

PRODUCER



DANIEL LANOIS

A master producer vows to raise the standard yet again

By Chris Neal

DANIEL LANOIS WAS RIDING HIS MOTORCYCLE DOWN A Los Angeles street in June when he was cut off by a car coming from the opposite direction. He veered to miss it, swerved onto the sidewalk—and woke up a few minutes later on his back in a parking lot, suffering from six broken bones, a cracked pelvis and internal bleeding. Lanois spent the next three weeks in intensive care, and has been recuperating ever since. “It was not comfortable, I’ll tell you,” he says, peeling an orange at the L.A. home of Neil Young’s manager, Elliot Roberts. “I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

Lanois’ bones have mended, but the crash left him with an adjustment of perspective likely to outlast his injuries. “It sharpened my priorities,” he says. “I realized that acquisition comes easy—you can always get another house or a boat or whatever. But what interests me most is making sure that I surround myself with great people and make great records. I want to raise the standard as far as I can push it.” That’s a bar that Lanois has already set high,

having spent the last three decades producing groundbreaking works for artists like U2 (usually in tandem with longtime collaborator Brian Eno), Bob Dylan, Peter Dinklage and many others.

He most recently pushed artistic barriers with his production of Young’s *Le Noise*, which found the artist accompanied only by his own guitar and Lanois’ adventurous sonic manipulation. *Le Noise* was recorded at a residence in L.A., a symptom of Lanois’ evolving approach to production work. The producer and multi-instrumentalist was based at his own New Orleans studio, Kingsway, throughout the 1990s before selling the facility and becoming the have-gear-will-travel kind of guy he is today. “I have very transportable equipment now,” says Lanois, who keeps facilities in L.A. and Toronto. “I just like catching music wherever it’s on fire.” That philosophy extends to Lanois’ own new band, Black Dub, which recorded its new self-titled debut album in Jamaica, Mexico, Toronto and L.A. We spoke with Lanois about his philosophy of production, and the oft-overlooked value of power outlets.

‘My process is more about friendship and psychology than anything technical!’

Why did you leave Kingsway?

I had a nice studio in New Orleans, but I didn’t want to be in the studio business anymore. I have my small Neve consoles that I’ve had all along, a bunch of BCM10s and some Melbournes and Kelsos. That’s what I usually use for preamps, and they can be shipped pretty easily. The listening console changes according to what’s in good shape in my equipment closet. I have a Heritage 4000 in Toronto, which is a front-of-house console that I brought into the studio. It’s got 32 sends per channel, so it’s pretty wild. That opens up a lot of possibilities. The new Neil Young record was mixed on a little Melbourne with a honkin’ EQ. It’s great for guitar sounds.

How did you find the sound you wanted for Neil’s album?

You never know when you’re going to get something great. We hit a sweet spot in this house. We couldn’t have gotten that sound in



On stage with Black Dub

a conventional studio. It just happened to be the sound of that mezzanine foyer, which has a lot of body—and was great for the guitar sound. We used two Fender Twin-Amps from the ‘50s, cranked all the way to 10. Neil’s guitar had a split pickup so the bass came out of one amp and the high end came out of the other amp. It was like a secret formula. We positioned him vocally so that it was more like he was singing into a PA. That gave us particularly great diction, because if you’re not wearing cans you articulate your words better. You don’t have the comfort of the voice right in your eardrums, so you work a little harder. I think that suited the project. All the vocals were live, so we were pretty much restricted to the dynamic mics. We used a Beta 58 Shure mic on the vocal, and that seemed to work out pretty good. We got some feedback a couple of times, but we made adjustments. That was the spirit of it.



With Willie Nelson

Are those limitations useful?

I think so. In the case of the Neil record, we weren’t going to have a band—it was one man standing and no overdubs, so that was quite a restriction in itself. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do, but Neil was very supportive of my sonics. Any enhancement to the already existing guitar performance was fair play. So I did that rather than stacking other instruments. That was quite a limitation, but I think we got a unique, rocking record out of it. I don’t think that having a lot of equipment necessarily yields the best results.

How did Black Dub come together?

I knew [singer] Trixie Whitley’s father [late guitarist Chris Whitley] back in the day, so I’m a family friend of sorts. I ran into her and her mother in Belgium and she said, “I’m singing and writing songs now.” I heard her on a CD and thought she was great, so I invited her to do a project at Berklee College of Music in Boston as a trial run—I was a visiting professor at the time. That came out so great, and we had so much fun, that we decided to carry on and start this band.

