

WHARTON TIERS

WHARTON OUTSIDE HIS STUDIO

BY LARRY CRANE AND HILLARY JOHNSON

Wharton Tiers has run Fun City studios out of his Manhattan basement since 1981. He's recorded some of the finest records by Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr., Helmet, Unrest and many more. It's an unimposing place, and not very large, but the records he makes sound amazing. For the last few years he's also been helping Sonic Youth set up and run their Echo Cañon studio, where they've

recorded recent releases for the band and their side-projects. He also leads the Wharton Tiers Ensemble, a riveting instrumental combo that he composes for and plays drums in (check out *Twilight of the Computer Age* on Atavistic). Hillary and I dropped in at Fun City and had a great chat.

The following day we visited Echo Cañon and chatted with Lee Ranaldo (of Sonic Youth - see sidebar) about working with Wharton and setting up a private studio for their band.



INSIDE WHARTON'S STUDIO

In 1981 you started in this spot?

Yes.

What were you doing before '81, recording wise?

Playing in about 20 bands. No, actually at my peak I was playing in five bands, no money in any of them.

Playing guitar?

Playing guitar in a couple, but mostly drums. I was always a busy guy.

Had you been going into studios with any of the bands as a musician?

Yes, in a bunch of New York studios, basically we were rehearsing stuff down here. We use to put a cassette down with a couple of mics and people were saying, "This sounds better than the studio." I had a 4-track, which I ran into the ground by recording on it. I ended up getting an 8-track and then I had Sonic Youth here a month later.

That would have been *Confusion Is Sex*?

Yes. They never made another one that sounded exactly like that again. [laughter]

I kind of wish... it's so raw.

It was an 8-track with no outboards, I think we had one compressor.

Had you been using this place as a practice space then?

Yes

How does that work with people living up there?

My apartment is directly over the studio and this is all brick and stone. For a New York space it's pretty isolated.

I think Lee [Ranaldo] had said you had some problems awhile back with someone.

I had a problem with a person in the building next store.

Did you off them or anything?
[laughter]

No, we worked it out.

Did you set up some times or something?

It was just one those people that you find in New York, nothing happens in their own life and they're like, "Everything bothers me." She's complaining about the studio at the same time she's complaining about her neighbor closing his door or having his girlfriend over.

I think when people see studios, they see bands pulling up and coming in and out, they probably think a drug deal is going on half the time.

People knew what I was doing. In New York it's better to have people around than to not have people around. If you have people

around... half these buildings are empty during the day, everyone leaves for work and that's when all the robberies happen. So you're much better off having people around.

So you had a 4-track initially and then went to eight and did the Sonic Youth stuff right after you got the 8-track going?

Pretty much, it was a Tascam 38, it had just come on to the market, it was a couple thousand dollars. I thought that was a lot of money to spend for my personal use so maybe I'll get some people in to record.

What kind of jobs did you get after *Confusion Is Sex*?

Just a lot of local bands. I, of course, from playing in bands had a lot of contacts from different bands.

What kind of board were you using then?

Kelsey, it was a Pro Club 12 channel. I got two of them at one point and spliced them together for 24 channels. Basically, when Kelsey was over Crest Audio blew out all of the stuff they had and I bought a whole lot of it.

I've never seen one of these.

I don't know how many of them they made. It's an amazing board, it was designed by some guy in England, I think he worked for Neve. The circuitry is very similar to the Neve VR except it's basically half as much. It's the most economical straight-line design as opposed to outboards at every stop. It always had a really cool sound so I stuck with it.

How many channels do you have now?

I've got the 24 and the 12 and the Mackie [1604] for effects returns. I've got the Pro-Mix here which I use to automate stuff.

What are you tracking to these days?

A 1" MSR24 [Tascam].

You don't see too many of those around anymore.

No, it's really a shame because I think it was the last analog tape machine that was ever designed. It's a spectacular machine but of course the ADAT revolution was already underway by the time it hit the market. The ADATs came out about three or six months before that machine was released and everyone was like, "Yeah, digital, digital!"

What do you think of ADATs?

