What Kind Of Producer Do You Want To Be?
Excerpt from The Art Of Record Production, by Richard James Burgess, ©1997, Omnibus Press (Out of Print)

a) The All-Singing-All-Dancing-King-Of-The-Heap

These guys could easily be artists in their own right. In the movies and theatre someone who sings, dances and acts is known as a triple threat. This type of producer is a triple, quadruple or quintuple threat. They will most likely write the songs, play the instruments, sing the demos and may even engineer and program the computers into the bargain.

They are blessed with a natural, diverse musical talent, a rock solid sense of direction and their songs, arrangements, orchestrations, sounds and vocal stylings are instantly recognisable even though the vocalists themselves may be unfamiliar. That's not to say their records are "samey", just that they have an identity that shines through no matter what.

They're not a good choice for a band that writes its own material and intends to play everything on the record, but they're perfect for the solo artist who either does not write, needs a co-writer or is short of hit singles. Much in demand by record companies, these producers are the answer to many an A&R man's prayers. In one fell swoop they solve the problem of having to find a song and a producer. Their names carry a huge amount of clout at radio since, in their care, an unknown artist can get exposure that would normally be available only to an established artist.

Artists who will choose the All-Singing-All-Dancing producer usually fall into one of two categories: either the all-time great singers who do not write their own singles but can deliver someone else's song with conviction and great power; or the puppets who are often not even from the music business. These may range from established soap stars to good looking young tea boys who happen to be in the right place at the right time.

These producers almost invariably end up running their own production company or label. With the ability they have it's almost insane for them to be using their abilities any other way. The only artists it is worthwhile producing for another label are the truly great singers. Once they hit their stride they tend to have an unbroken run of hits for a number of years. Their style is usually very distinctive and can become a genre or at least sub-genre in itself.

The only downside is that when they finally drop out of favour or fashion it may be impossible for them to recover. Flexibility is not the hallmark of the All-Singing-All-Dancing-KingOf-The-Heap. The consolation, when it's all over, is the money. Unless they have been on a wilful mission to financial oblivion they should be able to buy a small country to retire to.
Generally this is a category you are born into rather than aspire to. The diverse range of skills need to be developed from a fairly young age, and the genre is often populated by production teams rather than individuals. Sometimes one of the partners is the creative genius, with the other being either the sounding board, the big picture guy, or the business brains.

Les Paul pioneered the concept of overdubbing (more like sound-on-sound the way he did it) in the late Forties and early Fifties on the revolutionary "How High The Moon. On that record he played all the guitar parts and Mary Ford sang all the vocals. This apparently simple recording technique would change forever the way records were to be made. Previously, artists performed live in the studio. The aim of the engineers and producers was to capture the sonic event as accurately as possible so that the original sound field could be reproduced in the consumer's home. Just like a Cartier Bresson or Ansel Adams photograph, which is an idealised or optimised representation of reality. As artistic as these photographers may have been, their photographs were dependent on what was happening when the shutter opened. Likewise, early recordings were a representation of a single continuous event that took place in a single environment.

Suddenly, with the technique of overdubbing, it was possible to create an entirely artificial sound picture. It was possible to have multiple takes of the same musicians. Musicians and instruments that didn't play together could be recorded at different times in different sonic environments. This was more like the way Man Ray had used the photographic medium. Using his instincts as an artist he had manipulated the photographic medium directly by placing objects onto light sensitive paper and exposing it to light. There were a lot of inventions and innovations that had to happen to bring us to where we are now, but once Les Paul crossed that bridge from reality to artificiality the stage was set.

