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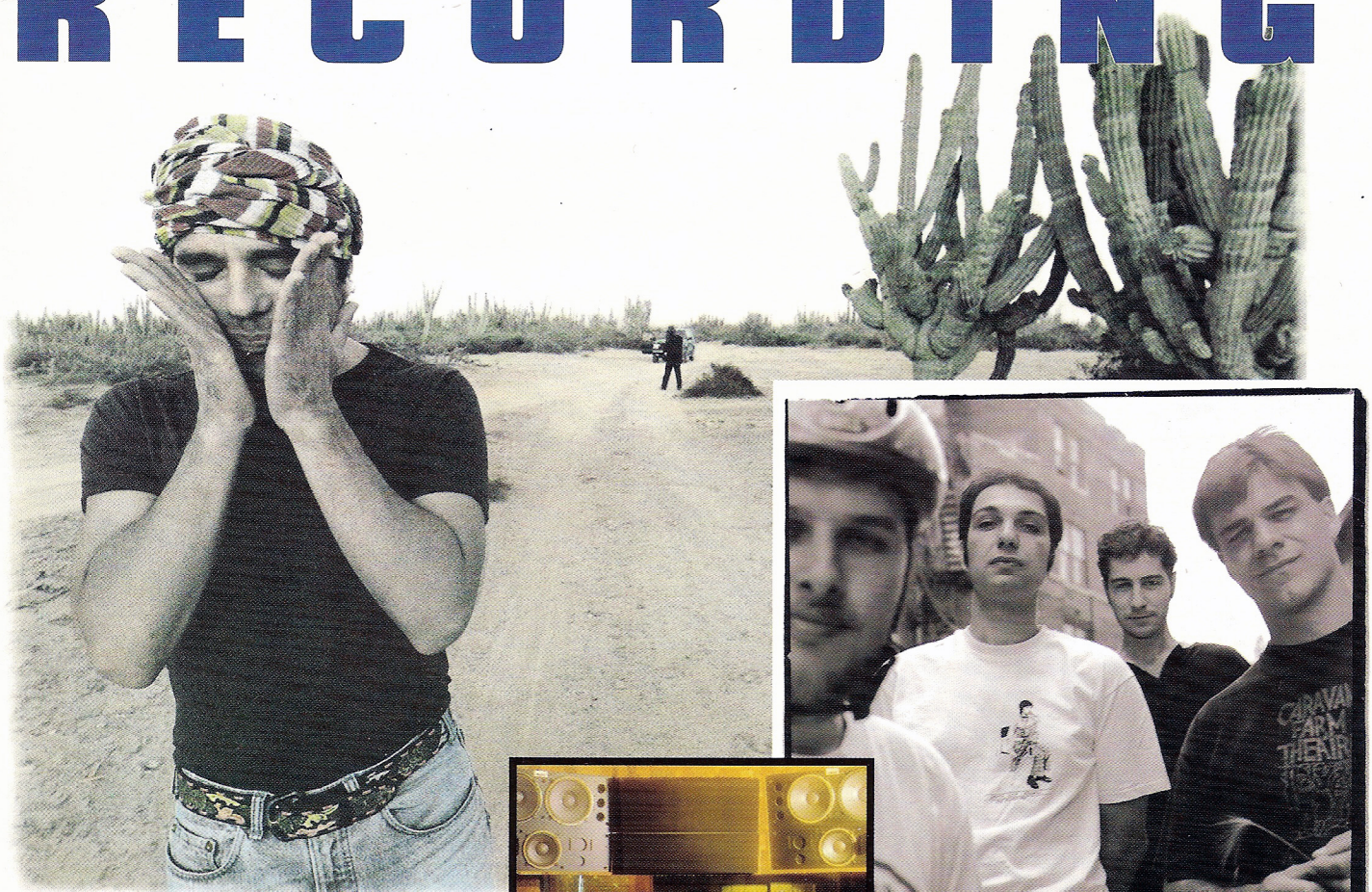

DANIEL LANOIS
RECORDING IN THE LAND OF THE NEW DREAMERS

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Plus: A Musician's Guide To Nashville

Today, musical recordings are being created in bedrooms, project studios and state-of-the-art facilities — and also on desktop computers, live-off-the-floor, via telephone lines and in buses, churches and open spaces. The "recording studio" is no longer a fixed, tangible entity. Technology has given us freedom — our minds and souls are our studios and we are limited only by our imagination and desire.

It's an exciting time — a "golden age" of recording where the future embraces the past; where state-of-the-art technology seamlessly melds with the vintage gear of yesteryear. Where the vacuum tube and the microchip hold equal allure, and analog and digital become allies in the search for the recordist's utopia.

DANIEL LANOIS: RECORDING IN THE LAND OF THE NEW DREAMERS

by Peter Murray

"...a five minute drive and you're into the kind of terrain that you can see in these photographs. It's a very special place, I call it 'The Land Of The New Dreamers'..."