I've worked with them. 16-bit audio is a little thin for my taste as a rule, some of the 20-bit ones that are out now sound pretty good. I think that as the high bit stuff starts happening, the sound will catch up.

After the 8-track, what did you move to?

A 16-track 1" Tascam. I was always into Tascam because they use to have a great service center in New Jersey.

What projects were you doing when the sixteen came around? I think you had Dinosaur Jr. and Unrest.

I think the first Unrest I did was 16-track and the second album was 24-track.

How did you get to do Dinosaur Jr.?

That was a Sonic Youth referral.

It seems like that was a good band to get working with originally.

Absolutely, *Confusion Is Sex* did really well; it got a lot of press and everything. I think it took me another four years to get something that had that level of visibility. Eventually, people were happy with what they were getting so they came back and told friends about it. I never really had to advertise, it's all been through word of mouth.

Now your at the point where you're doing lots of work.

Yeah, now you walk around and it's like, "Blah, blah, blah was a classic record to me!" [laughter] It's fun when all that kind of stuff survives.

Think of all the recording sessions that you've done that don't go anywhere. You never know when you're working on something which ones are the ones people are going to hear.

It's not always the best stuff either. Sometimes it's just people who have the right connections and their stuff comes out, other bands do this incredible material and sit home and smoke pot and never get any further with it.

As far as recording, how do you use the space in here?

It's set up now for my band, there's something about the way this room is; you get incredible isolation. There's nothing parallel about this room, the floor slopes down, the ceilings are all curved, if you look at these walls they're not straight, they're kind of angled a little.

You didn't even have to build it this way.

This was totally one of those lucky, fortuitous things. I just kept moving stuff around until it got to this point where things worked really good.

Do you ever try to do vocals live with the band going?

Yes, usually if I do vocals live I'll just use a mic that hardly picks up anything except for what's right on it.

A dynamic mic?

Yeah, like an Audix or an [Beyer] M500, something like that. If you get a good vocal take it's great because you've got plenty of isolation, you can compress it or put effects on it without getting instruments in it. A lot of times if you get a cool sound and later on you try a better mic on the vocals they end up liking the rough tracks better. Not everyone needs to sing through a super expensive clean mic. It doesn't really help a lot of people at all. Especially with rock'n'roll singers, high end condenser mics pop, sputter and hiss from their singing styles and it's just not the right mic. One of the best parts about recording is trying a few different mics out on a vocalist and seeing what really gives it character. Every mic has it's own character, you find the right match with the person. Helmet, for example, Page sounded great through this 635 Electrovoice which is an \$80 mic. The guy from the label practically had a shit when he came over and saw... "This is your vocal mic?" Of course he called up a rental company and got 4 tube mics. We put them up together and tracked with them but in most cases the 635 was the one, it just sounded perfect on his voice.

I heard about that session, they were even fighting with you about the tape speed.

Yeah well, some A&R people know a little more than you do. [laughter] If they worried about selling the records the music business would improve immensely.

In the position you're in now, how busy are you? Do you have to field everything that comes in and decide which things you have time to work on?

I've been basically trying to get more time for myself. I'm trying to get a little less busy. I've been working with Sonic Youth a lot in the last couple of years, which has taken a lot of time between all of their individual projects. A lot of the local bands, which I use to record, don't even call at this point. They just figure that I'm too busy or I'm too expensive or I'm unreachable. I generally have enough to keep me busy.

You're not having to scramble and record blues bands?

I don't really do anything like that. I've been spending a lot of time on my band and my stuff and that's totally rewarding. I've been doing a lot of mastering which is a lot of fun because you can get something to sound

good with no commitment to spend 80 hours doing the thing.

When you're doing the mastering, what kind of gear are you using?

I basically just use the Sound Designer.

It's all in the computer?

I use the analog tape machine a lot because I get a lot of stuff that's totally digital and the best thing to do is to put it on tape.

So you take it from DAT and dump it down to 1/4"?

Yes, usually I'll EQ the DAT or compress the DAT a little when going to tape and then the tape to the computer is pretty clean. Once it gets into the computer I try to do as little with it as possible. I don't really like the way that the manipulation makes things sound. It's pretty much just a straight line in with a maximum level.

