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12 Years Of Recording Dwight Yoakam

Dusty Wakeman

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Ron told me of plans to record a country and cowpunk compilation and asked if I wanted to be the engineer, which, being Texas born-n-bred, I jumped on. Pete Anderson walked in the door and we really hit it off. Dwight was in the process of getting signed and had already released the EP version of *Guitars . . .*, which was creating quite a buzz. They were opening for bands like X, Los Lobos, and The Blasters, and really connecting with those crowds. The plan was to go in and cut four more tracks to complete the album. There was some controversy with the label — Warner Nashville — who wanted Dwight to go to Nashville and work with “the establishment” there. There have been scores of great records recorded there that we all love, but this was the tail end of the Urban Cowboy era, and most everything coming out of Nashville at that moment was pretty wimpy and formulaic. Pete liked me because I was coming from a rock background but knew and loved classic country. He had Dwight drop by Mad Dog to meet me while working on Town South of Bakersfield. I remember Dwight and Pete looking at the 2-track and being impressed with how hot the recording levels were.

GUITARS, CADILLACS, ETC. ETC.

We were booked into Capitol Studio B for something like three days, as I recall, to cut four tracks: “Honky Tonk Man,” “Guitars, Cadillacs,” “Bury Me” (a duet with Maria McKee), and “Heartaches by the Number.” We were like kids in a candy store — we kept waiting for some adult to come and stop the fun. Dwight and Pete had spent a lot of time thinking about what they wanted to sound like, listening to records and really analyzing what they heard. This is what got us to Studio C at Capitol — many of the great California country artists had recorded there — Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, and so on. Capitol has eight live echo chambers under the parking lot that were poured when they built the studios and that were a distinctive part of the sound we were going for. Capitol was, and is, a true world-class studio complex, and Studio B remains my ideal of what a great room should be. When we built Mad Dog in Burbank, our Studio A was modeled after Capitol Studio B, which featured a Neve 8068, Studer A800s, a great sounding large room the size of a basketball court (it actually has a hoop in it), and two large iso booths stacked on top of each other.

I’d come up outside of the “studio system” and had learned things largely by trial and error (making shit up), so I was both elated and terrified when I sat at the console and the assistant, Steve Himelfarb, asked me what microphones I wanted to use. I think I replied that I was open to anything he cared to recommend. I did know, though, that we had to have one of Capitol’s great U47s on Dwight’s voice, which I had coming through the 8068s 31102 modules into an LA-2A, and then straight to tape.

We built a little “hut” in the center of the room — with the U47 facing toward it — in order to control the amount of room getting into the vocal, giving us a more focused sound. The band was totally well prepared, every overdub was planned, and Dwight never did more than a couple of takes in those days. We moved across the hall to Studio C to mix on the Neve 8108 with Necam 1 automation, taking advantage of the echo chambers and EMT plate . . . still the best I’ve ever heard. Studio C had a rack of Pultec EQP1A3 EQs, one of which ended up on Dwight’s vocal, along with a dbx 160x compressor. The 8108, though a maintenance nightmare, was a nice sounding mix board — great EQs! We spent a lot of time referring to albums and A/Bing our mixes for overall sonics with some classic country albums, really trying to achieve that classic sound for our record, yet still having it have the dynamic impact of a rock record.

HILLBILLY DELUXE

We recorded and mixed *Hillbilly Deluxe* in late 1985, with pretty much the same setup as on *Guitars . . .*, the big difference being that we were coming off a hit record. They had toured in an RV non-stop for about ten months, and by the time they came home, Dwight was a star, part of the “New Traditionalists” movement in country, along with Steve Earle and Randy Travis. Once again Pete had everything completely planned out. The band was well rehearsed, and Dwight would walk out and give us one to three great takes.

I think we may have done some very light comping, but big sections, not words. The signal path for Dwight’s vocals stayed the same. One great change on this album was the addition of Charlie Paakkari to the team. Charlie was officially my second engineer, which was kind of a joke to me, because he was so much more knowledgeable than I was. He was a staff engineer at Capitol — one day an assistant, the next day a first — working with a lot of the great masters. It was an amazing education. The one smart thing I did was to let him really contribute to the project and share his knowledge of that studio with me. Again we mixed across the hall in Studio C. I was really proud of my tom sound on “Little Ways,” which I had running through a Pultec and the Fairchild 670, with a lot of live chamber on it.

