TIM PALMER is regarded as one of the finest producers of the decade, combining technology with a human touch. MAT SMITH talks to him about his recent work with The Mission, Texas and David Bowie’s Tin Machine. PICS: TOM SHEEHAN

AS FAR AS POP PRODUCTION GOES, MUCH OF WHATS HAPPENED IN THE EIGHTIES CAN BE VIEWED AS A REACTION TO OR AGAINST THAT BIG DRUMSOUND STEVE LIVIE-WITHE PIONEERED WITH U2 AT THE TURN OF THE DECADE. STOCK, ALATTA & WATERMAN may have had more hits, but LIVIE-WITHE actually pioneered the very idea of record production as a creative art in itself. However, in his search for the big music, LIVIE-WITHE barely ever sacrificed the humanity of expression in his awe-inspiring overview, which is probably why we all ended up loving the bands he worked with.

The ideal, of course, is to combine the impressiveness of rassled up sound, the rawness, the power and the sheer force, with the emotional impact and the personality which created it in the first instance. But there was always a hard-push to recover the cost of his expensive equipment.

"Tim can do all this, which, coupled with an immensely likeable disposition and an ability to hold the subtleties in an over-heroic transition, has resulted in him, in 26, one of the most sought-after producers in recent years. His most recent success was David Bowie’s ‘Tin Machine’ project. He started, however, as is often the case, breeding up tea rather than laying down tracks.

"I could never keep my mouth shut in the studio. I was an assistant to Mark Knopfler on the ‘Local Hero’ soundtrack. You’re not really meant to say anything in those situations, just watch the tapes. After a few days of my saying, ‘That’s great he just took me aside and asked if I’d always said so much at sessions."

"For Tim, it wasn’t so much a case of wanting more control, just a greater level of input. And watching Knopfler, you can imagine, was a particularly painful process, which taught him how he didn’t want to do things.

"You learn from other people you work with. Working with Bowie, I learned that you can take a lot more chances than you think. With Wayne Hussey from The Mission, I learned that if you drink a few bottles of Blue Nip, you fall over, and with Robert Plant, I learned that Steve Ball is the top golfer for Wolves!"

AFTER hearing Tim’s work with The Mission and David Bowie telephoned him to work on his next album. The initial shock, (it’s not everyday that someone rings you up and says, ‘Hi, I’m David Bowie’) he accepted the offer. Both had similar views on what they did and what they wanted most didn’t want to do.

"Bowie hadn’t enjoyed his last two or three albums and he wanted to get back to his roots, I was interested in the LP as an extension of Scary Monsters’ and Lodger’. I wanted to capture the band as they were at that particular moment. There was very much a case of setting up the sound up, keeping the space rolling all the time. It was incredible to work on in that respect, because there were no preconceived ideas, just that the band wanted to take that chance. As turned out, most of the vocals were done live in one take.

"It was a lot of the time we were working with limited equipment, but Bowie seems to have a great knowledge of how it will all up. I wanted to record the sound as rough and ready as possible as I think his voice and his style of singing suit that.

"The last few records have been very polished and produced, and I think he was beginning to realise that didn’t suit him. At first it was a little bit of awe, but he’s so open, he really lets you be yourself. It’s why his records have always been so interesting. He lets other people do their own thing and doesn’t get in the way. When he steps in it is when he can see the final thing not take the shape he wants.

"It was a performance album and everyone was allowed to perform, including me at the desk. We kept everything that happened rather than think about it too much afterwards. We mixed a lot of the songs in an hour. I’m really happy with it. I think it’s definite return to form.

"Many of the reviews didn’t think so, however.

"Yeah, well, obviously when you’re close to something, it saddens you when someone stumbles it off for the wrong reasons. That album isn’t designed to have commercial hit singles or sell millions of copies. It’s weird, exciting and fun and it seems wrong to rip an artist apart for making records in the right way.

"From a production point it was a real eye-opener. I’d set up all these expensive mikes, but when he sang through them it didn’t sound like David Bowie, so we used a Shure SM57, which is the cheapest mike you can find. He opened his mouth and it was amazing — he really has an outrageous singer. The drummer, Hunt Sales, was amazing, too, in the middle of a take he’d be pushing all the mikes out of his way and carrying on playing.

"I’ve always tried to get a certain clarity and separation on my records, but on this one I resigned myself to the fact that there wouldn’t be any. But when I measured what had been gained against what had been lost, it was a good trade-off. You’ve got the personality coming through, the power, and it works so well, there’s something about people playing together in a room that can’t be ever played by overdubs.

"Things haven’t always gone so smoothly. The House Of Love single ‘Never’ was met with the predictable ‘Oh, they’ve sold out and used a big producer’ kind of criticism. Tim is understandably defensive.

"I’ve pissed off people when they say that The House Of Love went into the wrong hands. I can see it with some producers, but knowing the way I work, I always have the band in mind, so at the end of the day what comes out is what we’ve both wanted. Both me and the House Of Love wanted to make a bigger-sounding record with a cleaner sound so that you could hear everything going on. The thing is, unless the song is there in the first place you can put a 100 fancy treatments on it, but it doesn’t mean a toss. You can’t make mystery out of Meccano.

"I think a lot of the time bands are unhappy with their record — something he chooses to avoid by discussing everything as he goes along.

"I really strong about the way bands get a lads’ tray by producers who won’t acknowledge what the band want to do and also the way record companies force bands to work with producers who are completely unsuited to. Too much money is wasted on recording. Before I came to Texas, they had already been over to LA to work with Bernard Edwards. That hadn’t worked out, so then they worked with someone else and did that. So the by the time they got to me they already spent a lot of money.

"I can introduce one of the most transparent to be heard, or rather not heard, today. He doesn’t so much stamp his own sound on a band as allow them to stamp their own on him, which, of course, is what should be.

"I think having a ‘sound’ is wrong. The only important thing is to be able to look at the band and say you’re going to assess, what do they want to do and what goes with that.

"Making music should be easy. I think when I hear about stars for having two-and-a-half years making an LP. Spending that long on something means you iron out the curves and the sex in the music. Everything becomes so precise. It’s much better to have that human side to it."

WHEN we met, Tim was working in Jacobs studio on the next Mission album. Listening to some of the sad But Tin Machine LP, we were surprised by the brightness and ‘life’ of their sound which, in retrospect, is quite similar to John Paul Jones’s recording from the last LP ‘Children’. "The nicest thing about the Mission is that we did the first album together and now they’ve come back to the third. It’s almost an orchestra approach with them — their sound is very layered but at the same time the power is very important. Being a sound man it’s nice to work with a band who are aware of different textures. With John Paul Jones and the last LP, I just think they lost their power. I don’t think I was very good and they spent far too long on it. They were just a case of these usual dynamics.

"Capturing those dynamics is, of course, depends as much on the room and desk used, as the producer himself.

"Like the drum room at RAK. It’s got a big, wooden and full sound inside that veryizzy, it’s not a sounding room you get nowadays. Like working on different desks for different reasons, like Neve boards and API desks, like a fuller warmer sound. I absolutely hate those idiots who put paper over the NS10 monitors. If you don’t like the speaker don’t fiddle around with it, just get that you lose. It’s one of the things of reference anyway. People like that would put the tissue paper over their ears if they’re not happy.

"Like to mix on a Solid State desk cos you can take things to the extreme. You have to be careful, though cos the sound can get too thin and basic. Basically cos I like an old-fashioned warm sounding room. When you’re recording in the middle of this huge casino in Montreux. You could put the mix as far as you like, cos there was no treatments or reverb. You just had to make sure that the sound was good, cos that was all that was going onto the tape.

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