

Godfrey Diamond: Paying it Forward

By Greg Di Gesu

I had the chance to sit down with producer/recording engineer Godfrey Diamond at his home studio, Perfect Mixes Recording in Brooklyn, New York. Godfrey is known for his production and engineering work with Lou Reed, Billy Squier, Aerosmith, Frank Sinatra, Luther Vandross, and countless others. An early shining moment was playing drums at a young age on The Andrea True Connection's disco hit "More, More, More." We were able to indulge in his long career, accompanying stories, and his successful studio working methods.

How did you get your start?

I was very fortunate at the age of 19 to get a job at MediaSound Recording Studio in New York City. Everybody started in the shipping department. After hours, I spent as much time as I could in one of the four recording rooms, eventually assisting Tony Bongiovi [*Tape Op* #127], Harvey Goldberg, Bob Clearmountain [#84, #129], Ron Saint Germain, Alec Head, and Mike Delugg. Later, I had some great assistants; Michael Brauer [#131], Gregg Mann, and Ramona Jan. There was a high bar to deliver great sound fast to major label clients paying top New York City rates. You either had to be good or get out. On an average day, we'd be recording musicians like Steve Gadd, Will Lee, Paul Shaffer, Bob Babbitt, David Sanborn, Neil Jason, Elliott Randall, Bernard Purdie,

Carlos Alomar, and Allan Schwartzberg; not to mention brilliant singers such as Robin Clark, Luther Vandross, Gordon Grody, and Lani Groves. I found myself in this musical playground with some of the best musicians in the world. I was laser-focused on becoming a producer/writer, and it was obvious to me that engineering was a path to this goal. But engineering quickly became more than a means to an end, it became another passion, especially in recording basic tracks, partially because I love recording drums. Being a drummer myself, it challenged me personally to play around with drum sets, mics, and tuning, as well as experimenting with EQ and compression. To develop a well-rounded set of skills, after sessions ended I would mix every night for hours and hours and figure out how to do it.

That's the classic way to learn.

I did a couple of albums with Desmond Child & Rouge back then. Desmond Child, as we all know, is one of the most popular writers in the pop world. I recorded both of his albums way before he penned "Bad Medicine" and "You Give Love a Bad Name" for Bon Jovi. Aside from the sessions, I learned a lot about writing from Desmond. I think some of the players from his albums liked the sound I was getting, and word got out – I started getting calls. One day I was doing a record at Media, and I got a call from another studio, perhaps Sundragon. I used to moonlight there, so I knew the room pretty well. They said,

"Listen, can you get me a drum sound? I'm desperate! I've got a check for you right here." I told my assistant, "I'll be back, ASAP. Keep this train a-rollin'!" I ran down and got a drum sound super-fast, made the producer happy, and got back to Media and kept working without skipping a beat. A bit stressful, yes; but this was when I realized I would eventually need to go independent.

Your brother, Gregg Diamond, was a writer and involved with the disco scene.

Right. I was a New York City kid, 15 or 16, and I'd go to Max's Kansas City to check the New York Dolls and watch the waiters carry out a smashed Alice Cooper at 4 a.m. – drinking age was 18 then, so they'd let kids in if you didn't look 12. When my brother's band, Five Dollar Shoes, played there I would help lug gear, go to rehearsals, and watch them work up tunes. Mike Millius, the lead singer and a great writer, would say to me, "What do you think of this? Do you like this part or that part?" Off the top of my head I would say, "You could repeat that chorus, or try a different intro." I would tell them what I honestly thought as a kid and a fan – I didn't think they would listen to me. What I figured out later was that I was an amateur record producer before I even knew what a producer was.

In a lot of ways, a good record producer is also a good fan.



Exactly. Those early days gave me a solid background in how to interact with musicians. As far as the disco, that started later, in '75 – we made a lot of disco records at Media. My brother and I had the opportunity to do a song for this movie *More, More, More*, which was a flop porn film. We had \$1,500 to go in and do it. He called me one day at Media as I was wrapping up microphone cables and said, "You know that song we came up with and rehearse all the time? Can you come over and play drums on it? I've got two hours at Dick Charles Studio around the corner." I said, "Sure man! I have a break at 3 o'clock. I'll be there." I went over and we recorded the song "More, More, More." I played drums, Gregg played piano, and Jimmy Gregory played bass. We gave it to Andrea True – who was a fledgling porn star and friend of ours – and it became a number one record for The Andrea True Connection. Around the same time Lou Reed's *Coney Island Baby* became the 4 a.m. NYC club closer. After that I found myself on this blurry Ferris wheel, recording and mixing dance records all day at Media and going downtown to hear punk rock all night with Lou.