Cool. What kind of projects are you getting for that?

All kinds of strange things. My cousin's actually got a recording studio in his basement now in Brooklyn. He's been recording a lot of stuff that I probably would have done 10 years ago. A lot of them will come here to master stuff. Labels will send me stuff.... It's basically people that can't afford to go to Master Disc and get the super high-end deal.

How much are those kinds of places?

Hundreds.... hundreds an hour, depending on whom you're doing it with. You can literally spend a few thousand dollars mastering something these days. They don't cut deals. It's hard to find off-hours, those places are really expensive. Obviously they have all the latest gear continually rolling in so I'm sure there's some little measure of benefit from all of that, but in reality, when your starting with tapes that are basically raw anyway, you don't want to clean them up. You're really just looking to get a good maximum level and a nice sound spectrum.

When did you start doing the mastering?

Obviously the software became available and it really started about a year and a half ago when I was having some problems with the cassette machine and I thought "Well, I'll just go by a new cassette machine." The quality control on the cassette world has gone to where the machines don't play at the right speed. They don't track correctly... this is brand new out of a box! I started out spending a few hundred dollars and kept ratcheting my way up figuring sooner or later there's got to be a good cassette

machine out there and there wasn't. I ended up taking the money and getting these two tape machines, a Nakamichi and a Teac and I got them completely rebuilt because I was happy with the sound of them. I figured it doesn't really pay to give people demos on cassette anymore so I just got a CD burner.

WHARTON AT ECHO CANNON
SONIC YOUTH'S STUDIO



The level of stuff has gone up to the point where you can get good sounds out of tons of stuff.

LEE RANALDO

You had worked with Wharton on *Confusion Is Sex* ages ago. As far as bringing someone in - how did you pick Wharton for the job?

We had been good friends for a long time and in the years after *Confusion...* we worked with Wharton periodically on all kinds of things. Never really big album projects, but lots of EPs or singles, or one-offs. It was always easy and comfortable to work in his studio and he seemed to have the most savvy grasp on the whole thing. When we decided to set or own place up and get our own gear, he was a big part in being a consultant - as far as what stuff we were going to buy and what was going to be good for us. He knew what our preferences were at this point... the analog stuff, the Neve, the 15 ips 2" 16-track. He was consulted a lot as we were purchasing this stuff. It was always assumed that he would be the "Tech King" and wire all of it up. It just worked out that it was the perfect time, because things weren't happening in his building - he wasn't working a lot there and he had a chance to come here and work with us. We wanted to do an album with him, so it all kind of came together. With the Neve coming from the BBC, it had its idiosyncrasies and quirks - it took him a long time to figure it out.

He told me about trying to figure it out and firing it up.

Yeah, we basically drew a lot on his information and John Siket's information. John turned us on to the dealer in Detroit that sold us the Studer and the Neve. John, himself, sold us the Ampex

Then I experienced the usual dilemma of how do you really make a CD sound good, because so much of the software is geared towards not peaking out so you end up with these things that are really flat sounding and don't have the correct level. So I went through this whole intensive period of studying and talking with people who worked with the big mastering houses and figuring out my chain to do stuff. When it got to the point where I was able to make my stuff sound as good as it would've sounded if it went somewhere else I figure I was ready to master.

Initially you were doing it so you could give people a good sounding CD at their sessions.

Yeah, if they wanted something to give to someone that really sounded right. I would always experience bands taking off with cassettes and coming back and saying that the mix doesn't sound good. I'd say, "You're listening to a cassette." I can't even guarantee that when it leaves here it's going to sound right because your cassette player may be playing it at different speed or blah, blah, blah. If you give them a CD you stand a better chance of them getting an idea of what it really is going to sound like. Amazingly enough, cassette tapes survive better than reel to reels, which I haven't quite figured it out. I think in an effort to create a better tape, I think they just fucked up and didn't realize that climate would affect the tapes the way it did. New York City is horrendous on reel to reel tapes. They have ways of aging things to try and emulate what's going to happen. I guess they think that everyone stores their reels in underground humidity controlled vaults.

As the backing gets older the oil type based moisture disappears.

