

TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

SHOOTER JENNINGS

Marilyn Manson, Tanya Tucker, Brandi Carlile

LOU HOLTZMAN

NYC's EastSide Sound

MARC URSELLI

Hal Willner, John Zorn, Lou Reed, U2

BEN KANE

Emily King, D'Angelo, PJ Morton

DENISE BARBARITA

MONOLisa Studios, kid's Music, NYC

HEBA KADRY

Björk, mastering, mixing in NYC

JESSE LAUTER

Tedeschi Trucks, Elvis Perkins, music docs

SCOTT JACOBY

Jason Mraz, Vampire Weekend, John Legend

LOGAN FARMER

Recording his solo album Still No Mother

GEAR REVIEWS

\$ 5 . 9 9 N o . 1 3 9

O c t / N o v 2 0 2 0

I ♥ NY





I ♥
NY.

Marc Urselli

Hal Willner, John Zorn, Lou Reed

by Larry Crane

photo by William Semeraro

Several decades ago a young engineer left Italy for New York, looking to enter the studios of Manhattan. These days, Marc Urselli is a respected producer, recording engineer, and front of house live sound mixer. He works out of New York's EastSide Sound as Chief House Engineer and has done sessions as varied as U2, Esperanza Spalding, John Zorn, Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, and Foo Fighters, as well as having worked extensively with Hal Willner before Hal's passing this year. Willner was famous for his unique, multi-artist tribute albums, and his final production, *Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs Of Marc Bolan And T. Rex*, was engineered by Marc and saw release in August this year.

How does a Swiss-Italian guy end up in New York working at an established studio?

I got to New York in 1999 and sought out an internship here, thanks to a common connection. It took me another year until I actually got the internship. In the late '90s a lot was happening in studios. When I finally got my internship – making coffee, cleaning toilets, and vacuuming the floors – I basically stuck around 15 to 18 hours a day until I could prove my knowledge and value. I already had been running a studio in Italy for several years, but you can't come to New York and say, "I already know this." You've got to *show* people what you know. I started vacuuming floors and pouring coffee for clients, and then I started assisting on sessions, eventually engineering. Now I'm the Chief House Engineer and I manage the studio.

EastSide Sound is known for having lots of isolation possibilities when tracking.

Yes. And I love it. It's my favorite way to work now. I got so used to the isolation and the cleanliness of tracks that I get, without sacrificing the "vibe" of people playing together. It's something I wouldn't want to sacrifice. I don't want to have a studio where everyone has to track one at a time. Here they can still track together and look at each other, because there's perfect line-of-sight with at least four out of the six booths in the live room. Everyone can record together and play to each other, and I get clean tracks out of it. Of course this is a huge asset when it comes to editing, which people do a lot of these days. They're so used to having options that they might say, "We should try this without drums." And here you can actually mute the drums, unless of course it's a super-loud drummer where you're going to hear some of it through the doors. When I book studio time in other studios, right after console make and brand, iso booths are one of the first things I look for and ask about.

To see what isolation they have available?

Yeah. It obviously depends on who I work with. I did lots of recordings with a great producer, the late Hal Willner. We were tracking the last record [*Angelheaded Hipster: The Songs of Marc Bolan & T. Rex*] all over the US. Hal wanted to be in the live room, but he didn't want to sit next to the drums. The first thing I'd look at is, "Is there a drum booth? Are we going to have horns or strings on the session that we can isolate?" And so on...

Hal Willner had a very hands-off approach with artists.

The first session for the *Angelheaded Hipster* album I did with Hal, I made an assumption: I assumed he was old-school. I mean this in the best possible way; I love old-school. I assumed he wanted everyone set up in the same room, so that's what I did. He came in and was not down with that at all. I moved the drums into the drum booth. No problem. That was in L.A. at Studio A of The Village Studios. Their drum booth in A is pretty small, but the drummer was cool and made it work. That was a session with Nick Cave. From then on, I knew what to book when I looked for a studio for a Hal session.

One of his fortes is gathering people and seeing what they make.

That was definitely one of Hal's fortes. Putting people together who he knew are amazing, and that you didn't necessarily think would work together. He always made it work beautifully. Hal was a huge influence and mentor to me and for how I work now.

Do you work with a lot of different producers?