What does the name mean?

I’ve always had a fascination for Jamaican dub, and I’ve invented this new dub system

of mine called “black dub.” I extract from an already existing sound—let’s say, in the case of Neil Young, his guitar. I essentially sample a short section—just one chord, maybe—and I work on that chord separately from the rest of the track. I manipulate it. I might add extra harmonics, maybe an octave below. I play around with it ‘til I hit on something really great, then I spin it back into the track. It’s not something you can do quickly, it’s quite a laborious process. But if the sutures are hidden, in the end what comes of it is a very larger-than-life sound.

How did you come up with that?

I’ve been working on this idea for 20 years. I’ve just finally gotten good at it. To give you an example, take the opening song from Neil’s record, “Walk With Me.” It goes into this electro-shuffle groove. That was a byproduct of me sampling Neil’s guitar and voice. I hit on this thing and built a new ending for the song, which he loved. He started encouraging me to create these sections for his songs, which was very trusting and sweet of him. But I’m still flying by the seat of my pants with it. I wish I could tell you there’s a specific system. You do have to be musical to go up this street. It’s not something you can turn on for an entire song, because then you get train wrecks. But if you’re musical and understand arrangement and chords, you can put them back in the right spot.

Should producers also be musicians?

I don’t think you have to be musical to produce records. I’ve always envied those great producers who are big-picture people—like Chris Blackwell, who produced a lot of great Jamaican records. He’s not a player himself, but he understands content, tempo and balance. That would be his technique. Mine is absolutely musical. I try to have an understanding of every note—how the bass



With U2 at the 44th Annual Grammy Awards, February 2002

PRODUCER



With engineer Mark Howard

'I don't think that having a lot of equipment necessarily yields the best results.'

part runs, what the riff is. I'm very much a musician first and a technician second.

Do you keep up with technology?

I've always welcomed a new carrier, whether it be a recorder or whatever. There's a new Canadian machine called the RADAR [digital multitrack recorder], and I'm enjoying that. I can do without a lot of splutter and crosstalk—all those old analog problems I don't miss. But anything that's been good to me along the way is a piece of equipment I'll keep around. Once the dust settles, you find that there's always one box from any era that gives you a certain sound, so it's good to not throw it out. I still use a Sony C-57 for certain vocals, which is a great mic from

the '50s—but I also like contemporary mics. I try and mix them all up.

Do you have a favorite piece of gear?

I'm still using my AMS harmonizer. That has a very nice voltage-controlled oscillator. You can't beat it. I think it's fantastic. I don't have to have one computer program that provides everything in the universe. I like the romance of having one box that sits in the corner and has one sound, like a piano.

How do you establish a working relationship with an artist?

I recently worked with Brandon Flowers on his new solo record [*Flamingo*], that's a pretty good example. He pretty much had his record



With Brian Eno, 1984

carved out, so I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I was honest with him. I said, "There's a couple of songs here that I don't get any feeling from. Why don't we cut them from scratch again?" I started asking him about his life, how he grew up, where he came from and what he's done. He told me about moving into his aunt's house in Las Vegas at 14, and it became clear he should write a song about that. That's part of my process—it's more about friendship and psychology than anything technical.

What's going on with U2?

I'm in touch with [lead singer] Bono, but we haven't spoken about music recently—we just talk about life. We're both injured soldiers. [Bono suffered a serious back injury in May.] There's a whole library of delights left over from *No Line on the Horizon* [2009], because we just kept coming up with great things. There's plenty to pick from, some fascinating works. But they're always writing songs, and who knows? That material might have since been overshadowed by new stuff that they're excited about.

You once said the key to good recording is having plenty of power outlets.

I still rant on about that. [*laughs*] I need three ingredients before I can start work: lots of power outlets, lots of mic cables and lots of guitar cables. Somebody always comes in with another box to plug in, and people will be on all fours trying to find an outlet. The absurdity of that! It's a slap in the face to productivity.

ESSENTIAL LANOIS

Here are a few of the recordings that best demonstrate Daniel Lanois' production expertise.

