

learnin' producin'

Over 60 people recently paid \$850 each to complete a course in audio engineering run at Harlequin Studios in conjunction with the QE II Arts Council. The cost was partly due to the importing of expertise; producer Roy Thomas Baker, his engineer Ian Taylor, and Kent Duncan, a California based studio designer. Duncan took the acoustics and disc mastering session, rebuilding Harlequin's master control room in the process. Roy Thomas Baker, and Ian Taylor worked with the Blams, Garage Crawlers, and D.D. Smash for the recording and mixing sessions.

The participants included musicians, live engineers, radio, TV, film, and other interested people. Three courses ran over 10 weeks, one day a week, finishing up last month, while there was another ten day block course in January.

"It was a lot more work than we anticipated," Doug Rogers comments. "But it was valuable,

materializing out of need. I'd been getting letters and personal visits from people wanting jobs in the industry who were obviously without any experience, and without experience you don't get a job."

Doug expects only half a dozen people, if that, will be placed directly in recording. But there are opportunities in related fields — on the road with live sound, in dubbing and mastering facilities, radio, film, ad production.

"As a creative medium not everyone is going to be suited to it. The emphasis at the school was on being a recording engineer in the practical sense, and it was left to their own intuition to take it from there."

Working with Roy Thomas Baker was summed up by Martin Williams (Garage Crawlers).

"If someone asked him a question, he'd answer it but there was no step by step rundown on what he was doing."

Doug Rogers was disappointed in Baker's ability as a communicator.

"He approached it from the point of view of an everyday recording session. If someone is good at a job, it doesn't automatically make them a good teacher."

"He didn't give away as much as he could have — perhaps for commercial reasons. But I think the most important aspect to emerge from his visit was that there are two sides to the story. If you're a creative person, and know the basics, you can put it all behind you and do something unique, which he does. On the other hand, Kent for example, had very methodical techniques, but both systems are valid."

"Without their two million dollar studios, and 64 harmonizers



Roy Thomas Baker, Ian Taylor, Doug Rogers.

they just seemed to be lost," says engineer Steve Kennedy.

"Having them here was valuable, in that Doug and I could spend hours explaining technique and methods, and they'd walk in and do the exact opposite. Their technique was totally unconventional, and yet it worked. They know the rules so they know how to break them."

Peter Rooder (D.D. Smash) enjoyed recording with Baker.

"It was great. He put you at ease with his eccentricity and he worked fast. All the sounds were together within half an hour of us going into the studio. It only took five minutes to get the right drum sound, and if something wasn't right he'd come through to the studio and talk about it."

The next course is in June, this time for \$500. Harlequin personnel are doing tuition themselves, and it extends over nine day blocks.

AnnLouise Martin

Roy Thomas Baker Int.

Heads turn to look at the man who walks into the restaurant at the South Pacific Hotel. Dressed in red track suit and yellow clogs, with green and red hair, he's not a regular sight on a Sunday afternoon.

The man is Roy Thomas Baker, best known for producing Queen and the Cars, and currently working with Cheap Trick. His heavy, grandiose production style has helped create more than a handful of hits.

He's been here for a couple of weeks, running a production seminar at Harlequin Studios, assisted by the Queen Elizabeth Arts Council. Baker wanted to be constructive, but was quick to point out where things were lacking.

"Some people just needed brushing up on international techniques, while there were others who didn't even know what a studio was like until they went on this course. It's been quite interesting as far as we're concerned, but I think a lot of it might have fallen on stony ground."

Baker was accompanied on the visit by his engineer, Ian Taylor. Baker knows his way around a mixing desk, but seldom touches it, preferring to listen and make suggestions.

"You're teaching people who probably aren't too advanced in recording," says Taylor. "It's very difficult to teach a person recording anyway, because it's something you have to do, it's all down to practice. On an artistic level it's been dull because it isn't really creative recording."

"When we make a record, we create in the studio," says Baker. "It's like painting a picture, and it's very hard on this level to show people how to be creative. It doesn't matter how well you teach someone, they can't be a

Picasso if they haven't got it inside them to do it."

"I hope they learn something out of it," says Taylor. "It had shock value, if anything."

"I think we worked the equipment to its fullest, to the extent where the people who were in the studio thought we were going to blow it up. We drove it like a Ferrari, even though it's basically a Ford."

NZ recordings have been notorious for their lack of depth, something Baker puts down to a combination of technical shortcomings and a somewhat timid attitude.

"When we started here, we did it the way we're used to doing it, with the sound very hard and loud and upfront, with lots of rumble bottom and lots of treble. But people were actually offended. They walked out because it hurt their ears. But that's the way it's got to sound in the control room, to come across on a little radio. That's what they've got to work for."

Baker and Taylor were also perturbed by the apparent dislike musicians here have of producers, and vice versa.

"There seems to be this animosity, and a bit of a void between the technical people and the musical people," says Taylor.

"I've never seen anything like it," says Baker. "We were working with musicians and songs we'd never heard before. But under normal circumstances, when we decide to work with someone, we not only see whether we can work with them personally, but we also listen to some of their new songs. There's this exchange of ideas. It could be a good four months or so before we actually get into the record. We work very closely with the bands that we have to work with. For instance, we're now doing Cheap Trick, and they're actually re-writing songs in the studio, which is a good idea anyway. We're up to 26 songs now, just to get 10 songs off. And that's a good way of working."

Are musicians afraid of studios?

"Maybe the first time, but basically, the people we work with have got their own eight-tracks at home, and they do their own demos. Because of that, they know what they can do and

what they can't do."

"As a musician these days, you have to be aware of the technical aspect," says Taylor. "It's a very important part."

The key to Baker's success lies in his judgement as a listener. He describes his role in the studio as that of a layman, listening as a non-musician (he plays no instruments) to see if things sound right.

He recorded D.D. Smash, Blam Blam and the Garage Crawlers, but while finding some interesting ideas, he had reservations.

Baker and Taylor both stress that they can't really judge in the short time they've been here. But Baker points out that the feeling of isolation here is mental, not physical, and travel is essential to broaden the outlook.

"If anyone asks me what they should do, I tell them to get on one of those cheap flights and go to America, even if it's only for two months. Suss things out. But people here don't want to do that. They want to go to Australia. They're scared to go anywhere else, and I can't see why."

Baker is British by birth, but has been an American resident for several years. He doesn't knock Britain, and is very critical of the state of American music.

"England is good, but the audiences are so fickle. They love you when you're starting out, but as soon as you get a hit record, they hate you. The press there is terrible for that. But if you can break through that barrier, then you've got a good chance of making it in America. And once you do that, you've got sustaining power."

"With the music industry in America, because of the recession, there's a need for financial stability. It slows down money going into new bands, budgets for existing bands, and radio stations are playing the same thing they were playing last year, and the year before. It's a tried and tested formula, and it's going to stay that way until stability returns."

Roy Thomas Baker is always keen to hear from new bands. If you think you've got what it takes, post your tape to him at 1340 Sunset Plaza Drive, Los Angeles, California 90069.

Duncan Campbell

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