

George Martin



Stock, Aitken and Waterman

Production lines

As the line between artist and producer becomes increasingly blurred, we explore what goes into producing other people's work and talk to some industry experts...

What do you picture when you hear the word 'producer'? A long-haired visionary telling the bass player of a band to wear purple shoes for improved ambience, or a drum 'n' bass DJ turning his hand to making a tune? Whether it's Phil Spector or DJ Krust who comes to mind, this month we're separating fact from fiction and glamour from graft in the arcane sphere of production.

In the beginning, music production was an administrative process, with producers simply organising recording sessions and then taking on a supervisory role. With the advent of magnetic tape in the 50s, it became possible to run cost-effective independent recording studios. This in turn facilitated the rise of independent producers like George Martin, who broke from his role as a staff producer and A&R manager at EMI to go it alone.

Martin's diverse background – which had included work on classical music and novelty records for Peter Sellers

and Rolf Harris – was to give him the wide-ranging experience that would enable him to help the Beatles revolutionise studio recording.

On *Strawberry Fields*, for example, Martin was required to interpolate classical orchestration, a horn section, a Mellotron, a swordmandel and, at one point, a large number of people banging biscuit tins. He was also forced to combine two takes of the song that were in different keys and at different tempos: a Herculean task considering the technology available in 1966.

In essence, Martin's role was to take John Lennon's sparse original song and transform it into a finished record, making decisions based on the Beatles' creative input but also adding his own eclecticism to the mix. He's pioneered the structure for many artist/producer relationships since the 60s.

The other side of the production coin was illustrated by Stock, Aitken and Waterman in the mid 80s and early 90s. The trio often took control of both

song and mix, frequently composing the entirety of the artist's record themselves: Kylie Minogue's *I Should Be So Lucky* and Rick Astley's *Never Gonna Give You Up* were enormous hits, and the largely instrumental *Roadblock* elevated them to even further fame.

Producer or artist?

It was the approach of people like SAW that brought the producer out of the shadows and into the limelight. Recently, production teams like the Neptunes have enjoyed both the ubiquity of the 80s hit machines and the international fame of pop stars. Pharell Williams' solo career continues to thrive, but it was his work with partner Chad Hugo on hip-hop crossover records like Nelly's *Hot In Herre* and unusual mainstream pop such as Britney's *I'm A Slave for U*, which got him his initial phame and phortune. The popularity of the Neptunes' sound, which introduced a naïve and often awkward electronic

palette to a mainstream audience, has helped to create some of this decade's biggest musical franchises: Nelly, Usher, Jay Z, Justin Timberlake, Kelis and P. Diddy to name a few. They veer in the direction of artists themselves, stamping a clear impression on every project they take, and then extending this branding out to their solo careers – it's a logical step from the collaborative days of the 60s towards the self-sufficient electronic underground of today.

Fresh produce

A knowledge of technology and arrangement built up by producing your own music can lead to production requests from other musicians, and suddenly throw you into the job of attempting to translate someone else's creative fancies into actual music. This won't appeal to everyone, but if you've ever had a desire to inflate the number of edits you've made on a vocal track by an order of magnitude, made up terms like 'spectral disambiguation' to describe using a free plug-in, or told someone that their funk saxophone overdub 'really adds something', then this could be the creative path for you.

To further our investigation into what makes a producer, we tracked down a legendary producer and an underground production duo to get their take on the art of making other people's music. **cm**

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NILE RODGERS

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM SHARPE/REDFERNS

Nile Rodgers is one of the most prolific and successful producers of all time. He's worked with Diana Ross, Madonna, David Bowie, Duran Duran and Mick Jagger; he's sold over 100 million records worldwide; and as a founding member of the band Chic, he co-wrote the hits *Le Freak* and *Good Times*, as well as the anthemic *We Are Family* for Sister Sledge. His film credits include *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Thelma and Louise*, his business ventures are still expanding exponentially, and if we listed the awards he's received, you wouldn't be able to lift this magazine off the floor.

Nile took some time out from preparations for a series of high-profile gigs with Chic to answer our questions about his incredible career and give us the benefits of his production wisdom.

cm: What aspects of your musical upbringing and education do you think

helped you to achieve your status as a production legend?

NR: Music surrounded me at home: my mom was young and we led a nomadic life. I went to dozens of schools before I was 17, and they all assigned me different instruments to fill out their orchestras, consequently giving me a working knowledge of the way that all the instruments function.

cm: How do you approach producing a record when you're working with an artist for the first time?

