

PRODUCER



RON ANIELLO

Doing whatever it takes to make the record great

By Michael Gallant

WHEN RON ANIELLO WAS SELECTED TO PRODUCE Bruce Springsteen's 2012 album *Wrecking Ball*, he faced a daunting challenge—how to offer constructive criticism to a personal hero. "Being in the studio, and hearing the voice of my childhood was the main thing I had to get over," Aniello says with a laugh. "Telling an artist like Bruce that a certain take sounded good but I'd like to hear another was definitely difficult at first." Considering the results—*Wrecking Ball* topped charts and earned critical acclaim around the globe—the veteran producer handily proved he was up to the task.

Aniello grew up in Las Vegas and began playing professionally as a guitarist after high school but was soon drawn to the music scene in L.A. He played in multiple bands and began creating original music that he describes as part Tom Waits and part Danny Elfman—yet something wasn't quite right. "I started bands and always found myself as the main songwriter, but I never really felt comfortable with it," says the Grammy-nominated, multiplatinum

producer. "I loved the recording aspect of what I was doing, but I didn't love the traveling and touring, and I didn't even love performing." For Aniello, a career shift towards production was the answer. "It was all about the studio," he says.

Aniello gravitated to young, talented musicians on whom he could focus and inspire in the studio. "I wanted to be able to flesh out the empty spots in people's work," he describes. "I felt I worked best as a coach, filling in the blanks, and that's what led me to producing." One such group was Lifehouse—a band that Aniello plucked from obscurity, recorded and launched into stardom.

Aniello went on to fashion sonic gold for the likes of Gavin DeGraw, Guster, Barenaked Ladies and Matt Nathanson. He also branched out into the Christian genre and is responsible for seminal recordings by artists including Jars of Clay and Jeremy Camp. Aniello discussed with us the secrets of capturing vocal tracks, rights and wrongs of vocal tuning, and working with an American legend.

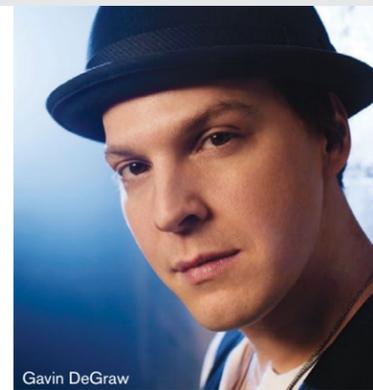
'Good songs tend to sound great almost regardless of what you do when you're producing them.'

What made *Wrecking Ball* different?

With Bruce, it's all about the songs—what he's trying to say and how he's going to say it. He puts a lot of energy into that aspect of his music, so by the time you're ready to record you already have a wealth of great material to work with. There aren't many artists who have recorded 30 records and thousands of songs. Producing someone like Bruce is very different from working with bands that are trying to figure out who they are and what their album is about. Bruce already knows all that. My job became more to inspire, reflect and articulate musical things that helped him get the songs to a level that he was happy with.

Where did you record?

At Bruce's studio, in the middle of his New Jersey farm. It's in a garage, like a lot of musicians' studios, but it's a magnificent space. It has an SSL board that



Gavin DeGraw

xylophone and play along. Other times, I'd jump on the drums, record a beat and loop it as the basic rhythm track for a song. The real drum tracks came later.

Did you discuss the album's vision?

I discovered the direction of the album for myself as we worked on it. It wasn't something we vocalized about much, since over-discussing can sometimes kill an idea—you're talking about it instead of doing it. Much of it was going on in Bruce's mind, and my role was to give him the tools he needed to help him get on the right level with each song. We started a new song practically every day. It was a great experience.

What did you use to record vocals?

We used the Telefunken 251E microphone that Bruce has had for a while through a Universal Audio 1176 [limiter and amplifier], a Neve preamp, and that's basically it. We tried some other mics on songs where we wanted distortion or guitar amp sounds on his vocals, but 90 percent was with the Telefunken.

What was the vocal tracking process?

Bruce isn't big on punching in. He will do it if asked, but each take is a performance to him. He lays down a song a couple of times

and then listens to every take all the way through, contemplating how he's singing it. The most important factor is what the character of the story is saying through the vocals. He has so many different voices—from the way he sings on "Born to Run" to his folk voice, operatic voice and rock-and-roll screamer. No two vocal takes were the same so it's not like working with singers where it's easy to put a comp together. It's never just about getting the best vocal—it's about getting the right emotions and capturing the right vocals for the story of the song. I had to be very alert to the lyrics because that's his main focus, always has been.

