

PRODUCER



GREG KURSTIN

Blazing his own trail from jazz scholar to pop hit-maker

By Michael Gallant

HE'S PRODUCED A BEVY OF WILDLY SUCCESSFUL ARTISTS including Kelly Clarkson, Pink, Ke\$ha, Tegan and Sara, James Blunt, Dido and the Shins. But Greg Kurstin came to his hit-making career through an unconventional route—as a student of jazz piano. “I loved arranging songs and finding different voicings for chords,” says Kurstin, who studied at New York’s New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music.

Yet it’s those very years spent poring over complex scales, keys and chord changes that played a vital role in his pop success. “It’s still something I carry over into my pop music work,” he says. “It’s really important to me that the notes I’m choosing strike the right emotional chord.”

As an outlet from the “intense jazz culture in New York,” Kurstin would often experiment with a four-track recorder, laying down beats inspired by the likes of Public Enemy. But his first professional forays into pop production began after he moved back to his native L.A.

in the early 1990s, having grown disillusioned with the jazz scene. With singer and songwriter Tommy Jordan, Kurstin formed Geggy Tah, a group that would earn a Billboard Top 20 single in 1996, and help Kurstin develop his production chops.

Kurstin also began work as a touring and session musician for groups like the Flaming Lips and Red Hot Chili Peppers, and served as music director for Beck. He continued to grow his resume, producing and writing songs for artists like Lily Allen, Kylie Minogue, Jessica Simpson, Natasha Bedingfield and Britney Spears. “Regardless of the genre, I just try to get into what the song needs and bring out the best of it,” says Kurstin.

When not in the studio with chart-topping superstars, the three-time Ivor Novello Award-winning producer plays with his own band, the Bird and the Bee, an indie pop duo signed to Blue Note Records. Kurstin discussed with us his creative process, changing up genres, and studio accidents that can conjure platinum-selling magic.

‘It’s hard to plan what will happen in the studio, so you have to keep an open mind!’

How was it producing Kelly Clarkson? She can *really* sing, that’s for sure. She’s cool, professional and easy to work with. She’ll do a few takes to get warmed up and after that, you’re getting awesome take after awesome take. We did some vocal comping, but nothing extensive.

What’s the story behind the megahit “Stronger (What Doesn’t Kill You)”?

I was both the producer and a songwriter, but there was a somewhat finished version of that song that existed before I came into the picture. It was slower, and the chords and feel of the track were different from the version that was released. The label wasn’t convinced it would work for her. I had previously worked with Kelly on “Honestly” and it went really well, so her A&R played it for me and asked, “Think you could do anything with this?”



And you heard potential in it.

I thought it had a strong chorus and that we could do something with it. That meant I’d have to speed it up, change the chords and feel, and maybe come up with a guitar riff at the beginning—things like that. I asked for an a capella track of the vocals from the demo, which were done by a demo singer and not Kelly, and I sped up that vocal track and put it into Logic. I ended up building a rough version of what I wanted to do with it around that a capella track. I came up with more of the guitar and bass rhythmic feel of the verses, and then we basically had it.

What did you do on the track after that?

I played every instrument, recorded her vocals, and produced it. I’m an old keyboard nerd—I have a studio full of analog synths and organs from my session keyboard days. But on this song, I used a lot of soft synth plug-ins, and the Access Virus TI 2. All of my effects are in the box, plug-ins that I use to tweak stuff and make it sound as freaked-out



Kelly Clarkson

as possible. I’ll put a sound in, sometimes later Wayne Coyne asked me to give him something that the band could record. I gave them four or five tracks, and they chose one that’s probably one of my favorites I’ve ever done, “Haven’t Got a Clue”—an instrumental track that was going to be for my possible electronic solo record before I started producing pop. [laughs]

What about guitar and drums?

I go back and forth between using real amps and amp plug-ins. I used a 1964 Vox AC30 and my Fender Telecaster on the guitar elements. I run my guitar signal chain through an Altec mixer and a Fairchild 660 for an old-school analog sound. There weren’t many effects on the guitar except for compression—maybe a little EQ. All my drum sounds come from the sampler in Logic. They’re custom sounds that I’ve sampled and collected over the years.

