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Capital Studios

DON WAS

For one of rock's best-known producers, it all comes down to the song

By Howard Massey

DON WAS INSISTS THAT THE MAGIC TOUCH HE brings to his production projects—albums by some of rock's biggest names, many of which have sold in the multimillions—comes *through* him, not *from* him. "It requires lightning to strike in order for something amazing to happen," he says. "Hopefully, it eventually dawns on you that you're not the source."

Wherever it originates, Was' talent as a producer is something very special indeed. The man born Don Fagenson actually got his start on the other side of the glass, first earning notice as half of the eclectic R&B duo Was (Not Was) along with partner David Was (*née* Weiss) and establishing a reputation as one of the top session bass players in his native Detroit. The culmination of all these skills led to a quiet side career in production, which became his primary focus after his work on Bonnie Raitt's career-rejuvenating *Nick of Time* and the B-52s' pop breakthrough *Cosmic Thing* catapulted him to fame in 1989.

He spent the next two decades producing acts from the Rolling

Stones, Elton John and Bob Dylan to Kris Kristofferson, Carly Simon and Paula Abdul. In 1995 he expanded his horizons by directing the critically acclaimed short film *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times*, about Beach Boys mastermind Brian Wilson, and producing its accompanying soundtrack album. Was is as busy as ever these days, working with contemporary artists like Jill Sobule, Maia Sharp, Todd Snider, Pieta Brown and Sharon Little while producing original content for mydamnchannel.com and hosting the Sirius XM satellite radio program *Motor City Hayride Show*. He and David Was have reconvened in recent years to make new Was (Not Was) music, some of which is included on the new retrospective *Pick of the Litter 1980-2010*.

In our wide-ranging interview, Was combined a keen insight with a sharp wit and a healthy dose of humility. "At some point, you've got to ask yourself why people hire you to produce their record," he says. "If you assume it's because you know something, right there you're in trouble—because you can never know the unknowable."

'You always have to remember that people are paying you to be honest with them.'

Sometimes you play on the records you produce, sometimes you don't. How does that decision get made?

I won't volunteer to play on records I'm producing. If someone asks me, that's generally the determining factor. The one exception was the Bob Dylan album I produced [*Under the Red Sky*, 1990]. From the time I was 14 it had been my dream to play bass for him, so I painted myself into that picture, even though I may have been a little out of my league. You run the risk of compromising your ability to produce if you also play on a record, because if somebody doesn't like what you're doing everything gets very awkward. You can't really say to someone, "You can write a better bridge than that," when they can come back to you and say, "Well, you can probably practice the bass a little more." (*laughs*) I'm always out there with the musicians, regardless. With the Stones, for example, I sit at a [Hammond] B3 that's off, or I hold an acoustic guitar in my hand so I can at least get a sense of what it would be like to be playing with them. When you have a live band playing, the air is moving in the room—you feel the sound waves coming from the drums, and it makes the whole experience different than when you're listening over speakers in the control room, where there's often a lot of commotion going on anyway. I prefer being out in the studio with a pair of headphones on, hearing exactly what the musicians are hearing.

You also wrote a song with Dylan ["Mr. Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore," from the 2008 *Was (Not Was)* album *Boo!*]. What was that experience like?

That was really something. At the time we were mixing *Under the Red Sky*, my wife was vice president of A&R for Virgin Records, and she needed a couple of songs for Paula Abdul—so I said to Bob, "Let's write something for her." To my surprise, he said, "Great!" So we wrote a song and Paula ended up turning it down. (*laughs*) Things were quite jovial the whole time we were working on it. When the smoke cleared, I thought he and David [Was]—who co-wrote the lyrics—had come to a really poignant place, especially considering how loose the mood was in the room. There's some very strong imagery in the lyrics, though I didn't really know it was there until we set out to record the song and began to discuss what it was about. That's when I realized that they had really created a vivid, albeit impressionistic, sketch of a bygone era.



Do you find that advances in technology can lead an artist to give less than his or her all, figuring it can be fixed in the mix?

You know, that used to be true even long before Pro Tools. You'd lay down dozens of vocals and comp them, only to find that there's a kind of malaise that colors the performance. An artist can start to think, "Well, if I sing the vocal 75 times, there must be *one* time I got it right," but that's not necessarily true. It's all about motivating people to do their best, and realizing that you're not doing anyone a favor by letting them make a mistake. You always have to remember that people are paying you to be honest with them. But there are different ways of talking to people, and you have to find the most delicate way to express your opinion. Diplomacy is really important. Things like Pro Tools are a neutral shade to me anyway. It's like having a chainsaw: You can use it to trim your trees and make everything look nice, or you can use it to dismember somebody. (*laughs*) It really depends on what you do with it. For example, I can quite easily go down the abyss with plug-ins. They're like video games; you can get addicted to using them. I went through a period where I ruined a lot of records with plug-ins. (*laughs*) When they first introduced



the Digi 001 so you could run Pro Tools on your laptop and take the tracks back to your hotel with you, I went crazy with that kind of stuff. There's a Black Crowes record called *Lions* [2001] where I wreaked some serious sonic havoc on the proceedings by going back to my hotel room and normalizing everything. I didn't know any better! You can go way off on a tangent and ruin everything in an hour. I had to learn not to do that.

