

PRODUCER



## MARK RONSON

One of pop's top producers is also one of the world's hottest artists

By Michael Gallant

FEW IN THE MUSIC WORLD CAN MELD THE ROLES OF artist, producer and DJ as seamlessly as Mark Ronson. His latest album, *Uptown Special*, encapsulates that trifecta, showcasing his production and engineering chops, songwriting and arranging prowess, instrumental expertise, and ability to electrify dance floors around the world. The album—featuring guest stars Stevie Wonder, Trombone Shorty and Mystikal—generated the smash “Uptown Funk” featuring Bruno Mars and spent a stunning 14 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, selling more than 10 million copies worldwide.

Yet what steals the spotlight in Ronson's career is his wildly impressive resume producing other artists—from Adele, Christina Aguilera and Lana Del Rey to Bruno Mars, Nas, Kaiser Chiefs and Paul McCartney. He's also won three Grammys, including two for Amy Winehouse's *Back to Black* and the hit single “Rehab.”

Ronson's musical journey began when he picked up drums and guitar as a child in the U.K. After moving to New York as a teen,

Ronson delved into the world of hip-hop, honing his chops on the turntables and quickly becoming an in-demand DJ. Ronson's debut album, 2003's *Here Comes the Fuzz*, capitalized on his expanding popularity, featuring guest stars Q-Tip, Questlove and Weezer's Rivers Cuomo. “I'm not a conventional artist in that I don't sit down, write songs, and then sing them,” he says. “Most of my role as an artist is to basically be the producer.”

When producing others, Ronson sees his role as fluid. “If you're working with a band like the Kaiser Chiefs, where they write their own music, you're there to serve as arranger, engineer and life coach,” he says. “If I'm working with Action Bronson, being the producer means creating the track in a more conventional hip-hop way. Then someone like Amy Winehouse is a combination of the two. She wrote most of the songs, but we worked out a lot of the arrangements together. So when I produce other artists, I'm basically doing all of the same things I'd be doing on my own records.”

**‘The producer’s job is to make an artist feel like he or she can accomplish anything and everything.’**

### Tell us about working with Jeff Bhasker on *Uptown Special*.

I'd been a big fan of Jeff Bhasker from his work with Alicia Keys, and I liked how his chord changes moved. The way he wrote "Try Sleeping With a Broken Heart" made the song feel effortless. We ended up working together on Bruno Mars' second record, and when the time came to work on this record, I asked Jeff to co-write and co-produce. He's a remarkable talent—great songwriter and producer, Berklee-trained pianist, and he's great with sounds and acoustic performances. I knew early on I wanted deeper chords and something more harmonically complex for this album, so getting Jeff involved helped push things that direction.

### How did the collaboration go?

There was one time when I was playing some guitar parts for "Uptown Funk" with



Adele

Jeff producing, and immediately after, I thought, "Oh, I've just been produced!" The producer's job is to make an artist feel like he or she can accomplish anything and everything. Hopefully that's what I've been doing with other artists and performers, and that's what Jeff did with me. This was my first time sitting on the other side.

### Bruno Mars also co-produced tracks.

Bruno is an incredible producer, and he's also a hook wizard. Everything that comes out of him creatively, whether it's a horn line, guitar riff, or background part, is a massive hook. I don't know anybody else quite like that.

### How did you come to work with Mystikal on "Feel Right"?

I had first heard a song that Mystikal had put out two years ago. It was an underground hit, this awesome, uptempo frenetic thing with him half-rapping, half-James Brown soul-power era talking over the track. I loved it. When Jeff and I went on a trip south to



Bruno Mars

discover new vocalists, we met with Mystikal in Baton Rouge. Nothing happened that night, but about a month later while we were recording at Memphis' Royal Studios, that track started as a jam. Three weeks later, Mystikal recorded vocals. There were no clever tricks to recording him. We tried out maybe two mics, chose the best—and that was the deal. Every verse of that song is him performing straight through. At Royal Studios, I couldn't see him too well, since the vocal booth is far from the control room, but he came out of the booth drenched in sweat like he played a two-hour show. He puts everything into his vocal performance and brings it to life.

### How did you get Stevie Wonder?

I had written the song and, every time I heard it in my head, the melody was being played with his signature harmonica tone. I thought it was such a pipe dream to have him play on it, but I decided to send his manager an email and tell him he's my favorite musician, songwriter and maybe even producer—people forget what a great record producer he is. Stevie was on the road, but he liked the track and said he'd cut the tracks at a Chicago studio. I booked the studio, half expecting it not to happen, and when the parts came back it was such a crazy feeling: This guy—whose music and harmonica playing can reduce me to tears—

was playing on something that I wrote? The part is only a minute, but I listened to it maybe 50 times in a row, just taking it in.

### Did you process the part?

Stevie has such a beautiful tone, and the part was recorded well, so I could have left it naked and it would have been fine. But that said, when you get a gift like a Stevie Wonder harmonica take, you want to make sure that it's the absolute best it can be, even if that means adding only the tiniest bit of chorus or plate reverb to it. I usually don't obsess over those details, or I leave it to the great mix engineers I work with, but this time I spent three days trying different plate reverb and chorus settings.