I think it's the lubricant, when the lubricant breaks down that's when you start losing your takes.

It replaces it with humidity.

Hillary: that's where tape baking comes in.

I got the full thing on how to build it.

Hillary: I got a whole set of instructions from Ampex on how to do it; I'll put it up on the web site.

It's like a three day process if you're doing it right. Have you ever done that?

Yes. I had to do that on a couple of old Heartbreakers tapes that Richard Hell found.

They were mush but we baked them and we got it off, I think after the baking you lose a little of the sound quality but if that's all there is then you're happy that you can get it at all.

Was it studio stuff?

It was some stuff that they had done in the studio when he was in the band.

How did you get involved with Echo Cañon [Sonic Youth's studio]?

I guess for the last record, *A Thousand Leaves...*

I guess, basically, most bands without studios would spend large sums of money to make their records. For a band like Sonic Youth, it really made sense to have their own studio because every one of them, individually, has their own projects going on. They called me up and asked me to help them put something together. I put an 8-track studio together for them some years before so they would have something to at least do demos and things like that. They had accumulated a bunch of stuff for that, then they went and bought an old 16-track 2" and an old Neve BBC broadcast board. We found a space downtown and the stuff showed up... the boxes, no manuals, no documentation. I got to sit down there and figure it all out.

Hillary: Was it fun?

Yeah, it's kind of like discovering a wreck, and trying to figure out... I always feel like the spaceship that lands and someone goes in and says, "How does it work?" I had worked with Neve consoles before and you learn that every one of them is different. So many of them are custom built, this one was on a BBC remote truck so it was definitely a custom built console.

The faders go the wrong way right?

The faders go backwards.

So if you want to hear more, you're pulling it towards yourself.

Yeah.

Hillary: There's a story as to why that is.

Just to screw everyone else up? [laughter]

Hillary: The BBC engineers wore suits, so the cuffs from the suits...

No way.

Yeah. When you're on the air and you send out the wrong signal it'll just blow everything to a million pieces. The BBC is entirely anal about that anyway so that was exactly the reason that they did that. It's also got another feature where you push the control up a little you could actually solo. The fader actually solos, like a cue.

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When you buy a new Soundcraft or Mackie you just patch cords into the back. When you get a board like the Neve there are tie-points and you have to figure out where the wiring is all going.

Fortunately, there was a built-in patch bay and the jacks on the back we basically don't even use. Most of it was on the patch bay and what was on the back was labeled so it wasn't like totally being in the dark. One interesting thing I found was that they flipped the inputs and outputs on the outputs of the board so they were reversed on the labeling. You could be there for hours trying to figure out that the inputs and outputs were flipped. It took me awhile to figure it out. It looks right but it sounds all weird. I think they just flipped it around as a real easy way to screw people up that weren't BBC engineers, it was a union thing.

With Abbey Road too, it was a very regimented thing.

Yeah, and that's totally what the BBC's about too. It's quite easy to imagine them doing that. I would like to find that out, that would be a good story. I suppose it could've been an accident, someone just wired it wrong.

They got a Studer 16-track?

Yeah.

That's kind of rare as far as I know, I've never seen one. It's not set up to do 24 at all, right?

Well it's pre-wired for another 8-channels. I've tried to get them to get those 8 channels while they can. Of course everyone is into the macho 2" 16-track kind of aspect of it.

I can't say that I'm not but....

I don't really think it's a valid consideration unless your talking of long-term storage on tape, maybe there's some advantage to it. Maybe there's some advantage from going from studio to studio because the heads will line up better. I could tell that the Tascam 1" is a quieter machine with a greater dynamic range.

But you're saying that there's not that much of a difference in what you hear?

Well I could tell you that this machine [Tascam 1"] is quieter with the noise reduction, there's no doubt about it.

They have no noise reduction?

Right, no noise reduction.

And they're running it at 15ips or 30ips?

Usually, if it's quiet we'll run it at 30ips and of course that cuts the hiss out.

The low-end changes a little.

The low-end changes a little, which I never liked. I like the low-end at 15ips.

Steve [Shelley] was telling me that they kind of just do a lot of rehearsing onto tape.