I do. I'm not exclusive to anyone. Hal was one of my favorites because of his method of work and his incredible way to be around artists. He was really special and unique. Like I said, old-school in the best possible ways. I love that about producers, and I aspire to be that kind of producer when I get older.

You've worked a lot with John Zorn. I bet that's a different experience.

Completely different! We stopped counting, but by last year we had done 100 plus records together. You can definitely say I work a lot with him! He's an incredible artist. I guess you can call him a producer, but he's a different kind of a producer. He's not a producer, in Hal Willner's way. Hal was very hands off, whereas Zorn is very hands on. He's very unique and obviously an incredible musician. Zorn is like one of those movie directors who writes a specific part for an actor. He writes scores, knows who the score is for, and he writes it for their persona, their ability, their sensibility, and their techniques. If he were to write the same score for two different violin players, he might even write each one differently. That's a really unique thing about Zorn. He writes with musicians in mind so that he can get the most out of the musician. He always pushes everyone past what they think is their best. Some projects are more open and free, and on other projects he knows exactly what he wants, and he wants it *that* way. He's obviously open to suggestions, but he's one of those cats who knows before he walks into the studio where he wants to go and what he wants to achieve. A very specific vision. He works to get that out of the musicians, and I'm there to make sure it translates in the way he expects to hear it. Zorn is very good at psychology too. I remember one session where the artist wanted to start with the hardest tune [in order] to get it out of the way. Zorn was like, "No, we're not doing that. Let's start with one of the easier scores instead." I asked him why he didn't want them to do the hardest one first, and he said that if they tried the hardest one first, it would take so much time, and it

would affect their performance for the rest of the day. If you do the easy one first, they'll have a morale boost, so to speak, and feel more relaxed and not under the microscope. The other thing he does is: Let's say he's not happy with one thing. He will first mention five or six other things that he really liked before he says what he *doesn't* like. They'll feel great about him liking it, and then they'll listen the last thing he wants them to change, but they're still hyped-up about what he liked of that performance so they don't feel criticized. These kinds of subtle techniques are one of the many lessons I learned from him. That's one of the many ways he gets the most out of everyone.

Do you feel with a long-running relationship like that that you intuitively capture his compositions?

Yes. After more than ten years together, we don't have to say much. I know what he wants before he walks in. I set up ahead of time before his sessions, because I know how he likes to place musicians. There's never that question. Bringing it back to the isolation here: The first time we worked together, Zorn walked in and said we should record everyone in the same room. I said, "I think you would benefit from having everyone in isolation. This studio has that capability. Why don't we try it?" He was very reluctant. I did the same with Lou Reed. I said, "Look, let's start tracking this way [with iso booths]. If you don't like it, we will not charge you for any of those hours. We'll bring all the musicians back into the live room, and you'll start paying when we get rolling." That way they don't feel any pressure about wasting time. Both Lou Reed and John Zorn went with that, and they were happy with the results. Neither ever went back. I facilitate Zorn's method of work, in terms of knowing what to expect from him, as well as knowing what he's going to want from the musicians, in terms of microphone choices. He's not technically knowledgeable to the point where he'll say what mics he wants – except for the sax, of course – but *I'll* know, from trying different mics, what he wants on different instruments. Even if they're not *my* primary choice. For example, Zorn and I have never seen eye-to-eye on kick drums. When I start mixing for him, I'll put the kick drum where I want it, then I take it down 6 dB and I know that's the "Zorn level." After years and years, you know and do these things automatically.

The great thing about long-running working relationships like this is that the process is much easier for both of you.

Exactly. You take all the guessing out of it. We know exactly what we want. We have a very close relationship. We don't eat when we work, which is not necessarily my choice, but he likes it that way. It's nonstop from when he walks in to when he walks out. We record and mix very, very quickly. *Very quickly*. That's how he does 100 records in ten years. We've never spent more than four days on one record. I'd say that the average is around two and a half or three days for a record. It's usually one, or maximum two, days of tracking, and then one, or maximum a day and a half, of mixing. That's really it. There have been cases where we mixed a record in five hours. The last

