

# Interview with Tim Leitner

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RW: How did you get involved in music production?

TL: From a young age I was a big music fan, listening to the music of my parents as well as an older sister and brother. Though I had years of piano and drum lessons, my curious scientific side wanted to know the details of how the records that I loved were made and that's what led me to "the other side of the glass." At 19, I headed from Ohio to New York City. I spent a year at the Institute of Audio Research and after that I got a job at a studio called Eras Recording on Manhattan's east side. It was a great place to get started. We had a big recording room and worked on everything from records to jingles to music cues for soap operas and ESPN. On one late night session, I worked with an engineer named Bobby Cohen who had worked at Hit Factory and was still friendly with the owners Troy and Eddie Germano. He asked if I would be interested in meeting them. Was I ever! They hired me shortly thereafter and I began the most intense period of learning and experience I'd known up to that point in my life. During my years there, I realized my tendencies leaned towards taking more control when I was involved with music projects and I began producing.

RW: How did you learn your craft?

TL: I learned my craft by being very fortunate to work with some of the most talented artists, producers and engineers in my formative years. I kept my ears and eyes open and took opportunities whenever I could to get my own hands on the gear and try to make tracks sound like I wanted.

RW: You've worked on projects with a wide range of great singer each with a unique sound, such as Dionne Warwick, Michael McDonald, Bruce Springsteen, Milton Nascimento, Pat Benatar, Paul Simon, and Billy Joel. What are you thinking about when you are setting up and tracking a singer? What is your focus when you start adding EQ or compression when you get to mixing? How do you make the voice stand out in the mix and still get a full sound from the rest of the band?

TL: When I prepare to record a singer, the most important aspect to me is the performer's comfort. Capturing a great performance is much more

about the artist than the microphone or mic preamp, unless seeing a particular kind of mic gives them confidence in the result. Talk to them and see what makes them comfortable. Everybody is different so don't assume that the same meticulous planning that has worked in the past will work with everyone. Of course you always want to use quality gear, but it's secondary.

As far as mixing, there is no magic bullet for getting a good vocal sound. Certainly vocals on most pop mixes have more compression than most beginners would think possible and you need to leave room in the instruments because the vocal is THE most important part of a mix to me. But the vocal can't take up too much space in the mix either. This is accomplished with a combination of compression, EQ and panning, though getting the overall balance right is still key. I mix as a continual refining process where I begin with the basic elements: drums, bass and rhythmic guitars or keyboards and start roughing out the sounds until everything has been added in. But nothing is finished until everything is finished because it all fits together like a puzzle. I keep playing through a song and tweaking anything that catches my attention as not being right yet, never obsessing over anything or soloing for very long. It's too easy to get caught up in one thing and completely lose your perspective on the big picture.

I get the vocal to stand out in a mix by making sure that it's loud enough!

RW: Could you say anything about the way you worked with Adam Ezra's voice or band? What did you do as a producer in addition to mixing? The styles of the songs on *Daniel The Brave* are very different so each track was handled in a unique way. As part of the production team including Adam and the keyboard player, Josh Gold, we had extensive discussions to decide on the songs we would record (Adam had quite a library of unrecorded material) as well as the production style we would use for each one. A few songs are not much more than just Adam singing and playing guitar while some have the whole band playing. Even some of the band tracks were recorded as overdubs. I usually feel pretty strongly about trying to capture a performance if possible and we did record some tracks that way but quite a few of the tracks were focused on Adam so on those we treated the band as an embellishment rather than a bed.

Adam is such a great natural singer that you can put up any mic and he will sound great. The biggest challenge recording him is that he tends to give his most natural performance while also playing guitar so we recorded them together. This is tricky not only for mixing (due to the leakage in each mic) and trying to get the optimum sound on each element, but also for

punching in. We needed to have him play and sing for punches to fix both vocal and guitar so the sound would match. If we missed any mistakes during the recording, I could later sometimes use a small section from an outtake - challenging since we didn't use a click and the tempos were not always spot on.

RW: You've also worked with artists such as George Benson and Andreas Vollenweider. What's different about mixing an instrumentalist in general or a string player specifically?