That's basically how they've always recorded. I keep trying to convince them to write the song and the vocals and then record, but I don't think I'm going to win that over. The only thing that's on my side is that the record company... "Sunday" is the last track to release as a single off of *A Thousand Leaves* and that was the only song that they had actually done like that because they had recorded it once before for a movie. The song was already together so when they recorded it they were recording the vocals and the music and everything else. The record company picked up on it right away and said, "This is the single." And they asked, "Why do you think they picked that?" I said, "Well, it may be because it was something that was already completed when you were recording it." They just like working the other way so it's a hard sell.

It seems like you have a lot of give-and-take with them though.

Yeah, I've been working with them for a long time. I know what they're going to agree to and what they're not going to agree to. I'm comfortable enough with them to say whatever I feel or whatever I think and they tell me whatever they feel or think. It's a perfect working relationship really.

As far as them doing lots and lots of recording, do you get called in every time they rehearse?

Things are set up to run in a way that I try and be there as much as possible. Especially, with the machine and the dynamic range of that machine, you have to be really careful about setting the levels than you would if you had higher headroom. One track on the last record I didn't actually... I wasn't there when it was recorded. It's the crappiest sounding thing on the record because of it; there's a lot more hiss and noise on that track. It took a lot more work, mixing it, to get it to sound as good as the other things. In a way it's good to be there. I basically worked out an arrangement with them... to be there when they're ready to do stuff like that. They never usually get together for more than three or four hours so it's always an easy day. It's really like hanging out with your friends for a few hours and pushing a few buttons. It doesn't get much more perfect than that.



1/2". They were both instrumental in sort of guiding us to the equipment that we wanted.

You had an 8-track right?

Yeah, before this we had a Tascam 8-track 1/2" and a Soundcraft Spirit board. That was a cool step... Me being someone that's fascinated with recording and recording gear, I was always pushing for that stuff. We use to have a 4-track that we did some stuff on, but when we got the 8-track, we really got serious about incorporating the recordings into the working method of the band. We had always recorded stuff on cassette and listen back to it, trying to figure out what the good parts of the songs were. Once we got the 8-track, we would come back from doing something really good and one of us would be like, "Well I don't remember what I played on that part." We would just solo the track. We got a lot of use out of that studio, it was fairly inexpensive to set up – a few thousand dollars for the gear. Again, Wharton helped us with the mics and the purchase of all that gear as well. Around the time that we were doing Lollapalooza, we realized that they were going to pay us enough to make the jump to something serious, if we wanted to. For the last three or four albums we had been recording on Neve, mixing to 1/2", working at 15 ips on both machines. We just finally realized that we should buy this gear and have it for ourselves. Eventually it'll be a cost-effective measure. We've only done one album... well we've done the album, but we've also done the fourth [SYR] EP on it. So, it's definitely proven very cost-effective, in spite of Manhattan rent.

Wharton was talking about when you had to have a place to store your gear, you had a place to



Tape Op: If I'm going to make someone sound like someone else I'll turn them into the Backstreet

Boys - why not, they sell a bunch of records

ECHO CAÑON

When they do that, is there any specific goal in mind or does someone have some new ideas that they're going to run through?

They approach everything a little bit differently. They get together and it's like, "Well blah, blah, blah wants a track for this" and "We should really think about some stuff for the next record."

The three EPs that came out before *A Thousand Leaves*, were those all things that were coming together before they tried to make a new album?

The whole idea behind that was that they could record these instrumental versions that will evolve into the next record and they could release the instrumental versions as a thing. When the record comes out with the vocals, it'll be a different thing. In some cases that's what happened, in other cases it was just a jam or something that seemed like it would be cool on that record.

I really like the EPs; they seem kind of informal.

I was trying to get them to put out the third EP as the Geffen record. [laughter] Which would have been a very radical step; it's the weirdest one. It would have been pretty amazing. Months later after the record came out. They reviewed both the record and the E.P. and they actually gave the E.P. more stars than the record. I felt like it was some vindication, even though vindicated by *Rolling Stone* seemed so horrible. Maybe I was wrong! [laughter]

With the Sonic Youth studio, what things did they buy? Did you get to advise gear after the main two purchases?

