

TIME AND MONEY

The Story Behind the Recording of 'Back Roads'

March 2006

By Steve Robinson

Monthly Workshop

The next ISS songwriting workshop is scheduled for April 3 at Five Towns College. See you there.

ISS Member Produces Play

"Straight to the Top" is the title of Jen Ostrowski's original off-Broadway play

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The recording of my CD "Back Roads" is an example of something good coming out of something bad. On September 9, 2004 my life underwent an unexpected and unwelcome change. My boss called me into the office to let me know I was being laid off. She kindly called it an RIF (Reduction In Force) but the long and short of it was I was out of work.

It wasn't the first time this had ever happened, since I've had more career changes than many people have had jobs, but it had been more than 20 years since the last time and I wasn't looking forward to retesting my ability to bounce back. Fortunately, my 14 years at this company entitled me to a severance package that provided me with a hefty lump sum. As a result I had two things in hand that you generally don't see together – time and money.

What to do?

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A number of fellow musicians had been encouraging me for some time to record. I sought advice from Dave Isaacs, a musician for whom I have a lot of respect, and who had recorded some outstanding CDs with his band Jackalope Junction. At Dave's suggestion I contacted Bob Stander, who Dave had worked with at Vudu studios in Freeport. Bob, a 30-year veteran of the music scene was not only a wizard behind the boards but a monster guitar and bass player with a great ear who could help me with production.

I sent Bob some samples recorded on my iPod, and sounding like recordings from the 1930s. We got started on the project in early March 2005. For 10 days over a two-week period we spent 10 hours a day getting basic tracks down. The rest of the project was to span another six months.

The first step was to record basic rhythm tracks. For that, Bob brought in John O. Reilly to play drums. John was to be the first of a group of veteran professional musicians that Bob would enlist for the CD. For two days we recorded the 12 songs as a trio, with Bob adding electric bass while I sang and played acoustic guitar.

It was a kick to listen to the two of them discuss the songs and trade war stories about the various other musicians they knew. Bob had toured with The Platters for 10 years and had recorded Paul Butterfield, Roy Buchanan, and Peter and Simon Townshend. He even met his wife through the Townshend family. John O. Reilly, at the time, was just about to embark on a tour with the Trans Siberian Orchestra. He has played with people ranging from Ritchie Blackmore to Ritchie Havens and even Earl "Fatha" Hines.

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Time and Money

Behind the Music with Steve Robinson

Writer's Choice

By Gerry Dantone
 For some unknown reason, the well-attended workshop on this first Monday of February 2006, a day after the Super Bowl, yielded only a handful of new tunes.

Winner: Fred Bredfry

Why? Perhaps the mild winter weather has lead us to enjoying the season instead of working on our craft. If that is the case, then let the call go out: Songwriters, get to work!

In any event, we had a winner in a close race. **Michael Szevia's** unique "Do It!" recorded on 8-track cassette took the honors. Against a backdrop of a repeating vocalization of "But I don't wanna do it" that must have received nods of recognition with anyone who has ever been a parent, the tune consisted of keyboard and bass loops supporting the vocals that built to a musically sliding chorus.

Yes, the tune was crazy but made sense at the same time. The whole idea of the song made one yearn for a hi-quality recording where the song's attributes could really be

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On day three John added some additional percussion effects like the marimbas that are heard on "A Little Bit of Heaven." Once the drum tracks were solid and Bob had made some corrections to the bass parts, we spent the rest of the 10 days re-recording my guitar parts without the vocals and then re-recording some of the vocal tracks. From then on the project went slowly but methodically.

Bob is a perfectionist and works very hard to get just the right sound and quality. The songs were built layer by layer. I would typically do four or five takes of every song. We would then go over each song phrase by phrase and choose the best version from each. Bob would then do his Pro Tools magic, seamlessly blending the vocal tracks. The vocals on each of the 12 songs took an average of about four to five hours. To say that this part of the process was a grind would be a gross understatement.

The next step was to add the additional instruments. Bob had sounds in mind for each of the songs. Some were left alone with minimum additional work. Others were given full-blown production. Bob decided that some of the songs needed acoustic rather than electric bass so he brought in Tony Montalbo to replace the electric parts with acoustic. Tony, who has played with Sam the Sham, would later be called in to do the violin part in "Wake Up" and the harmonica for "Lucinda."

A major addition to the CD was provided by the keyboard work of Paul Errico. Paul can be heard on the first few Steve Forbert albums. He has also played with Peter Duchin, which gives some idea of his range. Paul played acoustic and electric piano and does all the Hammond B3 work on the CD. His tasteful work on "A Little Bit of Heaven" was so amazing that, while we were listening to one of playbacks, Bob and I both looked at each other and had the same thought: We need to give him a solo.

That was the genesis of the short piano solo on "A Little Bit of Heaven." Bob simply copied an instrumental sample from another spot in the song and inserted it after the bridge that follows the second verse to make some room for Paul to add his part. Paul nailed it on the first take.