EastSide Sound History

When Lou Holtzman opened this studio in 1972, musicians were afraid to come downtown. There were a lot of drugs down here in the '70s. All the studios at the time were in midtown. This actually was the first downtown studio in the city. It was definitely the first one below Houston Street and one of only two below 14th Street – the other one being Jimi Hendrix's Electric Lady. This whole area was like zombie territory in the '70s. Now it's super gentrified and unaffordable, which is a problem for us, of course, because we are renting. But we've been hanging in here close to 50 years now. We moved into this "new" space in 2001. Before 9/11 we had a bigger building two blocks away, with three studios on three floors. Two were large control rooms. One had a large live room attached to it. In the upstairs mix room we had a Harrison Series 10. Not this same exact console, but the same model. Then downstairs we had a Neve, serial number 13, actually (modded and with Flying Faders). That console sounded incredible. We had another studio upstairs, a small production suite. In 2001, after 9/11, we downsized to this facility, which is self-contained on one floor. We still have two studios, but Studio B is a production suite with an iso booth, while Studio A is a control room with a live room and six iso booths. After a few failed partnerships with people who almost ran the studio into the ground, Lou took back the lease and I've been helping him run the place. But we are looking to partner up with somebody so we can keep the studio alive. <www.eastsidesound.nyc>

Mary Halvorson record [*Paimon: Book of Angels Volume 32*] was recorded in a day and mixed in five hours. Needless to say, I start mixing when I'm recording. Not printing, but I start getting my sounds when I'm recording so that then, when they're done recording, I'm already 70 percent there. That's why it only takes five hours.

With the Harrison Series 10 console here being recallable, you can have everything ready to go.

Absolutely. Everything I do here is saved, so when John comes back a week later, I can recall the mix, or whatever tracking settings I had, and start from there.

I'm assuming this is all being tracked digitally, at this point?

Recording is all to Pro Tools these days. We have two tape machines in storage, but nobody wants to pay for tape. I record everything in Pro Tools these days.

I think people romanticize tape a lot, but when you tell people it's \$370 a reel...

I agree. That immediately puts the tape conversation to rest. I have had that conversation, "Sure, we have tape machines in storage. Are you ready to pay \$375 for 15 minutes of music?" That usually stops that.

Do people ever approach you and look at the isolated style of recording for jazz-ish sessions and feel it's incorrect?

It's happened a couple of times, but I don't get that a lot. On the first session I did for this great vinyl-only audiophile jazz label – Newvelle Records, for whom I've engineered and mixed over 30 records – they wanted to record in the same room and I talked them into trying it

my way. People trust me. Honestly, I've only gotten compliments, even on classical recordings. Comments such as, "Your classical music recordings sound so close and palpable. You feel like you're right up there with the musician." That is definitely my style; close mic'ing, even when I do classical music ensembles. I'll still have room mics, but I spot mic as much as I can. I like that level of precision; of hearing everything. I got that partly from Zorn, actually. He wants to hear every subtlety of the instrument. He doesn't even use room mics anymore. That's another example of how you get to know what an artist wants after you've worked with them for a long time. At the beginning with Zorn, I used to always set up close and room mics. After a couple of years of realizing that they never got added into the mix because he didn't like them, I stopped setting them up all together. He likes everything up close so you can hear the bow on the strings and sounds like that. I've carried that over to a lot of other classical recordings that I do. I did one with ICE, the International Contemporary Ensemble, that was all tracked together in the same room with no isolation, because the classical guys like it that way. But I still did close mic everything and mixed it together with the room mics.

Zorn's taken you on the road for live sound mixing too.

Yes. Live sound is something I've been doing since the very beginning, at the same time that I started tinkering in recording studios, around '94 or '93. When I moved to New York, I stopped for a minute simply because I didn't have any contacts here. Then I resumed around 2002 and did a tour with Eliane Elias at that time. That brought me back in touch with the live music world. I do both to this day, and I love doing both. Diversity keeps things interesting. I did live sound for Lou Reed for seven years, and also worked with him in the studio until he died. That was being on the road with him about 30 percent of the year. I've toured with The Beach Boys, The Black Crowes, and Marianne Faithfull. I still work with people like Mike Patton [*Tape Op* #53] and John Zorn live. Lately it's been mostly studio work, but I still do a good percentage of front of house live sound.

How do you see the skills intertwining between live shows and studio work? They're quite different.

