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INTERVIEW WITH STEVE ALBINI

RECORDING ENGINEER

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1 What's it like to be working as a recording engineer during this difficult time for the entire music industry?

It's very cumbersome having to follow the covid safety and disinfection protocols, but I couldn't imagine doing it any other way; we would feel terrible if somebody got sick because they were here for a session, even if the infection wasn't our fault. That means everybody wears a mask unless they're singing or blowing a horn, and then they need to be in a room by themselves. No guests or extra staff in the building, no sharing of headphones, microphones or other equipment between band members. We spend a lot of time, up to a full day, disinfecting the equipment, surfaces and furniture in the studio, and that's otherwise unproductive time, but I'd rather do that than take a risk.

From a booking standpoint, there's a lot less activity just because bands can't get together to rehearse, write songs or play gigs, there's no touring and everything in the whole economy has slowed down. We're probably doing about 25% of our normal work load and it's stressing the studio tremendously.

2 You got your start in the independent scene and went on to earn a worldwide reputation for your recording skills. How would you describe your sound, and how do you achieve it?

I predicate everything I do as starting from the perspective that the sound of the band, playing on their own, left to their own devices, will be nearly ideal. They have worked out the sounds, the arrangements and their playing style, sometimes over many years, so my first obligation is to try to make an accurate, naturalistic recording. That's the starting point. If the band want to stylize their record, or abstract the sounds, that's all perfectly fine, I just want them to know that if they like what they sound like at the moment, they can have that.

It's surprisingly difficult to make a recording that doesn't do some kind of insult to the sound, where the loud things sound loud and the impression you get from the playback is faithful to the impression you get in the room. It's difficult because sometimes the equipment introduces effects or has limitations that aren't apparent until you're comparing it to something you know intimately. So the basic method is to use a naturalistic presentation as a starting point, then see how happy everybody is and make adjustments from there.

3 You are known for the empathic way that you work with bands – what do you really focus on during your work?

It's important to remove your ego as an engineer, to avoid trying to claim authorship of the music, the sound or even a little moment of accent. If you are too in love with your techniques or your results, you may overlook something more important, and you may unintentionally attach something to a band's recording just because it amuses you, and that's not a good enough reason. Spend the time it takes in conversation with the band to understand their aesthetic, talk to them about what they like and don't like, who they want to emulate, what parts of the sound are critical at every juncture. Listen, not just to the sound you're working on but to the people behind the sound, ask them what they're into and try to deliver it.

4 In the past, you have worked with artists like Nirvana who had rather minimalistic productions. But last year, you teamed up with the Japanese band Mono and made an orchestrated rock album. What is the attraction for you of such a bombast production?

Well MONO is very much a self-sufficient band. The rock band parts of the songs are worked out by the band in rehearsal, and they play beautifully as an ensemble. They've been playing this music for decades and they understand it intuitively by now. The string and orchestral arrangements are begun as files by Taka, Goto the band leader and composer, and fleshed out by his long-time collaborator Susan Voelz by correspondence. The two of them have developed a beautiful, sympathetic relationship and the orchestrations they come up with are a pleasure to work on. I think what appeals to me about MONO, as differentiated from other rock bands who incorporate orchestral parts, is that the orchestra never feels incidental, it's always a structural part of the music. It's much easier to compose a rock song and use the orchestra as a kind of chord organ playing in the background. What MONO does is to allow both the orchestra and the rock band to use their full range of capabilities. They are unique in that.

5 What do you enjoy more: being part of a band or pulling the strings during a recording session as the engineer?

Playing in a band is the most fun thing I ever get to do. I love it like nothing else in my life, and I miss it terribly during these awful times. I enjoy my work as an engineer, it's quite satisfying to see people achieve their life's goals that way, and I get to work with people I love and admire and have become friends with, all over the world. It's a very satisfying job. But it can't compare to the pure pleasure that is playing in a band.

6 You swear by our microphones – what do you think makes them special?

I'm very fond of Beyer microphones because there are distinct characteristics for each type that make it uniquely suitable for certain applications. I love that I can fine-tune the sound by using the character of the microphone to emphasize one aspect or another.

7 Which of our microphones do you use on which instruments?

I use the M380 on literally every session. It is an absolutely unique and perfect mic for low-frequency sound sources like bass drum, bass guitar, tympani, tuba, bassoon and organ. I often pair it with a brighter mic, in a kind of woofer-and-tweeter arrangement, and that gives me a lot of flexibility. The figure-eight pattern is useful inside a bass drum, in that the null on the sides reduces internal acoustic reflections inside the drum, avoiding the resonant „bouncing ball" effect.