NR: I become a fan and get completely immersed in understanding their history, then I feel equipped to envision the artist's future. I always try to make the artist's 'next record' and not their last.

cm: What do you think are the most important contributions that a producer can make in enabling an artist to achieve the sound they're after?

NR: See the artist's vision with clarity, so

that when they're going off the path you can get them back. If the car is going straight, you don't have to steer. To me the artist always has the final word: it's their picture on the cover of the record.

cm: What do you see as some

Know your enemy

All our interviewees stress the importance of getting on good terms with the artist you're working with before you kick off the production process. If a cruise around Santa Monica in your convertible and lunch on your three-million dollar yacht isn't an option, we suggest going for fish and chips and a pint of Original. Seriously though, it's essential that you take the time to get acquainted with the needs, influences and desires of your artist, and sort out any potential personality clashes before you get in the studio. Being on the same page from the outset will save you time later.

personal highlights of your production career that the public might not know?

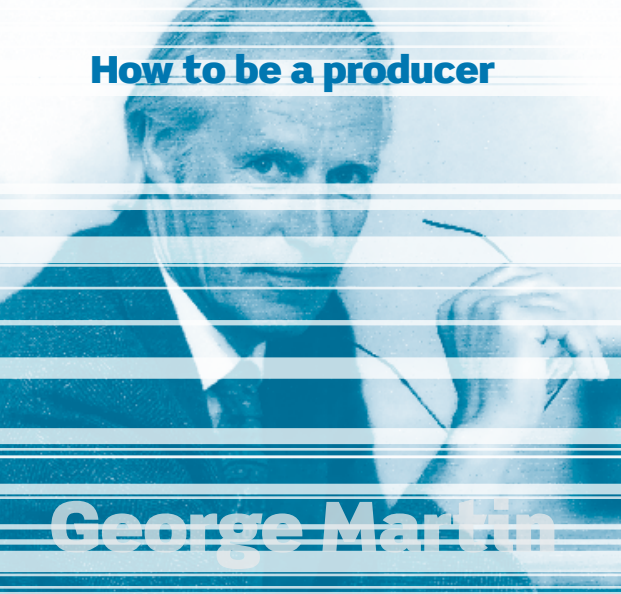
NR: All of my work with Peter Gabriel on film soundtracks: things like *Against All Odds*, *Gremlins* and *Home Of the Brave*.

cm: How do you approach the technical aspects of production?

NR: I'm not trying to be funny, but the best tools are cool ideas: in today's world we have a myriad of cool gear from which to choose. Usually I work with one engineer for a long period of time, so they have to be well rounded.

cm: You work across a huge range of genres – do you feel it's important to cross genre boundaries, mixing and matching elements?

NR: I was raised in a world music culture. We all have a lot to offer each other, and with sampling you can have a virtuoso shehnai performance without one lesson or even knowing what a shehnai looks like.



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cm: What do you feel you have learned from being involved in music for the past four decades?

NR: That I have only started to learn about music. Last night, I had dinner with the RZA and the GZA from Wu Tang Clan: it was an education! The great instrumentalists I've worked with (Jeff Beck, Herbie Hancock, Stevie Ray, etc), the instrument becomes a part of their bodies, almost like an extended appendage. Well, that's how the RZA is connected to his computers and the gear he works with. Respect, respect and more respect!

cm: David Bowie's *Let's Dance* was pioneering at the time of its release. What was it like making that record?

NR: Ha ha! This was one of the greatest experiences of my life. I could write a book on the making of *Let's Dance* alone. It only took 21 days from start to finish. I call Bowie the Picasso of pop music: it always makes him uncomfortable but I really mean it.

Listen to the demo

It's good policy to listen to any versions of the track(s) you're going to be working on that have been made beforehand, no matter how rubbish the production, as you should be able to pick up on the artist's intentions. A good producer should be able to identify the strengths of a song or track despite any technical inadequacies, and then use his skills to draw these out in the final version.

If a demo doesn't already exist, consider knocking one up on your first day of recording – just a guide vocal, some chords and a drum loop will do. This will give you a template from which to work – who knows, your singer might even do a Thom Yorke and produce a glowing take first time around.

Prince, Miles and The Beatles – he's on that level to me. I think that when rock history takes a close look at Bowie they'll see what I see.

cm: Chic's sound has remained popular and you're about to play some further high profile dates. How do you account for that enduring popularity?

NR: We play every gig as if it's our last, because one day it will be. Get the DVD, *CHIC: Live in Montreux* – it will be clear to you. This video is the 'line cut', like a sporting event, meaning this is what we did live. They handed it to me right after we walked off stage.

CM: How do you go about building strong relationships and mutual respect with artists whose work and personalities are so diverse?

