

# Sheryl Crow & Her Producers

## The Crow Road

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Sheryl Crow's rise to the top has seen her use — and lose — the talents of a lot of people behind the glass, from world-famous producers to unknown songwriters.

Hugh Padgham and Sheryl Crow in A&M Studios, where they recorded her abortive debut album in late 1991. A certain amount of tension in the sessions is suggested by the 'Faffometer' in the background.



"A couple of middle-aged cooks in a Southern kitchen, sharing a really crazy recipe and putting it all together," is how Sheryl Crow has described her in-studio relationship with favoured engineer Trina Shoemaker. Crow has always benefited from working with others, but despite her cosy description of the collaborative process, her career illustrates the ways in which even the most famous producers and engineers can be exploited by an ambitious artist and a powerful record company.

Crow's career path has been long and often circuitous, requiring her to navigate her way around numerous pitfalls and setbacks while utilising and then discarding a wide array of talents along the way. Armed with a sample reel of her work recording jingles, as well as a degree in voice and piano, she arrived in Los Angeles from Missouri in 1986 and plunged headlong into the world of rock & roll schmoozing. Crow was a natural at networking and hooking up with the right people, and within just a few months she landed her first major gig, singing backup on Michael Jackson's 1987-1989 *Bad* world tour. This was followed by a similar stint on Don Henley's *The End Of The Innocence* tour, while she maintained her visibility through session work providing backing vocals on albums by, among others, Henley, Johnny Mathis, Jimmy Buffett, Nancy Wilson, Kenny Loggins, Taj Mahal, Patty Smyth and Foreigner.

### New Talent

For all of her contacts and hard graft, Crow's efforts to establish herself as a solo singer-songwriter appeared to be going nowhere until a chance 1991 meeting with Grammy-winning British producer Hugh Padgham. In Hollywood to mix Sting's *Soul Cages* album, Padgham had previously been urged by A&M's head of A&R, David Anderle, to help the industry by working with more new artists. Now, listening to a tape that Sheryl had handed him, featuring demos of synth-pop-cum-gospel songs that she'd written with a number of different collaborators, Padgham realised that he had stumbled upon the opportunity to fulfil Anderle's request.

"I thought, 'Wow, this is really, really good!'" Padgham recalls. "She was a good keyboard player, she sounded great, she was writing these really good songs, and I just thought, 'She will be a star.' She looked terrific and her vocals were brilliant. The only thing that I was concerned about was her name. I thought, 'Oh, I'm not sure if Sheryl Crow sounds very good, what with all of the connotations relating to a crow. Maybe she should have a stage name...' but I soon got over that."



On the strength of Hugh Padgham's recommendation and the A&M execs' own favourable opinion, Sheryl Crow was signed to a two-album deal in the spring of 1991. Work was scheduled to start at A&M's state-of-the-art Hollywood facility in September of that year, utilising the vintage Neve 4972 that had been purchased from AIR Studios Monserrat and was now housed in A&M's Studio A control room. Assigned to produce, Padgham assembled several of the musicians with whom he'd worked on Sting's album: Vinnie Colaiuta on drums, Pino Palladino on bass, Dominic Miller playing some of the guitar parts. Sheryl would sing as well as play piano and Hammond organ, and she'd also co-produce her debut alongside the man whose credits included Genesis, The Police, Phil Collins, Sting, David Bowie and Paul McCartney.

With a budget of around a quarter of a million dollars, the basic idea was to save time and money by using the demos that had secured Sheryl her deal and simply replacing the parts that weren't quite up to the mark. "In terms of the instrumentation, the demos weren't brilliant quality," Padgham explains, "and so where, for instance, there had been a fake piano, we would put on a real piano. We also planned to overdub real drums, put on some more guitar, and do the vocals properly."

Producer/musician Jay Oliver, who had provided Sheryl with her initial jingle work back in St. Louis, had also been responsible for recording the demos, so he was hired to come in for a week with all his own gear and lay down the basic tracks. "I transferred all of the parts onto tape and I was out of there," Oliver recalls. "As I perceived it, Sheryl was handling a lot of the production herself, and I thought the dynamic in the studio between her and Hugh was fine."