Who were the engineers you were learning from?

I learned a lot from Tony Bongiovi back then. You learn what to do and *not* to do from a mentor. He totally inspired me about making records, and inadvertently showed me how to move smoothly from the engineering chair to the producer chair. I think the people who influenced me the most when I was coming up were Tony, arranger Bert De Coteaux, Joe Beck (Miles Davis' guitarist) and, believe it or not, Joni Mitchell. While we never worked together, we did have a very long night talking in L.A. back in the late '70s – I've never agreed so much with any artist about recording philosophy; she's a treasure. Harvey Goldberg was also generous with his knowledge. We spent a fair amount of time together recording Kool & The Gang. But the reality is, it's been my experience that a lot of guys don't give up their secrets. They don't share. One engineer I assisted (a non-staffer at Media) would normal the board as soon as the session was over! This was the climate that I grew up in. You had to watch closely and get what you could on the run, because nobody was going to hold your hand and show you.

I can see why you're so appreciative in mentioning those who didn't covet their secrets.

I've probably had 15 to 20 interns and assistants over the years and because of that, I tell them everything. With some people it goes in one ear and out the other, but others have become great engineers. Honestly, it's very satisfying to pass it on and pay it forward.

You came into it wanting to be a producer, but also recognized that being an engineer and a mixer would aid you in the production process.

Absolutely. As an engineer, basic tracks are still my favorite part of recording because I'm doing the

nucleus of the record. As a producer/engineer I also love overdubbing and mixing, because it's always important to me to be part of the creative process in making the record. It can be frustrating to only be on the technical end and not have any say on what goes down on tape; when there was tape. I realized that a lot of the producers and arrangers who worked with me wanted my input, not only on the technical level, but they wanted to hear my ideas. I had this alert system, these red flags that would go off when I heard arrangements conflicting with each other, and I would let them know. I think they appreciated that. It's one of the reasons they would come back to use me. Honestly, I think most good mixers and engineers share this gift.

In reading over your discography, it's impressive how well-known the artists are and their musical diversity. I think it's important to mention that you've paired up with some very challenging personalities.

I think that I got all the crazies! And I'm saying that in a very affectionate way, because I love the artists I've worked with. I worked with some artists who people have claimed were extremely difficult. When I started working with Lou Reed, this A&R guy said to me, "Oh, my god. I can't believe you're working with him! He's such an a-hole." I said, "Well, I'll keep that in mind!" But I gotta tell you, I had already had so much training working with people who were hard to work with. Lou was a walk in the park next to my brother. I was trained right from the beginning on how tough personalities can be. When I began producing these other artists, I was super prepared. I learned a long time ago that amazing talent and self-destructive instincts often coexist. It's my job as a producer to get beyond the problems in order to harvest the ideas that lie below the surface and come out with a record that their fans want to hear. On the other hand, I also work with a lot of young artists, which brings a completely different set of challenges. In fact, I created a mnemonic. It's TCPPP. There's a sign in my studio with those five letters, which stands for: "Tone, Confidence, Pitch, Phrasing, Projection." I developed this because it's a great way to communicate with younger artists as a producer when they're in the vocal booth. As much as I love producing experienced musicians and singers, I also enjoy working with artists who haven't done it all before. It's a whole new world to explore. The reason tone is number one on TCPPP is because I find it is something I constantly need to remind some inexperienced singers about. I want to hear great tone coming into the mic before the EQ or any processing. People are not always sensitive to this, so you have to remind them – it's not a gig where the audience is in and out and no one will hear it again – they are recording something they're going to want to listen to ten years down the line and be proud of.

Although nowadays, you can go out on stage, and everybody could possibly hear it again on YouTube and elsewhere.