Yeah, they are; but there's obviously a strong connection. I like that difference; it keeps me on my toes. I will also say that a lot of what I've learned in the studio, I've been able to apply live, and vice-versa.

What types of techniques?

I've experimented within the studio with mic'ing techniques that you would only do live. Or, if I'm on a digital console live, I'll try things that I usually would do with plug-ins in the studio. Why not? I experiment. It doesn't always work, but if I have the option and the time, I do it. Obviously time is the biggest difference, because live you don't have time to try things. Although nowadays in the studio, everyone's rushing anyways, so it's almost the same.

Since moving here you've seen a lot of changes in the studio industry, especially for New York.

Of course. I miss the golden era where people were throwing money at studios. Already by 1999 people were looking at the clock. But it's definitely gotten worse, in those terms. That's why being a fast engineer on Pro Tools, and having a recallable console, have become assets; those together are important these days. People are on budgets and there's no time to spend on recalling settings. Whatever it might take to allow a client do what they need to do, in the amount of time that they are able to afford, is obviously key to making it happen.

The more jobs you can get through the door, being organized helps.

Absolutely. You know how I feel about organization.

I know that you're a stickler for it.

It's got to be the Swiss side of me. I couldn't do what I do without being organized, because I'm constantly working on at least six projects at the same time. If I don't keep it organized, it's not going to happen.

How does a lot of your work find you now?

I find it really fascinating that you've worked in quite a few different genres.

That's the thing I'm most proud of in my career. It's what I try to hang onto and focus on. I would say that the main reason for me becoming an engineer in the first place is that I love too many genres and cannot decide which genre to focus on. When I was a musician, at 15 or 16, when I played an instrument, I had a crossover band that mixed rap, metal, rock, and jazz or whatever, because I couldn't make up my mind about what I liked the best. Engineering allowed me to do all the genres. Now I do almost everything. I don't do hip-hop or R&B so much. I do jazz and all its derivatives of avant-garde music, new music, etc. Rock, classical music, and electronic music. Most of my work is word-of-mouth, really. Occasionally there is going to be the person who found me on the web, like Googling out of nowhere, but 95 percent is word of mouth.

So you do some mixing here and some at home? How do you delineate that for clients? Different rates?

That's the only reason to mix at home. I have good speakers. I use Adam Audio these days, both at home and here in the studio. My listening reference is very similar. For the client it's a matter of money. If they can pay for the studio, we should do it here because it's analog summing and it's going to sound a little bit better. If they can't afford it, rather than go mix it with some guy who doesn't know what he's doing, I can mix it for you, so at least you still get my ears to mix it; but it won't be analog summing and it won't be attended mixing, because at home I only do unattended. That's the way they get to choose. They can choose whether they want to be present and have analog summing, or not. A lot of it is hybrid these days. Even the last record I did with Hal Willner was hybrid, in the sense that I'd do pre-mixes at home, simply because the scheduling was so insane that it would've been impossible to get together with Hal every time to do a new mix. I'd do pre-mixes in-the-box at home and get comments from him. I'd send him a new mix, and when it was 90 percent there we'd bring it into the studio and break it out on the analog

