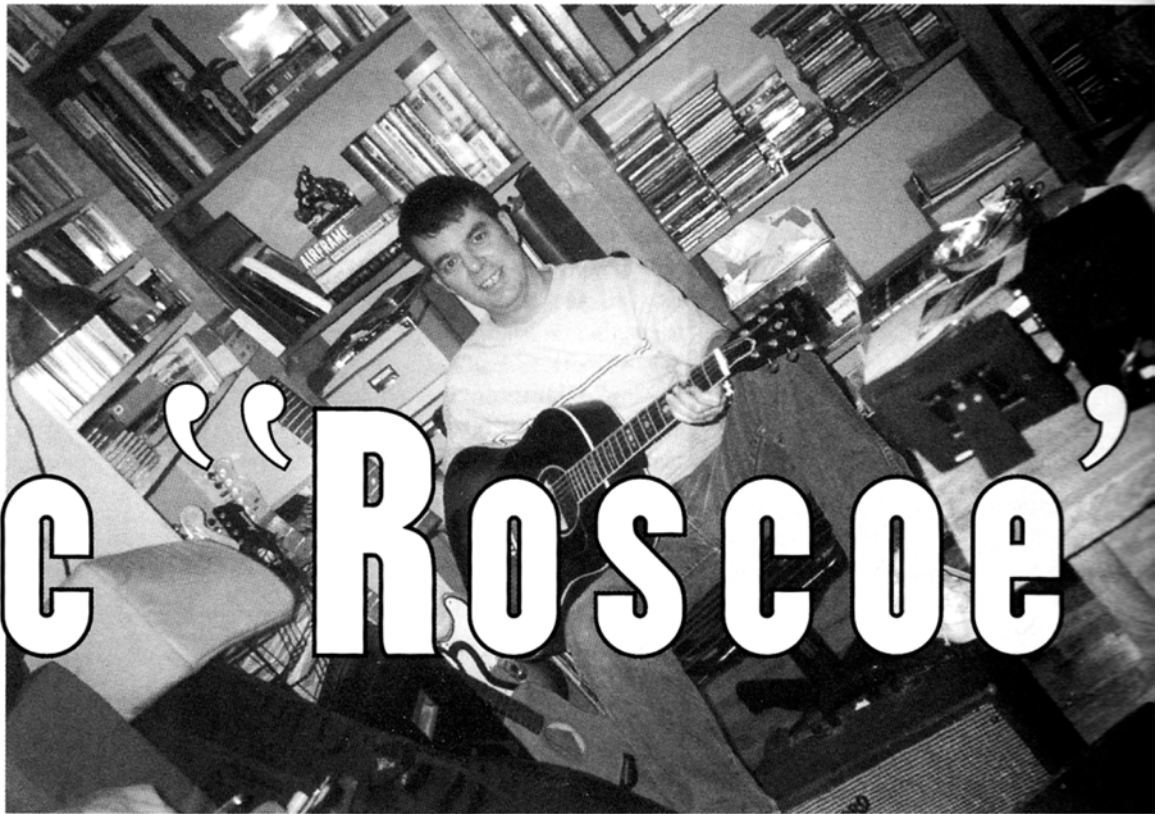


Eric "Roscoe"



Eric Ambel started his professional career writing and playing guitar as a **Blackheart** and a **Del Lord**. Now a producer and musician, he has worked with many great artists including **Nils Lofgren**, **Mojo Nixon**, **Steve Wynn**, **Blood Oranges**, **Blue Mountain**, **Syd Straw**, **Simon and the Bar Sinisters**, and **Go To Blazes**. He keeps busy producing records out of 33 1/3 Recording Studios in Brooklyn, which is housed in a turn-of-the-century bank building with 2000 sq. ft. and 20' ceilings. The studio is based around a vintage Neve console, modern tube and discrete Class A analog recording gear, and an extensive collection of vintage guitar amplifiers and keyboards. In his spare time, he runs two clubs in NYC and Raleigh, NC called 'The Lakeside Lounge.' Whew, what a busy guy! I met up with "Roscoe" in his amazingly-quiet East Village apartment where he lives with his wife, Mary Lee Kortez (whom he also produces) and his soon-to-be-setup mini studio...

reminds me of the police interrogation. Where the three kids get arrested for writing graffiti on a wall and they take 'em into an individual room, one at

a time and hopefully their stories will match up. That's what the overdub process reminds me of. "Didn't you fall in love with this band because you saw them play and sing at the same time?!" It's really hard for me to understand. That answer's probably pretty wide and all over the place...I learned about engineering I think the way a lot of people do-from having a 4-track and breaking it down to the basic elements of recording which are, to me, EQ, compression, delay and reverb and putting the signal on tape. If a person can learn those things then you've pretty much demystified the whole process. And everything...comes from there.