"We'd had quite a lot of preparation beforehand, and to start with we had bloody good fun on the sessions," adds Padgham. "You know, Vinnie Colaiuta was an absolute hoot. When he was in the studio playing drums, I remember having a really good time and laughing constantly. There certainly were no bad feelings at all, and even though Sheryl let me do my thing, there was never a question during the sessions of me doing anything that she didn't want to do."

### The Wrong Book

Sheryl Crow owes much of her success to choosing the right musical partners. On one occasion, however, her gift for choosing collaborators went spectacularly wrong, when she decided to adorn Crow/Trott composition 'The Book' with a dark, funereal arrangement like that on the old Bobbie Gentry hit 'Ode To Billy Joe'. Assuming this to have been the work of Van Dyke Parks, she contacted the accomplished composer/producer/arranger and commissioned him to come up with something similar for 'The Book'. "That's a great orchestration on 'Ode to Billy Joe'," Sheryl said over the phone, and Van Dyke agreed. She just never asked him if he had written it.

Several weeks and \$40,000 later, everyone gathered at the Capitol Records studios in LA to hear the result: Sheryl, Jeff, Van Dyke, his family, a full orchestra and numerous A&M execs. "They started the song, the orchestra came in, and at first it kind of sounded pretty cool," Jeff Trott recalls. "But then it just got frillier and frillier, and flowers seemed to be popping out all over the place. Sheryl grabbed my left arm and squeezed so hard, and I was thinking, 'Now, is she really excited and really happy, or is she furious?' Because in my mind I was shrieking in horror and almost ready to cry. Anyway, they finished it and Sheryl said, 'Um, I want to change a few things on this.' So, we looked at the score and she said, 'This over here — can you guys maybe not do so many of those waterfall-type things?'

"Well, now there is dead silence. I mean, after the orchestra had played, all of these execs and important people had been high-fiving each other like 'This is the greatest thing ever! Oh, my God!' and now I'm thinking they're going to start crying. It was really embarrassing, but Sheryl looked at me and I instantly knew that she was on the same page as I was. She looked over at Van Dyke and said, 'Hey, you didn't change anything, did you?' and he was like, 'Oh yeah, yeah, I made the changes,' to which she said, 'Well, it sounds exactly like it did before.' 'Yeah, well, it'll be great,' he said. 'I mean, this is like one of the best things I've ever done,' and then he looked over at me and he said, 'You should be proud!' I was thinking, 'I know I should be!'

"We were trying to be polite, but Sheryl said, 'We've got to get out of here. You know, I just lost \$40,000 and I feel horrible.' So, we went down the block to Musso & Frank's, and we had a couple of martinis, and I was

sitting there going, 'I can't believe this! Where did we go wrong? We got the wrong guy. Van Dyke Parks — didn't he do stuff with The Beach Boys and so on?' Sheryl said, 'I don't know what he's done really. I mean, he did U2...' At that point, in walked Van Dyke and his family. He sat down and he was like, 'Oh, yeah! I wanna have a drink!' He then repeated, 'This is one of the best things I've ever done,' and he said it over and over again, at which point Sheryl just looked at him and went, 'Well, you can put it on your record. I can't use it.' His reaction was along the lines of 'Well, I think it's great.' It was just one of those really sad, sad situations."

If Sheryl had done even a little investigating, she'd have discovered that Jimmie Haskell was the orchestrator of 'Ode To Billy Joe'. Subsequently, noted roots specialists Mitchell Froom and Tchad Blake replaced Van Dyke's pretty arrangement for 'The Book' with phasey, funky funeral horns.

### Things Go Sour

Unfortunately, the camaraderie didn't last. Mindful of Padgham's status and experience, as well as the opportunity he'd presented her with, Sheryl largely acceded to his choices in terms of the sound while overdubs were taking place. However, as the sessions progressed, she began to realise that what she'd let herself in for was a sonic treatment that bore many of the hallmarks of Padgham's work with Sting, Genesis and Phil Collins — clean, highly polished and, as in the case of the latter two, heavily layered, with little front-and-centre space in which to highlight her vocals. In no way did this conform to the more rough-hewn edges of Sheryl's self-image or ignite the music that she and Jay Oliver had conceived.

