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## The Art Of Record Production: What Kind Of Producer Do You Want To Be?

*Richard James Burgess*

*Richard James Burgess' book The Art Of Record Production is a must-read for anyone aspiring to be a record **producer**. It is also a must-read for artists, because it provides sound advice and an excellent analysis of the art (and business) of producing a recording. In this excerpt, Richard describes the different types of producers who are out there by asking the aspiring **producer** the basic question, "What Kind of A **Producer** Do You Want To Be?"*

### A) The All-Singing-All-Dancing-King-Of-The-Heap

These guys could easily be artists in their own right. In the movies and theatre, someone who sings, dances and acts is known as a triple threat. This type of **producer** is a triple, quadruple, or quintuple threat. They will most likely write the songs, play the instruments, sing the demos, and may even engineer and program the computers into the bargain.

They are blessed with a natural, diverse musical talent, and rock-solid sense of direction. Their songs, arrangements, orchestrations, sounds and vocal stylings are instantly recognizable even though the vocalists themselves may be unfamiliar. That's not to say their records are "samey", just that they have an identity that shines through no matter what.

They're not a good choice for a band that writes its own material and intends to play everything on the record, but they're perfect for the solo artist who either does not write, needs a co-writer or is short of hit singles.

Artists who will choose the All-Singing-All-Dancing **producer** usually fall into one of two categories: the all-time great singers who do not write their own singles but can deliver someone else's song with conviction and great power; or the puppets who are often not even from the music business.

Les Paul pioneered the concept of overdubbing in the late forties and early fifties on the revolutionary 'How High The Moon'. Les Paul did it in a way that was like sound-on-sound. On that record, he played all the guitar parts and Mary Ford sang all the

vocals. This apparently simple recording technique would change forever the way records were to be made. Previously, artists performed live in the studio.

Suddenly, with the technique of overdubbing, it was possible to create an entirely artificial sound picture. It was possible to have multiple takes of the same musicians. Musicians and instruments that didn't play together could be recorded at different times in different sonic environments.

With the advent of multi-track tape machines the process became easier and more widespread. Through the early sixties records were still made largely by recording a band live in the studio. Overdubbing was mostly confined to vocals and additional orchestration. George Martin's arrangements on The Beatles' records and Brian Wilson's elaborate vocal overdubs on classic Beach Boys' albums such as *Pet Sounds* represent the pinnacle of this era of recording. It wasn't really until the early seventies that artists such as Stevie Wonder and Mike Oldfield made the first successful commercial records by multi-tracking all or most of the instruments themselves.



"I like to do everything," says Walter Afanasieff, **producer** of Mariah Carey and Michael Bolton, writer of hits such as Kenny G's 'Don't Make Me Wait For Love' and Gladys Knight's 'Licensed to Kill' and keyboard player on too many records to mention. "Some producers prefer to work with full bands and leave it up to the musicians to supply the music and the arrangements," he says. "I'll create the rhythm, the drum parts, the bass lines, the keyboard parts, the string arrangements, the horn arrangements, and the vocal arrangements".

Very often the only thing All-Singing-All-Dancing requires of his artist is that they sing. Teddy Riley says of his work with Michael Jackson and Bobby Brown, "Most of the vocal tracks were completed on the first or second try. If you can't come into the studio and sing a song the way it's supposed to be sung, then you don't need to be working with me. If the singer feels the music, and you've got the melody recorded beforehand, you're going to get the vocals down cold."

In the case of Stock, Aitken and Waterman, and, later, just Stock and Aitken, the artist's singing ability has often been secondary to prior fame. They laid the foundations for an empire by writing and producing a phenomenal run of hits for previously non-singing but well-known soap actors Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan.

Nowadays, the new inexpensive digital technology makes it much easier, and more practical, to develop impressive studio skills at an early age. The influence of artists and producers like Prince, L.A. & Babyface and Jam and Lewis will hopefully inspire more kids to become proficient writers, arrangers and multi-instrumentalists. Those who choose not to become recording artists in their own right may well develop into the next generation of this very powerful and influential breed of **producer**.

Although L.A. and Babyface no longer produce as a team, when they were collaborating, L.A. Reid said of their highly successful and long-running relationship, "One of the biggest advantages of having a producing/songwriting partner is that you always have someone to bounce ideas off. Working by yourself can sometimes get a

little stale, so it's better to have a collaborator around to help keep up the inspiration level. As my partner, Babyface, says: 'By working as part of a team, one always has the benefit of a second opinion'."

#### B) Humble Servant

No one ever wants to own up to this stereotype. Almost invariably credited as a **co-producer**, this category of **producer** usually gets started as an engineer, programmer, musician or co-writer. They often connect with one particular artist early in their career.

This type of **producer** is not a good choice for the artist who doesn't have a strong sense of vision and direction. He or she is the perfect choice for the confident, independent minded, self-directed artist who needs a right-hand person and someone to bounce ideas off. They will take care of the jobs that the artist doesn't want to deal with or doesn't have the expertise to handle; in particular, the administrative, engineering and technical aspects of the production process.

