

Producing results

Artists Joe Henry, Steve Dawson also make magic behind the board

BY ERIC VOLMERS, CALGARY HERALD JULY 22, 2010 2:03 AM Spotlight

Joe Henry plays the main-stage on Friday and the Mississippi Sheiks play Saturday at various stages at the Calgary Folk Music Festival. Visit calgaryfolkfest.com

Joe Henry knows how an established producer can alter an album's sound, for better or for worse.

This is not only because Henry himself is an established producer who has altered the sound of an impressive list of albums in the past five or six years.

No, he first learned this lesson during his early days as a singer-songwriter, long before he became involved in the mysterious and often under-appreciated world of sculpting sounds for other artists.

In the late 1980s, he was a 20-something songwriter freshly signed to A&M Records. They assigned him what was commonly known in the day as a "name producer."

So his major label debut, 1989's *The Murder of Crows*, became a slick country-rock album produced in a somewhat overbearing manner by mercurial New York drummer and bandleader Anton Fier.

"Suffice to say, Anton was making the record that he wanted to make and he used my voice, my songs and my recording budget," says Henry, in an interview from his home in northern California. "But he had no interest in that time to what my preferences might be. I was a young kid, he thought, and I should fall in line and do what he told me like everybody else was supposed to do what he told them. And I realized very quickly that A&M had much more invested in their relationship with him than they did in their relationship with me. I didn't know that I could just say no."

When it came to his second album, Henry had some specific ideas but was certain his label would frown on them. So he was relieved when producer T-Bone Burnett intervened on his behalf and convinced the company brass to let him produce what would become 1990s exquisite *Shuffletown* with a lighter touch. Using acoustic instruments, musicians such as jazz trumpeter Don Cherry and recording most songs live-off-the-floor, Burnett shaped the album with what has become known as his trademark warm, economic and clear sounds.

It didn't sell any better than *A Murder of Crows*, but Henry was impressed. Burnett, already a producer of some note by that point thanks to his work with Elvis Costello and Los Lobos, was also impressed. He quickly asked the young songwriter to be a production assistant on a new album he was overseeing for Bruce Cockburn called *Nothing But A Burning Light*.

"It was the first time I had been involved in anybody's record other than my own," says Henry, who plays the Calgary Folk Festival on Friday as part of a tour behind his 11th album, *Blood From Stars*. "I realized quite quickly that producing myself and touring and waiting for a new batch of songs and making a record every couple of years was like learning to drive by driving a car five minutes a week."

Needless to say, Henry's modus operandi in the studio as an in-demand producer has come to reflect Burnett's delicate, diplomatic style.

"What you're doing is creating an environment where music can happen," he says.

"It's not about dictating parts or a sensibility to anybody. It's about inviting people to a table and allowing a song to be revealed."

That has become the guiding force for what has become a celebrated second career for Henry behind the boards, even as he continues to release his own albums to a devout if somewhat small following. Within the industry, his reputation as a producer seems to have eclipsed his reputation as a performer. He can now properly be listed alongside Burnett, Daniel Lanois and Rick Rubin as one of the industry's increasingly rare A-list producers.

Since overseeing Solomon Burke's 2002 comeback Grammy-winning album, *Don't Give Up On Me*, Henry has produced albums for Ani DiFranco, Aimee Mann, Elvis Costello and Mary Gauthier. He recently signed on to do a record with Rosanne Cash.

Despite the fact that his own songs and albums owe very little to traditional soul, his in-studio work with Burke, Bettye LaVette, Mavis Staples, Irma Thomas and Ann Peebles have also placed him on the forefront of a soul revival in the past five years.

It has all put him in the strange position of being most recognized for a role that traditionally has been woefully unrecognized in the industry. Despite the historic importance of many producer's contributions to modern music -- Phil Spector's "wall of sound,"

Sam Phillips' pioneering rock 'n' roll strains for Elvis Presley, Daniel Lanois's haunting hit-making for U2 and Peter Gabriel -- they are rarely celebrated.

Henry's wife, who also happens to be Madonna's sister, managed Daniel Lanois for 11 years and was never able to push him to the levels of fame as a performer that befitted his influence on the industry.

"He was always looming above me," says Henry. "I saw him as this uber-successful record producer. And then I would find out that outside a very small stream of people, people didn't know who he was either."

Part of the problem could be that producer's role can often seem esoteric and be radically different depending on the producer. Burnett's hands-off diplomacy is a far cry from the gun-toting terrorizing that Spector was known for. But it's not only the general public who are perplexed.

"A lot of bands and young artists don't understand the role of a producer," says Steve Dawson, a multi-instrumentalist who has produced a number of Canadian roots artist, including Deep Dark Woods, Jenny Whiteley and Jim Byrnes.

"Even when they're working with somebody they may not understand what they're bringing to the table. Because maybe all they are bringing is that they are able to get the band very focused and very relaxed and sit back and let the band do their thing. That's really hard to do. And people don't understand that sometimes."

Like Henry, Dawson began as a songwriter and musician, most notably playing instrumental jazz-folk music as part of Zubot and Dawson, before turning his talents in the studio into a thriving career that now seems to take up most of his time.

Dawson's most recent project was overseeing a tribute album to the Mississippi Sheiks, which found him working with everyone from Bill Frisell to the Mississippi All-Stars to John Hammond. Dawson will be performing with various participants of the tribute at the folk fest as well.

But while the production chores may cut into tour schedules and the recording of their own albums, these very different pursuits have a tendency to become part of the same artistic arc.

"It's all just different aspects of the same work," says Henry. "I see less and less distinction all the time in the different components. I could say it cuts into my work or I could say it enhances and creates different opportunities for that same work. I don't look at them as competing in any way."

evolmers@theherald.canwest.com © Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald