one style of music and could never listen to or play anything else – maybe I'd have to say funk, but I would say probably jazz because it feels the most rewarding to me because of harmonic complexity and things like that. So I really consider myself a jazzer even though I don't stay up on top of my scales and my chops aren't what they should be, but I would never be embarrassed playing. If I got up on stage with George Benson I would not be embarrassed. I mean I would of course go "You're the man." I played with John McLaughlin a couple of years ago, he was the man, but I hung (Laughs).

You've often described your production style in other interviews in very spatial terms: a house under construction, driving a vehicle, a ship being navigated. How important is the concept of space in your work?

For me it's everything. Just for clarity's sake, when I talk about producing like driving a car, what I mean specifically is the way that most people drive is if the car is going straight you don't have to steer and as long as the car is going in the direction you're planning on going you don't overcompensate. And that's my style of production, I try not to overcompensate, I let things happen naturally. When you get into a car you just drive. You look down the road, you don't look right in front of the car. If you look right in front of the car you'll probably have an accident, so you look where you're going and you just go there. When I do a record I envision the completed work, and that's not to say that it doesn't alter during the journey. In other words, you can stop and go eat some place. but the destination is very important to me, and the process, the act of getting to that destination is what it's all about. So driving some place could just be a linear thing. You could just think, "Okay, today is Monday and we're going to Ipswich and we get in the car and drive there." No. no. no. It's Monday and we're going to Ipswich and we stop over here and we look at that and we go "Oh cool", let's get out the car for a minute, what are we listening to while we're driving there, what are we thinking about, what's the conversation about, you know, that sort of thing. So it's the journey and the experiences along the way.

How would you say your background as a musician & songwriter has influenced your production sensibility?

I think that being a musician and being a songwriter and being an arranger which is like a songwriter is the most important part of what I do. If I didn't know how to construct the song and if I didn't know how to compose and perform, I don't think I'd be able to direct other performers and composers how to make their craft better or at least get it more correct.

And at the same time, while you're doing all of this you're making space again within the arrangement of the song.

Well, space is just something that I sort of cherish because I inherently am a complicated writer. I think that intellectually the more complex something is, the happier I am. So I start with a complex composition and then take away. I wish I knew another way, but I don't. It's hard for me to admit that I'm not smart enough to write "aaahhh, freak out." I'm not smart enough, I don't know how to do that. But I can write something else and take away and then you're left with "aaahhh, freak out."

A lot of creative tension in this business arises from the friction between the organic and the technological. How do you get that balance right in your own work?

It's getting more right as I get older and wiser. At first I, like a lot of people, were threatened by technology on some level, but I was an early adopter. If you listen to the last couple of Chic records, even though we had one of the greatest drummers in the world, Tony Thompson, I still used drum machine and I still used sequencers in a minimalist way because I liked what restrictive groove technology did. In other words, I wish I could play like a machine. Here's something that most people do not know: The Chic song called "I Want Your Love" was my attempt at being (German disco & new wave era producer) Giorgio Moroder. I never knew that there was a machine called the sequencer that actually electronically put things in the pocket. I thought Giorgio Moroder was the baddest fucking funky person that has ever walked the earth! When I first heard those Donna Summer records - and prior to that I was into Sly (Stone) and people I thought were incredible groovesmiths, Ron 'Have Mercy' Kersey and those kind of people who just were like tight, tight, tight in the pocket - then all of sudden I heard Giorgio I was like are you kidding me, somebody could play like that? So "I Want Your Love" is me trying to imitate Giorgio Moroder. I had no idea, and then when I found it was a machine I was like, "Oh man!" But still, it helped me write "I Want Your Love."

So there was an oblique technological influence even in the early days of Chic?

Yes, and then of course Kraftwerk changed my way of thinking. It was great.

What do you see as some of the major positives and negatives regarding the ways we now use digital technologies in record production?

