



At the time I'm only 16 years old. Most people are still in high school. I ended up down in Santa Cruz, a great beach and surf town, which was where the Doobie Brothers, Bonnie Raitt and Jackson Browne. We had this whole Rock 'n' Roll Mercenaries that I immediately hooked up with. They brought me to a rehearsal studio called the Alley in L.A., which turned out to be really fortuitous thing. It still exists. It's been like my second home. I've always believed if you keep your eyes open, it's not only all about lucky breaks — it's about doors that open. You have to see them open and go through them.

Right place at the right time?

Well, it seems that when you're open for the right people to be in your life, if your eyes are open and you're present to that, then you probably will see them, whoever they are. And if you're not, then you're probably going to miss them. [laughs] So I connected up with this whole family of music. Coincidentally, my brother is an artist, so I had the whole art crowd — including the guy, Neon Park, who did the covers for Little Feat. I just gravitated towards them — just like minds.

So the Alley became home?

Right. It's still vital. The [Red Hot] Chili Peppers are in there doing pre-production right now. Before them, System of a Down. But in the mid-to-late '70s, you'd have Little Feat, Poco, Emmylou Harris, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, Crosby, Stills & Nash, Mick Fleetwood, Billy Burnett, punk bands. At any point in time they'd be in there rehearsing. I was just like, "Who needs me to work for you?" That was my attitude. So I went to work.

What kinds of work were you doing?

I tuned guitars, set up drums, drove around L.A. and went on the road. The punch line of it all is that I befriended people that, to this day, are crucial to my career- most of all, David Lindley, who was Jackson Browne's guitar and slide player. He's a wailing slide guitar player and multi-instrumentalist. David started a band named El Rayo-X that did this white hybrid reggae music, and made a record that's an underground favorite. They had a hit named "Mercury Blues". I was in the studio with him while he was making his record and found myself running the tape machine at one point. That was the entry into, "Hey, this is what I want to be doing!"

Were you still doing road gigs?

Well, one of the things I learned really early on is that the concept of service, serving the moment, and being aware of what's needed, is crucial. And that's what has always been in the forefront of what I do. It's okay to serve people. There's nothing demeaning about being a roadie if you're a great roadie, or a great tech, or a great engineer; maybe it's not important to be the producer. Maybe on a monetary level, if you don't feel like you're paid enough, that's another conversation. But strictly from a separating-yourself- from-the-credit-and-money sort of thing, it's really pretty cool to travel around, work for great musicians, do a great job making sure there's cables and batteries, guitars are in tune, and then stand on the side of the stage. You've served them so they can play a great show, so all they have to do is play [laughs] and all you have to do is listen to great music.

That's not too rough of a life. [laughs]

TAPE OP



Not at all. So when it comes to engineering, for me it was a natural serving musicians. I get to be closer to the process. I get to be part of that thing where, when I was a kid, I would pore over the credits on records. I saw that early on, but the closest I would get is to sit in front of the board when someone took a smoke break, but I'd be like, "You don't have to come back..." [laughs]

You had the musical background, the connections, and the great attitude. From an engineering perspective, did you ever go through any formal training?

Besides the road, I did live sound for a club in Santa Cruz called the Catalyst. I got to set up the sound system there — it was such a rocking club back then. At that time, I took some electronics courses, circuit board layout and design, and some applied math and physics at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz for a short period of time in the late seventies. I had thought about getting an Electronics Engineering degree if what I was doing [in music] didn't pan out. I was also taking some deep music theory classes, too, but it's all stuff I ended up learning to forget.



(https://tapeop.com/_m/photologue/photos/cache/Ross_Melissa18_display.jpg)

You've worked with a lot of classic artists, like John Fogerty, Melissa Etheridge, Roger Waters, Fleetwood Mac. What do you think makes you so accessible to these artists such that they seek you out? Is it a reputation from the 'service' attitude?