- Peter Gabriel, *So* (1986)
- Robbie Robertson, *Robbie Robertson* (1987)
- Emmylou Harris, *Wrecking Ball* (1995)
- Bob Dylan, *Time Out of Mind* (1997)
- Willie Nelson, *Teatro* (1998)
- U2, *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (2000)
- Dashboard Confessional, *Dusk and Summer* (2006)
- Neil Young, *Le Noise* (2010)



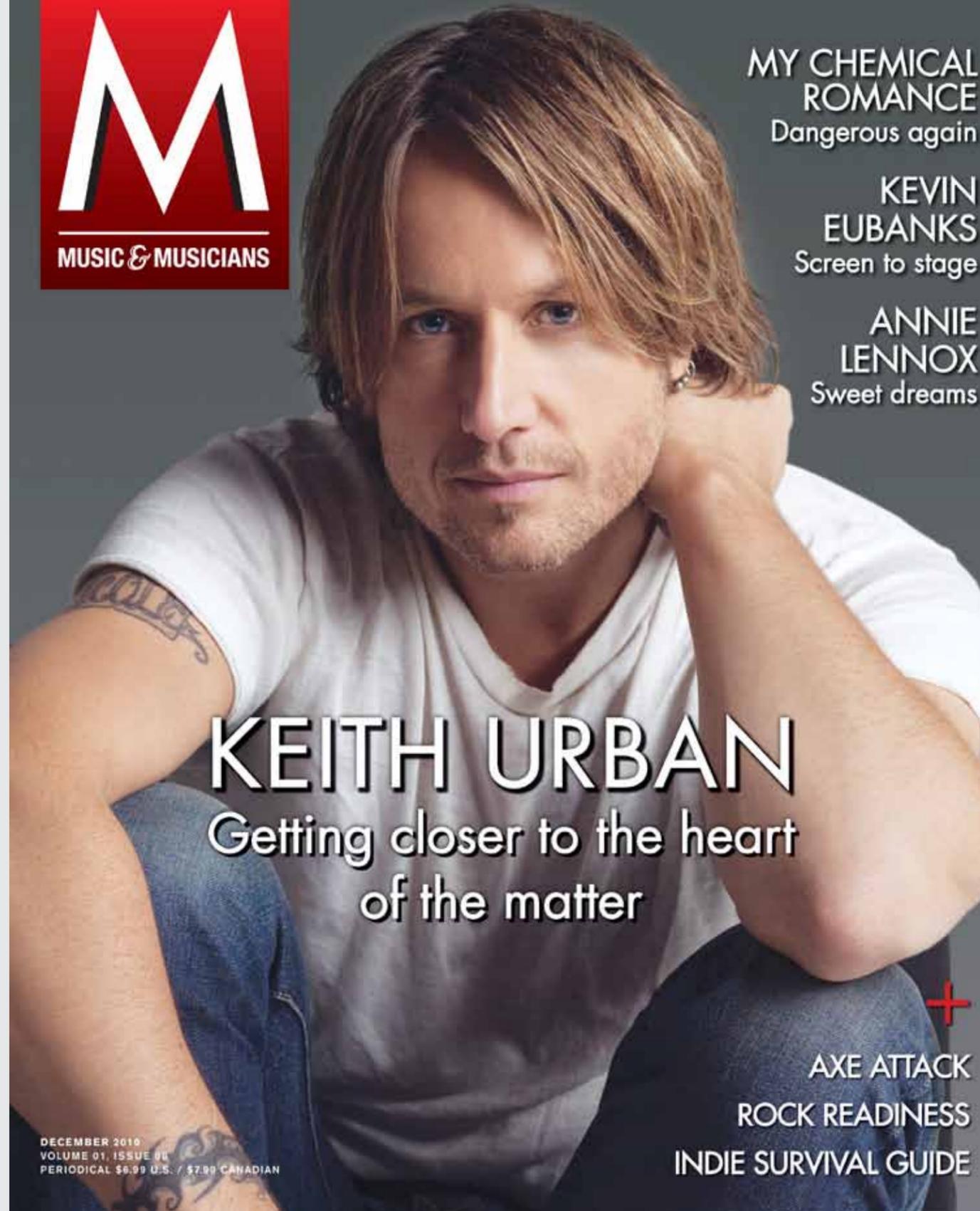
REGINA SPEKTOR | YOKO ONO | CAKE | BRYAN ADAMS



MY CHEMICAL ROMANCE
Dangerous again

KEVIN EUBANKS
Screen to stage

ANNIE LENNOX
Sweet dreams



KEITH URBAN

Getting closer to the heart of the matter

AXE ATTACK
ROCK READINESS
INDIE SURVIVAL GUIDE

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