With the advent of multi-track tape machines the process became easier and more widespread. Through the early Sixties records were still made largely by recording a band live in the studio. Overdubbing was mostly confined to vocals and additional orchestration. George Martin's arrangements on The Beatles' records and Brian Wilson's elaborate vocal overdubs on classic Beach Boys' albums such as Pet Sounds represent the pinnacle of this era of recording. It wasn't really until the early Seventies that artists such as Stevie Wonder and Mike Oldfield made the first successful commercial records by multi-tracking all or most of the instruments themselves. At that time Tamla Motown and Virgin, respectively, had to take a huge leap of faith to allow an artist access to as much studio time as they needed to painstakingly piece those records together without even the safety net of an outside producer. This was all the more remarkable since record companies are not renowned for embracing expensive, creative or technological innovations. (Digital recording took a long time to catch on, partly because of its negative effect on the bottom line; the same with stereo in the Fifties and Sixties.)
"I like to do everything," says Walter Afanasieff, producer of Mariah Carey and Michael Bolton, writer of hits such as Kenny G's "Don't Make Me Wait For Love" and Gladys Knight's "Licensed to Kill" and keyboard player on too many records to mention. "Some producers prefer to work with full bands and leave it up to the musicians to supply the music and the arrangements," he says. "I'll create the rhythm, the drum parts, the bass lines, the keyboard parts, the string arrangements, the horn arrangements, and the vocal arrangements. Even when the guitar players are in doing their parts, I'll be in their face every minute, every second, making sure they're giving me exactly what I want them to play. I like being responsible for every note on the record, which I suppose classifies me more as a producer/arranger."

Very often the only thing All-Singing-All-Dancing requires of his artist is that they sing. Teddy Riley says of his work with Michael Jackson and Bobby Brown, "Most of the vocal tracks were completed on the first or second try. If you can't come into the studio and sing a song the way it's supposed to be sung, then you don't need to be working with me. If the singer feels the music, and you've got the melody recorded beforehand, you're going to get the vocals down cold."

In the case of Stock, Aitken and Waterman, and latterly just Stock and Aitken, the artist's singing ability has often been secondary to prior fame. They laid the foundations for an empire by writing and producing a phenomenal run of hits for previously non-singing, but well-known soap actors Kylie Minogue and Jason Donovan.

Nowadays the new inexpensive digital technology makes it much easier, and more practical, to develop impressive studio skills at an early age. The influence of artists and producers like Prince, L.A. & Babyface and Jam and Lewis will hopefully inspire more kids to become proficient writers, arrangers and multi-instrumentalists. Those who choose not to become recording artists in their own right may well develop into the next generation of this very powerful and influential breed of producer.

Working as a team helps Jam and Lewis to handle several projects simultaneously. They have a saying, "We have no slack," that helps them to come up with a solution to any musical or technical problem. If one of them is experiencing a creative block, the other one will pick up the slack. Jimmy Jam calls Terry Lewis Vocalmaster and Terry Lewis calls Jimmy Jam Trackmaster which loosely defines the roles they play in the productions.

Although L.A. & Babyface no longer produce as a team, when they were collaborating L A. Reid said of their highly successful and long-running relationship, "One of the biggest advantages of having a producing/songwriting partner is that you always have someone to bounce ideas off. Working by yourself can sometimes get a little stale, so it's better to have a collaborator around to help keep up the inspiration level. There are always ideas out there that you may not have
thought of, and that your partner has humming around inside his head. Plus you don't have to second guess yourself when working with someone whom you trust. As my partner, Babyface, says: 'By working as part of a team, one always has the benefit of a second opinion'."

The vast majority of producers congregate in either London, New York or Los Angeles. In fact, the job can involve a lot of travelling. You very often have to go to where the artist is, where the record company is or where the studio is that has been chosen for the project. One beneficial side effect of being in the All-Singing category is that the artists will come to you, wherever you are based. Jam and Lewis are based out of Minneapolis, Teddy Riley is in Virginia Beach, Walter Afanasieff operates out of the San Francisco Bay area, and L.A. & Babyface moved at least part of their operation to Atlanta, Georgia.

b) Humble Servant

No-one ever wants to own up to this stereotype. Almost invariably credited as a co-producer, this category of producer usually gets started as an engineer, programmer, musician or co-writer. They often connect with one particular artist early in their career. If that artist goes "mega" the "Humble Servant", having become a seemingly indispensable asset, is in line for a promotion. A co-production credit is the next logical step. Continued successful co-productions with the one artist lead to full production credits with other artists.

This type of producer is not a good choice for the artist who doesn't have a strong sense of vision and direction. He is the perfect choice for the confident, independent-minded, self directed artist who needs a right-hand person and someone to bounce ideas off. He will take care of the jobs that the artist doesn't want to deal with or doesn't have the expertise to handle; in particular the administrative, engineering and technical aspects of the production process.