Did you learn about the technical aspects of recording when you were in the studio as a musician with the Del-Lords in the 80s?

A little bit...I was in Joan Jett and the Blackhearts and then the Del-Lords, and being in bands in the 80s it was kinda the dark years of recording guitars. There's, uh...

What

is your role as far as the technical aspects of recording go?

Most of the records that I produce I don't engineer. I'm pretty involved in the mix. I've worked with several people over the years... I really believe in producer and engineer being two separate jobs and if one guy is doing both of those things that one of those jobs is suffering. And I work with bands...I really love bands...and when you work with

interview and photo by Hillary Johnson

bands, it's not so much...sitting in there with one person overdubbing all the time. That kind of thing a guy could be engineering and producing but what my specialty is...I like to work with bands, I really respect bands. I think the way most record companies...ya know, they go to see a band play and they love the band, then they sign the band and they put the band in a recording studio with a guy who starts overdubbing them one at a time. It really

...a lot of buried guitar...

...yeah...like here we were with the major label record deal and we're in there, in an expensive studio in LA and our money is being used by some engineer who's trying to figure out how to run the big Lexicon 240-whatever and I really vowed that I would someday be in charge of this thing so that wouldn't happen to me or the people I was working with.

So, it was you, the band, and an engineer, no producer?

Ambel

No, there was a producer. He was excited about that big Lexicon box too.

How did you get hooked up with the producers that you worked with in the 80s?

With the Del-Lords, our first record was made with this guy, Lou Whitney from the band called The Morells which became The Skeletons and I still work with him to this day. This guy has a studio in Springfield, Missouri [The Studio]. His band backs a lot of people, like they back Syd Straw and Dave Alvin and Jonathan Richman, myself...a lot of different people on their solo records. That guy did the first [Del-Lords] record then the next couple we did with Neil Geraldo, who's Pat Benatar's husband and producer/guitar player. Great guy...something that I'll say fairly often is "The rule is there is no rule". One of the subheadings under that is "What worked for the last guy may not work for the next guy". He was applying what he was doing with [Pat] to us. In hindsight I don't think it was the best way to deal with a rock band.

So how did you start producing?

In the 80s I started seeing some bands around here. There was an afterhours bar called No Se No down on Rivington St...an unlicensed place...and the Del-Lords were already kinda happening, we had a coupla records out, and I started seeing these young bands and following some advice from Lou Whitney...if

you got a band and you wanna record, one of the most basic things that you could do is find somebody who's already done it to help you. I'd already been 4-trackin' at home and I just knew that I could help. I have a background in music in that I took piano lessons as a kid and I played trumpet from 5th grade all the way through college at the University of Wyoming. At the same time I taught myself guitar. There's a lot of skills that, even coming out of the punk rock era when training was not so groovy, the

training that I received helped me a lot in being able to help bands with their arrangements and hooking up harmonies and stuff. So I started producing some of these bands from No Se No like the World Famous Bluejays and The Clintons. My own personal goal was to try to make the bands sound better than they were and make the recordings sound like it cost a lot more than it did. Make the bands sound better with them doing everything, not with...me or somebody else playing everything.

What did you grow up listening to?

Well, I will be 42, I'm of that era where...you have to have graduated from high school somewhere in between '74 and '76...Those are the only people that will tell you that they really like Grand Funk. When I grew up it was AM radio in Chicago so you had WLS and WCFL and...it would be like The Stones and The Kinks and The Who and The Beatles, and if one song sucked you'd just punch the button and go to the next station. So it was a lot of those really great records, that sort of AM radio and the beginning of FM...I think Creedence was one of the first bands that you could actually, without a lot of trickery...make yourself sound like... The Grand Funk thing is kinda funny, because Grand Funk...were...I mean, it's a joke to say they were an American band but they were an American band when this English thing was really dominating. And they were kinda

like a hard rock Creedence. They were like a hard rock band, but you could...successfully play their songs and sound like them. It was exciting.

So from listening to that how did you get into the whole roots rock revival of the 80s?