After they started off with a couple of things I basically helped them fill out the stuff. There's nothing really super complex, they bought a U-47 [Neumann] which is the good microphone down there. I got them a bunch of other mics... Sennheisers and EVs. Outboard is pretty minimal, a few reverbs and a Harmonizer and a few compressors. The board sounds pretty decent so we don't need a lot of outboard EQ.

Did you mix the album on that..?

Yeah, it was done quickly down there.

What are you mixing through down there?

They bought an Ampex 1/2". The classic repair special. You never know when you throw the switch if it's going to go on or not. It's really not my favorite kind of tape equipment to work on. That's one of the problems with a lot of the vintage stuff, I try and make them understand that. That stuff is expensive to fix, it's hard to find parts. I'm sure that once that machine is done they'll have spent as much on repairs as they did buying it.

Hillary: What do you think about recapping Neves?

Well, they run extremely hot because of all the circuitry packed in on it. I think when they're actually shot, if there's a problem that's usually the answer. As far as taking the entire board apart and recapping it, uh... Caps should be caps but there's a broad range of... Anything you change is going to change the sound. People buy these vintage amps and they take it to someone and the guy changes everything in it. You could of just went out and bought an "off the shelf" amp at that point. It really is trying to figure out what's not happening; maybe it's just some output caps that need to be changed.

Has anyone done sessions at Echo Cañon?

Lee [Renaldo] and I did a record for a Spanish singer and that came out on Warner Spain. Steve did the Two-Dollar Guitar record there; Thurston has done a bunch of stuff there, Kim's working on her record there.

Is she doing a solo record or...

She's doing a trio with DJ Olive and Ikue Mori. It's a really cool record.

Who engineers on stuff like that?

I actually engineered that record.

What kind of gear, both here and at Echo Cañon, have been cool finds that you've had lately?

These Orban compressors are cool. You can find them around for not a lot of money. They really make things sound incredibly strong. They're not for everything, I use them for vocals, especially with hardcore bands because no matter what goes through it, it'll cut through anything in the mix. You get those screaming vocals that's sheeted by guitars; it really works well to bring it forward.

They're old radio compressors right? For radio stations mostly?

I think radio stations probably bought them but... they're from the early '80s, before the tube thing really happened. They're all solid state, but they're cool. I have a Dynaco PAT-4 preamp that's great for putting shine on anything. The treble control on it is just amazing. I've seen them all over E-bay for under a hundred dollars. You get a couple channels of cool, two band EQ. [laughter]

I noticed you got a couple of [Radio Shack] Realistic graphic EQs here.

I'm totally into the Realistic things for really grunging down something.

Just insert it into a channel?

Yeah, it definitely gives you a different sound. What else have I got there...?

These little APIs.

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Well, APIs, they're not cheap on any level, but they are really nice.

Oh, the Alesis MicroEnhancer. What have you been able to find that you can do with it?

I honestly don't use it that much anymore. It's good for brightening things up a little.

You've got some higher end stuff, lots of it...

There was a point where I was definitely an equipment junkie. I had probably twice as much stuff here at one point. My cousin's studio has a bunch of it, Sonic Youth's studio has some. I just kind of work it down to the stuff that I really use. If something just sits there for six months and doesn't get turned on, you might as well sell it to someone that's going to use it. The Orban spring sounds amazing. These things are beautiful sounding reverbs... amazing on guitars.

Hillary: You don't have any problem with bass vibrations?

It's actually really solid down there. I don't really have problems with bass vibrations, because it's all stone. It's not like a floating room, you don't have too much bounce.

Those Klipsch speakers, those are home speakers right?

Yeah, that line came out in the early '50s and was made up until the '80s. Of course now you can't find that kind of stuff anymore. They're the Klipsch Heresy, it's basically a 12" woofer and two mid-range horns and a high-end horn. They were under a thousand dollars when I bought them, I don't know what they would go for now. They are very dynamic, they can rip your ears off. It's really useful playing back basic tracks for bands. I really don't mix on them, I'll put stuff up there to hear how they sound but...