The only negative to me is when you compensate for the lack of skill on the part of the user, but that's not a bad thing because earlier on (in a panel discussion) I gave the example of anti-lock brakes. The first time I bought a car that had anti-lock brakes it felt uncomfortable. I pushed the pedal down and all of a sudden it started braking *for* me. I was like, I don't wanna do that, and then I realised that the computer was smarter than the human because it didn't have emotion. When you jammed down the brake pedal because you were afraid, the car knew you wanted maximum stoppage but you don't want to go into a skid. So it did that and it kept you from skidding. So I had to realise that computers can fill in what you don't have, and also I became a lot more open because I'm a product of a wonderful school system. When I was a kid, America had nationalised education programmes. My mom had me at 13 years old but it didn't make any difference because whatever school I was in from whatever neighbourhood I moved around we were all at the same level. So the intellectual standards were incredibly high and we had music, we had art, we had theatre, we had all of that stuff. It doesn't make any difference whether you were good at it or not – you were exposed to it. And if you gravitated towards one subject, you could pursue that. I happened to gravitate towards music, so every time I checked into a new school – my mom at 13 didn't provide a stable home, I was going, as we say in America from pillar to post – I would register with the band and usually they would assign me an instrument where the position was already filled, so by the time I was

11 I knew how every instrument in the symphony orchestra functioned. I knew the written range so I became an arranger. So by the time we did Chic, I could do all that stuff.

So all the time you were getting this training...

Not realising that it would come and benefit me in my later years.

What are some of the factors that influence your involvement in a project or that make you decide not to take on a project?

There are a number of things. Usually the seal and the credibility of the person who's recommending the project. Secondly, my own enthusiasm after I become familiar with that work. I can't work with a person unless I'm a fan. Let's say it's a new artist – I have a new artist right now, she's signed to Interscope.

Is that Lanz?

Yeah. The first day I met her I became a fan. I was in a studio which was the last place I wanted to be. I was managing a producer, a hip-hop producer, a guy who I love, and I was trying to help him get his life together. I said the greatest thing that ever happened to

me was when I was younger. I listened to business people, and they said to me there's gonna come a day where you're not gonna be the hot guy. There's gonna come a day where you're gonna be sort of passé in the business. He said I could teach you how to be rich your whole life. I was like 'Wow, really?'. Because all you got to do is be successful for a short period of time, and then do the right investments and set your life up properly and you will never ever have to worry again. He says think about it. He says being a musician is like being a professional athlete, especially being black you only have a certain amount of time. So do it well and do the proper investments and you have earned your life forever. So I tried to help this dude out, and he said, "I'm working with this new artist, help me figure out the deal." I was like, I don't wanna be here, and I was falling asleep 'cause I was up the night before. This little white girl, tiny little Jewish girl from New Jersey walks in the studio, I'm like I definitely don't wanna be there. And she's doing hip-hop and she opens her mouth and the most brilliant shit comes out of her mouth. And I'm like, "What was that?" And then she started doing this other rhyme and she had a hook and she was singing, and then she went right from the singing right into the rhyme. There's a few people who can do that but they don't, because in hip-hop you're either a rapper or a singer, and she did it without even dropping a beat. She kept doing it over and over again and it was always spot on, so I developed my own relationship with her. The next thing I know, Jimmy Iovine (head of Interscope Records) and these guys are signing me up as the executive producer of the record. Go figure.

How do you account for the scarcity of black producers like yourself operating outside of the conventional boundaries of R&B, jazz & hip-hop? Why don't there seem to be more black producers working with a Jeff Beck, a David Bowie, or a Mick Jagger?

It's hard to speak to that. I think that historically if you're a young black producer now usually your musical taste gets broader once you start making music. The cultural experience of young blacks right now, it's so controlled because of the money making machine. In other words, we're targeting those people in America. Its whole lifestyle, marketing and branding , and they're into it and they're aggressive because they know that that's the largest growth area in the music business. So it's all about the 'bling' and the cars, and it's not about spirituality so to speak. And a lot of music that's outside of your culture presupposes a certain amount of spiritual and intellectual growth. You have to be open.

I liken it to food. In order for a person to eat something that's culturally not normal for them, they have to be open. You don't wake up one day and say "I need some beluga." Your palate becomes wider as your brain becomes more open. It's spiritual development, it's human development, and if your world stays small because of forces outside of you trying to keep it small it's gonna stay that way. Now when you become very famous like a Jay-Z or a Pharrell not only does your world open up organically because you're in the mix, but also because those people are attracted to you because of what you do. Their worlds are open. So it's not odd that Linkin Park would be aware of Jay-Z .