Having two working lobes on the mic allows me to use placement of the mic to emphasize different parts of the drum, closer to the mouth of the drum the rear pattern hears the resonant head, closer to the batter head, the front pattern hears more of the initial attack of the drum. Moving the mic around inside the drum allows me to tailor the attack, weight and sustain of the bass drum just by moving it a few inches. The mic also has a dramatic proximity effect, which I use to emphasize the lower octaves of a bass guitar cabinet, for example.

I use the M500, M160 and M130 as close mics on electric guitar cabinets. I find them less sensitive to blowout than a lot of classic ribbon mics, and they are generally brighter as well, which often suits the crisp sound of a distorted guitar. I use the M130 and M160 on acoustic guitar, mandolin and other string instruments, and the brightness of these mics compliments the smooth, detailed midrange that is a hallmark of ribbon microphones.

M 500 M 160 M 130 M 88 M 201

There are some vocalists, particularly those with a soft, modulated delivery, who sound fantastic on the M500, which has a slight presence peak that adds detail without becoming overly sibilant.

I use the M88 as a vocal mic when the singer wants to hand-hold the mic. I've found it has much better detail than other common stage microphones, and it's nice for a singer to be able to hold their microphone for comfort. The M88 is also a great mic for heavy electric guitar sounds, it has a nice low-frequency extension that helps with capturing de-tuned or baritone guitars. I use the M201 on snare drums, often in combination with a small condenser mic, and making a balance of these two is often a very powerful sound.

8 We have read that you really want an artist's sound to be as "natural" as possible on their recordings. This is one of the fundamental principles of our company: Our microphones should have the most natural, clear sound as possible – is this possibly one of the reasons that you like them so much?

The Beyer ribbon mics have great consistency from one to the next, which means I can know what to expect when I pull one out of the drawer. For the ribbon mics, the extra detail in the high frequencies sets them apart from other ribbon microphones. The best thing about the complete range of mics is that they are all so distinct from each other, and that allows me to choose the specific sound quality I need at the moment, rather than using a mic that is almost what I want.

9 You have called our M380 one of your favourite microphones. For which recordings did you use it, and why is this microphone so special to you?

The figure-8 pattern has a lot of utility, mentioned above, and the high output means that often I can use the mic as a line-level source, meaning I don't need to use a preamp at all, I can just connect the mic to the desk as a line input. This avoids a number of potential problems with distortion or mismatching, and I use the mics this way often. The extended bass response, especially when exaggerated by the proximity effect of close placement, is very useful in preserving the energy of low-frequency instruments. I essentially never record bass guitar without one.

10 There is an exciting internal story behind the M380 because the system is based on our DT770/990 headphones (600 Ohms). This is why the microphone has such good bass response. On which instruments does the M380 work best? Do you sometimes combine the M380 with one of our other microphones?

I often use a bright mic in combination with the M380, as mentioned, but which mic I pair it with varies a lot. I use condenser mics and bright dynamic mics. I have heard the story about the headphones, and we have tried using headphone elements from other makers to make microphones, but unfortunately they have not been nearly as good as the M380.

11 We have a funny story for you: A French sound engineer who attended a seminar with you and Greg Norman saw you working with the M380 on a number of different instruments. He then wrote us an e-mail and asked us to resume production of the microphone. We really got a kick out of that. Why do you like to teach such seminars? Do you still teach them?

I like to teach what I know because I learned almost everything from someone else and I want to repay that kindness. I think the more we share knowledge the more potential for greatness we have in the music community, and if somebody does something great, then I get to listen to it too. I also enjoy hearing the work of the students, and I have even learned a few techniques from them, which I can incorporate into my skill set and teach to other people as well. All in all, it's very satisfying to see people learning and growing, and I like the idea that the things I've learned will not disappear with me.

12 Did you use our microphones during the recording of "In Utero" by Nirvana? The band had a special relationship with our microphones and used them during MTV Unplugged.

I'm certain I would have used some Beyer mics on the electric guitar, but without consulting a track sheet I don't think I can recall which.

13 To what extent do musicians such as Dave Grohl or formerly Kurt Cobain contribute to the choice of microphones? Do these musicians decide with you or do they leave the choice completely to you?

Most musicians are rather unaware of the technical details of the recordings, since they have other things on their mind, like their own equipment and performances, though if somebody asks, I'm more than happy to share what I know with them.

14 Which recording during your career are you really proud of? Is there a band/artist whose work you would really like to record?

I've done several albums with the singer Nina Nastasia, and I think she and her ensembles are exquisite. I have similarly done a bunch of albums with the psychedelic/metal band Neurosis, and I'm always impressed by the sound of that band. They are unique.

15 Describe beyerdynamic in 3 words.

Make M380s again!

Thank you for the interview Steve!