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Rock 'n' Soul

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Don’t ask me what makes Tim Palmer bounce with health, but rarely in all my years at this interviewing game have I come up against anybody as wildly and sincerely enthusiastic as this bluff, amiable 24 year old. I mean, he came bounding down the corridors of Utopia Studios, big smile on his face and hand outstretched like he’d just done a line of something highly illegal and couldn’t wait to share the experience. Later, round the corner in the pub with a pint in his hand, obviously clear of all chemical charges, he admitted that interviews always made him nervous and whenever he got nervous his tongue took on an identity all its own. Then he told me a self-deprecating but amusing little story from back in his tape-opping past when he tried to tell Mark Knopfler which solos he should keep and which he shouldn’t. Evidently there have been times when Tim Palmer’s mouth has been fit only to stick his feet into. Nevertheless, my first and lasting impression of Tim Palmer the record producer was of a happy-go-lucky fellow who really enjoys his work, cares about his clients. And identifies with them too.

What prompts me to say that? Dunno, really. Maybe it was the black leather trousers. Or could it have been the studded biker’s belt and the assortmet of rings which silivered his fingers? Or perhaps it was just the sideburns and the jet-black hair. That should have been responsible for The Mission’s breathtaking debut album God’s Own Medicine and its gargantuan single Wasteland might have had a little bit to do with it too. However, you’ve only got to look at the guy and it becomes patent and immediately obvious that Tim Palmer is a Rocker at heart. And proud of it as well.

Which, I’m sure you’ll agree, is a little unusual for a 24 year old living in these troubled, post-rockist times. But then, as producers go, Tim Palmer is a little on the unusual side anyway. With some unusual things to say. Which, naturally enough, came pouring out in our conversation.

From the vantage point of comparative youth Tim Palmer was quite disparaging of A&R men, producers, engineers, and just about anybody else you can think of if the music business – although, scandal lovers, he refused point blank to point fingers and name names. About the only people who didn’t flail under the Palmer hammer were the boys in the bands. Could that be because he harbours a secret desire to be in a big Rock band himself? (After all, as he made a point of telling me, he was in a band at school while, somewhere in the vaults at Rockfield, there exists a ‘Trogs tape’ of one very drunk Palmer playing lead guitar with the Robert Plant band). However that’s a question which must remain unanswered because it was never asked. But read on and draw your own conclusions.

“I think it’s terrible these days that so many bands seem to be frightened of their record companies. Or at least frightened of what the A&R department or the promotion department are going to think of what they do. They feel they have to agree with whatever the producer who has been hired to work with them says, even though sometimes it may be obvious to them that he’s the wrong kind of guy to produce their records. I mean, when a band’s got a good drummer, what producer has the right to say ‘Sorry. I make records with drum machines’?”

Tim Palmer spent almost five years as a house engineer at Utopia Studios in London’s peaceful Primrose Hill, serving under hundreds of different producers, working with hundreds of different bands, watching and waiting and storing away a brainful of do’s and don’ts which he now applies to his own production work. Since stepping up to the big chair he has been in at the kill with the likes of Robert Plant, The Mission, Paul Young, Cutting Crew, Zerra One, Wire Train, Big Supreme and The Impossible Dreamers. To name just a few.

“I believe a producer should assess the band and the songs and then attempt to bring the best out of the material but in the vein in which the band play naturally. Too many producers have their own sound and before they’ve even got to know the band properly they’re laying down the law and saying ‘Look, we’ll need a Fairlight here and then I know this great session guitarist I always use and oh, by the way, you can sing on the record if you like.

“Now that’s fine if you’re dealing with a Pop act who are maybe only a couple of singers and don’t carry very many musicians of their own. But if it’s a band who are good at what they do then I think it’s inexusable. I’ve been in the studio with a lot of groups over the last couple of years who have themselves worked with some big name producers, who, they claim, never listened to any of their own suggestions. I believe the least I can do is listen.
“Of course, it is much easier to wheel in a drum machine and trigger some samples if you’re working with a drummer who is a bit dodgy. But I feel that if you can afford to take time to get a performance out of that drummer then you’re far more likely to come up with something a bit special. You read reviews in the music press of records that are ‘over-produced’, with lots of clever sequences and synth stabs and so on in all the right places. Those records aren’t ‘over-produced’ at all. In fact quite the opposite. Those kinds of records are actually ‘under-produced’ because they’re so easy to do. It is so much harder for a producer to sit down and gauge exactly what a band with real character is trying to do and then capture it on tape than it is to make a record that sounds like 90% of everything else that’s on release or in the charts.’