NR: So, let's talk about diverse personalities. Last week the pop/country act Big and Rich met me at my apartment in NYC. After we met I realised that these guys are artists with great vision. We're all searching for people to help us bring our vision into focus in a time where art is languishing – just cos it's pop doesn't mean it's not art. I also work on many video games that are Art, with a capital A!

cm: What kind of music are you listening to right now?

NR: I'm currently listening to *Halo 2: Vol 2*. Composer Marty O'Donnell and I are working on cool ways to present this great music to a world that doesn't have a good outlet for alternative art. I am also listening to a band called MorissonPoe. I turned them onto Robin Beanland – MD for Rare Studios – and he loved them right away. He put two of their songs 'in game' for the Xbox 360 launch title *Perfect Dark Zero*. I signed them to my Sumthing Else label and they just turned in their new CD.

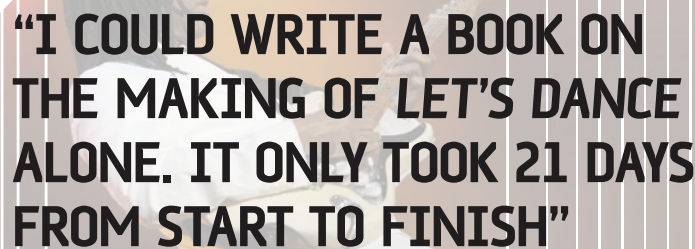
Needless to say I'm listening to MoPo every moment I have.

cm: The majority of *Computer Music* readers write, produce and engineer their own music – how do you feel about this trend in home recording? Are there any analogies with your early work?

NR: Yes, it's very similar. Bernard Edwards and I wrote, produced and

basis? Has it opened your eyes to other possibilities and other ways of working?

NR: Well, budgets have the main effect on the way that I work, so I'm forced to be open to other ways of working. If it's a top-shelf motion picture or the Grammy TV broadcast, it's just like the good old days. I have a team of music prep people at my command and I'm inside my super-comfort zone. If it's less than that then I morph into a modern



“I COULD WRITE A BOOK ON THE MAKING OF LET'S DANCE ALONE. IT ONLY TOOK 21 DAYS FROM START TO FINISH”

performed all of our own music, not only for ourselves but most of the artists that we worked with.

cm: In the studio, how do you like to build up tracks from a technical point of view? Have you changed your approach throughout your career?

NR: I change my approach from time to time, but I usually start with laying down lots of vibey guide vocals. Then I construct a demo of them to inspire the artist to do it better than my comp. This gives them a great sense of security because usually my vibey comp is pretty good.

cm: You've done a lot of film soundtrack work in the past, and have recently diversified into game soundtracks. How does this differ from recording artists on a purely musical

composer-producer, using any and all tools around me.

cm: Have you ever had any strong disagreements with artists you've produced? How did you resolve these problems?

NR: I quit the Madonna album *Like A Virgin* after an argument. While I was waiting for the elevator to leave the building Madonna came out and said, 'Does that mean you don't love me any more?'. Madonna has a perfect sense of humour and timing. I cracked up laughing, and that was the end of that disagreement.

cm: Finally, do you have any advice for musicians who are looking to get started in production?

NR: Just make sure that your songs are hits!

Phil Spector

DJ Krust



A SCHOLAR AND A PHYSICIAN

Oli Horton and Steve Dawson are *A Scholar and A Physician*, a young production and remixing duo who have already racked up some diverse credits in their relatively short career: Erasure, electro-pixie turned country belle Piney Gir, Chicks on Speed, apocalyptic noise-lords The Shit, and geekcore rapper MC Lars are among the artists who have called on their talents.

They started out with a series of guerrilla remixes: a garage version of a track by alt-country rockers Goldrush, a collaborative mash-up of the *Super Mario Bros* theme that became an internet sensation, and, of all things, a swing-jazz reinterpretation of Liberty X's *Just a Little*.

Based in Oxford and affiliated with the pioneering and staunchly independent Truck Records, the pair have worked as in-house producers at Truck Studios as well as on their own personal projects over the last few years. As they ready themselves to fly out to Berlin for some further work with Chicks on Speed, we caught up with them to get their take on the role of the truly independent producer.

cm: What are the aspects of production you enjoy most?

Physician: When we were working with Piney Gir, we got asked to remix *Don't Say You Love Me* by Erasure. After chatting with composer Ash Verjee, we decided to re-write the backing and arrange it for a girls' school choir.

We composed the choral parts in Logic, listened back to them and printed out the score with all the lyrics, effects and annotations. On the day, we miked up each part of the choir with some C1000s and spent the day listening to them perform our creation.