That's right! It also goes for playing guitar or any instrument. I learned something a long time ago about guitar players and tone from Mick Ronson. I was in the studio and he popped in to say hello and asked, "Do you have anything you want a solo on? I'm early for my gig downstairs." I said, "Of course!" I pulled out a song that needed a solo, he sat down in the control room with me and plugged into an amp. I sent the sound out to a cabinet in the live room and he started playing. I didn't even have the time to set the mic at the sweet spot, but what he did made it sound amazing. The way his fingers, the strings, and the fretboard came together produced this magnificent tone. Voila! It was "Moonage Daydream" by David Bowie, all over again. Tone is *king*.

Get it at the source. You're a producer and engineer, however there is a songwriter in there as well. I can attest to this through our own collaboration.

Oh, wow! I remember that song, "Million Dollar Face." That was a blast. I love collaborating. Some people don't like to write with other people. I love it and encourage it.

How do you develop an artist, from a songwriting perspective?

Usually what happens is that they're playing a song and it hits a section that I think might be either a little weak or might still need to be written. I'll suggest something. It usually comes organically out of the situation. Sometimes people come in and go, "Dude, I have this song and I love it, but I don't have a bridge or a chorus. Can you help me?" We sit there and hammer it out together. It's a challenge I enjoy.

You're a producer, engineer, and mixer, but then there are times you'll work with another engineer. I met you working at Waterfront Studios in Hoboken, NJ, on a Piss Factory record in the early '90s with Tim Hatfield [Tape Op #67] as the engineer. In doing that, how does this relationship affect how you produce?

That depends on the engineer. I was used to producing from the engineering seat, so it took me a while to develop the skill of working with an engineer by my side who could interpret the sound that I wanted. When I tried in the mid-'90s using other engineers, it took patience to be able to stand back and say, "Can you raise the vocal 2 dB?" and not reach my hand in and do it myself. I discovered rather quickly that some engineers found that insulting, so I had to learn to think in measurements of sound and articulate precisely what I was hearing, because I had to ask. For me, engineering and producing are very visceral; grab a fader and go. Luckily, I have had great engineers such as Tim Hatfield, and more recently Myles Turney, who are very accommodating if I am being more hands on, and that results in a much different process. It creates a certain synchronicity between myself and the engineer when it comes to running the board, and that is a great experience as well.

How long have you had your studio?

After working in major studios all over, I got my first little studio with my old buddy Sherman [Ewing], in 2001. It was right after 9/11, and there wasn't a drop of work in New York City. You couldn't get a job doing anything, let alone making records. So, I felt this was a good time to hunker down and learn Pro Tools. Previously I had had my assistant running it. Sherman had a little space above his apartment. We used to call it The Dog Pound, because he was a dog walker [Club Pet NYC]. We got a Pro Tools rig, and that's where I learned. My second studio was in Williamsburg. I recorded a ton of Brooklyn bands there from about 2002 to 2006. It was a shared studio called MetroSonic Studios, but when I was working there it was called Perfect Mixes. They had a sweet Neve board already, and I contributed with my HD Pro Tools rig and some outboard gear, including my Manley compressor and [Telefunken] V72 mic preamps, which I love. During this period, I had my own Neve completely recapped. Around 2006, my wife and I moved to Brooklyn. We got a brownstone and I built a studio on the first floor with a separate entrance for clients. It's a nice size studio with two floated rooms. The acoustic design was done initially by Rod Gervais [at Sound Solutions]. Frank Comentale did the construction, adding a great deal of his expertise to the project.

Instead of complaining about the loss of analog, you are very forward-thinking in how the technology can facilitate the process. You've set up your studio to keep the flow and concentration.

It's so much easier and so much faster. The flexibility and manipulation that is possible with Pro Tools is awesome. No more aligning machines. No more thinking about azimuth. No more dealing with take up reels and lugging around 2-inch boxes. Yay! For me, one of the strengths of Pro Tools that sold me initially was the concept of the playlist. I embraced it early; there was nothing in the analog world that gave you so much flexibility while recording basics. To be able to do a number of takes over the same section and then jump from one to the next, choose the best performance and comp it in was a huge time saver coming from the world of razor blades and tape. That said, I am very sensitive to the dynamics of the performance and value having musicians play all the way through a song to keep the flow going. You may have to fix a section here or there, but I see over-editing as a major problem with some of the sessions with unfinalized edits that come into my studio. They sound like a patchwork of performances with no continuity of feel. Sometimes a little imperfection adds to the overall heart and soul of a song.