In the case of the musician co-producer, the attraction for the artist may be his more formal understanding of music and help with the arrangements, songwriting or organising and rehearsing the band. Mostly these relationships become long-standing, very tight and extremely lucrative, even though the producer may be on quite low royalty rates. Very often one early relationship with an artist who turns into a superstar can turn into parallel relationships with two or maybe even three superstars if the recording/ touring schedules can be synchronised.

The title may sound somewhat demeaning but the position is definitely not. It is usually a very hands-on producing role which for the right personality type is ultimately satisfying. If you are a hands-on detail person this could be one of the most fulfilling ways to do what you do best and succeed in a big way.
I wouldn't dare give an example of a producer who fits this mould. Most prefer to think of themselves as collaborators, which as we shall see is another category entirely. There are distinct differences between the "Humble Servant" and the Collaborator. The Collaborator is usually more independent and has his own working methods that the artist will, to some extent, have to accommodate. He has undoubtedly worked with many different artists and didn't build his initial reputation primarily as the right-hand man of one artist. The "Humble Servant" is much more likely to fit in with the artists' style of working and become almost like an unobtrusive extension of the artists themselves.

Steve Albini had something to say about humility in an essay he posted on the rec.audio.pro news group on the world-wide web. "Remember that nobody ever goes into a record store shouting, 'Give me the new album on label X, produced by producer Y, whose deal memo was hammered out by A&R guy Z and lawyers A, B and C!' People like records because they like music. Music is made by artists. You're just sitting in the chair with wheels and pressing the button. Do not forget your place! You are not the star, and you must be content with that. Do your job to the absolute limits of your ability - don't be a pussy about anything - but remember whose picture is going to be on the sleeve, and remember how much of their souls they're laying out for all to see. Don't get uppity, not even at three a.m. Don't demand more money or credit or attention than you deserve. As of right now, that's probably less than you're asking for, so start by taking a step backwards."

In many respects the "Humble Servant" is the most noble of all the categories. Engineer/producers are the guys who garner the loyalty. These are the only producers other than the Merlin types who consistently make four or five albums with the same artist. Maybe the artists say about the Collaborator (the next category), "Oh we've collaborated with him, let's collaborate with someone else now." But an artist can get addicted to a "Humble Servant": UI love his drum sound, he knows how I work, we're comfortable, he doesn't get in my way." As Andy Jackson says: "You can roll into the next album and it's like riding a bike. You pick it up where you left off and you haven't got to reinvent the wheel."

For the right kind of personality this is a fantastic role. It takes a great amount of humility, which I believe every producer should have. At the same time they need to be quite independent and have a lot of initiative. They have to be able to take the bull by the horns and do things on their own without looking like they're trying to take over the project.

c) Collaborator

I would say that the vast majority of producers not only fall into this category but would happily characterise themselves as falling into this category. Collaborative producers often come from
bands themselves; rarely an ex-lead singer, most likely a drummer or bass player. This may be because they have a history of collaboration within their own groups. They see themselves neither as, nor even desire to be, one-man bands. They have most likely always enjoyed collaborative situations and bring that band-member-mentality to their productions. Often they will fit right in, almost as an extra member of the band. They usually prefer to steer the band towards a unanimous decision and use their casting vote sparingly. The Collaborator's hallmark is flexibility and a willingness to see the value in other people's ideas. Their own ideas are thrown into the pot with everyone else's and are not necessarily given more weight than another band member's. If the Collaborator had a catch phrase it would most likely be the whole is greater than the sum of the parts".

This relationship is ideal for the musically secure artist who nonetheless would like to have a seasoned ear on site, someone to bounce ideas off and a different, sometimes even opposing, point of view.

The producer's experience can save the artist time, money and frustration. Although there are very few "can't be done's" in record production, there are a lot of cul de sacs that don't need to be explored and can be spotted easily by a studio veteran. The collaborative producer will steer the band away from time wasting endeavours and recommend methods and approaches that are proven to work for the particular genre in which the band is working.