When I wound up doing *Let's Dance* with David Bowie, he came after me. I didn't go looking for David Bowie 'cause I would have never thought that was possible. The only artist in my entire history that I ever sought out – that I woke up one day and said I want to work with that person, I'm gonna beg and fight – was Peter Gabriel. He's the only person ever and I wouldn't take no for an answer. I followed him, I went to a concert and said look let's meet for sushi, I was relentless.

And it paid off.

It paid off spiritually. We never had a big hit record, but some of my best work I think was (with) Peter Gabriel. We did a record called “Walk Through The Fire” in the movie *Against All Odds*. That shit is the bomb, it's a great record! It's just that at the time there was Phil Collins who was one of the hottest guys in the world, and Lionel Richie was at the top of his game. So you had Phil Collins and Lionel Richie in line in front of us.

What aspects of vanishing technology do you miss the most and the least?

I don't miss that stuff because we've replaced it very effectively with software and it works better, it's all in tune.

It's cheaper too.

It's a lot cheaper! More memory. I mean, look, the things that I do now

If it wasn't for the Synclavier there would be no records like (Duran Duran's) "The Reflex", B-52s "Roam", "Like a Virgin" - Madonna. I played "Material Girl" on a Synclavier. I played a couple of things. Same thing with *Let's Dance*. I don't miss that technology because that stuff has gotten better. Sampling technology has gone light years ahead of where it was when I got my first Synclavier. Music writing programmes, Sibelius compared to the Synclavier – night and day - it's just great.

A lot of things I miss because I have the skill level to do it, but if I had to do it every day I probably would say I like the new stuff. I like writing charts because that's how I grew up, but if I had a machine that could just do what I thought of I'd say sure, let's do that.

It's interesting that your background is very organic in the way you develop ideas and yet you've been an early adopter of all sorts of digital technologies.

Absolutely.

Where does that curiosity come from?

I figure that anything that can help me be better, help me serve my clients better, is important. Very early on, I adopted a philosophy of every time I start a new record I'm gonna buy a new piece of gear and I've been doing that for years. I have a basement full of gear. And I do that now – every time I do a new record I buy a new piece of gear. I

just bought that Roger Linn box (M.A: Possibly the AdrenaLinn effects unit). It was wonderful. I took it and I used it live with the Arabic musicians that I was just working with (in L.A.), just plugged it in, I could set the delays right on the spot, tempo, it's great for a couple of hundred dollars. So I'm sure it's gonna wind up on the new Chic record I've been threatening to make for all these years.

How do you balance support of the artist and their creative vision with the often conflicting goals of the record company?

That's hard. That's probably, to a large extent, why I'm not the mister-in demand guy, because it's quite well known that I almost – not almost but always cede to the demands of the artist. So the record companies are looking for people who cede to the demands of the company because nowadays making their money is really important. They have to make their quotas. Nowadays, and I know you can hear it, why do record companies cut 30 songs on J-Lo? Because when it comes time to schedule her release date they have to have enough product so that they can put together an album and have it come out. That's why. Lanz – the same thing. Lanz's record is great now. They're gonna cut another 10 songs. It's just how it is – cut another 10 songs at least, and the record is great. It can come out right now. So I argue, why do we have to cut more songs. Let's just make the ones we have better. No one can make a decision in today's world and that's because they don't own the record labels, and if you make a bad decision you get fired and now

you can't have the perks that you had. Like if you work for a record company now, you can be just a Senior Vice-President - a Senior Vice-President at a record label makes more than the CEO of the record labels made when I was at Atlantic. I mean (Mirage Records head) Jerry Greenberg's take home salary in those days was probably - I don't know - \$200,000 a year with stock options? Now, when they fired Tommy Mottola I think his take home salary was \$20 million with stock options. \$20 million dollars? Are you kidding me? It's insane.

How do you deal with artist's moodiness, sulking or conflict in the studio?