BUENAS NOCHES FROM A LONELY ROOM

Enter the technology: Once again we were firmly ensconced in Studio B, this time with another hit record under our belts and a bigger budget to work with. Unlike the first two albums, which we raced through, we actually had some time to stretch out and try some things. We cut the basic tracks on the Studer A800 with 16-track heads and then bounced to Mitsubishi 32-track digital machine for all the overdubs. Charlie Paakkari was once again working with us and we had some fun. We spent half a day figuring out a way to sync the tremolo in one of Pete’s Fender Twin Reverbs to our drum track. Pete’s two Twins had been modded to allow one tremolo to drive the other, so we figured there must be some way to control it from an external source. We listened to the sound that was coming from the “master” tremolo — it was basically a low frequency pulse. We hooked up a signal generator with an audio trigger input to an oscillator and filtered the sound to match the control that the Twin generated, then fed a mix of the drums into it, and plugged that into the slave tremolo. Amazingly, it worked.

The track is “What I Don’t Know.” I was amazed by how many people actually noticed that the tremolo was locked to the drums and asked how we did it, which had been a secret until now. One of the great things about Capitol, besides the great rooms, is the amazing level of support available from the staff, especially the tech staff — very handy when you’re in experimental mode.

By now, we had gotten into full-on vocal comp mode and I had purchased an Emulator EIII, which we used for tweaking and flying. It

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was a great machine for pitch correction in those pre ProTools days, although you had to take it apart and reseat the cards every time you moved it. Dwight had been touring non-stop since the last album and was barraged by promotional duties, so getting the vocals took a little longer. Dwight's voice is so clear when he's in good shape, that it would be obvious right away if there was any hoarseness present. Thankfully, we had the time to spend to get the great takes.

This album also features Buck Owens on "Streets of Bakersfield," which went on to become DY's first number one single. We were just putting together Dwight's vocal comp when Buck showed up to sing and it wasn't sounding right. I discovered that somehow the console tapes' take numbers didn't line up with the actual take numbers, so I discreetly pulled Pete aside and told him what happened. He said "fix it — I'll stall for time." He went out and kept those guys busy while Charlie and I frantically rebuilt the comp. That song also features Flaco Jimenez on accordion, which was recorded in the iso booth in Studio C using the same U47 and a Focusrite mic pre we'd been using for some overdubs. Once again we mixed in Studio C.

JUST LOOKIN' FOR A HIT

[1989] — This was DY's first greatest hits package, but we recorded two new cuts for it a duet with k.d. lang on the Chris Hillman/Gram Parsons classic "Sin City," and a cover of Dave Alvin's "Long White Cadillac," featuring one of Pete's most blistering solos. As a side note, I had the pleasure of recording kd lang twice — with DY and with Roy Orbison. When she sings in the studio, she might as well be on stage in front of thousands — she gives a total performance and it's a real thrill to be on the other side of the glass experiencing it in real time. She does have an incredible dynamic range, though, so you have to be on your toes with the mic pre gain.

IF THERE WAS A WAY

[1990] — I consider the first three albums to be part of the "phase I" of DY's recording career — most of those songs were written and performed live before Guitars . . . was recorded. If There Was a Way marked the beginning of "phase II." All of the material was new, some of it co-written with other writers, and we had lots of time to make the records. We used more outside musicians for overdubs — to his and Pete's credit, Dwight's band always played on the records, even venturing into strings and background singers. The parameters that had been set on the first three records were definitely being pushed.

Another big change for me was the change from Charlie Paakkari to Pete Doell as my "assistant engineer." I consider both these guys to be two of the finest engineers anywhere and I learned so much from working with both of them. Charlie was unavailable and we knew and respected Pete Doell from working across the hall from him at Capitol for years.

Now, Dwight is an amazing singer who on any given day is capable of walking out and giving you a couple of perfect or near-perfect takes, but getting his vocals got more difficult in this era for several reasons — he hadn't been performing these songs live for years and, on many days, by the time he'd get to the studio (usually early evening), he'd have been on the phone all day taking care of business. Aside from his music career, he was starting to get active in film, which requires lots of Hollywood lunches, meetings, and long phone conversations. The upside was the string of beautiful actresses and models that would drop by for a visit. In fact, sometimes the presence of a couple of babes would be the catalyst for that great performance we were looking for. But by now, we were deep into vocal comping and tweaking, which Pete Doell brought a lot to — he has perfect pitch. Although I had good relative pitch, I really learned to hear pitch from working with him, especially sharpness. The slightest bit of "pitchy-ness" would provoke a physical reaction in Pete Doell. This also was the first record to be mixed by David Leonard, who is a brilliant mixer best known for his work with Prince and John Mellancamp. At first I wasn't thrilled with the idea of someone else mixing "my record." But he totally blew my mind — another great engineer that I learned volumes from.

