Tim Palmer's list of album credits as both a producer and mixing engineer is more than impressive. He has worked on tracks for Pearl Jam, Mother Love Bone, Tears For Fears, Sepultura, Robert Plant, Duran Duran and even the 'Thin White Duke' himself David Bowie. We had a chance to chat with him between projects and discovered a few of his hidden talents.

One often wonders how these producers who have album credits that read like Grammy Award ceremony invitation lists got their first break. Naturally enough, this was my first question.

**SL:** How did you get your start as an engineer?

**TP:** I was first offered a place making tea in a studio in London called “Utopia Studios”. This was a very lucky break for me because it was a very popular studio in the early 80s. I started off at the very bottom, as everyone does, running around and clearing up. On the first day that I went I made tea for Stevie Wonder. From that beginning position I moved my way up to assistant engineer and then started to work with different producers who gave me more and more responsibility. One of these was Colin Thurston who worked with Duran Duran. I then started to engineer projects. The first producer that I engineered for was Zeus B. Held who at the time was producing Dead or Alive. I engineered that album and some recordings for John Fox. I also engineered some demos with Sting.

**SL:** Do you play any instruments?

**TP:** I'm a self-confessed 'Jack of all trades, master of absolutely none.' I can play anything enough to show people an idea. I have to be able to fill in the gaps when producing a band. It's been very useful to me and the fact that I'm not a fully trained musician is quite appealing to some of the more refined musicians I've worked with like Roland from Tears for Fears. He let me play quite a lot on the record because he liked some of the simplicity of the parts I would come up with. I managed to play drums on one of the tracks on that album.

**SL:** Are you a frustrated musician?

**TP:** Yes, I suppose a lot of us are. I'm pleased to be on this side of the glass. I originally had aspirations of pop stardom, but I am happier in a supportive role. It can be very short-term being a musician I think, especially in a band.

**SL:** What was your first successful album as a producer?

**TP:** My first successful album as a producer was a band called The Mission. They were a dark, gothic English rock band. I co-produced with the band on their debut album and that did very well. My other early successes were mixing the Cutting Crew album and producing some songs for Kajagoogoo.

**SL:** Did you have a feeling at the time that it was something special?

**TP:** No, I think you put your heart and soul into every project and you wouldn't be doing it unless you thought it was good. The rest of it is down to luck - you roll the dice every time you finish producing a record. You do the best...
job you can and then it's down to a combination of things. A successful record is a combination of a good manager, a good label, a good A&R man, a good promotions person, a good album sleeve, a good-looking band and so on. So you do your job then you roll the dice and wait.

SL: Do you have a preference for mixing or producing?
TP: At this point in my life I prefer mixing. I like to come in fresh on a project and take it to the next level. I can weed through all the stuff they may have been concentrating on too much and get to the real point of the song. I can help to increase the dynamics of the material and I just really find it fun. I use my Pro-Tools set up now, so when a lot of the time it's just supposed to be a mix, I'm actually re-recording stuff into my Pro-Tools and effecting it and trying new ideas. So even though it's mixing, it's still a creative process.

SL: Did you do one thing first?
TP: I became an engineer first and then moved up to producing. Later in my career I became a mixer. After mixing Mother Love Bone and Pearl Jam I became accepted as a mixer by most people.

SL: Do you prefer to mix the music you have produced?
TP: Yes, I do, 100%. I hate listening to other peoples' versions of my vision. I know I do this to other people's music all the time but when it comes to my own material I find it very stressful. It's not that I believe no one else mixes as well as I can – I'm sure they can. I just have a very clear image in my mind of how I want the music to be. There are certain things that need to be done in the mix stage and when they're not done, or not done the way I want them to be, I get very disappointed and frustrated.

SL: When you worked on the Tin Machine album were you daunted by working as a producer for David Bowie who is not such a bad producer himself?
TP: Yes, at the beginning I was very awestruck by working with David since he had been a hero of mine since I was young, so obviously it was a little odd for me. David, through his career, has employed different people and it seems to me he always lets them do what they think is right. He's not an intrusive person. He doesn't force you to work a certain way or ask you to do certain things and therefore it was very painless. In fact even when it came to recording his vocal he was very open minded and just would say, "Yeah fine, if you think it's good, that's fine, let's move on." He made me feel very relaxed. I learned a lot from working with David Bowie about the bigger picture. By watching him work I realised that some of the fine details we fret about are not that important. He'd say, "Oh leave it, that's fine," and I'd think, "Oh no we'd better not," but by the time the track was done he would have been right – it wasn't worth worrying about.

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SL: How do you maintain objectivity?

TP: I think the best way to maintain objectivity is, do not work too late in the studio! Secondly, try not to spend too long on a song, move on to another and come back later. I am now in the privileged position of being able to employ an engineer to work with me on albums. This definitely helps as I can take a step back from the console.

SL: Would you say you’re a hands-on producer?

TP: Every project is different, when being hands on I certainly can provide that. I like to get involved with the arrangements of the songs and the developing of parts but sometimes I can be in a much less involved position, that’s fine too. I like the fact that the job changes all the time. Recently I have mainly been employed as a mixer.

SL: What are your thoughts on the great Digital vs. Analog debate?

TP: People demand music and they don’t really care or know what format it’s on. It’s up to the individual what they choose. Both can be as successful as each other.

SL: How’s your percussion playing?

TP: Pretty good I think. I usually play all the tambourines and shakers on the albums I produce.

SL: Do you have a home studio?

TP: When I’m not working I set up my equipment in a room in my home in California. It’s basically my Pro-Tools set up with a Mackie board, my Genelec Speakers and two racks of outboard gear and pedals. I have a few guitars and mics. I sit and write songs there and can do pre-production on new projects.

SL: Do you have a particular style?

TP: I hope not! I think that I apply myself to each situation in a different manner. I think that I do help the bands make the albums that they want. The fact that I have produced two albums with most of my artists shows this. I have worked with such a varied mix of music – Sepultura to Tears for Fears, Pearl Jam to Cutting Crew that I can bring something to most situations.

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