### Is it common for producers to be DJs?

In hip-hop, it's almost a tradition that the producer role grew out of being the DJ in a rap group—look at Dr. Dre, Clark Kent, DJ Premier. It's a little more common for producers to also be DJs in hip-hop, but when you're talking about more traditional producers like Rick Rubin or George Martin, that's not necessarily the case.

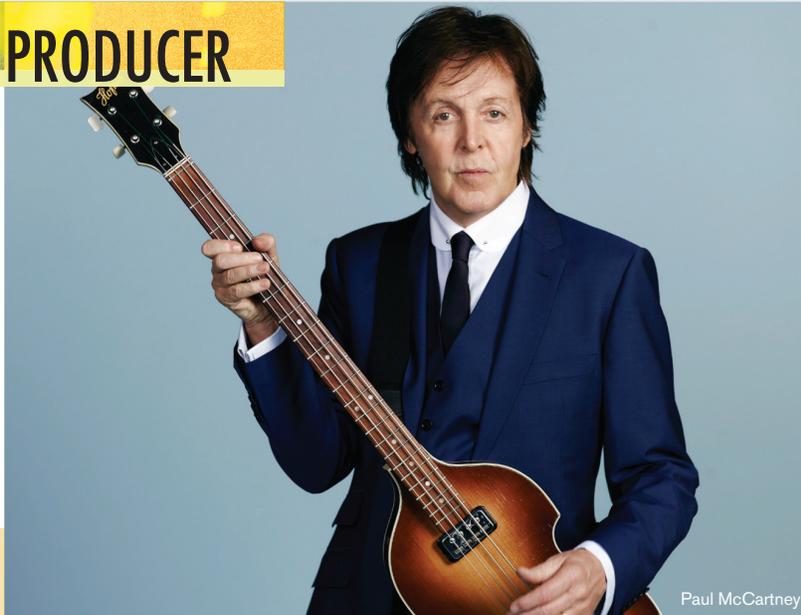
### How has your DJ experience informed your production process?

The most obvious way is that as a DJ you develop a sense of rhythm and know what makes people move, though you don't necessarily need to be a DJ to figure those things out. You also develop an encyclopedic knowledge of music and arrangements, and that's a healthy thing to have. It's our equivalent of going to college to study music theory, not that that would have been a bad thing itself—I kind of wish I had. But instead, having this deep knowledge of 60 years of pop music is not a bad thing to be able to draw on in the studio. Given that perspective, the goal is to always make something timeless. But it



Kaiser Chiefs

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Paul McCartney

## 'In hip-hop, it's almost a tradition that the producer role grew out of being the DJ in a rap group.'

depends on the day and what mood you're in when you go into the studio. I don't have an absolute rule.

### Describe working with Paul McCartney.

He's everybody's hero, and the Beatles wrote the playbook in so many ways, from songwriting to production techniques. It was a little terrifying working with him, not only because he's such an amazing producer in his own right, but because I felt like I was up against the ghosts of every great producer he's ever worked with. I was in the room not just with Paul but also with Nigel Godrich, George Martin, Trevor Horn. So it was harrowing at first, but he's used to it because everybody is probably freaked out to work with him. He gives you a day or two to get over the jitters, and then you deliver and do what you're there to do.

### What did you learn from him?

Quite a lot about arrangements, just seeing how his mind worked regarding textures and layers. Sometimes he would play wine glasses to make long tones, and other times seeing him take out the old tape machine that he used on "Tomorrow Never Knows" for guitar loops was great. It was inspiring to see somebody at that level—who could just put out a record of anything and have people love it because it's Paul McCartney—really delve into things like step sequencing a Moog synthesizer, free-playing a LinnDrum, or just experimenting with other pieces of gear.

### He's into music tech?

Since it's so embedded into our consciousness, we forget that every time the Beatles made a record they used the newest technology available to them. It



Amy Winehouse

makes sense that he'd still love doing that. One day, I remember him coming in after listening to Frank Ocean, telling me that the character of his Auto-Tune was different from the one Kanye West was using on tour, and suggesting that we try that one out. I'm a DJ and in my 30s and I didn't even know that.

### How was it producing Robbie Williams?

He was one of the first big pop stars that I really worked with. I went to his house in L.A. and played some demos that I'd been working on for my second album, and he was into them. He's a massive fan of all sorts of music, but I think he's also a real hip-hop head at heart. He loves A Tribe Called Quest and Eminem, and really knows the music. There was good energy in the studio, for sure, and he's charming and funny.

## ESSENTIAL RONSON

Here are a few of the many albums that showcase Ronson's production prowess.

- Mark Ronson, *Uptown Special* (2015)
- Paul McCartney, *New* (2013)
- Bruno Mars, *Unorthodox Jukebox* (2012)
- Duran Duran, *All You Need Is Now* (2010)
- Kaiser Chiefs, *Off With Their Heads* (2008)
- Adele, *19* (2008)
- Amy Winehouse, *Back to Black* (2006)
- Robbie Williams, *Rudebox* (2006)