Working with U2 and Elton John

Hal was good friends with the U2 guys. Had been for a long time. Hal considered the *Angelheaded Hipster*: [The Songs Of Marc Bolan And T. Rex tribute] album to be his "White Album," so, when he and I started working on that album, four years ago, naturally Hal asked U2 whether they'd wanna do a song. Bono sent Hal an iPhone clip of him singing "Bang a Gong (Get It On)," so that meant they were in. From that point – until the U2 schedule cleared to actually do a session – another year went by. They had warned us it would be last minute during *The Joshua Tree Tour*, and one day a call came in and they said they'd have an afternoon for us in two days' time, during a day off in New Orleans. We had less than 48 hours to book flights, hotels, a studio, and musicians. Hal wanted to add a horn section, since we were tracking in NOLA, so we also needed an arranger to write horn charts. Hal had produced Marianne Faithfull's *Horses and High Heels* at Piety Street Recording years prior, and I knew that studio too, but it had been sold to a private owner. I had to convince that new owner to let us occupy his studio for a day. I got in at 9 a.m. to assess the situation. The live room was basically a living room with several couches and a lot of gear was missing in the control room. The SSL console was still there, but I brought a lot of my own microphones from New York and we sourced some locally. They'd kept the BURL converters, but they only had 24 inputs, which proved challenging, but I had to make it work. I proceeded to clear the live room of all the couches and Hal's right arm/manager, Rachel Fox, handled the huge incoming U2 machine (security, catering, managers, assistants etc.). Two of U2's techs brought their drums and amps and set them up in the live room, and I mic'd up everything and put the horns in the "drum booth" of the studio. I got drum, bass, and guitar sounds with the techs. We were ready by 4 p.m., so I rehearsed the horn section with the original T. Rex recording. U2 showed up around 6 p.m. and we did a few takes, all live, playing together with the horns and with The Edge playing in the control room next to me. Bono had told Hal he wanted to track with two microphones, and I had heard a rumor that Bono likes to track with a [Shure] SM58 from the control room. I set up a 58 by the couch, and a Neumann, a [Shure] SM7, and my JZ Black Hole BH2 in a vocal booth next to the control room. Because I only had 24 inputs I had a patch ready to use for two out of those four mics in order to save channels. Hal was so proud I got Bono into the vocal booth. He always told people, "Marc got Bono in a booth. Bono never does that." The horn section was killer; Trombone Shorty [Troy Andrews] showed up and played a solo – probably the first time U2 had a trombone solo on anything of theirs. Still high on the fumes of a great, long day, at the hotel that same evening – at Hal's request – I did an in-the-box mix to send to Bono, and they liked it. Eventually we flew to France to record Elton John playing piano and ad-libbing on the same track, which was a surreal experience. Being in the same room with Hal, U2, and Elton was definitely inspiring and exciting. Everyone was so nice and easygoing, and they were all in awe of each other. The stories at lunch that day were incredible! The whole experience was surreal, and driving through the south of France with Hal is still one of my greatest memories.

console. We started with faders at zero and we'd go from there, making our last little adjustments while keeping our analog summing that we loved so much.

It used to be hands on the faders, make all the changes, and if you want to remix it, it's a big pain in the ass. Now it's expected that we can recall it.

We have to roll with it. That's the name of the game these days.

Skipping back, what Lou Reed sessions did you work on?

I wasn't fortunate enough to work on any of his albums, sadly. I did work with him once at Avatar, recording a Buddy Holly cover that's on a Starbucks compilation [*Rave On Buddy Holly*]. Then we did some recordings here. We did a lot of mixing here. We mixed "The Debt I Owe" for a Woody Guthrie tribute record [*Note of Hope: A Celebration of Woody Guthrie*] that was recorded somewhere else before I knew him; we remixed it together here. We did some recordings here with him and Laurie Anderson when they were guests on other projects. We did one with them here with Kevin Hearn, the guy from Barenaked Ladies and the MD and keyboard player in Lou's live band. The last thing I did with Lou was mixing a live DVD of the last concert that he'd done with his band, which was in Prague [*Live at Archa Theatre, Prague 2012*]. That was the last thing we did together. I mixed the show live and then mixed the DVD mix in the studio; I knew it inside out. We spent four days mixing in here, and that was an amazing experience.

As he got older, he got much more aware of sound and sonics, how his guitars worked and what he wanted them to sound like.

He was always very much into sound. We would do soundchecks at concerts where he'd stop a soundcheck and he wouldn't go to the next song because he was working out some specific sound. I don't want to say "waste," but we'd spend the rest of the soundcheck on that one sound and not be able to rehearse the rest of the songs. He was so fixated, but that speaks to his commitment to sound. I loved that about him.

Was mixing with him in the studio an interesting process of focusing in like that?

It was very much an interesting process. In fact, I had one experience with him on that Buddy Holly song I mentioned. He said to me, "I'll come back around 2 or 3 o'clock." I said, "Okay, I'll get the mix started around 10 or 11 a.m. so it's in a good place when we get started." I did the mix, and by 1:30 or so I didn't know what else to try anymore. It sounded good to me. I waited for him, and he shows up around 2:30. He was like, "Oh, it sounds pretty good, but what if we try this?" I thought to myself, "Oh, he doesn't like it." So we start "trying things." By trying things, I mean he has his guitar tech coming over with pedals that he wants to run elements of the mix through. We spent four or five hours [on it]. I was getting depressed, thinking, "Wow, he's really not happy with this mix." After about four or five hours he was like,

"Let me hear your first mix." I recalled it, and he said, "Oh, this sounds perfect! Don't change a thing. We can't do better than this." That was a morale boost. The next day we had dinner, and I asked, "Why did we do all that? That was a lot of time we spent in the studio." He said, "Sometimes you've got to try everything to know that you had it right in the first place." That was a lesson.

