

Fantasy Studios at Zaentz Media Center in Berkeley, CA, is one of a handful of studios where a huge chunk of America's popular music has been recorded over time. These days it is headed up by Studio Director Jeffrey Wood, who has been involved in many facets of the industry before taking the helm at Fantasy. During an earlier visit to Fantasy, Jeffrey had expressed some views that interested us enough to warrant further questioning; in October 2008 we returned to Fantasy and had a quite enlightening conversation.—LzR

Jeffrey Wood

Interview by Lorenz Rychner

on the Process of Production

These days the term "producer" means more things to more people than ever before...

Jeffrey Wood: Yes, that can include engineer, usually involves being a musical director, may or may not be that of musician, writer, arranger, mixer, manager, licensor, shopper, business consultant, chief financial officer of the project...

...and hand-holder, psychologist, guidance counselor... Last we spoke you touched on the topic of the "process of production"—could you elaborate?

All projects differ as to the role of the producer, from a one-take live all-in-the-room recording that may be done in an afternoon, to an overdub megamix that is pieced together over a long time, and anything in between. How you define those producer roles depends on the type of project, every project is different. On some you will be asked to do more, on others you will be asked to do less.

Who determines that?

That usually depends on how established the band is, how much experience they've had with the recording process. Even

with more experienced bands you will find that they rely on people for help with writing, arranging, as well as the technical aspects of engineering and mixing. Then there's a fluidity that happens—even if you're not hired to do *all* these things, if you're only hired to do one of those things, all of a sudden the role can open up as trust is established.

How do you establish that trust?

That's one of the things I want to address in this interview, looking at the role of the producer through a number of stages of a project.

Whether it's a record company approaching the producer and asking to meet a band or an artist and see how the fit is, or whether it's a manager or individual client making the approach, it's important to find the connecting points.

You want to know if you can musically connect?

If it is a band that you're interested in working with, obviously there is already a style connection, but personality-wise it is really important to make a connection also.



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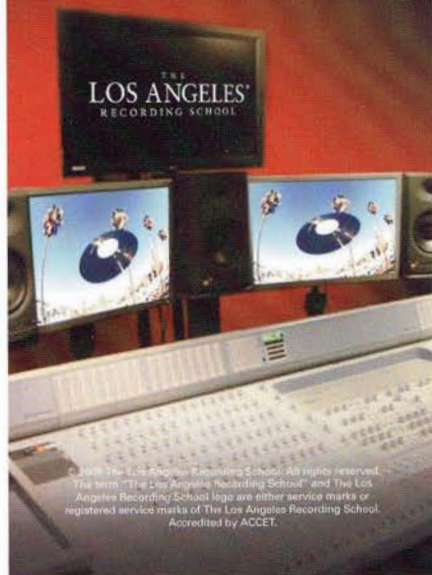
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Jeffrey Wood

I have found over the years that people must feel comfortable because the recording process is such an intimate situation, almost like a midwifing; people come to you with all these ideas, you create a container for them in the recording studio—recording studios are almost these womb-like spaces, with closed doors, dim lighting, no clocks as in casinos... You create a container so people can be as creative as they wanna be, and you can open up the atmosphere of a session so people can bounce and throw out any ideas.

How free that atmosphere is depends on what kind of relationship you set up ahead of time, in the first two stages of meeting with the client, and in the pre-production stage.

Meeting the client

How do you do that?

First you find out where your fit is. Are they good to work with, are you good to work with, do they feel comfortable with you and do you feel comfortable with

And do you discuss the project at this stage?

Another thing you find out in these meetings is the vision, what kind of recording they want to make. I always ask for examples, and they will tell you they like this CD, this artist, this sound. Then you ask if this project is meant to be an incremental step forward from their last release, or is this meant to take them into an entirely new direction? Do they want to keep their style and just augment it with a different vibe, or do they want to change their style? More into a psychedelic feel, or more atmospheric, or with loops and grooves, do they want to tighten or loosen their songs, do they want a more live feel or a more produced-out feel?

You also find out what the goals are for this recording: Is this a locally released CD or a major-label release?

