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HOT PRODUCER
TIM PALMER

MARTIN MILLS, BOSS
OF BEGGARS BANQUET

SLICING UP LOU REED

INFLATING THOMAS DOLBY

NEW MUSIC '88

The SMITHEREENS
New York

The PRIMITIVES
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The BROKEN HOMES
Los Angeles
THE PALMER METHOD

"You've got to be one of the guys and at the same time you've got to be completely in control. It's a hard thing to balance, but it must be that way."

By Pat Lewis

Tim Palmer is an ambitious 25-year-old record producer from London. He has two albums currently on the national charts: Robert Plant's platinum Now and Zen and the Mighty Lemon Drops' World Without End, which is Number One on the college radio charts.

Palmer started out as a "tea boy" (a quaint English term for 'gofer') at Utopia Studios in London. As an engineer, he worked with such bands as Dead or Alive, Cutting Crew, Mission U.K., and Wire Train; he also produced Plant's Shaken 'N Stirred.

We caught up with the busy producer at Larabee Sound studios in Hollywood, where he was putting the final touches on his latest project for Arista—the debut album of San Francisco's Legal Reins.

What was it like working with Robert Plant, since you weren't familiar with his material?

It was quite a nice way to be able to work with an artist, without having a preconception of what he should sound like. I first worked with Robert Plant on Shaken 'N Stirred. It was more co-production, and I was engineering as well, whereas on the new album, I produced it and I let other people engineer so I could have much more control. The first time I worked with him, while we were setting up the drum sound, Robert said, "Could you get the drums a bit like on, oh . . . do you remember 'When the Levi Breaks' or 'Misty Mountain Hop'?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know that one." Then he said, "Do you know this one?" "Uh, ah, I don't know that one." Then he said, "What led Zeppelin albums do you have, Tim?" And I said, "I haven't got any." I really didn't know any of the songs. I mean, now, of course, I've listened to all of it, and I think that they were one of the most amazing bands ever.

The very first time that I worked with him on vocals, I asked him, "Robert, why do you keep saying 'baby' all the time?" And he said, "I've been saying that since before you were born, mate." The funny thing about music is that it's done this complete turnaround now, with all these Kingdom Come and everyone trying to be like the Zeppelins and the Seventies bands. So on the latest album, I said to Robert, "You know what you were saying about those 'babies'—do you think you could sing a few more of them?"

One criticism I've heard about Plant's solo albums is that they don't sound like Led Zeppelin. Was Plant trying to get away from the Led Zep sound?

Robert Plant is a solo artist. The fact that his solo albums don't sound like Led Zeppelin isn't a criticism. We didn't purposely try to get away from the sound—never. Robert presented certain material to the band, and we interpreted it the way we felt it best for the particular song. We certainly didn't try to get away from it, but at the same time we didn't try to get to it.

So, he really doesn't write songs that are Led Zeppelinish?

No. Robert likes all sorts of modern music. He likes everything from Depeche Mode to the Damned. His musical tastes have moved in the same way that everyone else's have. I think it's just as much a surprise to him that the music business has turned round and gone completely into Zeppelin again—in fact, I know it is. On this tour, he's playing a lot of Zeppelin songs. For awhile, with punk and everything, a lot of people began to feel embarrassed by the Seventies, but there really was nothing to be embarrassed of at all. I think the fact that he's playing all these Led Zeppelin songs is just like saying it was good and it still is fun, so why shouldn't we do it?

Tell me about the Mighty Lemon Drops and your other recent projects.

The Mighty Lemon Drops is a project I did straight after Robert Plant. They're from the same town as him—they're from Woolverhampton, England. They've been around for quite a while in England. I really like their music—it's sort of like Echo and the Bunnymen, KROQ, one of the stations that I listen to a lot when I'm here, has been playing "Inside Out" ever since I got to Los Angeles. It's really great to hear it, because often you'll make a record and you never get to hear about it. MTV has also been playing the video about three times a day. I had just a really good time with those guys. We rehearsed for a week in Birmingham and then went off to Wales to record. We used to play a lot of football in the evenings. I did the Mission U.K.'s first record in England—it went gold there. I'll be meeting with them when I get back to England, and it looks like I'll be working with them on their next album.

Is Legal Reins a high-priority album for Arista?

I think that every album is a high-priority album at Arista. Arista is the most successful record company at the minute, as far as breaking bands and having success. So, I'd definitely say they are a high-priority band for Arista.

How deeply involved does Clive Davis become in a project such as Legal Reins?

Clive gets a lot more involved in the R&B sort of projects than he does with rock things. Arista has been going for a big selection of rock bands. Clive leaves the overall direction on how we want to approach it to the band and myself—which is really nice. Clive obviously hears everything. He vetoes the final mixes, but he basically lets us have free rein, lets us have a free run; that's it. He's very interested in vocals and in whether the song is coming across as well as it could be. When he's happy that it's coming across as well as it should, then he's happy with the whole thing. It's good, because he's got a fresh ear on the whole project.

What is your philosophy of record production? Do you strive to be a transparent conduit for your client's ideas, or is there a "Tim Palmer sound" to your production?

My philosophy of the record production is basically to look at what the band is doing and make it come across well on record. When I look at a band, I don't purposefully have a certain set method of doing anything. I've worked with all sorts of different bands. So I have to look at the band, assess what they're good at and what they're trying to do, and help them to do that. I help them get their message across on record. There isn't a set sound. The only sort of "Tim Palmer sound," I'd hope, is one of quality. I work a lot with guitar groups, so obviously there's a lot of guitar layering. It's an approach to the sound that people may recognize, but I wouldn't go as far as to say that I was like a Trevor Horn or Phil Spector. I agree much more with the George Martin and the Beatles' way of thinking. He said in an interview that a good producer ought to go so far as making the band think that they thought of all the ideas themselves, even if they didn't. There's a lot of truth in that.

How do you feel about other producers remixing your work?

I've been very lucky in that it hasn't happened to me a lot. I don't mind anyone remixing it as long as they make it good. Sometimes a remix is done when an album is finished and the second single comes out. They just don't want to put the album track out because no one will have an incentive to buy it. So they may want to remix it and change it a bit, so that people might buy the...
I said before, I try to bring out the best in the band so that they can do it. I like the character of the group to come through more than anything else. Robert Plant doesn't sound like the Lemon Drops, who in turn don't sound like Legal Reins. That's important.

When you're actually working with the bands, are you the "boss" or are you one of the guys?

You have to be both. You've got to be one of the guys and at the same time you've got to maintain your authority and be completely in control. It's a hard thing to balance, but it must be that way. You are the boss, in theory. You're given a position of authority by the record company and you have to ultimately be responsible for how the record comes out. You have to be the boss, but at the same time, if you want to make a record that brings out the best in the band, you have to become part of that band for that time and become a friend. Ultimately, you should have the same goal. You may have fights along the way—everyone has fights—but I really think it's a positive thing, because if you're gonna fight with somebody, it means that you care enough to go as far as arguing, and they care enough as well.

How close do you become with the bands?

When you're working with a band in the studio for two months, three months, or whatever, they become like your family, and it's always a very sad time when you finish an album. It seems almost anticlimactic, because you work so hard on it and it becomes your whole life—you become so close with them and you know everything about them. You're literally living with them for that time. I get the worst end of it: It's like having something, and then it gets taken away from you....