How did you start working with pop-rockers Lifehouse?

They were in the youth group at my church. I liked them and thought that Jason Wade was a great songwriter. They had never recorded before, so we started working at my house to put some demos together. We all learned together since I was just getting started as a producer at that time. We recorded on a Studer tape deck and a Neotek console—no computers, Pro Tools or vocal tuning. They were much more of a scruffy rock band back then, and I thought what we came up with was unique for its time. DreamWorks ended up signing them.

What was it like working with Barenaked Ladies?

They're a fantastic band—all multitalented multi-instrumentalists with a great sense of humor. When we were working together, it was inspiring to go everywhere with it. There were lots of good, diverse ideas being shared, and I think that's why they called the [2003] album *Everything to Everyone*. We ended up with rock songs,



Jars of Clay

Brendan O'Brien—who produced Bruce over the last 10 years—helped him select. We had a lot of outboard gear, too—compressors, Neves and APIs. There are a few isolation spaces, but we never really used them. When Bruce did his vocals, he sang right in front of me in the studio's main open space. I loved working in that open environment, nobody's closed off. It's more relaxed and leads to a different form of communication.

What was your recording process?

Bruce would bring a finished song, play it on guitar to a loop or a click track, and we'd take it from there. Sometimes I could tell that he'd never played the song before—he'd written it, but we'd build the arrangement on the spot. He has hundreds of instruments in his studio—guitars, vintage synths, percussion, organs, toys. I also brought all the samples and string orchestra libraries I had on my computer. We experimented a lot, finding different ways to sculpt and build his ideas. I'd play something on upright bass, for example, and he'd go to the

Jeff Fessenden, Ron Aniello, Patrick Fraser, Gavin DeGraw, Danny Clinch, Bruce Springsteen



Bruce Springsteen

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Lifehouse

'I can't stand it when tracks are processed to the point where they don't sound real!'

Tom Waits-style songs—tons of different influences were represented.

What about tracking vocals?

The guys sometimes broke into four-part harmony on the fly, like a doo-wop band, without ever rehearsing. There's such a deep well of talent there. I recorded their backing vocals in an old-fashioned way: three or four of the band members singing into two mics. They know how to blend their voices, and it was just my job to capture it.

Do you use vocal tuning?

Generally, I'm into sounding as natural as possible, but I use whatever is necessary to make a record sound great. I don't touch Bruce's voice with tuning, but there are some pop records that I tune and some bands that really want their vocals processed that

way. Too much tuning can iron out all the beauty in a vocal. I can't stand it when tracks are processed to the point where they don't sound real, unless that's an intentional effect. If I'm working on certain types of hip-hop, for example, I'll have fun playing with a tuner and making the vocal sound like a trumpet or something else interesting.

What was it like working with a Christian act like Jars of Clay?

They're a fantastic band, and I've never thought of myself as making "Christian music" when I work with them—I'm just making music that feels very creative. When it comes to lyrics, some of the Christian language can feel awkward in song form, but Jars of Clay does a great job of making it work naturally in their music. We had a lot of fun recording together. We'd all take a



Matt Nathanson

shot of whiskey, a gentlemen's drink at 4 p.m. every day—and that's the most drinking I ever did on any record—then they'd go home to their families. We didn't work on weekends and there wasn't a lot of profanity, but other than that it was like producing any band.

Any advice for aspiring producers?

Do whatever inspires you and gets you out of bed. Nothing is too small in the beginning. Whether you're just sitting at the piano or meeting up with friends to write songs, you may feel like you don't have a chance in hell. But believe me, you're just a good song away from being successful. The more you can focus on songwriting, the better. Good songs tend to sound great almost regardless of what you do when you're producing them. It's the subpar songs that you spend all the time in the world on.

Michael Scott Steiner, Lifehouse, Myrman Santos, Matt Nathanson

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ESSENTIAL ANIELLO

Here are a few of the records that demonstrate Ron Aniello's prowess in the studio.

- Bruce Springsteen, *Wrecking Ball* (2012)
- Gavin DeGraw, *Sweeter* (2011)
- Jars of Clay, *The Long Fall Back to Earth* (2009)
- Candlebox, *Into the Sun* (2008)
- Guster, *Ganging Up on the Sun* (2006)
- Barenaked Ladies, *Everything to Everyone* (2003)
- Lifehouse, *No Name Face* (2000)
- Jude, *No One Is Really Beautiful* (1998)