"What you have to realise is that the songs had been incepted in a manner where they were integral with the production," Oliver points out. "The material had been written using my studio gear, and I had a certain way of playing and working with these interesting sounds that were purely synthetic. They kind of s

ounded like drums and kind of sounded like guitars, but they couldn't be replaced by humans. They had their own identity and were never intended as substitutes for human tracks. Because of the nature of the sound, because of the way it was played, and because it was quantised by a computer, it just had a characteristic that couldn't be reproduced in any other way. If you tried to play it, the result wasn't as good; it sounded watered-down.

"What's more, all of that stuff that I did had a dated production sensibility, and therefore — although I wasn't cognisant of this — Sheryl, Hugh, and David Anderle were all saying, 'That's good, but we need to be cutting-edge. We need to do something new,' and in retrospect I would have said the same thing. I don't think anyone said it was bad, but where they went wrong was trying to keep the same songs and replace everything with real instruments to make them work. That was a mistake, the wrong move. They tried to take something and turn it into something else, and by the time it became something else it was so watered down that it had not only lost the integrity of the original demos, but it was also just plain confusing. There was no focus in any way."

Meanwhile, in addition to the problems encountered when trying to recapture the spirit of the demos when replacing synth sounds with piano and supplemental guitars, the major source of discontent for Sheryl was the album's intended focal point: her own voice. Somehow, it just didn't have the right feel — it lacked punch and emotion — yet she couldn't convince Hugh Padgham of this. The solution? Bring in Jay Oliver once again. After all, hadn't he achieved all of the right results on a Tascam eight-track?

"I went back in there for one or two songs that she wanted to re-sing, and I tried to recreate what I had done," Oliver recalls. "Hugh wasn't there for that, and so from his perspective it may have been kind of an unauthorised



Photo: Zhenya Nesterov

The Tuesday Night Music Club. Top row, left to right: Brian MacLeod, Bill Bottrell, David Baerwald; seated, Dan Schwartz, Sheryl Crow, Kevin Gilbert.

experiment. Later on I was told that, when he heard the results, he immediately dismissed them as unusable, saying the miking wasn't good enough."

Indeed, once Hugh Padgham embarked on the mix, tensions arose between artist and producer, and Sheryl's insecurities came to the surface.

"Towards the end, things started to get a bit weird," Padgham admits. "Sheryl would get very frustrated because she was always totally paranoid that her voice was out of tune, and I particularly remember going home and feeling pissed off during the mixing stage... Unfortunately, in those days there weren't things like *Auto-Tune* — if she was really upset about something it would be so easy to fix now. It was a pain in the arse having to hook up Harmonizers, and having the Harmonizers on faders to change the voltage that changed the pitch of the machine...

"As far as I was concerned, she was being sort of over-the-top anal about everything, because to me her performances were great in the first place. There again, we also didn't have 10 or 11 killer songs. I'd had enough of her and she'd probably had enough of me, so I suppose what we had was a falling out, but without a full-on slanging match."

### **One Down...**

A&R chief David Anderle eventually sanctioned Crow's request to give her musician boyfriend Kevin Gilbert the chance to remix the record at Andora Studios in Los Angeles. However, the sound was imprinted on the tapes and not a lot could be done to effect the desired change. Thus, despite a budget that had mushroomed to \$441,000 and a tentative release date of September 22, 1992, the painful decision was taken by a frustrated record company and humiliated artist to shelve a project that they both agreed would be an unmarketable, dead-end debut at a time when grunge was king.

Soon, rumours began to circulate that A&M was dropping Crow from the label, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead, showing remarkable faith in the talents of a newcomer, David Anderle placed her in the hands of producer/engineer/writer/musician Bill Bottrell, whose list of credits ranged from Madonna to Michael Jackson — Bottrell co-wrote and co-produced Jackson's biggest-ever number one hit 'Black Or White'. Nevertheless, working out of his own studio named Toad Hall in Pasadena, a few miles north-east of Los Angeles, Bottrell had chosen to turn his back on contemporary recording methods and on what he perceived as overblown superstar projects in favour of employing old techniques with new artists — working live, working more immediately, leaving things raw, never doing demos.