That was real simple. The stuff that I like and the stuff that I still like...I don't know about roots or country or blues or anything, but most of the songs that I like and most of the bands that I work with-their songwriting takes place on the guitar. And there's natural stuff that comes from writing songs on the guitar. Like when I was a kid and you're listening to The Beatles, when The Beatles went from their guitar songs to the piano songs...with the descending bass note...that to me is when it got not-so rock and roll. So if there's any generalization, that would be it. I really love the guitar. Also in the 80s when you had people playing synthesizers and stuff...it's so same-y sounding. But you can...plug a Les Paul in a Marshall and have ten people play it and it'll sound different...and that's not the case with the electric keyboard really. That's why I really love the guitar and what it can do.

Who are some people that you're listening to now?

Well, I work on music a lot. I work with bands and the producer job, it's a very difficult job. Sometimes I don't get to listen to enough music.

What were the last five CDs you bought?

Well, I got the new Tom Petty record and I...went out looking for the new Tom Waits record but they didn't have it so I bought myself a copy of T-Rex "Electric Warrior" which I didn't have on CD-I bought it-when it was new when I was in junior high but I really like that. I was really surprised, I liked the new Richard Buckner "Since"-I think it's called...Oh! And I love this Hounddog record! Have you heard that? David Hidalgo and the guy from Canned Heat...Mike I think his name is... [Mike Halby] It's really creepy...it sounds like...Don & Dewey and...Jimmy Reed only slowed down...I think David Hidalgo...is probably the most musical guy of my generation...It's really good, it's really wacked out. He's got like an 8-track cassette rig...he's got the Fostex version of my old rig which is a Tascam 688. I think that they did this thing on a cassette machine...

...lot of tape hiss?

...yeah...and slowed down stuff. They have their picture in what looks to be a real control room, but I think they're fakin' us out!...it could be...And I've just recently...been working on this apartment, my wife and I moved in here and I just recently set up my spot and I've listened to more music in the last week than I have in the last year.

What speakers are you using to listen to new stuff?

It's funny...People complain about Yamaha NS-10's. I think that they're among the best home stereo speakers. They really do sound great. And then I bought myself these little cheap Radio Shack Optimus deals for my desk. The Optimus 3 or Pro 33 or something...I got 'em on my desk and I've just been enjoying it like crazy!

Not a lot of low end?

Well, the low end is coming from the floor. I don't have subs...I recently had a positive experience with subs. I mixed the Bottle Rockets record with this guy Paul Ebersold in Memphis at Ardent. Ardent is a big facility, been there for a long time. They got some really nice rooms. Every one of their rooms has Yamaha NS-10's and a Yamaha powered consumer subwoofer. And I'm telling you the Yamahas...if they aren't trying to do what they can't do, which is reproduce below 60 or 80...if they're not trying to go down there, they sounded fantastic! I couldn't believe it. I mean I came in there and this guy started playing me this stuff and I thought the bigs were on...and it was the Yamahas with the powered sub.

Did the sub have a crossover in it?

Yeah, it has a crossover and basically the only controls on this thing...it was very bonehead-friendly...which is why we're talking to *Tape Op*. It had just volume and the crossover frequencies so you could pick. And at Ardent they had it crossed over at 80 and you just dial in enough volume.

What do you think one of those things runs for?

Not very much. I think it's probably under 500 bucks. I got the Yamahas at home 10 or 15 years ago because...I wanted to get my ears acclimated to the way that I would be listening all the time anyway...

...other than room acoustics...

...yeah...They don't really sound great until they're turned way up and that can wear you down.

Do you listen to your's loud or low?

At home?

mm hmm.

Not that loud. In the studio, whatever it takes for the inspiration to happen.

How do you approach recording conceptually? Sonically? Do artists approach you? Do you approach them? Or both?

"Starting your own studio...After you figure out how much you think it's gonna cost, double it. That's pretty standard."

Sometimes it's both. Say you're in studio and there's a band playing. In there, you've got the band in which there's a songwriter guy, there's a hot musician guy, there's the rhythm section. Then in the studio there's the engineer, and the producer and then there also might be some hot side guy that's brought in...I have sat in everyone's chair and hopefully I can help...because of my understanding of everyone's different role, hopefully I can help everyone to be doing their best. I can help them. My favorite producers...don't necessarily have a sound. They help the band get THEIR sound. Every band is different...pre-production is of paramount importance. Which really means going through the songs and picking the songs. That's an A&R guy's job sort of by definition, but there's not too many of them that actually do it anymore.

Do you go to rehearsals?