I deal with it just fine. I obviously don't have any set way of going about it because every person is different and I don't have standardised stuff that I do, but my general attitude is that unless you have some sort of apparatus of coercion - and I'm not that kind of person, I'm not Phil Spector, I don't have a gun - so if I'm working with an artist and things aren't going the way they're supposed to go or the way I feel that they should go, I say let's go to the movies, let's go to a restaurant, let's take the day off 'cause we can't make it happen. I never try and force it. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Come back in a few hours, it'll work then or come back tomorrow.

In the case of Diana Ross, we were working on an album, and somehow we offended her even though we were trying to say in the most delicate way possible that she was singing just a little bit flat. She walked out of the studio. I never saw her for another two months.

But when she came back it was cool (Laughs). She didn't come back and say "Don't tell me I'm flat ever again." She just came back and we resumed and we knew better.

What vocabulary do you use in the studio to describe sounds to engineers and musicians?

I hope that I'm using the standardised vernacular of gear and musicians. I call stuff what it is commonly known by, I would imagine. I don't ever remember an engineer looking at me going "What do you mean by that?" (Laughs).

When we talk about Nile Rodgers as a producer we always focus on the albums that really hit. But there are a lot of things like the Dan Reed Network album 'Slam' (1989, PolyGram Records) which I think is a great album...

Brilliant! Brilliant!

...that for one reason or another didn't catch the market. How does that affect you as a producer when you know you've done a great job, but the product hasn't reached its audience?

That always hurts because that's a great record. Dan Reed Network, it's great. You know, I do the same thing every time out. I do the best record I can at the time.

So lack of commercial success on a pet project doesn't really affect you?

I don't dwell on it. It bothers me a bit at the time, but I really don't dwell on it. The same way I don't dwell on the hits. Bernard said it really great. When we did "We Are Family" and it was the big theme song of the '79 Pittsburgh Pirates when they won the World Series, we didn't even know. We got on the plane and went "Look at that, check that out." I look at success and failure almost as the same. Success doesn't make me want to succeed more.

What happened with the Outloud album (1987)? A (Warner Bros.) record company executive reportedly said it was "too artistic."

That's a good word for "sucks."

Most people that I know who've heard the album have been very turned on by the production style, the songwriting, the musicianship, and also this was released at a time when you were extremely hot as a producer, so I'm wondering why there were problems with the record company?

Well think about it, look at the time – 1987. Music didn't sound like this in 1987. As a matter of fact, can I burn this?

I've got two copies. If you don't have a copy, you can have that one.

Yeah, I don't have a copy. I'm just looking at this going "Oh, I remember some of these songs, these are cool. You know, this is why I'm me. Like I just do stuff that I like doing. I like playing with these people, they're great. I like writing weird shit like this. I've always loved Sly – look at me, I'm covering "Music Lover" and knowing that I can't do it as well as Sly, but still I just love it. The fact that I did it like a medley and had to pay double royalties – I wasn't thinking about the business. I'm just a guy doing what I wanna do. At that time I had enough power.

It was a very elaborately produced album.

I don't even remember it. I don't even know what it sounds like!

You've got Synclavier, DX7, you name it. And you'll find all of the credits at the back of the CDs booklet.

(Reads credits) Wow, holy cow! Look at that. Man, look at all the guitars I was using! And see now, I wasn't doing this because of endorsements. I didn't have endorsements with any of these guys. I just wanted people to know what the gear was.

When I think of Nile Rodgers as a producer. I also think of this album along with Madonna's Like a Virgin and David Bowie's Let's Dance.

I was a big star making lots of money. When you're making lots of money, they can do what they call fuzzy math. They can say, this is the same guy who just sold 21 million Madonna albums. It's alright .

As a producer, what motivated you to set up your own distribution company and independent label?

It's really a historical political thing. When I was very, very young, my uncle took me to a rally to hear Malcolm X in Harlem somewhere. My uncle was super, super black militant and I remember hearing Malcolm X saying black people in America will never truly be free until they control the means of distribution. I didn't even know what that meant, but it sounded cool. It sounded poetic. So at a certain point in time I was financially able to purchase a distribution company. Up until I bought that company, no African-American had successfully been able to own a national distribution company in America, and believe me, people have tried. (Berry) Gordy tried it, and Berry was like "More trouble than it's worth." Dick Griffey who had Solar Records tried it, and I'm sure certain others. But it was just a neighbourhood that we were sort of locked out of, because on some level distribution – even though it's not a glamorous job – it really is power. It really represents that you're dealing with the money. You're a banker. At that point, you're the bank. You're consigning the product, you're collecting the product, you're dealing with vendors directly. You're a black man dealing with Best Buy, Target,

Sears, on that level. That's power in America. Very few of us have that kind of power when you're dealing with national vendors on that level.