These are all things you need to find out in your initial meetings, because you need to find out the general crux of how you're going to record the CD. That's going to affect your budget, how much time you need in the studio, and also how you're going to approach the entire project. If it is meant to sound like a live recording, you get them in for three days or a week, to knock out everything then maybe re-do vocals. If

A pearl of wisdom: "The client is right, even if they're not."

them—or is it going to be a pain-in-the-proverbial session? Are there ego problems or communication problems within the band? Do you know that all your ideas will be nixed?

Do you look to meet with the spokesperson of the group or with the entire group?

Absolutely both. First I may meet with the visionaries, the driving forces or the spokesperson, the alpha dog of the band, but then I insist on meeting with the entire group, as a group. That's where you see how the communication and the power structure of the band is. Once you've found that out, you can help to provide a more creative environment, where everybody feels comfortable contributing—if that is the established dynamic within the group. There may be a situation where in a band it is *not* okay for everybody to contribute ideas, and it is not your role to change the existing power structure, but to work within that and get the best possible recording out of it. So you have to find out.

it is a produced-out project you'll be in there for weeks of overdubs, four to six weeks, where they'll want to pick everything apart—that's a whole different exercise.

And you'll want to find out what they have and have not done before—if they suddenly want to do their own four-part harmony vocals...

Exactly, and these things get you into the role of the teacher in the studio, which is another role of the producer. You may have to teach them about harmony... Many bands, even some signed to major labels, have had to learn that a studio recording is very much different from recording a band live. Now, with home recording, more and more musicians find that out on their own.

Somebody likened it recently—I can't remember where I saw it and certainly am not taking credit for it—with being the difference between a video of a theatrical play versus a film. The video of the play shows a one-time performance, probably shot

from a single, static camera location aimed at the stage. The film has editing, different camera vantage points, re-recording of the sound effects and dialog, crossfades and different scene transitions, and music—all these creative aspects that raise it to another level of experience. Both can be good—I'm *not* dissing live recording! But you have to bring this up at the initial meetings, to make sure people know which it is that they want.

Sometimes they don't understand it until they are in the studio and you suggest something like "Let's put a second guitar part here, or double the vocal there...", something they had never done live. Suddenly a whole world opens up.

What do you do when you get the sense that you are not being fully understood, no matter how well you lay things out in the early discussions? Do you build extra cushion into the time frame you're planning, to allow for what may happen when the client begins to understand his options?

Well, building a cushion into the budget is necessary for another reason: When I started out I was very headstrong as far as wanting to bring

Could there not still be some producers known to be despots, who like to dictate their way of doing things, who are sought out by insecure artists or bands who go there thinking "He'll tell us what to do, he knows how to get it done?"

Yes—there used to be more of that when there was more A&R gate-keeping over the final product, which also had its good side—there was in many instances a sort of guarantee for good quality; the bad side was that it involved a lot of people who didn't know about the recording process. From the '80s and '90s they knew one word—SSL, from the late '90s onwards they knew another—Pro Tools...

...and now it's Auto-Tune?

Exactly. [laughs] Anyhow, your budget will be formed once you have established that you and the artist or band are a good fit, about the vision of what the end result is to be, about the goals, about the styles, and how you relate to each other. If these all fit, then you can work together and establish a budget.

How much time do you need to be sure about that—not just about feeling

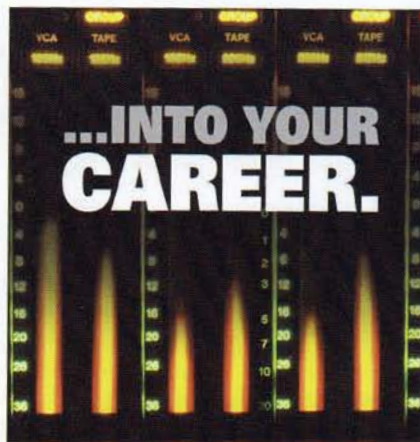
"I sound better than that, don't I?" "Well, no, you don't..."

out all my musical ideas, making it almost *my* CD as the musical director. I went through a project where I got some favorable notices, but on their next CD that same band worked with the A&R person from the label and their CD went to Number One. My lawyer at that time very wisely quoted another pearl of wisdom that we don't know where it came from: "The client is always right even if they're not."