Daniel Lanois' Hamilton sanctuary is hidden from the road by a dense wall of trees, shrubs and flowering vines. Inside, the style is minimalist and seems to allow for the imagination to provide decor. Candles are lit throughout the house, creating more mood at 1 p.m. than light, and incense is burning. A makeshift ADAT studio is assembled in what appears to be a dining room, amidst vintage amps, tube mics and scarcely legible lyrics strewn about the floor. There's definitely an atmosphere of calm here which suits Lanois' serene disposition, though it is, in fact, his production; he's on a holiday of sorts, taking time off from the recording of his third solo album in Mexico.

The man who produced some of the most

...Continued on page 39

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MALCOLM BURN

and the tape recorder is a documentation device that I think is relatively 'obedient' to what it's being asked to do."

Though Lanois has a strong love for Neumann tube mics (he owns half a dozen U47s), vintage tube amplifiers and a wide variety of analog gear, he by no means shuns digital technology. "The truth of it is, you use what you think sounds good. It doesn't really have anything to do with how old it is, how recent it is." Daniel used his ADAT while on the road in Mexico. "Some of those road recordings done on that tape recorder were then bounced to 24-track and built onto." He has several DAT machines, but expresses concern about their reliability: "They're really valuable in the sense that you can kind of keep them going and you don't have to feel bad about wasting tape; and it's real good if you can get a great rough mix and it's on DAT — then you can always use it as a master. But the strange thing about DAT machines is they only have about a three-year life, no matter how little or how much you spend. It's kind of the 'state of the art' with these things. I guess they're kind of fickle because they're a rotating head system, so they break down pretty quick, they deteriorate. It was a great idea that was put on a very bad format. I think the hard disk system is going to be far superior." Lanois relates that he's "heard through the grapevine" about the new 24-track RADAR hard disk recorder, developed by Vancouver-based Creation Technologies. "I'd be interested in trying one out. It sounds fantastic, actually. Anything small in a tape recorder really interests me, because tape recorders have been giant forever; and it's a bit of a deterrent if you want to move a tape recorder down the street and it happens to weigh twelve-hundred pounds! (laughs)."

> *...I really evolved into production through music, rather than through technology ...*

Lanois sees technology as an ally, but warns against letting it distract too much from the creative process: "What I usually do is, I collect a few things around me that I'm genuinely excited about, and that's what I'll use for a while. You can't use it all. If you try and learn it all and be a master of all, you'll just turn into a kind of a 'textbook' and you're not going to get any work done! Technically, I will use what I am most excited about at that time, and that keeps evolving. At any given time, if you manage to work with what you're most excited about, then that will be the stamp of that work. And two years later, in my experience, I will actually have *lost* the ability to be good working with that box, because I'll be onto something else; and that's sort of the interesting part of technology and its evolution — I think it has a lot to do with people and enthusiasm."

Lanois has the distinction of being an engineer, producer and musician, but his passion for music pervades everything he does. "I really evolved into production through music, rather than through technology. I've never had 'production influences' in the sense that I've never really studied recordings on that level. I've *responded* to recordings for how they sounded, but I've never gone as far as trying to work out exactly what *technique* was used to get to that result. And I think that's sort of a nice way to be influenced; if you hear something and you think, 'oh, that sounds *fantastic*, I just love the feeling of this!', it's almost better to put it away and just live with the memory of it. Then, when you get around to doing something yourself, you might think that you're mimicking, but your own feelings and your own efforts will stand a chance of being heard and have more identity."

That identity is something Lanois feels is making its way into more and more of the music that's being recorded today, particularly in Canada. "In Canada, the people here are such appreciators of so many things, and that comes from an intelligence. We want to know what the great films are, what the great records are, what the great books are, why things are happening politically in other parts of the world; but ultimately, that means that there's a certain kind of analysis that comes into play. And the danger of analysis is mimicry. If you analyze something to the degree that you really understand it, it may be the very thing that you'll do if you get a chance to do it, rather than just come up with something of your own. I think that's changing in Canada. I see more confidence and individuality in this neck of the woods than I saw ten or fifteen years ago.

"I think that there's a generation of people who are trying to find their place in the world and out of necessity, they're coming up with what they're coming up with. It's not a time for complacency. It's kind of like either you do it, or you get out! There's a certain urgency in the air, which is probably a good thing... economic pressure — I can't imagine that the government can keep paying for all those records and keep paying for people to live without working. I can't imagine that that can keep on going forever, and I think that even though that hasn't happened yet, I think that feeling's in the air — that danger may exist — and it makes its way into art."

CM

FREELANCE WRITER/SESSION PLAYER/PRODUCER PETER MURRAY IS THE AUTHOR OF ESSENTIAL BASS TECHNIQUE *AND IS BASSIST AND CO-WRITER FOR THE TORONTO-BASED ACT SURRENDER DOROTHY.*

LANOIS' TIPS FOR MAKING GREAT RECORDINGS

The Lanois Production Style

"I can only build on what I believe, and what the people in the room at that time believe, to be exciting; and I would only ever choose to carry on with something as long as there was a feeling about it that propelled me to the next level. So I'm very much a believer in *sonic persuasion*, if you like. If you have an amazing guitar tone, you'll come up with an amazing guitar part that will promote an amazing vocal idea that will promote an amazing response from the drummer. It's like a snowball effect; and until you have an exciting beginning of sorts, I don't think you could possibly carry on."