Jerry Harrison is a good example of a collaborative producer and his approach to producing was characterised in the comment, "I might experiment in the future with playing with more of the bands I produce. But these bands I work with have all been so self-contained that I didn't want to step on anyone's toes. Most of these bands have keyboard and guitar players, and I'm really trying to get their performance down. My attitude is that it's their album, and I'm the one who's facilitating making that album."

d) Merlin The Magician

"The best leader is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and the self restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it. " (Theodore Roosevelt)

Merlin is often an intangible force in the proceedings. Perhaps mysteriously, Merlin can garner great loyalty from the artist and record company even though he may spend most of his time on the tennis court, the phone, in meetings, in the car or wherever else producers go when liberated from the studio. In a way he acts like a hands-on A&R consultant, coming in with an objective/subjective view frequently referred to as "fresh ears".
Successful Los Angeles based engineer John X (Black Grape) had the experience of working on a four-month album project with a very famous producer who managed to appear for half an hour in the entire four months. Despite this, when the band would go out at night after the session, if anyone asked what they were doing they would proudly announce that they were recording an album with XYZ (the famous absentee producer). I guess the only explanation here is that this particular producer had built such a level of kudos and the band were so impressed by his reputation and track record that just by being associated with him they felt that some of his success would rub off on them.

There are many other fantastic stories around about Merlin. One in particular relates to a band that had just delivered their album. In classic form their A&R person said, "I don't hear a single". They were told to write more songs and come up with a hit single before the company would release the album. This is by no means an unfamiliar scenario. What followed was the common outcome of this kind of situation. The band holed up in a New York City hotel for about a month attempting to create the required commercial masterpiece. They were thoroughly con-fused. At the tail end of the month Merlin, who had nothing to do with this particular project, happened to come by the writing room with a mutual acquaintance. The band were putting the finishing touches to the N'th contender. They were playing it through as he walked into the room. When they finished playing Merlin pronounced the song a smash. They relayed their depressing tale of what was going on with the album and their state of confusion over the last minute pressure to deliver a hit song. His response was: "I believe in this song so much that I'll produce it myself." He promptly picked up the phone, called the previously worried, but suddenly surprised and delighted, A&R person in England. He told him he'd just heard a number one song and that he would produce it himself. The A&R guy could barely contain himself Normally, neither he nor the band in question would have had access to a producer of this calibre and reputation. Terms were agreed, the contract was quickly drawn up and Securicor trucks were dispatched with Merlin's advance money. Production would commence a.s.a.p. Merlin would not be seen again for the duration of the project. The band recorded and mixed the single on their own without so much as a phone call from Merlin. It subsequently grazed the Top Ten and launched the group into a short cycle of reasonably healthy single and album sales. Not Number One admittedly, but everyone concerned was happy. Merlin took the money and the credit and moved on to even bigger and better things.

So what actually happened here? Was Merlin's power so great that his pronouncement that the song would be a hit was sufficient to lift it straight into the charts? Was it his depth of experience that enabled him to walk into a room and immediately recognise a hit that might have been passed over by a lesser mortal? Was it his enthusiasm for the song that inspired the record company to market and promote the single effectively? Was it the mere presence of his hallowed name on the label copy that carried the record through to radio? Could he have walked in on any
day in that month of writing, made the same pronouncement about any other song and achieved
the same result? Who knows, but it sure is a nice way to make a living.

If Merlin does decide to spend some time in the studio the direction he gives can range from the
very specific, subjective and detailed to the vague, general and philosophical. Sometimes it can
be quite obscure. Brian Eno rejects the idea that there are "correct" ways to do things and thinks
that we should "earn and enjoy from all the different ways we can do things." In keeping with his
philosophy, in 1975 he developed his "Oblique Strategy" cards. They featured over one hundred
possibilities to help alleviate uncertainty and stasis in the studio. Tony Visconti first showed
them to me after he had worked with Eno on a David Bowie album. The cards work on a similar
principle to the I-Ching. If you arrive at a point where you are unsure or there is some
disagreement about what to do next, choose a card. The advice ranges from "consider a different
fading system" to "look closely at the most embarrassing details and amplify them". If all else
fails you might get lucky and pick the one that says "go outside and shut the door".