You have to build into a budget the time to try out all *their* ideas—it's not your CD, it's *their* CD, your name is in fine print on the back and their name is in big print on the front. That was a big lesson. I was young then, and I totally changed my way of working after that. The producer can't have too much ego even if he knows he's right. It shouldn't be your ideas—you should help them to bring out their ideas, and you should augment them. So you have to build enough time into the budget to let them try things even if you know they're not going to work.

good with people over a cup of coffee in a nice place like Fantasy, with people being happy to have gotten this far, but about knowing that you will still get along in the studio when the tension builds?

I can tell all that during the first two meetings. The first meeting, with the visionaries, and the second, with the entire group, show me how everybody feels about the goals, how ideas are being communicated within the group, and many times it turns out that the driving force of the band is not who one might surmise. Thinking of famous bands, with U2 it's not Bono but it's Larry Mullen Jr.'s band—he runs the rehearsals, he runs the sessions... You need to find out those things, because what you are trying to become for the duration of the project is to be an additional member of the group. You need to find out how *you* will fit in, and that will happen during the next phase, that of pre-production.



They did...

Ari Levine - '03
Assistant Engineer
Kingdom Come,
Jay - Z

Trina Shoemaker - '89
Engineer
Globe Sessions,
Sheryl Crow

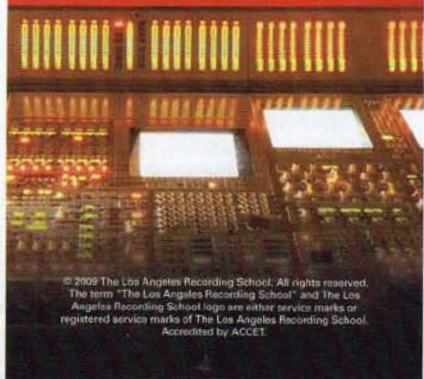
Paul Pavao - '02
Assistant Engineer
Daughtry,
Chris Daughtry

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Jeffrey Wood

Pre-production

What is the role of pre-production, and how do you make it effective?

It is more than just listening to songs and throwing in an idea or two. It is establishing your role with the musicians in the band. For the recording to go smoothly, your role must be defined during pre-production time.

How do you do that?

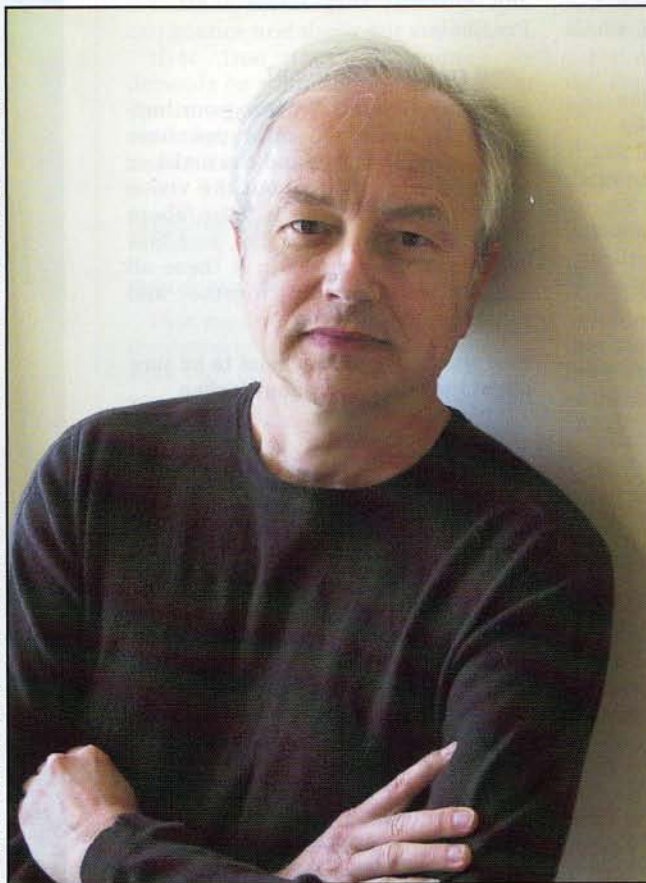
The tasks for pre-production time are working with the artists—and I stress that we always work with the artists, we don't dictate—bouncing ideas, making choices together, "Is this good for you—what do you think about this?"; choosing material, what is the left-to-right of the CD, from intimate material to the grandest hardest-hitting material, finding where everything lies and how to record that.