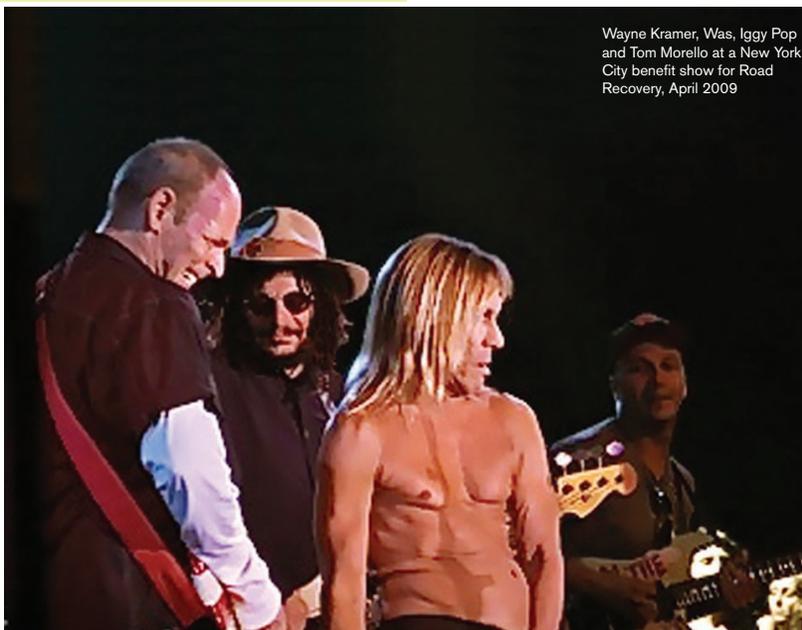
Do you mix with the final format in mind, in particular for MP3?

I've done it in the past, and I really should do it more often. In some ways, all this MP3 stuff takes you back to basics. If people are just going to be listening on earbuds, or through computer speakers, you better have a great song, and the singer better really mean it. In the end, the emotional content is the most important thing anyway. I actually like MP3s even better when they're really shitty: If you're going to go MP3, go all the way! (*laughs*) Whatever the format, it still comes down to people listening in their homes, where they might have one speaker up on a bookshelf and the other behind their sofa, or in their cars, where they never figured out that there's a balance control. The thing that stands the test of that is a good vocal and a good song. That's what it all comes down to.

Tell us a little bit about your new Internet project, *mydamnchannel.com*.

It was started by a guy named Rob Barnett. He told me, "Let's just accept the fact that we're now a couple of generations into kids thinking that music should be free—so rather than prosecute them, let's just give it away." We do give it away, but in return you have to look at some advertising. It's great for me, because I have to put some real restrictions on myself. For example, I can't spend a lot of money on it. So we'll

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Wayne Kramer, Was, Iggy Pop and Tom Morello at a New York City benefit show for Road Recovery, April 2009



Was, Paul Simon, Willie Nelson

record and mix a song, and film it, all in a day. We'll do it on a Friday and put it up on a Monday, which is really exhilarating; it's like the old days, where you'd cut a song and two days later you'd hear it playing on AM radio. It's been very exciting and the response has been great, even though so far it's made no money whatsoever. (*laughs*)

With the old record company model in tatters, everything seems to be about seeking new lines of distribution these days.

Yes, that model does appear to be dead, and it's tragic. I've actually got some strong, albeit unpopular, ideas about what really went wrong. For starters, I don't blame kids for downloading music. Here's the way I see it. [Late former Atlantic Records president] Ahmet Ertegun used to take credit for inventing the album. He claimed that he was hanging out with a friend who owned a record store, and one Saturday morning

there was a line of kids waiting to buy a single. As Ahmet was watching these kids line up, it occurred to him that if these kids were so hyped up on buying this one song for a few cents, he could just as easily get them to buy a whole album of crap for a dollar ... as long as that album of crap included that song. And that's the way the record business went for many years: Albums included one or two hit songs, along with a bunch of crap. That was fine so long as vinyl albums cost a dollar or two, but sometime shortly after the advent of CDs some marketing guy got it into his head that if you put 72 minutes of music on a CD—which it could hold—instead of the 36 minutes you could fit on a vinyl album, you could charge more money for it. But there was not commensurate value in those extra 36 minutes. In fact, it pretty much washed out the quality of most records because very few people can maintain their interest in *anything* for 72 minutes. So the quality of records went down at the same time that prices skyrocketed, and people

got sick of it. They didn't want to pay \$20 for something crappy, so as soon as they had the option of buying just one song for a buck, they went for it.

So what's the solution?

Simple: Make better music and charge a reasonable price for it. I'm convinced that if artists would make albums that consisted of 10 great songs and sold it for just a few bucks, people would buy it. You know, in the old days Robert Johnson would stand in front of a barber shop in the city where he was playing, singing for free in order to drum up business for that night's show. Then someone came along and said, "Look, we'll record you so that, instead of standing in front of this barbershop, people will be able to hear you on the radio and then they'll come to your show from far and wide." That's the real foundation of the record business. It used to be all about live performance, and now we seem to be coming full circle.

ESSENTIAL WAS

Don Was has been making records for more than 30 years as a producer, artist and session musician. To get an idea of the wide range of his abilities, check out these albums.

- Was (Not Was), *Are You Okay?* (1990)
- Bonnie Raitt, *Luck of the Draw* (1991)
- Iggy Pop, *Brick By Brick* (1990)
- Willie Nelson, *Across the Borderline* (1993)
- Brian Wilson, *I Just Wasn't Made for These Times* (1995)
- The Rolling Stones, *A Bigger Bang* (2005)
- Kris Kristofferson, *This Old Road* (2007)
- Todd Snider, *The Excitement Plan* (2009)