Creating 'Timeless' Recordings

"A 'timeless' recording *feels right*. And a recording that feels right is usually made up of some kind of truth — for example, a true documentation of how people were playing in the room at that time, uninterrupted by external opinion. If something has a natural feeling, then that's also a real good ingredient for timelessness.

"The *irony* of timelessness is that sometimes, the most dated things are timeless. You listen to... I don't know... a P-Funk record from the early '70s — and there's a crass wah-wah pedal that is dated specific *to the day* — and everybody thinks it's wonderful and timeless! I think it's because there was so much commitment that went into it, it was so much the 'sound of the moment' and done with such naivete that it *is* timeless. Naivete is not something that you can be aware of when you're trying to work, it's something that you're aware of maybe a year down the road; but it's also a pretty important ingredient to recordings you want to keep listening to."

Recording Acoustic Guitar

"I've stopped using microphones on acoustic guitars. I haven't done that in a good ten years. I use a pickup on an acoustic guitar and run it through a small amp, or I'll run it through some kind of guitar preamp and patch that directly to tape. I've recorded acoustic guitars for about twenty years of my life, and I got fed up with them; fed up with them booming and vocals spilling into the microphones... there's like, twenty problems you *always* have when you try and record acoustic guitars. So at this stage of my life, I've stopped miking them!"

The Mixing Process

"I think good mixing has to do with enthusiasm. All the best mixes that I've been associated with have had to do with somebody getting in there in a moment when they really believed; and they sort of got a balance rough and ready and moved in there and hit on a sound, and other people in the room were encouraging — and you end up with a great mix. That mix could be done by myself, if I'm enthusiastic, or I might let an associate of mine do the same. I'm not very territorial about the console. If *anybody* feels like going over to do a mix, I *welcome it*! Sometimes, I'll invite the singer that's never done a mix before to sit at the console, and say, 'come up with a balance — what do you want to hear?', and then just have some fun with it — and you'd be surprised at what people come up with. A balance and some kind of an approach is really the foundation of a great mix, I think, and just about anyone could come up with that as long as they've got an assistant around them who knows what they're doing."

Getting A Great Sound

"If something is great and I hear from the next room, I have a simple rule: hands off for fifteen minutes — let's have some fun and listen. What that gives you is kind of like a 'frozen moment'. Whatever you like about it, you do an extensive documentation; and the documentation involves everything — the EQs, the patches, what effects you're using, compression... You write down all the details of that mix, *especially* the ingredients that excite you the most, and if you happen to have a computer, then you stick the actual mix itself and the levels into the computer. It becomes a certain standard, a point of reference, and you name the mix. Now, even in a week's time or maybe a month's time, you can put that song up and say, 'I want to get back to that most exciting position again'. And at that point, you pull out your figures book and you reset everything back as it was and you get pretty close to it."

The Graveyard

We have a term that we use, it's called 'The Graveyard'. And whatever we've got on the master tape that we think we want to get rid of — sometimes, you do this kind of thing and two months later you think, 'Oh God, that vocal take was amazing, why did we erase it?' — well, rather than erasing we dump it to the graveyard, and it's always kind of sitting there in a library, if you like."

Using Technology

"I guess it doesn't apply so much now, but through the '80s, anything that had to do with automation or computerization was referred to as 'Hal' (laughs)! If someone did a great mix, my first comment was always, 'Did *Hal* get that?...'"

Pre-Production

"Pre-production time is the 'unofficial time'. It's the time when things are looser, defenses are down — it's a time to experiment and consider a lot of possibilities for where a recording could go. In those situations, I found that quite a lot of great seeds were sown, and they were often seeds that made their way to the final record. So I don't personally separate the two, I always record with the view of 'using it if you get it'."

Demos

"I'll tell you a little story — I was of the opinion this friend of mine's demo had more feeling than the final master of the record that they were just about to put out — just on one song; and I called him and said, 'you've really gotta give me a shot at resurrecting this demo and see if I can get it to the level where you'll want to use it on your record'.

"He said, 'well, I don't really know the history of how it was done'. So I called up several engineers who were involved, and it was started on an 8-track half-inch, then that half-inch was put on a 16-track half-inch which gave them another eight tracks, and they just kind of barrelled right into that tape and created a 16-track out of an 8-track that had some strange dbx noise reduction — and I dumped that to an SR system. I had to take the dbx out to get the sounds to not have a pumping effect, and ultimately, this thing sounded fantastic! The vocals were beautifully clear, the guitars were full of life and in my opinion, it sounded a lot better than the final master, that was done in a proper recording setting. So the moral of the story is sometimes, this sort of unorthodox, reckless recording in backrooms and basements will bring about results that you won't get in a formal setting, 'cause maybe you've got cheap microphones or the compressor's kind of nasty... but that equipment will give you a certain kind of result."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MALCOLM BURN