You've set up this little paradise; a recording world for yourself.

I love my studio. I record and mix almost everything here, but I also dig working in other studios because it opens my mind and forces me to do things differently. I look at that as an opportunity to sonically try new ideas. If I'm producing a band where I want a big drum room, I might go to Mission Sound Recording

in Brooklyn to get the bass drums, and then do the rest at my place. However, going back to creating my own little paradise, a good example of this was when I was in Montreal [at Planet Studios] doing a record [*Build a Storm*] a few years back with Gabriella Hook. She's a great singer, playing beautiful piano and accordion. It was a small, tight band with an upright bass, drums, and a trumpet. I did the whole album up there in nine days. They had a Neve room downstairs and an older SSL upstairs. When I finished all the recording downstairs, I had an extra day to do some mixing in the SSL room. Everything was bussed to the same channels I would use when I got back to my place. I tried to use the same plug-ins I have in my studio, but of course there are differences here and there. I had recorded it with an eye towards how it would be mixed and how I wanted it to sound, so it was easy to do the mixes there while it was fresh on my mind. When I came back to my room, all I wanted to do was raise the lead vocal a dB; it was the only thing that bothered me about the mixes. I put the vocal through a Teletronix LA-2A, matched everything up the best I could, and made it a little bit louder. I sent the mixes to the band and they wrote back, "What did you do? This whole thing sounds so much better!" Honestly, the only thing that I did was bring it back to my studio and run it thru the Neve and SSL Smart Compressor. I use Pro Tools, but always come out to the Neve. I'm guessing it's the Neve summing that made the difference.

What is your mixing process like these days?

I get Pro Tools sessions from all over the place. Some are recorded well and are easy to mix; they could benefit from a little sonic love and a couple of tricks. Others, however, might be recorded in a guy's kitchen in the East Village, and the drums sound [like] shite. But no matter what condition the sessions are in, I'll put all the faders up and listen to the song a couple of times to get a feeling of what it's about. Then, I sit with the bass, drums, and guitars, finding the pulse, looking for that energy in the balance, and getting that feeling from the basic rhythm section. EQ, reverb, and delay and all that is going to come, but I start with focusing on the rhythm section and seeing if I've got those tracks sitting where they want to be before I add in other elements. You've got to focus on the chorus and the lead singer, so at this point I may play around with some delay and reverb and see what sounds best and blends well with the track. I usually put the lead vocal in right after the rhythm section. That's also how I record when I'm producing; it comes from the old Motown days. You want to get the melody in there before the players fill up all the holes. It's key to carve out a strong melodic path so everybody knows where they're going. If you wait until the end to record the lead vocal, the singer might not have "room." You want to give them space to do whatever they want, and then all the other instruments should complement and support the lead vocal. Going back to the mix; my wife's a painter, and I am constantly thinking about the sonic landscape as the composition in a painting. You got a tree there, a pool here, a mountain over

there, and you need a way to tie these elements together into a single vision. A synth pad can be used to tint the canvas slightly, or I might leak the returns into each other to create a woven layer of color underneath it all. These are pieces of the puzzle in the mix. When I'm mixing, I focus on this whole scene at one time. I always ask for a rough mix before I start, because it's very important to know what they've been listening to all this time before giving them a new mix. That's how I look at mixing without getting into the minutia of every compressor and EQ.

Their feedback is usually going to be based on that original "mix."

Yeah. I call this "rough mix damage." They need to go through an adjustment period to hear the new mix that you're doing as opposed to what they've been listening to for so long – finally, after a couple listens, they never wanna hear the rough again.

What recording consoles do you favor?

