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AL SCHMITT

Five decades of sterling productions and still going strong

By Howard Massey

"LEGENDARY" IS A TERM THAT IS OFTEN BANDIED ABOUT too freely. But what other word could you use to describe a man whose first recording session was for the Duke Ellington Orchestra and whose work continues to dominate the charts to this very day?

After more than five decades behind the board, Al Schmitt is universally acknowledged as one of the absolute masters of his trade. He got his start at age 6, spending time at the New York City recording studio owned by his uncle, and began his own engineering career in the 1950s as apprentice to the great Tom Dowd. Since then he has produced, engineered, and/or mixed more than 150 gold and platinum records for an incredibly wide range of artists: from Henry Mancini to Steely Dan (he helped engineer the duo's famously immaculate *Aja*), from Ray Charles to Natalie Cole, from Frank Sinatra to Jefferson Airplane (at one point he was recording the psychedelic Airplane at night and old-school crooner Eddie

Fisher in the mornings), from Elvis Presley to Josh Groban and from Barbra Streisand to Diana Krall.

Clearly, he has no intention of slowing down now. Winner of a staggering 19 Grammys, Schmitt was nominated just this year for his work on French chanteuse Melody Gardot's critically acclaimed *My One and Only Thrill*. He is as busy as ever, having just finished mixing a live TV special for Gardot and recording songs for a new Josh Groban album. "I have to say, he's one of the nicest artists I've ever worked with," Schmitt says of Groban. "He's just a joy. If everybody was like him, my life would be a lot easier."

Despite his fame and recognition, he remains refreshingly down-to-earth, speaking with a distinct Brooklyn accent that he's managed to hang onto despite being based in Los Angeles for more than 40 years. We spoke with Schmitt about some of the lessons he's learned from his vast experience behind the board and the continuing evolution of his recording philosophy.

'My One and Only Thrill is a great album, and I guess the proof is in the pudding.'

How did you come to work on Melody Gardot's *My One and Only Thrill*?

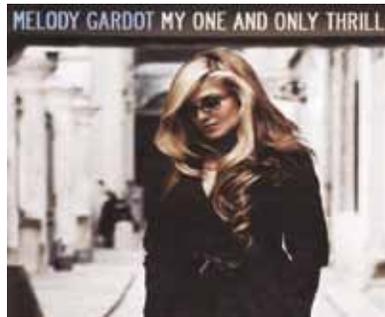
I got a call from Steve Macklam, who is Diana Krall's manager and also manages Melody. He explained that she was unhappy with the mixes of her latest album and asked me to take a shot at mixing a few songs as a favor to him. We went into the studio, and as soon as we loaded the data from her hard drives it became apparent what the problem was: There were a million plug-ins being used all over the place. There were two or three EQs on every track, filters, compressors, de-essers, you name it. There was more crap on everything than I've ever seen in my life—and as a result it really sounded weird. They had also mixed in the box [mixing inside recording software], which I still am not convinced is the way to go. So I started by taking everything off every track and began mixing it like I would a normal album—breaking out the tracks to an analog desk and using only analog outboard gear. Suddenly it started sounding just fine, because the original engineer—a guy by the name of Helik Hadar, who I've never met—actually did a pretty good job recording the instruments and vocals. At that point, Melody, who was sitting right next to me the whole time, began totally freaking out about how good it was. At 6 the next morning she called asking me to mix the rest of the album. Then I brought it to Doug Sax for mastering, who did his usual impeccable job. I have to say as good as it ended up sounding, I was really surprised it was nominated by the Grammy people for Best Engineered Album [Non-Classical]. From my point of view, it was really just a matter of taking all the crap off and putting it back to where everything sounded natural again. The problem with those original mixes was simply that things didn't sound real—not even her voice, and Melody has a beautiful singing voice.

Sounds like a classic case of less is more.

Absolutely. It seemed to me that they used all those plug-ins simply because Pro Tools gives you all those options. As we started taking them off, it was like removing layers of gauze and everything started sounding better and better. Plus I don't think that anything mixed in the box sounds as good as things that are mixed through an analog console.

Was Melody very involved in the the mixes?

She was here in the studio with me the whole time and let me know when she was happy or unhappy with something. She was a pleasure



to work with, and I think she's going to be a huge star. She's already big in Europe, and it's starting to happen for her here, too.

I understand she has hypersensitive hearing due to a car accident she suffered in 2003.

Yeah, and she has to wear dark glasses all the time because she's also sensitive to light. But the hearing thing wasn't a problem because I don't mix loud in the studio anyway.

From an engineer's viewpoint, how does Melody's voice compare with Diana Krall's?

Diana has got more of an intimate sound but Melody can really belt it out, and she hardly ever sings out of tune, which is amazing. It's as if she has a built-in Auto-Tune. Plus, she wrote all the songs on her album, apart from one cover: "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." I wrote that one. (laughs)

How do you feel about being nominated for a "Best Engineered" Grammy for an album that you only mixed and didn't record?

I don't know. It's OK, I guess. On the other hand, there are lots of albums nominated in that category that have tons of engineers. How much could each of those engineers have contributed? It's hard to say. I guess

I'd have more of a problem with it if I'd been nominated along with eight other engineers. [laughs] But *My One and Only Thrill* is a great album, and I guess the proof is in the pudding. I do have to say though that I was surprised that Diana Krall's *Quiet Nights*, which I mixed and engineered, didn't get nominated, because that's a beautiful-sounding record too. I thought if I was going to get any nomination this year, it would have been for that album, or for Willie Nelson's *American Classic*. But I guess no Willie Nelson album is ever going to be nominated for Best Engineered Album, is it? (laughs)

Do you ever use plug-ins at all, during either recording or mixing?