That means rejecting material?

In the history of mankind every band will do two things: They will say that their most recent material is the best—all songwriters say that because is the freshest in their memory—and they will also want to chronicle as much as they can. If they have written twenty songs during the past twelve months, they will want to record all twenty. Many times an artist will say "I want to record as many of those as I can". I'm always a big believer in doing fewer but better songs, and doing them well. You will get more mileage from that rather than putting in filler. If you're short on songs, go back and write more songs, but don't put your weaker songs on there.

An interesting point came up at an AES panel discussion, that of the resurgence of the singles. In a way, with the download availability of individual songs, we're back to the '50s era when singles ruled before the arrival of the LP (Long-Play) records. It was suggested that we could learn a lot from studying how the singles were marketed then.

Yes, and that's where the quality issue comes in, offering quality to a wide demographic, where each song has to be good. I remember reading in Billboard that while "free" downloads had affected the industry, that was not happening to the extent that the majors were claiming. The majors had painted themselves into a corner by not appealing to a wider demographic, by signing bands all to a younger demographic of the under-25-year-olds, with the boy-bands in the 1990s and the teen-divas in the 2000s, and not developing music for people in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties... These people buy CDs!



How did that come about?

The majors kept hiring these young A&R people who only knew bands in their own peer group. For a while there, smaller labels with a wider demographic appeal had sales that remained stable or even went up. These other age groups have disposable income and don't necessarily all download and share their music for free. They know what they like and are willing to pay for it.

Back to "choice of material"—do you want to hear the guys play or do you prefer to hear their songs in a scratch-recorded form?

I always insist that I need to hear a recording of all the songs they've written, no matter how it was done. Just a voice-and-guitar version, a live cut from a gig, a rehearsal. I may just have the lead singer come in and play a song with his acoustic guitar—I need to know, what is the song, is the song good?

Then when it comes to pre-production, one has to look at the song critically in a number of ways. That injects you into the creative process, you set people up in a circle and it makes you a member of that circle. You need to talk about what are the problems with the song, first of all arrangement-wise, things like intro-verse-chorus-bridge—do they make sense?

Then, are there problems performance-wise—is the drummer having a hard time getting out of the bridge section, is he always stumbling in that role, should he simplify, that sort of thing.

And finally, what are the problems part-wise as players create their parts—can everybody execute what they have chosen as their parts, do these parts go well together, is there something missing, do the parts help the song? What is the guitar player doing in the second verse? Does what he's doing help the lead singer, or the song, or does it get in the way? Is it a busy part, and should it be?

Often, when a band comes in and plays what they have performed live, if there are problems it's not that they can't play their parts but that the parts don't fit. When they hear what they played in the studio, all of a sudden it's like, "I never knew that this is what you play in that section—I haven't heard you do it because you're on the other side of the stage, but now I can tell that it's wrong for what I'm trying to do at that moment in the song..."

Bands get into a rut, thinking they have a song down pat if it seems to work live. Is this the time to ask them to play better?

Yes, setting the performance bar during pre-production and rehearsals is also an important part of being a producer, aside from engineering. That it has to be a better performance sometimes than the live performance. You have to work it a bit. Often it's enough to bring people into the control room and say "Listen to this," and they get it. Then you hear, "Do I sound

Jeffrey Wood

like that? I sound better than that, don't I?" "Well, no, you don't..." The hard drive doesn't lie...

And it helps that these discussions take place in front of the entire band?

Yes, their vulnerable spots are becoming obvious and are being looked at, and I always say, "Hey, everybody gets their turn to be in the hot seat."

That should open the door...

That's where the producer as the outside objective listener can suggest changes. Usually it's about simplifying—"simplify and succeed", and "when in doubt, leave it out". You have to think orchestrally, whether it's a 3-piece punk band or an 8-piece band or whatever, they each play parts that come together orchestrally, the parts form a harmonic structure, so they—or most of them—have to be simple, if not it becomes too busy and turns into mush.

Making these determinations starts to establish the role of the producer as the objective and benevolent judge. I always preface the process by saying, "Please don't take any comments personally, what we're talking about is working together to produce the best possible recording we can make."