"Everything gets recorded and everything is potentially a master," he explains, while also alluding to "leaving things looser and going for the proverbial three minutes of magic in a room."

Having spent the past decade working with African American R&B acts, observing how they tapped into their musical roots, Bottrell had determined that his own soul came from Appalachian and country music. As a means of trying to contrive an 'alternative country' sound that would draw on his rock sensibilities, Bottrell had taken to working with an eclectic bunch of musicians whose overlapping projects had introduced them to the unconventional environment of Toad Hall, with its high, long, faux-stone room, neo-Gothic lighting, tapestry-draped walls and opulent array of classic recording equipment. These included lyricist-composer David Baerwald, multi-instrumentalist Kevin Gilbert, whose all-around talents also included songwriting and vocals, drummer Brian MacLeod, and bassist Dan Schwartz. On the periphery of this core group were also the likes of bassist David Ricketts and guitarist Jeff Trott.

Beginning in August '92, varying permutations of this group gathered at Toad Hall on Tuesday nights (and, within a short while, whenever they felt like it) to write songs and record the results right there on the spot. The idea was to enter the studio with no preconceived ideas, yet on the first Tuesday that Sheryl Crow joined the proceedings — September 15, 1992 — Baerwald bent the rules a little. First he helped concoct lyrics and a basic chord structure for a Brechtian cabaret number named 'I Love This Man', which had Sheryl adopting a Marlene Dietrich-style German accent to assume the role of a prostitute in a

bombed-out hotel pledging devotion to her pimp. Fascinating stuff, but not exactly chart-friendly material, so then Baerwald flashed the galley proofs to an as-yet unpublished novel by a close friend of his. "That's it," he said referring to the book's title, "*Leaving Las Vegas*. There's our shiny phrase for the evening."

Playing the simple G-C-D chord structure that he'd already worked on, Baerwald demonstrated the song's first few lines and chorus, and before long everyone else was contributing ideas: Kevin Gilbert supplemented Baerwald's verse with one of his own, while Bottrell provided the number with a backbone in the form of a loop that he describes as "a weird punk country groove" and encouraged Crow to replace Baerwald as the lead vocalist. Heeding Bottrell's advice to play down the vibrato in her voice, Crow melded a laid-back, devil-may-care attitude with a searing, in-your-face vocal delivery, drawling the lyrics in a low-register one moment and then spitting them out with a high-octane intensity the next.

"She was singing like no one ever had before, and she made that up," asserts Bottrell. "It came from her, it came from country, it came from Missouri, it came from this crunchy sound that was blaring in her headphones, and it came from the fact that she could barely hear herself."

'Leaving Las Vegas' was the simplest of songs, but it provided the template for not only Sheryl Crow's *Tuesday Night Music Club* album (featuring such other highlights as 'Run, Baby, Run', 'Strong Enough' and her breakout hit 'All I Wanna Do'), but also the alternative country/neo-hippy sound with which she'd hereafter be associated. Both Crow and A&M, however, wanted to market her as the archetypal singer/composer, a

nd they did so with a vengeance, even though, as indicated by the multiple songwriting credits, most of the album's tracks were collaborative efforts.

### Two Down

Sheryl Crow's relationship with Bottrell and the Tuesday Night Music Club had been productive, but it would not last. By the time that she and Bottrell commenced work on her follow-up album towards the tail end of 1994, they found it hard to conceal their mutual antipathy and before long there was the inevitable explosion. Crow and the record company were now reluctant to allow Bottrell to do what he wanted, and demanded more rock-oriented material. In a purported attempt to diffuse the tension, in the Summer of 1995 the recording locale was switched from Toad Hall to Daniel Lanois' Kingsway Studio in New Orleans, but on the second day there was a heated argument and Bottrell walked. On the surface there was panic in the Crow camp, yet in truth this situation provided the ambitious Crow with the opportunity she coveted: to produce the album herself.

That she did, with the invaluable assistance of Kingsway's former chief engineer Trina Shoemaker, the ongoing support of drummer/composer Brian MacLeod, and the urgently requested presence of guitarist Jeff Trott, whose contributions as Sheryl's new songwriting partner would help her to consolidate and build on her success.

