

PRODUCER



GLEN BALLARD

The acclaimed producer favors artistic relationships over one-hit flings

By Michael Gallant

GLEN BALLARD'S RESUME IS STUFFED WITH BIG NAMES. He's collaborated with everyone from Michael Jackson, Quincy Jones and Alanis Morissette to Dave Matthews, Annie Lennox and Christina Aguilera. His production and songwriting chops have earned him six Grammy Awards, worldwide sales of more than 150 million records, and a reputation as one of the most in-demand producers in the business.

Making those achievements even more remarkable is his lack of musical education. "I got my bachelor's in English, journalism and political science," says Ballard. "I never studied music formally, except for some piano lessons." No matter. The day after graduating, Ballard moved to L.A. for a gig at Elton John's record label, where he landed his first break when Kiki Dee recorded his tune "One Step." "It did well," he says. "Not a No. 1 hit, but it changed my life."

Ballard's first publishing deal came in 1978, and song placements with a wide variety of artists quickly followed. "I've

always closely related songwriting to producing," he says. "Because I started as a songwriter, I was constantly making interesting demos of my work. Those demos started sounding more like records, and people started hiring me to make the records themselves."

A long-term working relationship with Quincy Jones further boosted Ballard's career, as he helped craft records for Michael Jackson while co-writing hits like "Man in the Mirror." His partnership with Alanis Morissette on her 1995 blockbuster *Jagged Little Pill* cemented Ballard's reputation—the record garnered multiple Grammys and a spot on *Rolling Stone's* Greatest Albums of All Time list.

In the last decade, Ballard has added Broadway composer to his resume, with projects like *Ghost: The Musical*. He continues to produce artists, including rising jazz trumpet sensation Christian Scott, and has also lent his name and support to the Glen Ballard Music Composition and Production Scholarship, which helps aspiring producers at the Los Angeles College of Music.

'There's something really special about taking the time to make a full album with an artist.'

What's behind the scholarship?

For me, a huge part of music is about learning how to collaborate, and teaching and mentorship are natural extensions of what we do as musicians. We help each other. I like to pass on anything I might know, and help students be around people they can learn from. Quality music education is a great advantage, so we're always looking to help people who really want to go for it but may not have the means.

Albums you're especially proud of?

The first Wilson Phillips record, *Jagged Little Pill* with Alanis Morissette, *Love, Shelby* with Shelby Lynne, and *Everyday* with the Dave Matthews Band. For those four records I not only produced, but I was also heavily involved with the writing—and loved the artists involved. I've done tracks with dozens of different acts, but there's



Shelby Lynne

something really special about taking the time to make a full album with an artist, rather than just trying to write a hit single. Spending that time allows you to experiment with a lot of different things.

Are you goal-oriented with projects?

I'm just looking for a way to make a song successful, creatively speaking. Writing music is all about problem-solving. Once you get one phrase, there are so many ways that you can move forward from there. Putting together the right combination—that's the challenge. It's a joyful exercise, but so much heavy lifting is done in those early stages.

How so?

Something I've been thinking about recently is artist development, which isn't like what it was just 10 years ago. An artist needs room to find his or her voice, and not just a three-minute voice on the radio. If artists have something unique and interesting, it's better to develop that than find an easy solution that might make for a quick, catchy hit, but have



Quincy Jones

nothing do with the artist as a whole. When I talk about heavy lifting, it's taking the time to discover and understand what the artist is really about. For singer-songwriters, the best, clearest and most honest work starts at the beginning—figuring out what you want to say and how you want to say it.

A lengthy process?

I love the opportunity to spend a few months with an artist and write songs, or if they've already written a bunch, to shape them. You can get your hits out of that process, but more important, I always want to find an artist's distinctive fingerprints. You can build a career on that. It's hard to build a career on a one-hit single.

Do you often work this way?

Over the last three decades, that's essentially how I've made records with people who want to write. We don't spend an inordinate amount of time, but we do take quality time without anybody listening—a safety zone—which is usually my studio. That's where you get to try things out, take some chances and figure out what you're going to do. That's a vital process—and if you get that right, making the record is pure joy.

What about recording?

In most cases, I'm making the record as I go. I work out of Logic, so once we get an idea

going, I start making some sort of recording of what we're doing. Many times, especially in those early stages, we invent something that can never be better. There's some magic that can happen in those moments, even if it's just a riff. I try to keep whatever's good about those early recordings and get rid of the rest. With Alanis, for example, it was one song a day, and that's about as quickly as you can do it.

How did that work?

We'd write a song at noon and by midnight it'd be done. The whole day, Alanis would be singing as we wrote, so by midnight, she would know the song and be ready to record. She'd sing one or two takes and that would be it. That all of the vocals on *Jagged Little Pill* were sung the day the song was written has something to do with the power of that album. There doesn't seem to be anything premeditated about it. It was literally the two of us in my studio. We added some live musicians after the fact—live drums on several of the songs, some musicians on other tracks. It's in those situations where the magic can really happen, but it takes a huge amount of trust on both sides. The artist has to trust me to go with them down some unknown road. It doesn't always work, but when it does, it's a whole lot of fun.

Have you had similar experiences?

I did the exact same thing with Dave Matthews. We wrote 12 songs in 10 days, then the band cut the record in a month, really because I didn't have any more time with them. But I'm a big fan of the flow. When it's right, you can get so much done in a couple months, or even a month. If it's not working, you can't get anything done in a year.

You've worked with talented musicians.

The most fun I've ever had was the 30 minutes of watching Eddie Van Halen



No Doubt

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JONNY LANG | RALPH STANLEY | KARMIN | SUZANNE VEGA



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SARAH MCLACHLAN
Fueling a fresh start



NICKEL CREEK
Won't stop

DOLLY PARTON
Still hungry

KAISER CHIEFS
New intent



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STARS ON FILM
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