Yeah, I think it is. I know that, for example, with Melissa, she was working with another producer who I work with a lot, and he brought me in to engineer one track with her. I guess the experience stood out to her, because I end up getting an email from her manager months later saying, "Aren't you that guy that Melissa

worked with on that one track? She wants to talk to you." She could remember the experience of whatever I did and she said, "Track like the 'musician's guy.' For instance, Kenny Aronoff, one of the great my greatest supporters. I should be sending him royalty checks or something. [laughs] Musicians seem to say, "Oh, get Ross because he takes care of me." That's great, because it's what I try to do. I want to make sure they're happy, because that's where the best music comes from. With Melissa, all she wanted to do was go in the studio, have some fun, and make some music, whether the label liked it or not. Now, she can do that, she's Melissa Etheridge — but we went in and made a bunch of music that made her happy. [laughs] It was great.



How do you walk into a new session?

It's always different, but it's always the same. I have to be myself. I don't want to present a persona on a first meeting that is radically different on a second, third, or fourth interaction. So it's really crucial to me that when I meet with a band or an artist, even if there's no real commitment to working together, that they get who they're going to be working with. This, instead of something like a date, where maybe the next day you realize you're with a psycho or something. [laughs] Sometimes, that's me saying I may not want to work with them, like a band that brings me a bunch of demos I don't even know what to do with. There's a side of me, and a side of making records, where you really have to be passionate about what you're doing or you can't really be making great records.

I know you won a Grammy at one point...

That record one is one of my favorites. That was with an artist named Keb' Mo'.

That was Slow Down, right?



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Right. For me, artists that really have it in their nature to want to make a difference. I know this sounds awfully airy-fairy — call it karma, whatever — but music really has the ability to touch and change a lot of people's lives, either on a daily basis or in the bigger picture. On a smaller, not-so-significant scale, there are a lot of artists that just believe in what they're doing. Keb' Mo' is like that. And at that point, I just needed a record like that. I'd just lost my father, and I needed to be around people who just loved what they were doing.

You also did Motley Crüe's *Girls, Girls, Girls...*

[laughs] Yeah. That was an interesting time in my career. I had been off the road for a few years and I ended up working on all these seminal records at Rumbo Recorders in the valley, like Ratt's "Round and Round". Of course, we didn't know they were seminal at the time. Here's how it tied together: My favorite record that I did at that time was R.E.M.'s *Life's Rich Pageant*. R.E.M. was produced with Don Gehman, who introduced me to Rumbo Recorders Studio in L.A., which was the San Fernando Valley home of metal in the '80s. This is where Guns N' Roses *Appetite For Destruction* was recorded. At Rumbo, I got to do Ratt, Dio, and Motley Crüe. In fact, Rumbo's Studio B turned out to be the design for John Mellencamp's Belmont Mall Studio we built for Scarecrow in Indiana, where Don Gehman and I recorded R.E.M.'s *Life's Rich Pageant*. So I came back from Indiana, then right into the studio with Motley Crüe.

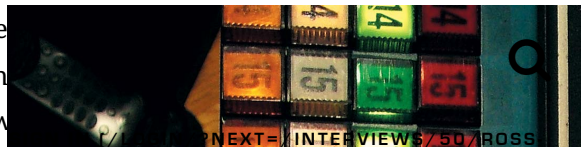
That's a change.

So there's a total blur going on with "my career". I wasn't even sure

"Holy shit, I'm in the studio... This is cool!" [laughs] I had just finish

similar zone in that they were huge, but not that huge yet. Girls... w

times. They were coming off some bad stuff, like drugs, and Vince [Neil]'s car accident, so it was actually a pretty focused record-making vibe. Well, until the end of the night. Then it was, "Let's go out to the strip joints and party all night." Fred Saunders, Motley's security guard who also toured with Bon Jovi, had this black book of doom for all the strip joints around the country. So, I think in the end when Nikki was writing "Girls", he got a chance to build a self-fulfilling prophecy out of Fred's book, with all the strip joint references.