Eno himself says. "Normally I don't stay with the project for the whole time. I deliberately keep
out so I can come back in and hear things with fresh ears. Some things will seem completely
obvious to me straight away. Like "that doesn't work, that works brilliantly, this is confused". I
can very quickly, within an hour's listening, set up an agenda which says, "This we must talk
about philosophically, we have to look at that structurally, we have to look at this in terms of
whether it's going anyway like the direction of the rest of the record". I set agendas like that, to
the extent that I will say that I want to take control of this song for, say, half a day. For half a day
I'll say what to do and we'll see if it works. Sometimes it doesn't. And of course any other
participant can take the same role. It's very good to be in a working relationship with people and
you can say, 'OK, I tried it and it doesn't work', and they say 'Yep, fine'. Fortunately most of the
relationships I am in are like that. You have to have the respect for people who say 'look you're
grown up, you can take an option and not pretend that it's interesting when it isn't'."

David Bowie once said about working with Eno, "It was a bit like being four-years-old again and
having a rather fun uncle who could produce coins out of his ear." Flood (producer of P. J.
Harvey, U2, Depeche Mode and Nine Inch Nails) who worked with Eno on the U2 project said
of him, "His psychological approach is something that very much influenced me - the way that
people can be encouraged, and how to judge a situation and discover what's happening, why it's
happening and what its possible outcomes could be. U2's Bono said, 'With him we discovered
the spirit of our music and a new confidence in ourselves'. "

Talented and successful artists are not renowned for casually praising producers. As mysterious
and obscure as Merlin can be, to be able to inspire these kinds of responses from major artists is
a significant achievement.
Talking about his overall attitude to producing, Rick Rubin (Beastie Boys, Run DMC, Red Hot Chili Peppers and co-founder of DefJam and Def American Records) said, "I look at producing in a very different way from most other producers. I think of it as being more like the director of a film or a play. By that, I mean that for the technical side of it, I hire engineers who I think are competent, much like a director hiring a cinematographer, and I let them do their gig. That doesn't mean I don't have very strong ideas about what I want to hear, but I don't technically know all the bells and whistles to make it sound that way."

Chili Peppers bassist Flea says, "Rick Rubin is an incredibly great producer. He keeps a balance between work and relaxing, maintains complete clarity and focus. He keeps his objectivity while we are completely caught up and so emotional. It might not be great for all bands, but we don't need that emotional push. We're just exploding and coming up with all kinds of stuff, and he helps us harness our energy. And he helps musically, making sure that every song is well-crafted. He's had a great track record with hit songs, but you can't really compare any other situation with this one." Singer Anthony Kiedis puts it most succinctly, "Rick has encompassed all the things we need in a producer."

"And he knows when to lie back on the couch and not say a word," adds guitarist John Frusciante. "As a result of his coolness, we've found the accurate, well-rounded colours of music that represent what this band is all about." Flea continues, "Some producers look at little things as they're going on, as opposed to getting the big picture of a song, or an album. Rick's suggestions don't interfere with the emotional feel. The most important thing is the energy and the soul of the music."

There's a certain point at which a producer can simply put his name on a record, get paid and just not show up. This is more common in America than in Europe. Ros Earls says, "I'm not sure whether the Americans are more honest about it. It happens sometimes that Flood is asked to mix something and before he's even done it they're saying 'you're great, you're great'. Flood is really adamant that he won't lend his name to something. He gets really angry about the way a name becomes public property, the way a name can help get a record on the radio. They're not really listening to [the work]. The kind of people I represent are very hands-on and involved. That's not to say I disapprove [of the more managerial approach]."

Merlin is undoubtedly the hardest producer-type to aspire to. Mostly we are the kind of producers we are because of our basic personality types. Age and experience are obviously modifying factors. It would be unusual for Merlin to be directly responsible for a great deal of the specific musical and technical content of the record. This is a high concept role, more to do with the overall direction and energy of the album, and the other intangibles that drive an artist's
career forward. Merlin has to be able to identify talent and harness it. He is usually charismatic, powerful and extremely successful. A natural leader with an ability to see the "big picture", and not get bogged down in the Merlin's occasional forays into the studio and casually dropped pearls of wisdom can earn him the same place in rock 'n' roll immortality, and on the "five hundred richest" lists as weeks, months or maybe even years of arduous labour by a more conventional hands-on producer. For the producer who spends his waking hours head down over a hot console, the mere suggestion of the existence of these mystical free-spirits can be alternately frustrating, infuriating and awe inspiring.