What do you mainly mix on, the Yamahas?

I switch between the three here, a lot.

What are the bottom ones?

Those are Cambridge Acoustics... The Optimus are kind of...

Radio Shack... You're a big supporter of Radio Shack here.

Radio Shack is not so bad, for the money. They always come up with some cool stuff.

What do you use for mic pres in here?
I throw them into the Kelsey.

Did you get heavy into the electronics yourself then?

Yeah, I do a lot of that kind of stuff. It's a good thing to know if people are going to get into

a studio, unless they're made of money.

You've been making your own mic pre or...

I basically changed the ones that were in the Kelsey... Jensen transformers and better op amps and better connectivity. For awhile I was totally into it, to the point where... tracking things with both of them and listening to it for hours afterwards trying to figure out which one sounded better. I'm sure we've all been through it...

You gotta' give it up at some point.

Like I said, I went through my whole period of buying stuff and everything, now I'm into just using what's around. The level of stuff has gone up to the point where you can get good sounds out of tons of stuff. Why be affiliated... "I can't do my record unless I have this..." As long as I have some speakers that I know what's happening I can walk into a studio and deal with it.

Have you done a lot of work out of different places besides these two?

I've been to various places... in town, in England, in Spain and the west coast...

Just for different album projects?

Yeah, for different stuff.

What do you take with you?

I took a few microphones, I always take a couple of Sennheiser 421s if they don't have those. I always take some 57s if they don't have those. I generally don't carry high-end mics around.

I can't believe a studio that wouldn't have 57s but...

They might have them, but they're stomped on or... It's good to have one for the snare that you know sounds right. I like the 421s on guitars, either alone or in combination. If I don't have them I get a little freaked out.

Do you take any gear or rack stuff?

Generally not. This record I did in Spain was basically 1" 16-track Tascam. This guy was running a lot of stuff at 30 (ips) because the machine had gotten so out of spec and it worked just a little better like that. The first day I re-aligned his machine without a test tape because it would take him a week and a half to get test tape.

He had a studio and didn't have a test tape for his machine?

It's not so surprising. You get into a place and you realize how great it is to be in New York, where you can go to 48th street and find stuff.

Hillary: Spa didn't have one for a really long time.

We bought that when we got our machine because the tech said he



wasn't coming over if I didn't have any test tape.

If you're going to take stuff from one place to another, you need the test tape. There's no other way around it. I knew I was going to finish the whole project in the studio so I knew if I aligned the machine and it was a little off it would play back right. Just make sure everything goes in at zero and comes back at zero, that would be a good start [laughter]. They had a Topaz console, which I think is a good alternative to the Mackie. I think it's a little better sounding EQ than a Mackie and it's in the same price range. I basically did the record on that. They had a few compressors and they were all the strange brand things I've never heard. Most of them didn't really do the right stuff. I brought the stuff back here to master figuring I could... it came on DAT so it sounded very thin and strange and I just EQ'ed a little and put it on tape and it came back to life.

How did you get a job like that?

I'm not sure how I got hooked up with that band, I think they either found me on my website or... they were big Sonic Youth fans. Doing Sonic Youth doesn't hurt, lots of people listen to them. Usually people that call me, that listen to them, are into good music which is really nice. It's always nice to do something that's good... in a way it's easy for me because I know what they expect.

Do you have any kind of manager?



practice... you had to rent all of these different places, now it's kind of like your little complex.

It's great, it's the total clubhouse... It's really good.

