by Mr. Bonzai

SHELLY YAKUS
GOLDEN EARS

PHOTO: MR. BONZAI

Shelly Yakus, chief engineer and vice president of A&M Recording Studios, is believed by many of his peers to have among the best ears in the business. His special sensibilities have been heard in the work of hundreds of artists, including U2, Don Henley, Dire Straits and John Lennon. Born the son of a Boston studio owner in 1945, Yakus began his serious audio explorations at the legendary A&R Studios in New York during the mid-'60s. Assisting such greats as Phil Ramone and Roy Cicala, he quickly absorbed their diverse talents and within three years was engineering Van Morrison's *Moondance* and The Band's *Music From Big Pink*. In 1970, he moved across town to The Record Plant, sculpting sound for ten years during the studio's peak years of hitmaking.

During this period, Yakus teamed with producer Jimmy Iovine for a relationship that created some fine records with artists such as Tom Petty, Stevie Nicks and Bob Seger. In 1985, Yakus and Iovine were asked by Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss to resurrect the aging A&M Recording Studios in Los Angeles. Ten years later, the work continues, as A&M consistently attracts top artists such as the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen. Art is abundant in this unique environment of high technology, vintage tools and earthy comforts. Join us now for some Pakistani take-out in an office adjacent to the construction zone.

Bonzai: So, you're building a new room?
Yakus: Yes, a room for Dave Collins, our chief mastering engineer. Dave's become so popular that we felt we had to build a room that was equal to his ability, instead of the room he's been working in, which is about the size of a phone booth.
Bonzai: How many rooms do you have here at A&M?
Yakus: Five studios and six mastering rooms, and one tape copy room with 130 real-time machines, plus assorted DAT machines and 1630 players. The room is divided so that we can do voice-overs on one side and duplica-

tion on the other.

It's really one of the most interesting rooms we have. Whenever you make cassette copies, how do you know that those machines are actually recording? Our techs invented a computer program, which in 60 seconds allows you to evaluate 60 cassette decks over the speakers, with a counter on a screen. If you hear something muffled, or one side of the stereo drops out, you know which deck is being sampled. You shut that machine down, and the computer skips it in the scanning. The operator making the labels can listen as he works to all of the cassettes being made.

Bonzai: Are these limited-edition cassettes?

Yakus: The record companies call them pre-release cassettes, and we do runs of anywhere from ten to 3,000. Because these are real-time and the quality is so good, the demand is high from the major labels—these are the advance releases for the key radio personnel and record company people working the albums. These cassettes are used to raise excitement, and the artists want them to sound as good as it does in the studio.

Bonzai: Is there a favorite room at A&M?

Yakus: Each room has a different personality, and everyone has a personal favorite.

Bonzai: Is Studio B the room that was never finished?

Yakus: Yes, and here's why: The studio was almost done and we needed to do some overdubs. The control room was finished, and we just wanted to set up some drums and have the workers stop for a few hours. There were stacks of plywood, the floor was bare concrete, and Herb had a large crystal hanging near the wall. One hit on the snare drum and we realized that we had to leave the room as it was. We just didn't want to mess with a perfect sound.

Designers are very "finish" conscious, because they want it to be their visual trademark. I told the architect, Vincent Van Haaff, that we wanted to stop working on the room, and he thought I was nuts. We discussed it, and he just did minimal surface treatment on the ceiling. We tried sanding the floor with a special sander to get rid of the coffee stains, but all it did was make a lot of dust. The stains are still there, and in the name of making a great record, we just left it the way it was.

Bonzai: Wasn't your first job as an engineer at A&R studios in New York?

Yakus: That was my first studio in New York, but my dad had a studio in Boston called Ace Recording. I grew up in that studio—going for coffee, cleaning ashtrays, doing errands. Even though it was a great-sounding room, the engineers in Boston didn't have the demands placed on them as those in New York. We got tapes in from New York, 3- and 4-track, that just sounded remarkable. I was about 16 years old and asked my dad how they got that sound. The Boston producers weren't really driving the engineers, so they fell short of that New York sound, or Los Angeles and Chicago. I was hearing tapes made outside of Boston and realized that I had to go to New York. Ace would have been my studio when I grew up, and my dad was disappointed, but he was proud of me for getting a job in a great studio in New York.