Within Kingsway, a large foyer doubled as a listening area, while through an archway to the left there was a control room containing a 1976 custom API console that had formerly been housed at the Record Plant in New York. Twin stacks of 1965 Tannoy Gold monitors had been imported from Abbey Road, while the rest of the gear included a Studer A820 with Dolby SR, a 12-channel Neve desk, and a standard



Bill Bottrell's Toad Hall studio. Photo courtesy of Bill Bottrell



Photo: Zhenya Nesterov

Sheryl Crow with Bill Bottrell.



collection of mics, compressors and preamps. Behind the control room, the 'wood room' was used for tracking, while to the right there was a departure from the open-plan setup in the form of an isolated area that served as the main recording room. Indeed, aside from the aforementioned vintage gear, one of the facility's main assets was its 14-foot-high rooms with their plaster walls and ceilings, pinewood floors and ambient chambers. All in all, the ambience wasn't that far off from that at Toad Hall, and for the *Sheryl Crow* album the four-piece rhythm section would sometimes even be set up immediately behind the console in order to capture a live sound that incorporated the desired leakage.

### Like A Black Hole

Initially, Crow didn't notice Trina Shoemaker setting up microphones and arranging to bring in a Wurlitzer, a Hammond B3, and other rental gear from Nashville. What's more, she also didn't realise that the engineer was rolling tape from the moment she and Jeff Trott began writing. "I went through about six reels of tape while they worked," Shoemaker recalls, "and then at around two o'clock in the morning Sheryl said, 'We need to start rolling tape because this is turning into a song.' I said, 'Sheryl, we already have that,' and I could see a click in her eye. She said, 'You're pretty cool! I like the fact that you just record and don't talk.' I had the very first writing moment down on multitrack, and that was the take that ended up being used."

The song that Sheryl composed that night was 'Home', a country lament whose world-weary lyrics mostly came to her as she was singing into the mic. Playing bass while Trott and MacLeod were having little success working on another number, Sheryl began singing 'Home', the three of them fell in together, and then and there a seemingly chaotic situation was turned on its head. During her first few hours of autonomy she had accomplished her maiden solo production, and thereafter the project was firmly back on track.

"Her whole notion was super-live yet super-dead, super-funky yet super-pop while also loop-driven, and at first that dichotomy appeared to be impossible, yet she pulled it off," Shoemaker remark

s. "It was by trying a million things that didn't work that we arrived at this one perfect dichotomy like 'Maybe Angels', which sounds completely live but is, in fact, a loop. In telling me that she needed a loop, Sheryl said, 'The loop cannot swing, but I want to swing over the top of it.' You try doing that! Finally, we came up with a loop pattern that had just enough in it to create the illusion of swing, and which she could also swing the instruments over. It started with Brian MacLeod playing a drum groove and me bussing five or six mics down to one track and heavily compressing everything. Brian also hit something metallic to give a ringing sound which was then mixed into the normal, dry, organic loop which I created. The result doesn't sound as if it swings, but it actually does, and that's what makes that song so groovy."

Characteristic of the Crow/Shoemaker approach applied to other songs on this and subsequent albums, 'Maybe Angels' employed conventional instruments and basic studio gear that was pushed to its limits. "For the grinding noise that kicks off the track, I just went wild on the loop for a few hours, distorting it and heavily over-compressing it to the point where the [Ure] 1176s started to feed back on themselves," Shoemaker explains. "I turned the input gain up all the way and then cranked these overdrive preamps so that I obliterated everything to the point where it was like a black hole."



Photo: Tchad Blake

Trina Shoemaker at Globe Studios, New York during the recording of *The Globe Sessions*.



Photo: Tchad Blake

Sheryl Crow and Trina Shoemaker (right) in the control room at Globe Studios.

For Crow's vocals, which were all performed in the control room, Shoemaker experimented with a Sony C37A and Neumann U47 before settling on the former. "The pop-screen on the C37A can really take her volume," she says, "and so she was able to sing pretty close to the mic."