What did you pick up from Hal Willner's work?

Surviving COVID-19

Needless to say, the Coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone in some way or another. My girlfriend was sick with Covid for seven weeks, and losing Hal Willner was definitely my biggest loss. He was a mentor, a friend, and a true inspiration. I've learned so much from him and, to pay tribute to his legacy, I created the website haltribute.com to collect tributes from his musician friends, as well as to collect and itemize his incredible discography. As a sound engineer who tracks, mixes, records, and does live show sound, two thirds or more of my income has vanished into thin air. Being a "non-essential" business, EastSide Sound has had to remain closed for months. When the pandemic started and borders started to close I was in Europe, as I was supposed to do a South African tour leg with a UK band, then work on the sound design of a theater piece in Paris, as well as later mix the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Germany. All of that was cancelled, and I decided to stay in London until it was safe and I was allowed to return to New York. I bought a pair of Adam Audio speakers, a pair of OLLO Audio headphones, and a 22-inch display for my London apartment and started doing unattended mixes. One of the things I did was to offer some free mixing services for bands in order to help with the current situation. I setup a voting system, so everyone had a chance of getting their songs mixed – I ended up doing six mixes for free. I also started a series of videos on social media where I discussed how to set up a home recording project studio to stay creative during the lockdown. I think it is super important that we stay active and continue making music. I made seven short videos and posted one every week, choosing an accredited charity as a recipient of donations made by myself and by those who found the videos useful. On the home front, Lou Holtzman has been doing an amazing job maintaining the studio gear to be ready for when we reopen EastSide Sound. In July, in accordance with NYC's official guidelines, EastSide slowly resumed sanitized and socially distant sessions. Aside from using masks and hand sanitizers (and of course sanitizing vocal microphones), once again the great isolation at EastSide has proven to be a winning card; with all the iso booths it is *truly* possible to do a socially distant session. We are grateful to our landlord for being understanding during this situation, and hopefully by the time this interview is in print we'll be doing sessions full time again.

www.haltribute.com

BB **BRYSTON**

"After four decades with Bryston, I can't imagine anything better..."

*Bob Doidge, Principal
Grant Avenue Studio*



Bryston has been manufacturing the 4B amplifier near Toronto, Ontario since 1978, offering reference levels of performance and our astonishing 20 year warranty. The current 4B³ Pro is revered as one of the finest audio amplifiers ever made. Those who demand every last drop of detail and transparency from their monitors choose the Bryston 4B³.

20 Year Warranty  Made In Canada
www.bryston.com

Well, one of Hal's greatest talents was psychology in the studio. He would basically let people do their thing without getting overbearing or in the way. Without them noticing that he was doing it, he made the session go in the direction that he wanted it to go. If it didn't go in that direction, or people got stuck, that's where he'd step in or make a suggestion that would usually make things flow again. So psychology, because he was very hands-off in that sense. He's wasn't a guy who writes arrangements, writes charts, or plays an instrument. He was very hands-off, but he got the best out of people. I saw that from day one, because Hal was Lou's producer. That's how I met Hal. He was sitting there at rehearsals with his iPad. I was like, "What's that guy doing sitting there?" Then I saw, over the years, how he worked, and it was pretty incredible. I definitely was learning from him. We're all still learning, but I did so many sessions with Hal, and I really enjoyed his way of working and seeing how it came together in the studio.

We might all start off technical, trying to learn where to put the mics and all that. But at the end of the day if you don't get people in the right headspace, you'll only get garbage.

Absolutely. It's all about the headspace. It's all about finding a good vibe. It's all about keeping musicians comfortable and relaxed. ☺

<www.marcurSELLi.com> <www.instagram.com/marcurSELLi>

any color you like.

sound heritage.