TL: Obviously with instrumental music there is no vocal to focus the listener's attention, so something needs to take its place. Usually it's pretty evident what that needs to be, but even in vocal tracks there are moments in between the singing when something else can pop out. One of the common mistakes that beginning mixers make is to let everything sit too pretty and perfect in the mix. I realized very early on that my favorite records have lots of things that stick out and make them exciting to listen to. Check out the tom fills on the first Cars record!

RW: How did you get to Bar1, and what's it like working there? Is that where Adam's record was recorded?

TL: It was a long time in the making but in the mid 90s the music and studio business in New York was really changing rapidly. I like variety as well as new challenges and I had an opportunity to get more involved with advertising work. I liked the quick pace and fresh material every day. I started working with a production company called McHale Barone. My initial involvement with them was music recording and mixing, but as the company grew I began to do lots of other types of work including radio and TV production. I eventually joined the staff and we built a great facility in the Union Square area of Manhattan in a style that was cribbed for other studios in the following years. One large recording area situated in the center of 4 rooms, each with its own vocal/voice booth. We had a lot of success and won just about every advertising award there is along with a couple of Emmys. I was also able to continue to work on my own music productions in the studio as time would permit. The partners in that company split in early 2006 and I left the facility to work with Joe Barone at Bar1.

Initially we worked out of a post studio complex in midtown with a long history called HSR. They had a studio available at the time that had a good recording room attached and that's where we started recording *Daniel The Brave*. We began with a few of the songs that were solo Adam like OK By

You and Ease It Down Right. But a lot of the recording was done at my house in upstate New York. We rented a Pro Tools recording rig and set players up all over the house. The biggest drawback was not being able to get the musicians in the same room - or at least have line of sight to each other - but everyone pulled it off. Recording this way gave us time to play without the pressure of a studio clock. Of course we still had Adam's clock which often said, "Get back to work!" That's not always the easiest thing to do on a beautiful day in the woods! We recorded Sacred Ground at the house (we call it Trails End) except for the lap steel guitar, as well as the entirety of House On A Mountainside, one of the tracks I'm proudest of. Then we finished the first round of recording with overdubs and mixing at HSR. Because of time limitations with both the band's and my schedule, it took us a long time to get it done. We had a second round of recording tracks at a great studio outside of Boston called Wellspring. I love recording in studios that have a great big room and lots of isolation with good sight lines. They also have a crazy selection of mics and gear to drool over. Not long after this, Bar1 moved into our own facility in midtown Manhattan, so the rest of the overdubs and mixing happened there.

Is there anything different about mixing a jingle than a pop song, or working on a commercial compared with an album?

Personally I don't treat them much differently. Certain production techniques are different because with ads you have much less time to get your point across. But I try to use the same artistic sensibilities for both. Albums can be different depending on the artist. It really depends on whether it's a collection of songs or the entire work fits into a particular context - not necessarily a concept album like Pink Floyd, but still thematically connected. We always try to use conceptual thinking when we write music for ads too. Maybe it's a sound that reminds of the product you're writing for or an instrument that has something to do with the lyric. The most successful music for ads works the same way as all good music - it connects to the listener emotionally.

RW: Do you think about creating an emotional reaction in listeners, and if so, what tools can you use?

TL: Getting a great performance from the musicians and singers is the most important part of creating emotion during the recording. And creating an emotional response is really is the only way I know how to mix. I'm not really that interested in sonic purity or accuracy - it needs to make me feel something as I mix it. The process I described earlier where I refine a mix until I'm happy with it has a lot to do with that. The only tool I know how to use is my heart. It's not really about any particular gadget or method of

making that happen because every track that you work on is different. And if it's not different you should make an effort to make it different. Constantly shifting the balances between instruments, making sure every word of the vocal is heard, accentuating vocal sounds that add life and making sure that you're always being taken on a journey, even if by momentary pauses or silence. I think one trait of good mixers is an ability to listen to a track a thousand times and not getting weary of it, but instead still feeling a challenge to wrench even more emotion from it. Of course on a simple track with only acoustic guitar and vocal it has to come down to a great performance.