Bob himself did all the electric guitar parts. If you listen carefully on "Every Minute" there are four guitars, my acoustic and three electric guitar parts, each played on a different vintage guitar. The last song we did was the first song on the CD, "Find My Baby Blues." It sounded good but I thought it needed something additional. After trying a few electric guitar parts neither one of us was satisfied with the results. Bob suggested calling in Mark Newman to add some electric slide guitar. Mark came in and within an hour we had just what we needed, a driving slide that still allowed the acoustic guitar to come through

By September all the recording had been completed and the mixing was done by the end of the month. The next part was the mastering, and for this

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Beyond Transportation

Making Your Car a Valuable Studio Tool

By Pedro Pereira

So you think your car is nothing more than a conveyance to get you from point A to point B? Think again. Because of the acoustics inside of a vehicle, you can turn that miracle of steel, rubber and plastic into a useful recording tool.

Sounds crazy? Well, yes. But it's serious nonetheless. For those of us who make recordings at home, it can be quite challenging to achieve just the right mix. I use a decent pair of Sennheiser headphones when mixing down my recordings, but I find that no matter how perfectly balanced a song may sound in the cans, it can be a different story when I put it on a CD and slide it into the car deck.

It takes only a few seconds of listening for my car's seven-speaker system to tell me if more tweaking is necessary. If, for instance, I can't hear the bass, I know I have definitely mixed it too low, since one of those seven speakers is a subwoofer. If the car is moving, it gets even harder to hear the low-end sounds, so mixing the right amount of bass is critical.

But don't overdo it. Take that CD and stick it into your home stereo, play the song on your iPod or whatever you use. Then take the lowest-quality speakers you have in your house and test the mix there. Can you hear the vocals? Are the bass and drums loud enough or too loud? Is there enough definition between instruments? Is the acoustic guitar rhythm you recorded for texture overpowering everything else?

Why bother with the low-quality speakers? If the goal is to release the music, keep in mind that not everyone who hears it has high-fidelity speakers or enough EQ control. If you can make the mix sound good on low-quality speakers, the folks with the higher-end equipment will have only to make EQ adjustments to their taste, as opposed to trying to correct a poor mix.

ISS Member Produces Off-Broadway Play

ISS member **Jen Ostrowski** wrote an off-Broadway musical titled "Straight to the Top." Set during 2005 and based on a true story, "Straight to the Top" follows a ruthless young woman's meteoric rise and fall while trying to make it as a singer and dancer. Surrounded by sharks, swindlers and friends who discretely despise her, she finds out about the company she keeps when she injures her back and is told she may never dance again. Check this URL for details: <http://www.straighttothetopmusical.com>

Writer's Choice: Mike Svezia Wins

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made to shine even brighter.

The runner-up was Debbie Viniar (spelling?) for her song "I Do." Ideal for use as a wedding song, the tune consisted of proclamations of love first to be sung by the bride, then the groom and finally both as a couple. It probably would work perfectly at your next marriage! It would be neat to hear this recorded with the duet in place.

Gerry Dantone is wondering what the chances are that the winning tune and runner-up both contain the word "do" and only one other word. Answer: Why do we even ask these kinds of questions?

Who Played What

Here's the list of songwriters and songs from last month's ISS workshop:

Bob Campbell

Not in our Name

Susanne Ernst

Doubting Thomas

Mike Svezia

Do It

Debra Viniar

I Do

Lois Morton

Time Is Suspended

When You Sing Your

Song

Bill Goldsmith

Make Love to It

Estelle Henrich

Sloan



What's Doin'

ISS members are always out and about. Check your local listings for appearances live, on the radio or even on TV. Go to www.islandsongwriters.org for gigs and links to member sites with information about CD releases, shows and MP3s. Here's what's happening in the coming weeks. (*Check with the venue first because dates and times may change.*)

ISS Workshop

Test out your songs in front of fellow musicians, who provide constructive feedback. The workshop is on the first day of each month at **Five Towns College, Burrs Lane**, Dix Hills. Run by ISS Director **Sonny Speed**, It starts at 7:30 p.m. Bring a guitar to perform your song live, or you may choose to play a CD or tape. A piano is available for keyboardists. Be sure to bring 25 copies of your lyrics so other workshops attendees can follow along and provide feedback.
Next workshop: April 3

Time and Money: Recording 'Back Roads'

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Bob had saved the best for last. He took me to DB Plus studios in Manhattan and introduced me to the man who was going to master my CD, Gene Paul, son of guitar legend Les Paul. On the walls of this unassuming little studio were Grammy nominations and a framed black and white photo of the crew working on my CD, taken in the old Atlantic Records studio, arm in arm with Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles. It was like being in a dream.

So. Was it expensive? Oh yeah! Was it worth it? Absolutely.

As I said, I had time and extra money. That will probably never happen again. If I only ever have one shot at doing it I'm glad I did it right. Hopefully you will agree.

Open Mics

Borders, Jericho Turnpike, Syosset, hosted by Bill Ryan or Vincent Crici, first Friday of the month. Sign-up at 7:30 p.m. *Next gig: April 7*

Bartini Bar, Babylon, 8 p.m. Mondays

Trinity Restaurant and Bar, Floral Park, 8 p.m. Mondays

O'Reilly's Pub, Oakdale, 9 p.m. Tuesdays

Cool Beanz, St. James, 8 p.m. Wednesdays

Café Mojo, West Islip, 8 p.m. Thursdays

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