Oh yeah, absolutely. I'm not making huge budget records and if there was a huge budget, I just don't think...you don't want to waste time in the studio. There's something about getting everyone together and now is the time. I think that those bands that go way overboard and spend days and days and days...

In terms of sonically approaching a record...we know the answer to this question, but do you prefer recording to analog or digital?

I don't think digital is ready yet. But sonically the thing is that...a lot of times when I'm working with bands, their rigs are touring rigs and a lot of my sound or what I try to help a band with is...I have a lot of equipment myself, like I have a lot of good guitar amps and I have most of the basic food groups of guitars - I have a great tele and I have a great Les Paul with P-90's because I've been a guitar player for most of my life so a lot of it in the pre-production is

maybe looking at the guy's gear and making sure that there's a little money in the budget to get his guitar fixed or get some new tubes. There's a saying that goes "shit in, shit out" and that's pretty realistic. "How do you get a good guitar sound?" You get a good guitar, that's how.

And a good player...

Yeah. But the analog/digital thing...I've had positive experiences with digital. Sometimes when I'm out at Lou Whitney's place in Springfield Missouri - he's got one of those big format dig machines, like the early Sony 3324-S which is a 24-track digital machine. And I'll cut the band on 2" 16-track analog and we don't listen to that tape more than twice...Cut the band, if that's the take then we dump it into the dig. On those big format dig machines, I've heard some pretty thrilling stuff. Say you record background vocals on a big format dig machine...When you're mixing, it's great to have tracks that there's nothing there and then the singing comes out. I mean that is positive. I produced a Nils Lofgren record in '92 and for part of that record we went out to Neil Young's place and did some work with him and I learned a lot about dig out there. Even though he will come out and talk against consumer digital, at the time when I was out there in '92, he didn't have an analog tape recorder in the place. He had the big dig machines and I think the best way to do dig is you have to put that sound down finished the first time you ever do it. You can't count on going back to EQ or compress the thing, you really have to run it through all really good gadgets and put it down finished the first time. You gotta get it how you like it. Sometimes I'll talk about the "kneerub" - analog gives you "kneerub." Like they have these bars in New Orleans, they're not really strip clubs, but you go in there and some girl sits next to you and [says] "would you buy me a drink" and these girls are in there drinking these \$9 champagne cocktails which is just champagne and 7-Up...I went and did that one time - I went in there and bought the girl a drink, my friend was there, and we bought 'em another drink...we did get something out of it...after the second drink we got a little "kneerub." It was like, "oh!

that's cool, one more drink and I'm out of my 20 bucks that I had with me but that was fun"... And I believe that [with] analog you can get more than you give, which is beautiful. And there's some tape that I really like. I used to like that 3M tape then they stopped making it. I had the opportunity one time to listen to the difference of a couple different kinds of tape, just printing their noise and I really liked the BASF tape-the 900...I'm not gonna buy any tape that changes their name like this [rattles my 'Ampex vs. Quantegy' DAT case]. That was the first name in tape! And now that Quantegy...I mean, "where did you come up with that name? Did your wife come home and tell you you were supposed to change the name of the company or something?" I don't get it. I really don't get it. But...just like that magic combination of the Les Paul and the Marshall...I met these BASF guys and they have this thing - and it might be of interest to your readers, a lot of people that have an old 8-track Tascam - BASF sells their own formulation of the 468 which was the first hot tape in the 70's and what it is it's a reissue formulation from the Agfa 468. Just like the Les Paul works with the Marshall, that 468 works with that ATR 102 - the 1/2 track tape machine - so good that when I'm using that tape machine with that tape and I'm mixing, the whole reason I'm mixing is so I can get done and listen how great it's gonna sound when it comes back off of that 468. That is really something else.

My experience with Agfa is that it sheds.

It's funny how people will talk about some of these things that were corrected like Neotek...they built a console around 1985 for one year that had a shitload of bad switches in it. And it's taken them all this time for people to kind of...forgive them. It was only one year and it was only...twenty consoles but it was bad. And that Agfa thing, people talk about that but...I think that BASF 468 is really, really cool.

Have you used the new Quantegy Red, whatever that number is?

GP9. Yeah, somebody tried to get me into that...I just don't like the idea that they changed their name. But, if you could get one reel of that stuff, which they seem to be giving away to try to get people hooked on it, the reel is red and it looks really cool and you could use it as a take-up reel!

