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December 15, 2023 -

As told to Hurley Winkler, 2695 words.

Tags: Music, Collaboration, Mentorship, Inspiration, Multi-tasking.

On the art of listening

Veteran music producer David Barbe on the benefits of continuing to make music in the Athens scene, the art of listening to a musician's vision, and designing a studio that works.

I've watched you work in the studio before, and the thing that stood out to me about you was your infectiously positive attitude. How much of producing and engineering music is being a cheerleader?

There's three skills you got to have to do the job. That's it. First is you have to have the technical and musical skills. Some people are more tech-oriented, some people are more musicians. I'm a little bit of a blend of both. I'm a Libra: love the balance. The second skill is the ability to get your own business. If you can't get anybody to hire you, you don't have a career, you have a hobby. A time-consuming, emotionally debilitating hobby. And the third one is the soft skill of working with people in the studio.

There are books that can teach you how to set microphones up. There are 10 zillion schools out there and YouTube channels to show somebody how equipment works. I mean, you do have to have musical nuance to understand it. But really, it's a people job, and it's a matter of understanding how to get something from somebody's brain and heart and soul into somebody else's brain. You just got to be tuned into people. Sometimes people need to be pushed a little more. Sometimes people need to be given a little more rope. Some people need a softer touch. Some people need a more direct approach. Some people need a break. Some people need to keep on pushing. It's just reading the room. Tuning in.

At the time that my career really was starting to take off and I was just busy all the time, more days booked than I could possibly handle, I also had three tiny children at the same time. I'd record bands and they'd say, "You're so patient. You're the most patient person in the world." That's my job. Being patient.

You feel like parenthood helped you with producing?

Oh yeah. I always viewed that job as being a farmer growing people. I needed to grow the crop straight and strong and keep the weeds out and keep my eyes on the prize and keep them properly nourished both physically and emotionally and mentally and all that. It's the same as making a record with somebody. Again, you're just tuned into the people. They make the great music. I'm just helping them draw it out.

You said earlier that a lot of producing is knowing when to push and when to give someone a little more rope. What kinds of cues do you take in from the musicians you work with?

I just listen and try to be flexible. I pride myself on being able to do anything anybody asks me to in the studio. That ranges from things like wanting to record digitally or all on analog tape. They can say, "We want to record live in the room," or, "We want to do this one piece at a time." "We want to record the click track," or, "We do not ever want to record it with a click track." "We would like you to edit this and make it sound like we can almost play our instruments," or, "We want this to be the rawest thing on earth." And sometimes, you'll listen to what somebody wants and realize that what they're saying is maybe not the best thing for their art.

The trick is being able to convince people to let me try something, give this a chance. But usually it's just me being tuned into people and trying to learn about them and who they are and how they feel and what they want and how we can connect on a deeper level. Because music is just a conversation between the creator and the listener. To me, it's all about emotional impact. I mean, there's 12 notes. That's it in Western Hemisphere, you're going to bump into somebody else's every now and again. How do you make it unique? I think the way that you make it unique is by figuring out if it really connects to people on an emotional level.

You're a musician yourself. It'd be silly to ask if producing has made you a better musician, and vice versa, because the answer is obviously yes. But in what ways specifically has it made you better?

Miles Davis said that music is the space between the notes. You hear these great sparse players who are just playing around—they're not overplaying, they're not pushing, and they're not dominating the conversation. Producing and engineering made me better at learning how to play with other people. The other thing is sitting in the studio and listening to music over and over and over and over and over again for my whole life, tens of thousands of hours. You get to the point like, "This gig tonight? If I can just figure out what the first note is, I got it." I just feel it.

When you listen to the same songs over and over again, do you ever get a little too lost in the sauce and have trouble connecting with the average listener's three- to four-minute listening experience?

Everybody can. It's real easy for it to happen. I listen at generally lower volumes than most people do. I mean, I have six or eight other engineers that work in my studio, and I listen typically at much lower volumes than everybody else because I know that your brain can fatigue. Your ears are fatigued. You become numb to it. It's like adding too much salt to a soup—you turn it up, turn it up, turn it up, turn it up, and the next day, it's just a pile of mush. It's awful. The other thing I do to stave that off is to work for a bit—45 minutes to an hour—and take a little break to go outside. The length of time it takes to make a cup of coffee, pee, walk out to the mailbox, answer a couple of texts, look at a couple of dumb videos on Instagram, check the score of the baseball game. Especially if I'm mixing. You really can't let yourself get lost in it. And there's people that think they're not doing the job if they're not driving themselves to the brink of insanity, but it's like, you lose your perspective.

So many new formats of listening to music have been introduced since you started producing. How do you take that into account when you're mixing?

I listen to music in my control rooms all the time. It's my overwhelming preference to mix at Chase Park because I know what it sounds like. I know what the bass sounds like. I know what a snare drum should sound like, and I know how loud the vocals should sound in there for my taste.

Are you ever hesitant to make changes to the space at Chase Park because of that?

Oh, no. We've made changes along the way many times. We moved in 26 years ago and eventually got an architect to come listen in the room and he said, "Your control room could sound a lot better." And so we got him to do a design and we tore it down and rebuilt it to its current state in 10 days, pillar to post, without a professional construction crew. It was an insane amount of work. We've changed the floor out in the main studio. We have hung different things on the walls and on the roof over time and just experimented to find what works. Right now, we're in a place where we feel like, "Yeah, this works pretty well." But as I'm saying this, something that just occurred to me that I should try.

Care to share?

Yeah. I'm going to put a two-by-four-foot cloud, a ceiling baffle, in the studio. An ISO booth, I think, might absorb a few low-to-mid-range frequencies that I think could be helpful in those little rooms. But that's how it is. I come up with an idea and I just build something and try it. If it doesn't work, I just scrap it. Don't be afraid to change.

