

## ***Music production - a short historical overview by Yuval Gerstein***



### **A framework for music production**

I aim to provide contextual background for the development of the role of music production as a creative practice. It is intended to offer a framework and not by any means a comprehensive historical overview.

In the early days of the music recording industry, the ideal recording sought after by producers was the faithful reproduction of a live performance (Moorefield, 2005).

It was written about legendary producer John Hammond, who produced Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith and Benny Goodman as well as many others (Gronow and Saunio, 1998, p.70, as cited by Moorefield, 2005): *‘A good record producer was, above all, a talent scout. In the studio, the music was recorded as “Naturally” as possible, as in a live performance.’*

The general role of the producer was to find the most talented performing musicians, bring them into a studio and capture their performance in the most accurate way possible within the constraints of the technology available at the time. Modern techniques such as overdubs, punch-ins, re-editing and splicing, which nowadays are taken for granted, were non-existent at the time and therefore the performing musician, a virtuoso of his instrument or voice was paramount (Moorefield, 2005). The producer was more of a critic than anything else, As Moorefield puts it (*Moorefield, 2005, P.2*): *‘The role of the producer in the studio was to be a critic, and, if he was really doing his job well, to help bring out the best in a performer.’*

With the technological advancements of the 1940’s and 1950’s and the invention of magnetic tape, sound engineers became an essential part of the recording studio (Negus, 1992). It was a gradual process that created the credited role known today as the music producer,

As discussed by Negus in his book ‘Producing pop’ (Negus, 1992, p.87):

*“Sound mixers’ began to be recognized for their contribution to the recording process and during the 1950’s the occupation ‘Producer’ emerged as a distinctive activity, separate from that of the sound engineer and A & R staff.*

*By the middle of the 1960’s the studio producer had become an ‘artist’, employing multi track technology and stereo sound to use recording as a form of composition itself, rather than simply as a means of documenting a performance.’*

The first music producers to be recognized and credited for their artistic contribution to records were Phil Spector with his unique ‘Wall of sound’ technique in the early 1960’s, George Martin with his innovative arranging and surreal influenced production techniques for The Beatles and Brian Wilson who used the studio as a compositional tool especially in the 1966 ‘The Beach Boys’ album *Pet Sounds*. Moorefield further points out (Moorefield, 2005, P. xvii):

*'The contemporary rock and pop producer is usually well versed in technical concepts such as the subtleties of ambience, compression, distortion, and effects...the producer almost always acts as some sort of orchestrator, be it in the choice of electronic timbral and spatial effects described above, a more traditional instrumental enhancement such as a string arrangement, or both (e.g. George Marin).'*

The technological advancements of recording and effects processing allowed Producers to create sounds that would not necessarily adhere to the natural, physical world. This contributed to the creation of their new artistic role. It became possible to produce a new type of Sonic scape that could only be created in a controlled studio environment.

In many cases the recording artist who originally composed the music had neither the vision nor the technical ability to produce the music, and this gave rise to the music producer's status. Albums such as *Sgt. Pepper* and *The white album* Produced by John Martin for *The Beatles* are good examples of this point.

In an attempt to explain the sometimes-mysterious role of the music producer an analogy is often made between music producers and film directors as mentioned in Negus (Negus, 1992). The music producer is at the centre point of an album production much as the director is at the centre of a film production. The director/producer leads the production and more often than not provides his unique sound signature, or visual signature in the case of film directors to the final output.

In Summary, The role of the music producer had changed dramatically from being a mere 'talent scout' or a 'critic' in the studio in the early days, into a credited artist that influences all aspects of recorded music.

### **The need for a music producer**

In his book *Behind the glass*, Massey (Massey, 2000) poses a fundamental question to some of the world's top music producers in a panel discussion (Massey, 2000, p.2): "'Does every artist need a producer?'"

To which producer Frank Filipeti replies (Massey, 2000, p.2):

*'FF: I'd say that the majority of artists need a producer. There are very few artists that I've admired over the course of their careers that are self-produced. You need someone to bounce ideas off of.'*

In another discussion panel in the same book, producer John x Comments on the artist's need for an objective ear (Massey, 2000, p.314):

*"I think the objective side of it is also important. The fact that you can come in and not have this emotional attachment to the music and say "That chorus does not work" or "Move this bridge completely around". When you're working on your own material, you almost don't want to do that because you're so precious about your own stuff."*

### **Bibliography**

Massey, H., 2000. *Behind the Glass – Top record producers tell how they craft the hits*. San Francisco: Backbeat books.

Moorefield, V., 2005, *The producer as composer-Shaping the sound of popular music*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Negus, K., 1992, *Producing pop – Culture and conflict in the popular music industry*. Great Britain: Athenaeum Press, Gateshead, Tyne-And-Wear.

### *About the author*

#### Yuval Gerstein

Producer, composer/songwriter, guitarist and music mixer/engineer. In depth knowledge of music and extensive hands-on experience in the music industry for over ten years.

Experienced in album productions, International band tours , session guitarist, studio engineering and mixing, film scores, songwriting and more.

***2001-2005 B.Mus, Jazz performance ,Jerusalem academy of music, Jerusalem, IL.***

***2010-2011 MA, Creative practice Goldsmiths University, London, UK.***

More information is available at [www.yuvalgerstein.com](http://www.yuvalgerstein.com)