Tape Op readers probably won't have exposure to the nice 48 dig machines. If you had to cut costs, where would it be? Would it be digital vs. analog? Would it be in the studio? Would it be on time spent?

Well, it's funny...I've never used one of those big 48 machines...my friend who has the 24-track...had to do that in a market where people were calling up saying that they WANTED to record digital. "Oh, you're not digital?" Because they just thought that it was better and actually for Lou on that 3324-S, he does a whole album project on one reel of tape, they're 60 minutes and it costs \$50. For cutting costs, I think the best, biggest cost cutter is to do some pre-production. And even if you're recording your own band, you have to kind of have a plan before you go into the studio. Even if it's your own studio, you have to have your time mapped out. "Okay, we're gonna spend this much time" and I think for a band, most times, if somebody is the producer...because you're talking about a group of people working together... somebody needs to be in charge. Somebody. And if you have that meeting before you start, that can save you a lot of money. To really have a plan before you start. It's unbelievable...when I hear horror stories from people about going over budget or this or that it's like, "well, you didn't even have a plan when you started."

As a musician do you think pre-production, in terms of doing demos, getting them on tape in any format; 4-track, or an 8-track digital DA88 kind of setup or something like that, do you think that is valuable or do you think it's more important to spend time talking and rehearsing?

When I work with bands, by the time I've decided to do the project, I already know that they're a great band. I've seen them play. My experience with demos is...when I'm producing a record, I never ask the band to do band demos. By the time that we've decided that we're gonna work together, then, like say, with The Bottle Rockets, Brian Henneman is the main singer guy but everybody writes and so he'll make a boombox tape for me. He'll get the songs from everybody and he'll make a solo acoustic tape of every single song. The solo thing is the most difficult thing to do but it really lets you know when a song is finished.

If you got a song, if you can't play it solo then I might argue that you don't have a song. And also for me, I'm gonna do both, I'm gonna do rehearsals also, but for me, if I sit around and listen to that solo tape a bunch of times, I might come up with an idea that no one would have thought of if we were just tweaking their existing arrangement. The other thing is that it's dangerous to record...you record a demo on your 8-track or something, you might do the greatest version of that song ever and then it could be very difficult to get it back...now that's kind of the beauty of the ADAT thing is that every once in a while somebody does do something usable, it's in a usable format. For the songwriting demos, what I usually do is I don't play everything myself on a record, but I like to at home, on my home writing rig, I like to completely overindulge myself and put 5 guitar parts on there so I can take it to the band and break it down and just play the best part through the song.

What do you have as your home setup?

Well, I had the Tascam 688 and I had various bits of outboard gear that is now in my pro studio. I had sort of a writing rig and right now I'm really close to finish the spot but really what I want to get is one of those...I want the smallest portable thing that I can get. So I think I'm gonna get myself one of those VS-1680 things.

The Roland?

Yep. And a pair of little powered speakers, and one keyboard that has all the rest of the sounds in it and that's a pretty powerful rig right there...with my little computer and I haven't really used one so much but I might, in keeping with the way I feel about digital, if I brought home a pair of Telefunken's and the Manley LA-2A, I'd be putting it down just fine. I hope to be sitting there doing that in three weeks.

What software do you have in the computer? Is it sequencer software?

I don't have any sequencer software...I'm gonna need to get some...I used to have Performer.

You just had a Mac Classic or something in your old studio to run it?

Yeah, Mac Plus.

And I see that you had a patchbay. Was that definitely helpful?

Absolutely. If you don't have a patchbay, you don't have a studio. I'm older I can't like, get on my knees all the time. [A] patchbay is cool.

It's not that expensive, takes a little time. When you have somebody over and you're feeling like you've gotta impress 'em when you can go [insert patchbay sounds here] "boop boop boop" it's very good. Albert Caiati helped me wire up my old studio. It was really great to have that patchbay in there.

Other than your own material, what else are you going to be working on by the end of the millenium?

I'm looking at some projects...I usually do a few bigger records a year and then I might do some of my own stuff and I try to keep the local thing going too.

Are the local bands what inspired you to open The Lakeside Lounge(s), here in New York and also in Raleigh?