Thus the gospel according to Mr Palmer. The one who cut his teeth engineering early Eighties Pop like Kajagoogoo’s ‘White Feather’ album and Dead Or Alive’s ‘Sophisticated Boom Boom’ LP with the likes of Colin Thurston and Zeus B Held respectively before forging a production partnership with former Fashion-man Dee Harris which peaked on Limahl’s solo album Don’t Suppose in 1984. In between, Palmer tells amusing tales of indie singles made in Utopia’s demo room with skinhead Punk bands who would begin to flex their tatts at the merest mention of vocal harmonies. And of running to and from the local launderette with pop stars’ dirty laundry.

But that’s another story for another day because as we spoke Tim Palmer was in the middle of the most satisfying and successful period of his career to date, securing production credit on Robert Plant’s Shaken Not Stirred LP and an album with San Francisco hopefuls Wire Train, 1986 was largely taken up with the now customary ‘additional production and remix’ work which spawned the Cutting Crew’s Top Five hit Died In Your Arms Tonight which, Palmer claims, had to be substantially re-recorded and rearranged before he could complete it. As 1987 appeared on the horizon a call from CBS had our man winging to Holland to remix Paul Young’s Why Must A Man Be Strong single while imminent album releases by Zerra One, The Impossible Dreamers and The Flaming Mussolinitis should serve to keep his name in the frame.

But as we spoke it was The Mission who were proving Tim Palmer’s passport to the charts. God’s Own Medicine album was clocking up its 100,000th UK sale and the single Wasteland bobbing up and down on Top Of The Pops charts, suggesting that Wayne Hussey’s motley crew was born of some unholy coupling of the spirits of Hawkwind and The Blue Oyster Cult stalking the Yorkshire moors.

If only from an engineering point of view. God’s Own Medicine is something of an achievement as it manages to capture intact the dark, macabre, Gothic and semi-occult mood of the band in a mix that is as clear and clean as Waterford crystal. Rather than the wall of noise which we might have expected from a Mission whose live appearances have sometimes been compared to the bombardment before the Battle Of The Somme, Palmer has contrived a wall of sound which is arguably even more daunting and disquieting for its purity. But he is swift to hand equal credit to The Mission themselves.

“My input depends entirely upon what the band put forward themselves. This is true of all producers but I think it’s something a lot of people don’t realise. In the case of The Mission they played me demos which had some lovely guitar parts. Especially on tracks like Bridges Burning, Sacrilege and The Dance Goes On. So rather than just put those guitars down on one or two tracks I suggested we go to town on them and really build up some nice textures.

“I wanted to try and get that sharp, scintillating quality you expect from synthesizers but using the guitars. So we analysed the parts and broke them up a little and then did a lot of half speed recording, where you record the part slowly but at real time tuning, if you see what I mean. When you play it back at the proper speed it comes out with a very tight sound but an octave higher, which has the effect of making the top end really glister. If you record muted parts using the same technique then you get a really percussive attack on the front end of the note. Because most of the parts in question were virtually arpeggios we then duplicated them with stereo 12-strings and layered all the tracks up.

“Initially the band were worried that I’d smooth them out and that they’d be better off with their fuzz boxes. But in the end we made the whole thing sound tough and huge. It sounds a lot more complicated than it actually was. It hardly took any time to do at all.”

Palmer obviously enjoyed working with The Mission and answered warmly all my questions about the album, from the string quartet on Garden Of Delights (which was apparently engineered by one John Timperley who had been on the Beatles’ Magical Mystery Tour sessions) to the hologrammic background vocals on Bridges Burning (achieved by recording three tracks of weaving and wailing and then sub mixing them to stereo utilising as many different effects sends, delay and reverb units as possible on individual faders to build up a Kate Bush-like 3D image). Making the album required Palmer to immerse himself in The Mission’s unique space time continuum, locked away at Ridge Farm. All in all though God’s Own Medicine took little more than six weeks to record and mix before Palmer had to readjust his watch to GMT.

“One thing I love about making an album is that you become part of the band for a while. You have to switch into their time scale and their humour and sometimes even their internal politics for weeks on end. You can end up getting very close to them which makes finishing the album quite sad because you know you might never get the chance to spend much time with them again ever. Because they’ll be off on tour somewhere and you’ll be in another studio with another band. It’s one of the strange things about this business. You can make good friendships but they’re unlikely to last very long.”

Chas de Whalley

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