Elvis Recording
“Don’t Be Cruel”
1956

Playing with
PRESLEY

The musicians who worked with Elvis tell the real story
Tim Palmer’s Good Fight

by Richard Buskin

It never ceases to amaze me how many bands come to have a negative experience in a studio,” says Tim Palmer. “Recording an album should be creative, fulfilling and enjoyable, and if it isn’t, then rethink, change producer or change career.”

Palmer is a producer who in 1985 graduated from engineering at London’s now-defunct Utopia Studios to a list of production credits that to date includes Robert Plant, Tin Machine, the Mission, Texas and Pearl Jam. He is a man who believes that a little antagonism in the studio is not a bad thing provided that the enduring memory is a positive one. He also believes that too many producers have such an awe-inspiring overview of the studio situation that they sacrifice the expression and kill the band’s chance to create its own sound. Palmer, on the other hand, would rather try and capture the realism, the emotion and the power with the impressiveness of good quality and exciting sound without running up a huge studio bill.

His approach quite obviously works, and this is borne out by the number of times he has been asked back—five albums with the Mission (producing three of them), and two each with Robert Plant, Tin Machine and Texas.

Tim is currently in the throes of co-producing the next Tears for Fears album with Roland Orzabal and producing a new guitar band called Kinky Machine. “I like to vary the type of bands I work with so that I can learn,” he says. “I try to keep a good mix of new bands and established artists.” In doing so he regulates his engineering input.

“If a project is more demanding from the musical side with, for example, a new group, I really don’t want to have to worry about levels and whether or not compressors are overloading because I’ll have other things to concentrate on. In such situations I’ll get someone in to help.”

Palmer’s role as producer varies in much the same manner, from arranging and orchestrating a song to sometimes, as he explains, just trying to get a band to play with more feeling.

“When I worked with Robert Plant the first time, I was inexcusably unfamiliar with his past. I became unstuck when he asked me to give the drums a vibe similar to that on ‘Misty Mountain Hop.’ At that point I had to admit that I hadn’t got any Led Zeppelin albums and during the ’70s was heavily into the Clash, the Damned and my own punk band Emergency Exit! Robert just agreed that ‘New Rose’ (the Damned) had a brilliant drum sound anyway and brought in some Zeppelin albums and said, ‘Check out my old band!’

‘On our first project my input was very sound-oriented and I was the ‘new boy’ to the camp. On the second album, Now and Zen, I was the only surviving member of the team to carry across as Robert put together his new band. On that record, I helped with the arrangements and contributed musically as well as engineering. Robert is quite a taskmaster in the studio and keeps everyone on their toes. You have to know what you want to do, and be able to explain why you want to do it.”

“I remember during the Now and Zen sessions Jimmy Page was to come in and play a couple of solos. Quite often here in Britain if you get an assistant and he hasn’t gone AWOL then you are doing well. The morning Jimmy Page was to play on the tracks I found I had three assistants and a maintenance man who insisted on fixing one of the compressors immediately and would not leave. I never understood why I didn’t get this treatment all the time!”

Palmer states that working on the Tin Machine albums,
on the other hand, was a challenge in the technical sense. "Bowie was unhappy with the way his last two or three solo albums had sounded. I agreed. They were far too corporate, polished and in-time for my liking. I wanted to capture the band as they were at that particular moment—raw, powerful, live and basically very unhearsed! In the back of my mind I hoped the sound would follow on from the Scary Monsters, Lodger period.

"Bowie's voice sounded great through a Shure SM57—very low-tech but what the hell. Reeves' sound was as diverse as his choice of notes, with plenty of speaker distress thrown in. He was aptly named 'His Oddness.' Hunt and Tony are as outrageous in character as they are in sound. It was a fun project but by no means as easy as it sounds. Getting a performance from the band onto tape was more about catching them all in one place at the same time!

"When we were recording in the Bahamas, we arrived to discover we were at least six mike stands short. We were told they would take a minimum of seven days to arrive so we decided to make do. Most of the mikes on songs like 'Crack City' were hung by string from the ceiling."

Palmer prefers to work quickly and believes time restrictions and technical limitations can be transformed into strengths. Thus the Burning Tree album was recorded and mixed in Los Angeles in 30 days—"Marc Ford, who is now the guitarist in the Black Crowes, seemed to play his best stuff in the first couple of takes anyway"—and Palmer resorted to shaking a pepper mill and clanging a fire extinguisher on the Pearl Jam album rather than wait for an alternative sound source to be hired.

"I feel it is important never to stamp your sound on a group but to let them stamp theirs on you," he says. "I could waffle on for hours about dynamics and sounds, but in the end it really is the choice of songs that will make or break an album. You can't make mystery from Meccano and you can't polish a turd. You cannot replace the craft of songwriting by personality and sonic, or vice versa. They must go together.

"Too many times albums are nothing but a hodge-podge of tracks, producers, remixes and studios. Call me old-fashioned, but I think 'the album' was lost for quite some time and hopefully things are now slowly heading back in the right direction."

---

**Palmer's Choice**

Old Neve recording consoles: "I just love the warmth that comes from those old boards, particularly the EQ sections."

Yamaha NS10M: "It's a personal point of reference that has been reliable for me for years."

Studer A800: "The best analog tape recorder ever made, I reckon."

EMT valve plate and Lexicon 224X: "The warmth of the old valve plates has not been matched by digital equipment, in my opinion. Something like the 224 does, however, offer so much versatility."

Shure SM57 and valve Neumann U47 and U67: "I use the SM57 for bloody well everything, great on guitars, great on drums, the best mike on snares, and really good on some voices. U47s and U67s are also good all-round mikes but you wouldn't want to use them on a snare."

Urei LA2A compressor: "They're fairly transparent—you can compress a vocal considerably and it will still sound even."

Eventide H3000 harmonizer: "User-friendly and you can do what you want with it."

AMS harmonizer and DDL: "Still good tools to have around a studio. The DDL's ability to fire samples off tape was a savior for many years."