At the same time, Crow's acoustic guitar parts were recorded either with a U47, an AKG C12 or a Sennheiser 421, while electric guitars largely made use of a Fender Tweed amp. As for the bass, she wa

s still feeling her way around what was still, for her, an unfamiliar instrument, yet although she'd often play guide parts and then bring in seasoned bassists to overdub them, in most cases it was the Crow contribution that would end up being used. Hereafter, the bass would be her instrument of choice. For now, however, her main priority in the absence of Bill Bottrell was to come up with credible new song material.

### **If It Makes Them Happy**

Several months earlier, Crow, Trott and MacLeod had assembled for a songwriting session at the drummer's cabin in the Gold Country region of Northern California, and although this had descended into drink-soaked disarray within a week, plenty of good came out of it. "We'd got, like, five songs together, but I didn't hear from Sheryl for several weeks and I was thinking, 'Nah, she didn't like them,'" Trott recalls. "However, as it turned out, three of the songs that we wrote up there were 'If It Makes You Happy', 'A Change', and 'Every Day Is A Winding Road', so it wasn't a bust!"

'If It Makes You Happy' would eventually be chosen as the lead single from the album, and Jeff Trott's description of the writing process illustrates perfectly the way an artist like Sheryl Crow is able to use other writers in collaboration. "It was a song that I'd worked on while I was in Pete Droge's band, before I had even hooked up with Sheryl, but it was kind of unfinished," explains Trott. "She related to that song and was able to carry it to where it really needed to be, to a place that it would never otherwise reach, because for her I think it represented some kind of triumph over trying to prove herself. The original idea was mine, but she took it and made it her own, and I think it was this number that really brought us together in terms of being able to relate. She changed some words, wrote the second verse, and strengthened the melody in a way that only a great singer can. Sheryl has this ability to take these germs of ideas and really make them explode. She's got a way of being able to communicate, and that in itself is invaluable. One of her best assets is that she's really believable, because when she likes a song she believes in it and her performance is totally convincing."

Originally written in the key of E, 'If It Makes You Happy' was transposed to G in order to fit Sheryl's voice. The song also underwent several different arrangements before Crow and Trott hit upon the final version. "It started off as a twangy, David Lynch-esque sort of thing," remembers Trott. "Then, when we were first fleshing it out and trying to find the right key for Sheryl to sing in, we played it like punk rock, really fast, as well as count

ry and funky. You know, you get a song and put clothes on it to see what looks good and what doesn't, and usually when you find the right one it's pretty obvious. With that song it was real obvious!"

The recording was also labour-intensive, thanks to Trott's determination to have the guitars sounding right: "I spent an entire day working on the guitars. I played that song in open E tuning and the song is in G, so I had to barre chord it. Trying to play barre chords low on the neck through the whole song and making it really tight was very, very laborious. My hand turned into this marble claw and practically fell off. However, after spending all of this time on the song, I finally got it sounding really great. I wanted to get absolutely the biggest intro possible. The silly thing is, after going through all of that labour, when we started rehearsing to go on the road with that song, I discovered that I could have just had it in open G. All I would have



Photo: Tchad Blake

Sheryl Crow lays down some bass lines for *The Globe Sessions*.



needed to do is play all of the strings open and then just add the little [*descending*] riff. A child could play it, yet I'd worked it out in open E and got carpal tunnel for my efforts!"

### **Around The Globe**

The critically acclaimed *Sheryl Crow* album eventually added to Crow's tally of Grammy Awards and established her as an artist who was here to stay. Her confidence in doing things herself grew further on 1998's *The Globe Sessions*, which saw her not only excel as a singer, songwriter and producer, but also push her self-taught abilities on the bass guitar. Nevertheless, unsure if she'd still have an audience amid the flood of rap, hip-hop and boy bands, it would be four years before she'd release another studio album. Displaying typical rock star insecurity and the obligatory fragile ego, Crow hesitated to the point of virtually suffering a nervous breakdown during the making of *C'mon, C'mon*. She'd achieved her initial breakthrough by rejecting slick production in favour of a raw, country-tinged sound, but when *C'mon C'mon* eventually appeared, it was a glossy piece of '70s-style AOR. Sheryl Crow, it seemed, had come full circle.