Has there ever been a time where you would've preferred to be known solely as a musician as opposed to a musician/producer/engineer?

No. I'm a generalist. When I was a kid, I just wanted to be a rock star like The Beatles or The Rolling Stones or The Who or Led Zeppelin or Jimi Hendrix, but I love working in the studio. When I first started working on other people's records, it was the first time in my life I felt I had a natural aptitude for something. And I'm not saying I don't have other natural aptitudes or I'm not naturally musical. I know now that I am. It's funny, as I say this, my fingers have gone out like I'm touching the faders or I am going to get the talk back mic or the tape machines over here. [Moves hands to the left.] And that's the height and angle of an Atari CB 120 Auto Locator when my hand is in the position.

I like being able to do it all. And sometimes I wonder, would I be greater at a piece of it if that's all I did? But I don't think my life would be as rich if I only did one of the things. If I was, like, studio guy but not a player. Frankly, I think I'd be worse at engineering and producing. And if I was only a player who didn't work in the studio, I don't think my playing would be as intuitive.

Does it have anything to do with a preference for being home over being on tour?

I generally feel that I'm exactly where I need to be right now. All the time.

Dang.

There's a booking agent, Matt Hickey, who's based in Austin. He books Wilco and a bunch of other bands. He's a really brilliant guy. One time, we were talking about meeting in a music festival, and he said, "No, I never look at my phone at a festival. I'm exactly where I need to be right now." And I was like, "Deep. I'm stealing that and adopting that as a philosophy." I love being home, but going on tour, meeting people, seeing things, experiencing things—that's also great.

How much of your success in music do you feel you owe to the Athens music scene?

I've been sponging off them my whole life. I moved to Athens for college and went to journalism school and saw cool bands play in clubs. I'd never seen that. I'd seen The Who and the Allman Brothers and Lynyrd Skynyrd play in theaters and arenas. I had seen Aerosmith and The Cars play on a football stadium, and I'd seen bands play at keg parties. But this indie club scene wasn't something that was accessible to teenagers in Atlanta in the late seventies. When I was in high school, we heard there was a new kind of music called punk rock, and there was a punk rock band in Athens called The B-52's. Now, it's funny to think of them as a punk rock band, but they were a different thing.

But really what I remember is going to see the band Little Tigers at the little-bitty 40 Watt, which probably held about 75 people at the time, maybe a hundred. And when I walked in there and saw all those people crammed in, just seeing how they were engaging with the music, I realized they were my people. This was what I was supposed to do.

Once I got into it, R.E.M. was an amazing, touring club band, and The B-52's were gone before I ever moved to Athens. Then there was this whole other second wave of bands right behind them. When I moved to Athens, I just believed in all of us here in this important music scene. I'd read how important R.E.M. was, so I believed that we, by proxy, also could be important because we lived in a cool place. I was really taken by it and believed in it. And when I first started playing in bands that other people liked, it felt good to be part of that. Athens is a very supportive scene. It's not so much competitive as it is supportive, and a lot of that, I think, goes back to those original bands like Pylon and R.E.M. who treated other people very well. Everybody's like, "Ah, there's a new band. We'll go see them. We'll support them." It's never been like, "They're popular. I'm jealous."

Then it started branching off into other types of music. Originally, there was the Athens sound—you could dance to The B-52s, you could dance to Pylon, you could dance to R.E.M., though they had more of a pop sensibility. By the mid-eighties, there's a punk rock scene with Bar-B-Q Killers and Porn Orchard and my band Mercyland. And then there's this jam band scene that started right after that with Widespread Panic. And you get a few years later, and there's Elephant 6 and Neutral Milk Hotel and Olivia Tremor Control and of Montreal. And then the Americana scene, like Drive-By Truckers, and then there's these bands that are a fusion of psych and jam: The Futurebirds and New Madrid. And now there's these new young bands like Hotel Fiction and a new punk scene with bands like Nuclear Tourism and Null. These bands are great.

It sounds like you've maintained the habit of supporting new Athens bands.

Totally. Because they supported me. Living in a place like Athens has been very helpful to me. Other cool people like to come to Athens to make records and play shows. Athens might be one of the really desirable, cool music scene places in America. It's probably the cheapest cool place to live in the country, which allows you space to grow creatively.

David Barbe recommends:

Nano Car, a new band from Athens. They're two brothers. They don't have any records. I don't think they've played many shows. But they write these amazingly catchy songs with harmonies. I've seen them play a couple of times and I love them. And their mom goes to every show.

Neil Young's recently released archived material. He's decided not to let his old fans die without hearing all this archival material that he's got. There are all these amazing records of his past that are being reissued on vinyl, and all these live shows have come out. There are a bunch of late-sixties, early-seventies solo shows when he was just developing as a songwriter, and his mid-seventies *Tonight's the Night*-era live shows are just amazing. Releasing his archive while he's still pushing forward as an artist is inspiring to me.

Haruki Murakami's books. There's a new one that has not been released in the United States yet. I can't wait to read it.

Puma Yu's in Athens, a restaurant with a new twist on Thai food. The chef's parents are both from Thailand. Every time I eat there, I'm amazed that I live in a place that has this restaurant.

Atlanta Braves. I texted a friend of mine I grew up with today and just said, "It won't last forever." It's our hometown team, and we've always been like, what if they were the best team in baseball? What if they kept their young players and didn't trade them with the Dodgers and the Yankees and the Reds? And it's like, "Yeah, that'd be great." And probably no one who will read this will have any interest in this, but I'm just going to say that, in my hometown, it actually happened. It just took 50 years from the time we were 10 years old for it to happen. But it did.

Name


David Barbe

Vocation


producer, engineer, musician

Fact

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