The title may sound somewhat demeaning but the position is definitely not. It is usually a very hands-on producing role, which for the right personality type, is ultimately satisfying. If you are a hands-on detail person this could be one of the most fulfilling ways to do what you do best and succeed in a big way.

Steve Albini had something to say about humility in an essay he posted on the *rec.audio.pro* news group on the World Wide Web. "Remember that nobody ever goes into a record store shouting, 'Give me the new album on label X, produced by **producer** Y, whose deal memo was hammered out by A&R guy Z and lawyers A, B and C!' People like records because they like music. Music is made by artists. You're just sitting in the chair with wheels and pressing the button. Do not forget your place! You are not the star, and you must be content with that. Do your job to the absolute limits of your ability – don't be a pussy about anything – but remember whose picture is going to be on the sleeve, and remember how much of their souls they're laying out for all to see. Don't get uppity, not even at three a.m. Don't demand more money or credit or attention than you deserve. As of right now, that's probably less than you're asking for, so start by taking a step backwards."

In many respects the "humble servant" is the most noble of all the categories. Engineers/producers are the guys who garner the loyalty. An artist can get addicted to a "humble servant" : "I love his drum sound, he knows how I work, we're comfortable, he doesn't get in my way." As Andy Jackson (The Boomtown Rats, Pink Floyd) says: "You can roll into the next album and it's like riding a bike. You pick it up where you left off and you haven't got to reinvent the wheel."

#### C) Collaborator

I would say that the vast majority of producers not only fall into this category but would happily characterize themselves as falling into this category. Collaborative producers often come from bands themselves; rarely an ex-lead singer, most likely a drummer or bass player. This may be because they have a history of collaboration within their own groups. They do not see themselves as, nor even desire to be, one-man bands. They have most likely always enjoyed collaborative situations and bring that band-member mentality to their productions. Often they will fit right in, almost as an extra member of the band. They usually prefer to steer the band toward a

unanimous decision and use their casting vote sparingly. The collaborator's hallmark is flexibility and a willingness to see the value in other people's ideas. Their own ideas are thrown into the pot with everyone else's and are not necessarily given more weight than another band member's. If the collaborator had a catch phrase it would most likely be "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts".

This relationship is ideal for the musically secure artist who nonetheless would like to have a seasoned ear on site, someone to bounce ideas off and a different, sometimes even opposing, point of view.

#### D) Merlin The Magician

*"The best leader is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it."*  
- Theodore Roosevelt

Merlin is often an intangible force in the proceedings. Perhaps mysteriously, Merlin can garner great loyalty from the artist and record company even though he may spend most of his time on the tennis court, the phone, in meetings, in the car or wherever else producers go when liberated from the studio. In a way, he acts like a hands-on A&R consultant, coming in with an objective/subjective view frequently referred to as "fresh ears".

Successful Los Angeles based-engineer John X (Black Grape) had the experience of working on a four-month album project with a very famous **producer** who managed to appear for half an hour in the entire four months. Despite this, when the band would go out at night after the session, if anyone asked what they were doing they would proudly announce that they were recording an album with XYZ (the famous absentee **producer**).

If Merlin does decide to spend some time in the studio, the direction he gives can range from the very specific, subjective and detailed to the vague, general and philosophical. Sometimes it can be quite obscure. Brian Eno rejects the idea that there are "correct" ways to do things and thinks that we should "learn and enjoy from all the different ways we *can* do things."

David Bowie once said about working with Eno, "It was a bit like being four years old again and having a rather fun uncle who could produce coins out of his ear." Flood (**producer** of P.J. Harvey, U2, Depeche Mode and Nine Inch Nails) who worked with Eno on the U2 project, said of him, "His psychological approach is something that very much influenced me – the way that people can be encouraged, and how to judge a situation and discover what's happening, why it's happening and what its possible outcomes could be." U2's Bono said, "With him we discovered the spirit of our music and a new confidence in ourselves'."

Talking about his overall attitude to producing, Rick Rubin (Beastie Boys, Run DMC, Red Hot Chili Peppers and co-founder of Def Jam and Def American Records) said,

"I look at producing in a very different way from most other producers. I think of it as being more like the director of a film or a play. By that, I mean that for the technical side of it, I hire engineers who I think are competent, much like a director hiring a cinematographer, and I let them do their gig. That doesn't mean I don't have very strong ideas about what I want to hear, but I don't technically know all the bells and whistles to make it sound that way."

Merlin's occasional forays into the studio and casually dropped pearls of wisdom can earn him the same place in rock'n'roll immortality, and on the "five hundred richest" lists as weeks, months or maybe even years of arduous labor by a more conventional hands-on **producer**. For the **producer** who spends his waking hours head down over a hot console, the mere suggestion of the existence of these mystical free spirits can be alternately frustrating, infuriating and awe inspiring.