What about working with Pink?

It was so easy and productive working with her. We had maybe 10 days together and we wrote a song nearly every day, and every song we worked on turned into an album cut or a bonus track. I would prepare some track ideas for her before she got into the room, and she’d pick out what she thought was cool. Then she’d work very quickly when it came time for lyrics. She’s extremely gifted—we’d record one or two takes, and

they’d be flawless. Other than layering and adding in harmonies, I don’t think there was any vocal editing.

How did you produce Tegan and Sara?

They’ve been making records for a while and wanted to expand their sound and try something different. They had heard a lot of music that I had worked on and reached out to me. A lot of their demos felt very synth-based, and being a synth nerd, I got excited. We ended up doing eight songs together. I played everything except for drums on the record. I love their songwriting and I’m proud of what we did.

What about producing the Flaming Lips?

I had played with the Lips, and sometime later Wayne Coyne asked me to give him something that the band could record. I gave them four or five tracks, and they chose one that’s probably one of my favorites I’ve ever done, “Haven’t Got a Clue”—an instrumental track that was going to be for my possible electronic solo record before I started producing pop. [laughs]

Did you approach the Shins differently than a pop act?

With the Shins, it wasn’t actually that far from what I normally do. Most people don’t seem to know this, but historically James Mercer would actually play a lot of the instruments himself. He had his musicians, but he worked a lot of it out by himself. So the two of us did the core of the record. We split duties, him on guitar and me on bass, for example. Sometimes we would re-cut something, and eventually we would have guest musicians come in and play over it. That was pretty much it—we played a lot of it, just overdubbing ourselves.

Describe your production vision.

Back in my session-musician days, I used



The Flaming Lips

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Tegan and Sara



Pink

'It's amazing how much you can do with just a laptop and recording software!'

to just dive into all different kinds of music. I would play a country song, then a blues tune, a jazz thing, and then some electronic pop—and that's what I do now. It's hard to plan what will happen in the studio, so you have to keep an open mind and try to bring out the best in an artist. If I'm working with a great vocalist, I try to find and underline or offset the emotion in those vocals. It's something intangible for me, but I try to be open-minded and understand there isn't a single way of doing things. I'm always surprising myself when I find new ways to work, because what worked last time won't necessarily work the next time.

Happy accidents in the studio?

That happens every week on different levels—great moments, and you have to be open to them. I may be writing a song or playing

something and think it's going to go one way, and suddenly something else happens I didn't expect and the song takes a drastic change of direction. "OK, that's cool. I guess what I thought was going to be a reggae song is now a speed metal song." [laughs] You just never know how things are going to go.

Share an example?

When I worked with Lily Allen we wrote songs starting on piano. Later, I reinvented these songs and come up with some weird drum sounds and remember thinking, "Wow, I had no idea this song was going to be so beat-driven." That happened on "The Fear." It was one accident after another, where the feel of the song unveiled itself. I thought it was going to be a half-time drum vibe—and then it turned into an up-tempo, double-time feel. That's just how I work, I

like to throw stuff against the wall, see how it sounds, and follow where the song leads.

Advice for aspiring producers?

It's good to be in a city where there's lots of music being made. Try to become an intern at a studio where a lot of recording is happening, so you can just watch and experience the process. Just being there is great because these are the people who move on to be the famous mixers, engineers and producers. The other thing is to learn to do things yourself. Learning how to use Logic was one of the best things I did. I wasn't a computer person—I was a musician who didn't know how to email. But once I got a handle on the basics of the program, I learned to be self-sufficient. I just wanted to make the music myself. It's amazing how much you can do with just a laptop and recording software.

Lindey Byrnes, Tegan and Sara

ESSENTIAL KURSTIN

Check out a few of the many albums that showcase Kurstin's production prowess.

- Tegan and Sara, *Hearthrob* (2013)
- The Shins, *Port of Morrow* (2012)
- Kelly Clarkson, *Stronger* (2011)
- Ke\$ha, *Cannibal* (2010)
- The Bird and the Bee, *The Bird and the Bee* (2007)
- Kylie Minogue, *X* (2007)
- Pink, *I'm Not Dead* (2006)
- Geggy Tah, *Into the Oh* (2001)



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