These things should be done ahead of time—for the most part, but you have to leave room for creative ideas to come once you're in the studio. And if there is time between these discussions taking place and the beginning of the recording, the band can work on some of the ideas that came up, rehearse them and maybe try them out on live gigs.

Sounds like you're quietly taking the reins...

Establishing that *you* are the one setting the pace is another important part of this process, because this will go on into the recording sessions. Many bands have a casual or disorganized way of working, some don't even have schedules... Establishing some structure during rehearsals will get them to use the recording time more efficiently, they'll take it more seriously—"We're here to work."

If all of the structural work can be done during pre-production, then once in the studio all you have to worry about is getting killer performances from everybody.

Do you record some of the rehearsals, the bits you ask them to change, the things you're suggesting?

Sure, just a reference, maybe on a portable little recorder or such. I can usually memorize the parts, but I make sure somebody, maybe someone in the band, records, so if there are any questions later about what was decided, we have a record of that.

Giving Focus in the Studio

Another aspect of pre-production is giving focus to creative ideas—it also has to do with establishing trust. In many bands, especially those that are run democratically, there can be an abundance of creative ideas that can just go in every which direction.

A lot of time the role of the producer is that of being a focus point. "Wait, we're working on this song now, we're solving this problem here, let's put that idea on the list and we'll get to it when we work on the bridge section." I make a list, we come back to everybody's ideas so that everybody, not just the main people, gets a sense that their contribution will be acknowledged, but *in a structured manner*.

They begin to understand that there is a process involved, so that when they get to the studio, somebody may have a great idea for a guitar lead, but we're not even doing guitar leads until next week, so it's "Okay, great, we'll put it on the list and come back to it". We tape the pieces of paper on the wall, for all the songs, listing what's been done and what still needs to be done, check them off as we go—again, it creates a sense of structure that many bands never had, even bands that have been on major labels.

It's the structure of the recording sessions you need, because you have so much to do, roles have to be defined, order of work has to be defined, A before B—as the producer you have to not only record and engineer, be musical director, be focal point of ideas, keep everybody happy and creative, do a mix that everybody loves, give them the most creative experience they've ever had in their lives—but you have to get it done in under two weeks...

...and under budget...

And under budget. [laughs] That's why you can't let the project go off on tangents and spread yourself too thin.

Does the average band get it when you tell them this?

Yes, once you establish in pre-production what I described, they will get it by the time you're in the studio.

During the first days of pre-production you set the comfort level and the pace. Then when you're in the studio, you're the one who decides when it's time to listen back. If you're on a tight budget, or you want to keep creativity high and keep going, you call for another take without always stopping to listen to everything you just recorded. You move people towards *the* take, in a way that keeps people from becoming defensive. Sometimes you ask for three or four takes, then you play them half of the earliest one first when they come in to listen, followed by the one just completed, and you point out, "See how you fixed what wasn't working?" to keep them moving in the right direction.

This verifies your process to them, and it starts to set within them the performance bar you're going for to make a professional CD. They begin to realize what it is that they can do better themselves, and once that has taken hold during the first and second song, when you get to the later songs all of a sudden it is *them* who start calling for better takes.

Another thing that I'm sure has been mentioned many many times in your magazine, one of the most important aspects of the process in the studio, is getting a good headphone mix. Spend as much time as you need on headphone mixes, because the more comfortable people are with what they hear, the better they will play.

I also believe in remaining quiet when it counts. By that I mean doing most of the talking about arrangements, and how to shape parts, and what to play where—doing all that during rehearsals, in pre-production, and maybe during the first or second take in the studio. Then I believe in remaining quiet. Let the player play—by now he knows what it is all about, and if you remain quiet he can go about digging deep and being creative. Also keep the others in the band quiet when somebody is doing overdubs and moving into that zone that leads to a great emotional performance. If you make last-minute suggestions, or let somebody else make them, the performer will play from the head and not from the heart, and you can always tell which take was which. ☺

Jeffrey Wood has been a music producer, engineer, manager and label consultant in Los Angeles and London. He currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area where he is the Studio Director at legendary Fantasy Studios in the Saul Zaentz Media Center.