Scholar: I like getting people to clank biscuit tins together or shake teabags, then processing the sound to death to make a snare drum. Or just plugging a drum machine into a delay unit, and then getting someone who doesn't really know what either of them are to play with the result.

cm: Do you feel that producing other artists is something that complements making your own music, or do you consider it a separate activity?

Scholar: It's fun working with other people because you discover more bits of yourself. Then, when you go back to doing your own stuff, you have all that at your disposal.

Physician: When you produce other artists you get to see them make the

mistakes that you inevitably make when you're creating music. It helps you to step back and criticise your own work.

cm: How necessary is it to get on well with the artist you're producing?

Physician: We've yet to work with an artist we don't get on with, so it's hard to say. Communication is so important, and if you get on well then you can get your ideas across much more easily.

Scholar: Artists like us because we're really nice. We actually produce in the studio, rather than sitting around smoking bifters and snorting talcum

powder and 'feeling the vibe'. It's our middle-class work ethic: we drink tea and do the job properly.

cm: Who are some producers you admire, and what is it about their work that interests or inspires you?

Physician: John Leckie seemed to be all over the records I listened to when I was growing up, so he's probably sitting there at the back of my mind influencing everything I do. He could make a simple song sound massive.

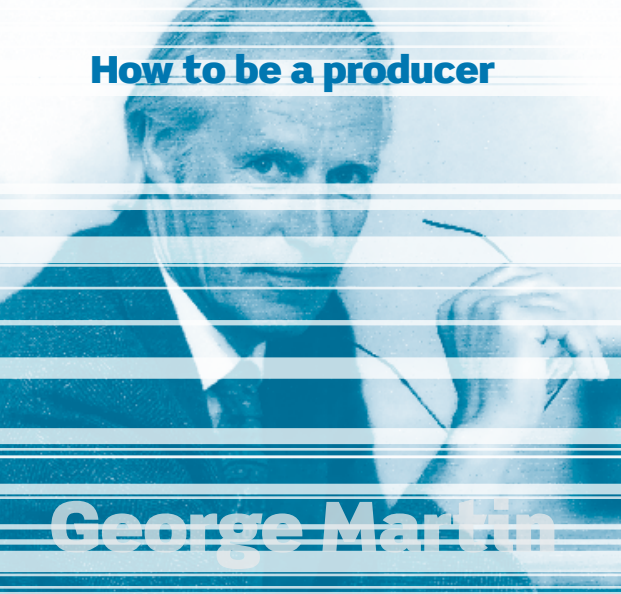
Other than that... Spike Stent was a genius, as his work made me realise that you could mix guitars with electronics and not upset anyone. And then there's BT: he's less of an inspiration and more of a goal.

Scholar: I can only listen to so much BT before I get annoyed: 'That's enough 32nd-note hi-hats for this bar! Stop it!' I'm with you on Spike Stent. Here's a bit of a list for you: Martin Rushent, Dave Fridmann, Richard X, Eddy Offord, Martin Hannett, Glove, Mark Bell. I also like it when bands who know what they're doing produce themselves: Super Furry Animals do this phenomenally, as do Clor – their album is brilliant. I'm in a three-piece electronic band called Trademark, and we produce all our own stuff.

Live it up

It's not like we try to wantonly shoe-horn a mention of Ableton Live into every other page of *Computer Music*, but everyone's favourite Teutonic real-time timestretchy thingy really can come in surprisingly useful for production work, especially at the ideas stage. Artists like nothing better than to be able to suggest a change to their track and hear how it will sound instantaneously, so having a stock of samples, loops and effects ready to drop into those clip slots at a moment's notice will help you to shape your work in progress and try out some wackier stuff on the fly.

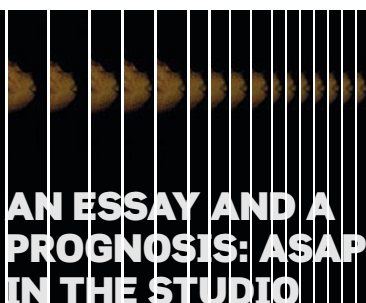
How to be a producer



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AN ESSAY AND A PROGNOSIS: ASAP IN THE STUDIO

cm: Tell us about your working methods.
Physician: Piney Gir comes in with her own ideas all worked out. So, for the first album, she'd play us something on an SHS-10 with single-fingered chords, then we'd set to work laying down a generic feel for the track in Pro Tools. We might play in a guide pad with A Scholar's Korg MS2000 and get Piney to put a guide vocal down. Then, we'd find whatever synths were lying around the studio (like a Korg Micropreset or Yamaha SK30) and put melodies or effects on top. After that, we'd take each track home home, open them in Logic and start pulling it all apart.