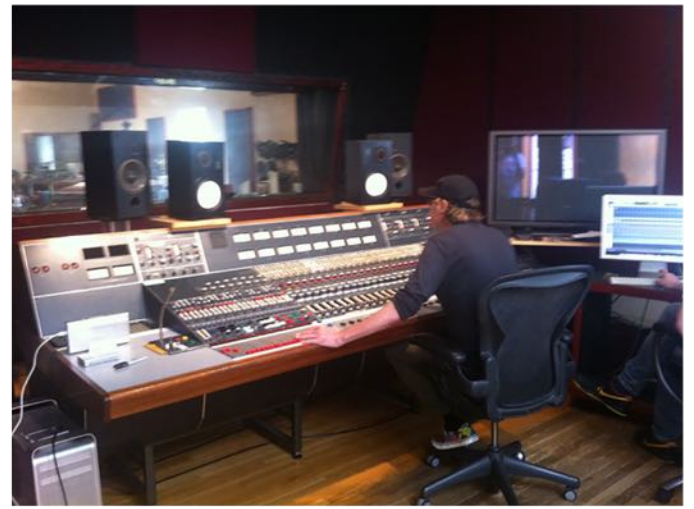
When I started out, MediaSound had two old Spectra Sonics that were sagging in the middle. I don't know what from, I guess people leaning on them. They sounded great. We recorded a lot of great records on them, but I gotta say it was a game changer when we got our two Neves in studios A and B; both big 8068 consoles. In the engineer's lounge – which became Lounge Studio at Media – we got an API. Throughout the '80s and '90s, it was my preference to work in studios where I could record on a Neve and mix on an SSL. It was the way to go back then. I was also happy to use an API 500 Series to record. They had a sweet one up at Dreamland [Recording] in Woodstock. I love the way the API preamp sounds. I also made a bunch of records on Trident [consoles]. They had a nice Trident A Range at The Record Plant, NYC.

And at Waterfront Studios, where we met, we worked on an A Range.

Oh, yeah; right. They're all great boards and they all sound different. The beautiful thing about recording is that once you understand signal path, you can run any board. It's fun to explore their unique characteristics.

You came up during the time of classic record deals on major labels as the model for releasing music. What do you see now as the predominant model for artists getting music out?

When I started out there were major labels spending \$175,000 to \$400,000 on a record, with lower-level budgets around \$30,000 to \$75,000. If you could sell 50,000 to 100,000 albums, you would get a second or third album, but you had to get the numbers to stay on the label. That's a simplified version of the past. While there's still a record label path for bands, in the past 10 to 15 years – with the advent of social media, the ability to crowdsource funding, and the growing number of streaming platforms – bands have DIY avenues that they can pursue to reach an audience. Now, with the rise of the bedroom studio, more control is in the artist's hands and it's become easier than ever to release your own music. If you're lucky, you will get picked up by an algorithm and a few million hits later you're on the charts.



What are you currently working on and excited about?

I'm usually working on two or three records at the same time, all in different stages.

I'll be recording and doing overdubs on one while mixing another. What's coming up is I'm actually doing my own record! After years and years of working with everybody else, I'm finally doing a record for me. It's going to involve the people in my life who I've worked with, and who want to play or sing on it. Some famous, some not famous. I'm co-writing it with various people. Marisol Limón Martínez is one of my co-conspirators in this, and she'll be singing some of the songs. I'm not singing on it. It may not ever sell a record, but that's not the point; this one's for me. It brings me a lot of joy and it's going to be a blast. I already have 14 songs written and a lot of it laid down. I will be calling on some great cats to play, like Joe Russo [drums], Dave Dreiwitz [bass], Robbie "Seahag" Mangano [guitar], and other people I love to work with. I can't go into all the names, but they're all fantastic singers and musicians.

Any other projects in the works?

Currently, I am mixing a new America's Sweetheart album, which I produced and did some co-writing on. It features the new song and video, "Face to Face," which has been put into rotation on MTVU. There are also a couple of very new bands that I am working with who I am excited about, but more on that later. They'll all be coming out in 2021.

Any last studio stories that pop into your head?

I've got plenty of stories, but the best ones involve all-nighters in the '70s and '80s with legendary rock stars, brilliant musicians, and copious amounts of illicit drugs. Hey, what happens in the studio stays in the studio! 🍷

<www.perfectmixes.com>

Greg Di Gesu is a singer-songwriter and recording engineer living in Atlanta. He spent years as a staff engineer at Waterfront Studios in Hoboken, NJ, and Loho Studios in NYC. He currently plays guitar in the Atlanta-based band, Lynx Deluxe who just signed to Drivin N Cryin Records.

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