Any other records that have special memories for you?

Definitely the Ziggy Marley record. [Dragonfly]



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You played on that one, too, right?

Yeah, I did. I played guitar on one song. It was a thrill. I got to ask him to tell stories about his old man — like the Marley record label, Tuff Gong — it's called that because the people around Bob called him "Gong", or "Daddy Gong", as Ziggy said, because he hit the strings like a gong. Stories like that were great. We also got to bring in David Lindley, so it was total full circle back to the beginning. Being there, producing, playing and engineering, with David and Ziggy — it was like, "If this is all I can do in life, it will have been enough."

On a totally different topic — how about the latest buzz about the demise of analog tape?



It's tragic, but you have to say you saw it coming, you know? I started
of need. To be able to run with the pack, you have to. Earlier this year
year-old piano-playing singer phenomenon named Holly Brook who
Linkin Park's Machine Shop, through Warner Brothers. When she comes out next year people's heads are
going to twist around. Anyway, she comes in right away and said, "I want to record to tape."

Right on. At 19, she already can hear the difference.

She picked out a whole bunch of records that she really liked and said, "I want that sound, what is that?" and I say, "Well, that's tape." Now, by the same token, here I sit in my studio with my Pro Tools HD3 rig — and I can't get away from it.

Do you have a tape deck at home?

My studio in my house is a pretty typical cottage industry vibe. I took my three-car garage and made it a very comfortable place. It's a bigger control room than most studios, but I don't blast away here in the house with my family at home. I do a lot of mixing here, vocal overdubs, some guitar overdubs, percussion... but I go to "real" studios for recording. When I mix here, if I need to mix to tape, I'll rent a half-inch machine. I thought about buying it, but there's enough of them floating around at a low enough cost that I can just build it into the budget of most records I'm making.

Are you mixing totally in Pro Tools?

It depends on what record I'm making and the budget. There's an upside and a downside. The upside to mixing at home is the fact that I can mix non-linearly, meaning I can work on a song, shut it down, go to another song, then go to another. When I'm in a studio and on a console, I'm not going to make my assistant do four recalls a day for me.

In that way, it's amazing in how it's freed up the mixing process.

Absolutely. I get to stop, have dinner with family, take my boy to Tae Kwon Do, read bedtime stories, and then go back to work without someone saying, "You'd better be done at this time because the overtime is coming on." On the other side, I only have so many I/Os, so I can only go in and out of so much outboard gear. I have a great deal of really wonderful analog gear that I have to think twice about. If I use so much analog gear and I'm doing recalls myself, it doesn't make it that quick to change. So I end using a lot more in-the-box stuff. With the new Pro Tools software and incredible plug-ins from McDSP, the Neve/API clones from URS, the Crane Song Phoenix, and the Universal Audio plug-ins, it's a lot easier than it used to be. But then there's the whole thing about going through a console, which just sounds better.

Are you using a console at home, a Dangerous setup, or something like that?

No, I don't, because I found that by the time I was trying those things, you find 16 busses isn't enough anyway. So, if I'm sub-mixing 16, I'll end up doing that much more in-the-box anyway, so I decided it's either one or the other. If I go to a studio I do it because I really want my hands on the faders, do it in a day, and then move on. There's a bigger time crunch in a studio, which is a plus and a minus, too, because you're

forced right then to create a result in that day. Sometimes you create
suffer. You don't get a chance to step away for two more days and s
my vocal effect."



What are you working on right now?

Right now I am in the middle of a record with a great young punk rock band in the vintage of all the great punk bands, called the Bronx, which I am making with Michael Beinhorn. These guys are slamming. I also have been tracking on and off Mandy Moore's new record with producer John Fields. Just prior to this. I finally finished Holly Brook's Like Blood, Like Honey that will be out in the new year, I also have been working ongoingly with the Doobie Brothers on songs for a new record. Earlier this year I produced/mixed and engineered a record I'm super proud of, for an artist from Austin named Stephen Bruton. He's a classic American singer/songwriter on New West Records who played in Bonnie Raitt's band, also with Dylan, Kris Kristofferson — just a classic. It was great. We went in the studio and tracked the whole record in three days.