Yeah...My partner, Jim Marshall "The Hound"...had a radio show on WFMU for over ten years and he manages this band The Pristeens now...We had helped a few bars...promoted events at different places and...helped a few rock clubs in this area that are really big and well-known...get going. Like my band was the first band ever to play at Brownies when it was just a little bar. I lived around the corner and I went in there after they opened and...we started playing in the corner [of the club] and the next thing you know...And I also helped the Mercury Lounge with the design of their stage. Also I turned them on to the booking...girl that STILL does the booking for both the Mercury and the Bowery [Ballroom]. And after helping these other people, we felt like we should just have our own joint. And then I really kind of approached...the bar...a lot like producing a record. One way to look at producing is if you can get rid of everything that sucks, you can have a great record. And I think the bar is a lot the same way. For me as being a musician and playing...It's not a boast for me to say that I've been to a lot of bars in my life. From being on tour forever...So I wanted to have a place like that where the jukebox is kinda the star, where only one band plays one set a night. After playing CBGB and stuff, and having to organize a whole 5 band thing and then you get there and they've added another band and my manager who's trying to get me signed has taken four A&R people out to dinner and they're all there and it's all going on my tab and I got this band where I'm paying the guys and I'm paying the guy to

drop the equipment off in the van and then by the time I go on an hour and a half late, all of these A&R guys, none of them saw me. That was kind of the last straw, I figured I'm gonna have my own bar and the one-band thing has really worked out well for us. We could have more business by having more than one band. I like it. One band. That way you go to see your friends play, when they're done you can hang out, you're not getting run out by the next band. Over at Arlene [Grocery] a lot of people get equipment stolen cuz there's so much stuff going...I like [Lakeside], it's a nice little place, I have the house equipment, because it's the right size. A guy who's playing gigs maybe doesn't have a small bass amp. Maybe they don't have a drumkit with a 20" bass drum but the Lakeside is quite hi-fi and it's because everything's matched...vocals-only PA. That puts me right back in high school. That's why my lighting system is one red lightbulb. That was me in 1973 in the basement.

Do the bands that play there fit into the "alternative country" category?

Not always. If you had to categorize, which I don't like to cuz it is like putting someone in a box but this stuff is for sale and you have to put it in a box to sell it...I'd say that if you're gonna generalize about what we have at the Lakeside is that we have some of...the alternat[iv]e country action and we have some of the garage rock kind of...that would be the circle I'd say.

Your publicist wrote on your discography that you were the "center of the East Coast and Southern 'scene' of musicians." How do you feel about that?

Oh, I don't know about that. I've been playing for a long time and I know a lot of people and I've played with people or done gigs with them and it's fun to help people even if I'm not producing your record if you are looking for a place that has a 16-track machine with a 2" headstack...I think I do perform a resource kind of function for a lot of people and the bar has been helpful for us and for other people, like say if there was some band that I wanted to see and they couldn't get a gig, well, "I'll get ya a gig, c'mon up here and play". Or if we need a place to have a meeting or also say there's friends of ours that are trying to get into CMJ [Music Seminar] and maybe they don't get accepted, "well, you can play at the Lakeside"...[I] try to help out.

And how do you think that those things are different from the whole mainstream-popular culture-record business-getting gigs kinda thing?

I don't know. I really don't know. But what it is is you like to have stuff that you can...Control is a word that kinda gets misused...stuff that you have yourself, you can optimize. Like I've got the Lakeside optimized for a certain thing. It's a nice small place. I've seen a lot of people in New York City try to...they have an idea and then they don't stick with it. All of a sudden they get sucked into doing something bigger than they really could do. The Lakeside is a really nice little formula, really nice. With the super-cool jukebox and the bandstand with the house equipment, photobooth, Steve Keene art on the walls. That's why when we did it with my friend in Raleigh it was pretty easy to boil it down to the essential ingredients and moving down there too.

Is there anything you'd like to add for Tape Op readers or anyone starting their own studio?

Starting your own studio...After you figure out how much you think it's gonna cost, double it. That's pretty standard. Sometimes when you read articles about studios, I know myself, that some of these really big facilities have...the quality of the people that are working there is really fantastic. Like at Ardent...Ardent is almost like when I first got to New York and there was Media Sound and Sigma and stuff...In those places, the assistants were totally overqualified. People did a lot of work to learn how to be an assistant and then nowadays with the engineering schools and people having their own home studio, they show up at the studio and they're ready to start punching in and telling the drummer to change his kick drum part and it's like, "you gotta slow down and try to learn and listen." And that was impressive when I was out at Ardent. Their assistants are full-blown engineers and it takes some time. Those recording schools, I think they're really good for a person not to learn about recording but to learn whether or not you want to pursue recording. Cuz you're not gonna learn how to do it from that school, but you could learn to if you wanted to... ☺