THIS TIME

[1993] — In many ways, This Time was a career peak for DY. It's been his biggest selling album to date and yielded a Grammy award for Best Country Vocal Performance for the song "Ain't That Lonely Yet." Pete's guitar solo on "A Thousand Miles From Nowhere" was another blazing classic. We'd usually do Pete's solos at night after DY would sing — lights down low, monitors cranked. Those were some magical moments, sometimes after a day of routine "work" — the kind of moments that keep you coming back. DY, too, would give you those moments as well, when he was rested and not distracted by all the BS he had to deal with. We were experimenting with Pro Tools by now — we had Scott Humphreys and Paul D'Carli there helping us — two of the pioneers of the medium. We really had fun with it on the track "This Time" — we were more interested in using it to make things greasier as opposed to tighter. We were back to analog, cutting basics on the A800 with 16-track heads and doing overdubs on a second 24-track A800. When we used Pro Tools, we would bounce it from the 16-track and back to a new spot on the tape, building the track from there. Once again, the U47 was employed, either through the Neve 8068 or through my John Hardy M1 pres, which I still use. Pete Doell had found a Fairchild 660 compressor in a storage room at Capitol, retubed it, and we used it on everything — Dwight's vocals, Pete's guitar, Tara's bass — everything.

GONE

[1995] — Gone was an interesting, artistic album to make. This Time had been a huge record for Dwight, with the never-ending touring success like that requires. It was recorded in much the same way as the previous two, with even more experimentation with Pro Tools, and musically the walls were pretty much blown out. The writing was eclectic, very much a statement of Dwight's influences. Stylistically, it ranged from straight-up country to British Invasion power pop to the huge orchestral "Nothing," with the gospel background vocals. I loved it, but I think it might have left some of his core audience behind. We used the same vocal setup as on This Time.

C'MON CHRISTMAS UNDER THE COVERS

[1997] — These albums mark the transition into what I think of as Phase III. By now, Mad Dog had turned in to a three room, 6,000 sq. ft. facility in Burbank and we started working there. My partner in Mad Dog at that time was Michael Dumas, who co-engineered these records. Michael had been Dwight's house mixer for many years (and still is) and we were used to tag-teaming on many projects. Often times, I would be in Studio A recording while Michael would be editing in Studio B. The studio was right down the street from the offices of Little Dog Records, the label that Pete, Michael, and I founded around that time, which meant that Pete could work in the office until there was something for him to hear or if we needed some direction. This team, including the musicians, had worked together so much that much of the work was pretty effortless — everyone knew what their role was.

Mad Dog had a Neve 8108 console, Studer A800, and a big selection of outboard gear, including my very own U47, which we used for Dwight's vocals, of course. It was run through the Hardy M1 pre into a Summit TLA-100 compressor and straight to tape. The 8108 sounded good, but was a maintenance nightmare — really bad switches that would vibrate from low frequencies and make these little buzzes during tracking that would drive me crazy, so we'd collected a big pile of outboard mic pres — Hardy, API, Focusrite, Demeter, and occasionally a rental rack of 1073s. Once again, we would build a little wall of baffles to keep the room out of the U47 when Dwight did his lead vocals. Dwight would usually show up late afternoon/early evening on vocal days — we would know he was there by the rumble of his customized El Camino in the parking lot. He had this habit of pulling up in the parking lot while on his cell phone, and sitting there revving the engine while talking, which could go on for quite a while. The truck did generate a great low end. Both of these albums

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- Astounding Performances
- Stunning Sound Quality
- Interesting Arrangements
- Great Songwriting
- Lots of Groovy Sonic Hooks

were really fun — by their nature they were not quite as serious as making a new original album. We recorded some great horn sections for both records and did our first big string date at Mad Dog.

A LONG WAY HOME

[1998] — Long Way Home turned out to be the last album that was made with this team and in some ways, it's one of my favorites. The writing is really good, especially the song "A Long Way Home," which seemed somehow to sum up where Dwight — and by extension, all of us — were at that time in our collective and individual journeys. Dwight's relationship with his label had somewhat soured by this time and he was doing very well in the movie biz, but he was more focused on this record than he'd been in a long time and was very creatively engaged in the making of it. This time, it was Pete's turn to be distracted — being a label head can be time consuming. I think he was comfortable knowing that the team he had assembled over the years was quite capable. Once again, Michael Dumas co-engineered and I'd been credited as engineer and associate producer (whatever that means) for quite a few records by this time, which meant I was doing more musically than just recording. A lot of these labels tend to blur when you've worked with the same people for a long time. For me, I enjoyed working so closely with Dwight on A Long Way Home. Technically, we were using the same combination of analog and Pro Tools that we'd been using for quite awhile. Michael quickly became a Pro Tools whiz and we were bouncing tracks back and forth between us. A Long Way Home wasn't well promoted and didn't sell like some of his bigger records, but a lot of the more astute critics realized what a gem it was and I still enjoy revisiting it.

Nine albums over 13 years — quite a run. It represents a good chunk of my professional life. Dwight and Pete broke a lot of barriers and created music history, and I'll always be proud of my contribution.



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