Don't be boring

It sounds easy but it ain't. Electronic musicians in particular are often members of the cantankerous 'everything sounds the same on the radio' brigade: now you're a producer it's your chance to change that. If you're producing an indie band, use some drum 'n' bass influences; if you're working with a soul singer, make her sing into a bucket. Early rock 'n' roll records achieved their unique drum sounds by having band members play cardboard boxes and hit radiators, so there's a long history of productive experimentation that's often neglected by today's radio-friendly, 80s pop sampling, filter-house clones. Use your initiative!

We usually do drums by manually laying kick samples on the timeline on one track, then snares on the next, and so on. Then you have a mess of drums that you copy across – because they're on individual tracks, you can effect each drum separately and add beat variations to the track.

Before we moved to Macs we used to use lots of external apps like Granulab to mess up the sounds or create interesting pads. We used those where possible, because they were fun. Then we'd take that final version of the track back to the studio to add live instruments; then finally back home to tidy up!

Scholar: We're currently working with Anat Ben-David, and with her material it's a bit more free-form. The most recent track we recorded actually started in the studio. I was in a bad mood and got really bored, so I dug out all the little boxes from the back of cupboards in the Truck Studio and plugged them into each other. I hooked up an old Hammond drum machine, stuck it through the Copicat and a large wooden brick made by Roland called the Revo 30 – a Leslie simulator, I think – and a cheap reverb unit, stuck all the gains up and played with the tape mechanism. Anat loved it, and started writing a text for it straight off. Later that day she sung a guide vocal.

Then we took it to my studio and

layered up a load of Mellotron orchestra samples and set about putting some chords underneath the melody. It suddenly turned into this Scott Walker-esque orchestral pop song!

cm: Any favourite bits of equipment?

Physician: At Truck Studios, we often use a badly looked-after Watkins Copicat without the delays turned on to add some character to instruments that lack it. But to be honest, we like plugging anything we find in to anything else we find. I have the portable setup (Logic on a Powerbook, a Novation X-Station and a Tascam FW1804) that enables us to record anywhere we want. A Scholar has all the hardware plug-ins that make it all sound good when we get home.

Scholar: That's the Universal Audio UAD-1, which I have in my G5. I like my hardware: I still have my first keyboard – a Yamaha PSS680 – and it still gets used on tracks! I'm also very fond of my SidStation and Oberheim Matrix 6. However, in the last year or so it's been mostly software, especially as it means I can copy a song to Steve and he can edit my bass sound or whatever.

cm: What advice would you give to someone presented with the challenge of producing another artist for the first time?

Physician: Try not to think too far ahead. Know what result you're aiming for, but let the artist guide you.

Official site:

www.ascholarandaphysician.com

Steve Dawson's homepage:

www.stevetronic.co.uk

Trademark:

www.trademark-online.co.uk

Work with A Scholar and A Physician at Truck Studios:

www.truckrecords.com/studio

ASAP's gear

Home Studio

Novation X-Station
Korg EX8000
Elektron SidStation
Korg MS2000
Oberheim Matrix 6
MIDI NES
Multivox something. Preset analogue thingy
Yamaha CS01
Yamaha PSS680
Casio PT30
G5 PowerMac (Scholar)/G4 PowerBook (Physician) running Logic Pro 7
Universal Audio UAD-1 Ultra Pak
Tascam FW1804
'All the free AU plug-ins they can find'

Truck Studio

G4 PowerMac with Digi001, Pro Tools and plug-ins
Mackie and Allen & Heath mixers
Dynaudio monitors
Rode Classic valve mic
Audio Technica large diaphragm vocal mic
Shure SM58 x2
Shure SM57 x2
Shure SM57 Beta x3
AKG D112
AKG C1000 x2
Audio-Technica pencil condenser mic
Various other dynamic mics
TL Audio Ivory valve mic preamp x2
Alesis two-channel compressor/gate
Behringer compressor/gate
Behringer enhancer
Alesis Midiverb
Time Machine delay
Watkins Copicat tape echo
Timeline analogue delay/
chorus/flanger
Schaller Rotoround phaser/
Leslie simulator
Roland Revo 30 rotary simulator
Various guitar pedals
Yamaha SK30 analogue monosynth/
string synth/organ
Various little keyboards
Various amps
Alesis ADAT
Sony DAT recorder
Sony MiniDisc recorder
PA for rehearsals/playback
Drum kit