It's allowed us to work in a way that we were never able to work in. That's the coolest thing about having our own place, it's not a commercial venture. We let our friends come in when we're not in here and a couple of us have done other projects in here. The best thing is that we come in and play in our natural, relaxed environment and we tape everything. It's not like you go to a studio after you've rehearsed the songs 50-million times and you're under that pressure – both financially and time wise... "We've got to do the best version of this song we ever did in our lives right now." Our whole thing is that we really like the idea of versions where the song is just starting to coalesce. All the elements are there, they're not all dusted and perfectly shined and polished and in place, but it's all there at that point. We feel like we can hear the newness of it – the sort of still inventive quality of the music, that's what we're going for. Whenever we're here Wharton is in there rolling tape, whether we're just doing a freak out jam for a week on end or... It's really the perfect way for us to work. What we realized, as far as capturing the sound of the band, it was not an overdub situation as much as the band playing live. When you heard old records from the '50s, Buddy Holly or whatever, they stuck a couple mics in the room and the band was really there playing. It wasn't like the drummer came in and did his part and the bass player layered over it. That was more interesting to us, even if it meant sacrificing – we play in here with not that much baffling, there's bleed all over the place. It's not really up our alley to worry too much about that stuff because it's all going to come back together at some point anyway. We are just looking for a natural situation to play in and having are own gear and our own place to do it...

Has it changed the way that you write and operate as a band?

In a way. I think it's just allowed us to be looser and free. It sort of coincided with a push in all of us to want to just blow everything wide open and forget about song form. It sort of started with *Washing Machine* – getting more into extended songs like "Diamond Sea", that just went a million places in 15 minutes. Since then, we just stopped worrying about record company bullshit and tried to just please ourselves. It was kind of a coincidence, the fact that we were able to have our own space at the same time meant that we could stretch out here and as long as the tape would roll... "Diamond Sea" is actually an early example of this. The song wouldn't fit on one reel of tape, so we had a DAT machine covering the interim while we swapped reels. We still put songs together that way, where there's a piece in the middle that is a DAT edit that we spliced in.

You guys seem to always be rejuvenating yourselves.

Yeah, having a studio has helped with that in a way. Since '90, when we signed to Geffen there's always been this record company umbrella over everything and we finally got to the point where we were like, "Somebody will put out our records." We got very loose and I think the solo stuff that all four of us were doing really helped – to sort of challenge the band and bringing back new stuff back into the band. We're having as much fun making music the last few years than as we've ever had, so that's a good sign.

I've got a manager in Europe, in Germany, so far she hasn't helped me get my record out there, but she exists. I made an attempt to find a manager to do the production stuff here, figuring I could get more into the record company stuff, but the music business is in such turmoil at the high-end.

When you get bands, how do you work out a production fee or engineering fee? Do you ask for points on records?

Yeah, I ask for points on records. I do that across the board now, for anyone who's there, it's part of the agreement of recording with me. It makes sense. There's tons of records that I didn't do that on and I think it's only fair; you're a big part of it and you should be compensated.

Has that paid off on some of the work?

On a bunch of stuff, it's always fun to get checks. But, I had an agent here for awhile and she would call me up in tears, "I can't get you anything."

Hillary: What's a typical amount of points?

I'd say three would be typical, I'm usually quite happy to do a two point deal with a band and split production credits or however they want to work it. The basic justification for a production is that your bringing something to the final product that wouldn't be there otherwise. It breaks down across a couple lines: The engineering line and the mixing line and the pre-production line... In most cases, bands I work with I don't get all that heavily involved in pre-production, unless it's a big record company project and they want me to. I'm not really in to rearranging songs for bands. I'll always make suggestions and things but my idea is to take the band and take what they're doing and make it sound as good as it can. I think that should be enough. If I'm going to make someone sound like someone else I'll turn them into the Backstreet Boys – why not, they sell a bunch of records – if you really want to go that route. I guess that's my hallmark and because of that, a lot of people will say, "Well, he didn't really do anything." I get that from people in the industry sometimes. It's like, "You send them to somebody that does something with them and then see what happens." What happens is the band is unhappy with the record, the record doesn't sell anyway and they've spent a lot of money on this guy to sit there and change them.

It's a fine line between... "Are you just an engineer or are you producing?"

You say, "Just an engineer." In a way engineering is just as important too. People find that out when they build a home studio and say, "Why doesn't it sound like the record I did with... this is what blah, blah, blah used to make their record, but mine doesn't sound that good." One of the nicest things of having done all of this stuff and having a gold record on your wall is that people start to take what you say seriously. I'm sure everyone's been through the fighting with people over things. I went through that for years, with bands. If you don't really have all these records that you've done, they're not as willing. **Now people are more willing to accept what I say, which is wonderful.**

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