RW: This book will be for people just getting started with music production. Any tips for beginners?

TL: Be a student of the art of recording and mixing. Listen to lots of different kinds of music and take notice of things you like, things you don't like, ideas you might use in your own tracks and try to figure out how the artist or producer created the sounds you like. Cross-pollination is how the world continues to hear music we've never heard before. And never stop learning. Anyone involved in sound creation that thinks they've already learned everything might as well retire. I learn something new every single day. It defines me.

RW: Any other comments or suggestions?

TL: We all can get close to work we've done and not want to change it. Maybe we think we've come up with an amazing delay effect or a brilliant guitar sound. But try to take client comments as a challenge to get it right. Especially in advertising I see a lot of kickback on the part of creative people when they get client feedback, dismissing them as idiotic and unimaginative. With very few exceptions, we're all working for someone. Isn't it our job as creative people to come up with a solution that's good for everyone?

RW: What to do in pre-preproduction so that the session has a better chance of succeeding:

TL: I joke with all the people that I work with that I am a "front-loader." I like to work very hard before a project to be as prepared as possible so that when it actually begins, there is not much to think about, especially when you're in my position of usually being the recording engineer and producer at the same time. I'm good at them both, but they use different parts of your brain and when the time comes I want to be thinking about the

creative aspects rather than the technical.

Talk as much as possible to the artist about the project, the songs you are recording, the sound they want to have, the audience they are aiming for and the methods of working they prefer. If they are inexperienced in the studio, try to guide them while also making them aware of options that may be available to them. Any artist I've worked with will tell you I am all about vibe in the studio. Whether it's lighting, throwing a few yards of fabric around the space, creating the right scents and smells and even playback volumes are all important in making everyone feel as comfortable and relaxed as possible, and keeping them focused on the creative side of the project.

RW: How you create and keep "good vibes" going during a session:

TL: Other than what I've just mentioned, always have positive energy. Even when a performer is not at their best on any given day, it's never right to make them feel bad about it. Coaching and encouragement go a long way and sometimes it can turn a performance around. With nearly limitless tracks available to us today, there is no reason not to keep trying day after day, week after week - whatever it takes to get it right, but with the attitude that today will be the day.

I would also comment at this point about knowing when a working relationship is going well and when it is not. It is still a mystery to me how it happens but every so often I work with someone who I just don't mesh with. It's usually not so much a personality conflict as working style conflict. They will describe the sound they want and when you feel like you've gotten it, they are unhappy. Or a method you've used to record a hundred times with great success is met with confusion and distrust. I can usually spot it fairly early on in the relationship and it's very rare, but when it happens, I do my best to make them as happy as I can (often with them acting like I have no idea what I am doing) and know that we won't work together again. I turn down future work of this sort because there's no reason to be unhappy while you work - though I never give them attitude about it because it's no one's fault - you just shouldn't work together. It is important to remember that it is not you.

RW: What to do if things start to go badly, in order to restore the good energy:

TL: As with all of our daily social interaction, psychology plays a big role. I'm not suggesting you play with people's minds, but everyone has buttons

that can be pushed. Most of the time we think of this in the negative context but we all have our positive buttons too. It is important to tap into this with each individual and figure out how to make them feel good again. If it seems like an obstacle that can't be easily solved, try to move on to something different for the time being. Often after people have time to think things over, they see things more clearly or at least have a better understanding of someone else's point of view. I have to admit being caught off-guard in sessions when, while I'm busy working away in the control room, certain band members are off having huge arguments which I only find out about later. It is always difficult to try to mend these fences between people you may not know very well, but during a recording project it's part of the producer's job to keep things on track. Otherwise you may never finish!

RW: Do you do anything after sessions are over to increase clients' satisfaction?

TL: Nothing that doesn't come with healthy client / business relationships. I make sure that everyone who needs materials from me has what they need. I make sure that they have been happy with the process. I let them know how rewarding it was to work with them. And I make sure we have each others' contact info so we can stay in touch.