How do you set that up? Was everyone in the same room?

Yeah. Steve Ferrone [drums] has four toms, so I mic every tom. I have a pretty standard drum setup, give or take a few things. I like to get the close mics sounding real and natural, and the overheads I use B&K 4011s, which are totally transparent. Then, when I move away, I start to mess things up. I'll use a pair of U67s on the outside room with some compression. Not completely mashed, but not completely clean. In the inside room, I'll have a mono ribbon, like a Royer 121/122 or a Coles 4038 that's totally smashed to bits through a Chandler/EMI type compressor. Then, above that, I use a Royer SF24 stereo ribbon in Blumlein pair that I won't compress — that I'll deal with later. It also depends on the size and sound of the room. I also might take another far set of mics and put them way up in the air. I like to have choices so I can either go with a smashed mono mic and something vibe-y, or something pretty pristine. Sometimes I'll take a bullet mic and put that behind the drummer. I'll either drive that through a Sherman filter bank or something to create another kind of weirdness. But with Steven Bruton, it was a pretty small room, so it was all I could do to squeeze the mics in. I had Billy Payne from Little Feat on piano, B3, and Wurli along with another keyboard wizard, Steven Barber. I had a Royer SF24 and two Royer 121s on the Leslie, with another set of B&Ks on the piano. I got all this great leakage, too. All the basic tracks, with two keyboards playing at the same time, drums, bass, guitars — in three days.

That's so rewarding – you walk out and you know right away what it's going to be and immediately start getting excited about it.

Exactly, yeah. I mixed both Stephen Bruton's record and Holly Brook's record at home. At home I have of the luxury of trying a direction and seeing if it might work or not. I might push up a reverb and then live with it for a couple of days or try something else. Of course, I have to deliver the record in a timely manner, so at some point I'll make some commitments, but it allows me to live with the record for a few weeks and not feel pressed. For me to stay focused and to let the artistry not lose out over a budget or time constraint.

Is that the real trick – having the time to listen?



Listening is the key — that's it. All the schools, all the upcoming guys at the end, listening — and doing it from a lot of different levels — is the on in the room at the beginning of the session, what's going on in the and, on a more finite level, just listening and making choices. There's a fine balance. This could open up an argument. There are some people who believe in the 'throw-down' method of making records, which is to just get it done and put it out there. And there's really nothing better than doing that if you can pull that off. If you can pull it off more than once or twice in a row and it's not luck, well, then you've got a tap into something. But I find for myself that there's an element that is very spontaneous, but then there's also an element that is very introspective. Part of making records is balancing the alone time and the social time. That thing that happens when you're tracking with a full band in the room and they finish a take and they come in and high five each other — when that exists, you know you're making a really good record. But at that point, there are still elements that haven't been recorded yet, say, with overdubs or vocals. So now there comes this point when it's really pensive — saying, "Let's make this as good as it can be." That's the hardest part — when a guy is stuck alone in a room and he's got to rise to the occasion of the other tracks that are just killing! [laughs] So for me, I like to have the time at the end of the record to make sure that this piece of art is complete.

What else is ahead?

What's ahead? I want to keep making records that make me happy. I believe I can continue to do that. I believe that it is important for me to be a good father, a good husband and a good person. If I am fulfilled in my work as I am in my life and likewise, then everything is right. As far as trying to make a contribution and have some fun with it, I'm moderating a forum where people can get together and discuss literally whatever works. I never want anyone to think that anything I'm saying is gospel. I guess it tends to happen, where you get to a certain point where people think you know what you're doing. But don't take it so seriously — they're just opinions — it really is about whatever works.



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