You also seemed to have moved ahead of the curve regarding video game soundtrack production. How does that differ from the conventional record production?

A lot of the artistic part is the same, but the business model is interesting for me. The business model that I adopted – I actually think I invented it – was one that was built on altruism, survival and fairness. I always thought that if I owned Chic records, how rich would I be? If I owned “Good Times”, if I owned “Le Freak”. You can't even imagine. Whatever number you think, it's not big enough. So I thought that if I were a record label wouldn't that be the greatest gift in the world – to give the artist back their records, and to have the model flip-flop. So instead of Atlantic Records paying me an artist royalty for the rest of my life as long as those records sell, what if I were able to pay *them* a royalty for the rest of my life or the life of that product? So the way I've set up my business, I license records from artists. One, it's economically viable for me as a company because I don't incur the production costs. Sometimes I supplement what they're doing and help them finish it, but I license the product from them, give them an advance for the license, use it for seven years. After seven years, the master ownership reverts to them then they pay me a royalty as if I'm the artist and they're the label. It's great, so I spend the money building the career, making the product valuable, get to exploit it for seven years and then give it back to them.

It sounds like that model is influenced by the fact that you weren't just a businessman – you've been an artist and you've been a producer.

Right. It's economically sound too because I don't run the risk of exposure of being millions and millions of dollars in the hole before I can recoup. Now it's true the upside of that is that you own everything and you can sell it , but I think that the cumulative effect of the ownership of these copyrights and trademarks will still be a viable, purchasable business. And even though a person may not have all the rights that one would have if they owned the masters outright, they will have a constant revenue stream - they don't have to do anything. That money will come in and they still have the logo and the brand which will be able to form the business. So in other words, the only reason that I say this is I think that anybody in today's world would be foolish to start a business that doesn't have resale value. So it's a model that I've adopted, and that I believe has good resale value, and also I own the distribution company too. So it's a model that works because obviously I get a good fee on the distribution side so I can make my money back there and I have product. You go to my site, you'll see I have lots of records. Not like I have just ten. I have hundreds, and in two years I'll have hundreds and hundreds.

You've recently invested in a luxury recording studio complex at Amanyara in the Turks & Caicos Islands.

Yes, The only six-star resort in the world.

That investment suggests that you're very optimistic about the future of record production.

That investment says Aman is the nicest resort in the world. Before I became an owner, I used to spend god knows how much going to Thailand to go to Aman. I'm not just a part of the studio, I also own 10% of the hotel so it's a little more than the studio. It's a financial decision, it's a spiritual and artistic decision, as well as having some faith that the music business will never go away. I think it's more robust than it's ever been. You just have to figure out how you're gonna participate in it. Yes, the true big studios have gone away. There's only a handful left, but there's always gonna be superstars and if your clients are the Madonnas, the Stings, the Bonos, the Bowies, The Eagles and those type of people there's a place for it. There's always a place for that upper tier.

What sort of adaptations do you think record producers need to make now to accommodate the digital era from the perspective of selling music to the consumer?

They're doing it now. The record companies have been somewhat threatened by YouTube and My Space and CD Baby. The fact that no one has broken super, super big like to the level of a Britney or Justin or something like that, I think it's all a matter of time. It's probably just like the early age of the recording business. Probably in the beginning,

people thought that player piano rolls were still gonna be the standard, and then when they started to have the cylinder recorders and things like that, wire recorders, it started to catch on. And convenience changes everything. All of a sudden when they went to wax and vinyl that became a lot more convenient and now MP3s are even more convenient, so the more convenient music becomes the more widely consumed it is just as we see now. Coming up with viable revenue streams as the technology starts to far surpass the archaic record company models - that's gonna be the key.