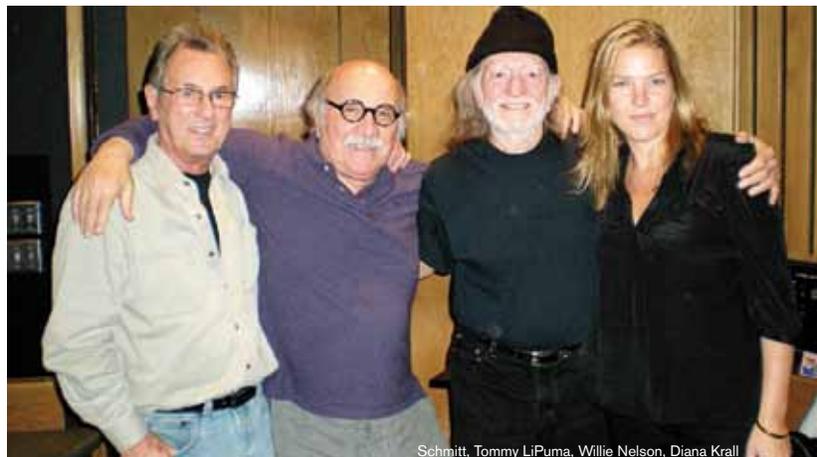
No, other than maybe to tune a word here and there. I have my own racks of analog gear that I use all the time. I just think they sound a lot better than any of the plug-ins out there.

So you pretty much just use Pro Tools as a tape machine.

Exactly. I love its convenience—it's great when you need to move something or cut and paste—but that's pretty much it.

Would you still be recording on analog tape today if budget allowed?

No, because of the convenience factor. The quality of digital today is so good—I always record at 96k and mix at 192k—that there's really no advantage to going back to analog. I find that working in digital makes everything happen faster—you can grab a piano solo from one take and fly it into another take in just a minute or two, instead of the long involved procedure if you were using tape. And if you've got a great take but there's just a couple of spots where the bass and the bass drum aren't hitting exactly together, you can just move one of



Schmitt, Tommy LiPuma, Willie Nelson, Diana Krall

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Schmitt, Rod Stewart



Eric Clapton, Schmitt, David Sanborn

them slightly to get them to lock together perfectly. And it just takes a second or two. There are just so many benefits to recording digitally. It's really just the plug-ins that I don't like, and I would never mix in the box.

What media do you mix to?

I mix to half-inch analog tape as well as to a Tascam DV-RA1000 at 192k digitally, through a custom converter made by a friend of [mastering engineer] Doug Sax. I take both to the mastering room and we listen to them both. Sometimes we end up using the tape and sometimes we use the 192. There's no real rhyme or reason to which one sounds better; it varies from track to track.

You're a proponent of getting sounds from mic placement rather than from EQ, but do you use very little EQ on your mixes too?

Yeah, I almost try to turn it off. If you look over my shoulder as I'm mixing, you'll see very few EQs.

What about dynamic processing like compression or limiting?

I mostly do hand limiting, especially on

vocals, where I'll simply ride the fader. When I do use a limiter or a compressor, it'll mostly be for an effect. Maybe I'll squash the hell out of a sound if I'm looking for a certain effect on it, but in general I use very little compression or limiting. If a compressor is affecting 2 or 3 dB, for me, that's an awful lot.

Can bad engineering obscure a good song?

Sure it can. But the reverse is true, too: Really good engineering can make a mediocre song or artist sound pretty damn good. I've had that happen. You'll say, "Wow, this is great," and then as you listen further you realize that it's not so great—it was just a good mix with good effects.

What's your general approach to recording vocals?

You've got to use a good windscreen, certainly, and you've got to make sure that the artist isn't swallowing the mic. That's one mistake that lots of singers make—they get too close to the mic, and the diaphragm just doesn't work right when you're that close. Plus, there's

the proximity effect. My recommendation is that you stand at the mic, then stick your thumb to your nose and then spread your fingers out. The singer shouldn't be any closer to the mic than that.

Is mic placement the same whether you're working with an expensive or inexpensive microphone?

It will be pretty much the same, but even with real expensive microphones, no two microphones sound exactly alike. I don't care what anybody tells you. So, I would start with the same placement, but that doesn't mean I'm going to leave it that way. And one of the best judges of that will be the musicians themselves—they can usually give you a good idea of where the best place is for the sound that their instrument is putting out, so you should start there. In fact, the best friend an engineer has in the studio is the musician. You've got to do whatever you can to make his life easier, because then he's going to make your life easier. The more comfortable the musicians are, the better they play, and the easier it is to make good-sounding records.

Al Schmitt won his first Grammy in 1962 for his work engineering Henry Mancini's *Hatari* soundtrack, and has gone on to take home many more—including, in 2006, the Trustees Award. Here are the recordings for which Schmitt won Grammys in the Best Engineered Recording, Non-Classical category alone through 2009.

Henry Mancini, *Hatari: Music From the Paramount Motion Picture Score* (1962)
 George Benson, *Breezin'* (1976)
 Steely Dan, *Aja* (1977)
 Steely Dan, "FM (No Static At All)" (1978)
 Toto, *Toto IV* (1982)
 Natalie Cole, *Unforgettable ... With Love* (1991)
 Quincy Jones, *Q's Jook Joint* (1995)
 Diana Krall, *When I Look in Your Eyes* (1999)
 Diana Krall, *The Look of Love* (2001)