There were no holds barred in getting sounds, because we didn't have the equipment we have now to make instant sounds. You had to go out there and work your ass off to make it sound exciting.

When I got the job at A&R in 1967, the studio was attracting just about every major producer and group in the world: We had Phil Ramone, Roy Cicala, Donny Hahn, Tony May, Dave Sanders, Roy Hallee, Brooks Arthur, and each guy specialized. One did the original Broadway cast albums, one did jazz, one did commercials, one did rock 'n' roll, and so on. Phil was doing Sinatra, Count Basie, Leontyne Price, Burt Bacharach. Being an assistant engineer for all of these guys, I took what I liked and learned from each one.

Bonzai: What did you learn from Phil Ramone?

Yakus: How to use echo, and when you hear something you don't like, you go out to the room and move the microphone, instead of moving the equalizer. You go out and listen in the room. He also gave me the confidence that it could be done. Hearing his incredible work, with very little EQ and limiting, just blew me away. My first day in the studio as an assistant engineer was a Phil Ramone session with Dionne Warwick and Burt Bacharach. I was trained by a professional assistant, Major Little, a young guy who just wanted to be a great assistant and nothing more. He taught me how to set up the studio. And that first day, I stood behind Phil watching him balance an orchestra and saw the way it should be done.

Bonzai: How many tracks?

Yakus: It was 8-track, but that was really the safety. We had something called the "jukebox," which was a routing device separate from the console. He could mix those eight tracks down to four tracks, a 2-track and mono. We had five or six machines running on every take. Dionne recorded three songs in three hours that day, and two ended up as major hits, "Valley of the Dolls" and "Alfie." Phil's balances, which he got at the time of the session direct to the mono and 2-track machines—those were the masters. It seems funny now, but stereo at that time was just done in case the industry went stereo. It was a new thing, and no one knew if it would catch on.

Bonzai: Was Roy Cicala your main mentor?

Yakus: Yes, because he worked at night. Roy was the engineer who did most of the rock 'n' roll at A&R Studios, and he began requesting me as his assistant. He was also producing his wife's records at night after the rock sessions. I learned how to get vocal sounds, because if he didn't come up with a great vocal for his wife, there would be trouble at home.

Basically, what these guys taught me was that anything goes. Don't be

afraid. There are no rules. One time, we put a prophylactic on a long thin mike, put it into a milk bottle filled with water and then put headsets on the bottle to send a sound through it. We tried everything, especially after the Beatles showed everyone how far you could take it. One time, Roy got a great kick drum sound by taking the cardboard liner from a tape box, which had a metal center, adding a block of wood and taping it to the drum head. Then he hung the mic in surgical tubing so that there was no vibration from the floor.

There were no holds barred in getting sounds, because we didn't have the equipment we have now to make instant sounds. You had to go out there and work your ass off to make it sound exciting. These guys also taught me to recognize what was loud on the radio and how to do it. I was working around the clock and becoming a zombie, so I asked to start at 6 p.m. with Roy and sleep in the daytime.

Bonzai: How did you make the transition from an assistant engineer to solo?

Yakus: It happened in a very natural way. This studio was so busy that they had second and third holds on the time. The traffic managers controlled the engineers' lives. We had two women booking A&R, which had three studio complexes in different parts of New York. One day I got a phone call at 8 in the morning from Carol Peters at the office. She said, "The engineer is sick and can't make the session. I need you to come in and record this album." She told me it was bass, drums, guitars, vocal and horns. I said, "I've never recorded horns." She replied, "I've heard that you are very good at what you do. I talked with the other engineers, and I know you can figure this out." Then I asked who the artist was, and she told me it was Van Morrison. It turned out to be the *Moondance* album. Now I didn't do it alone, because in those days engineers would fill in for each other, and Elliot Scheiner did the mix. Van probably had four engineers working on that album. The Band's *Music From Big Pink* had three or four.

Bonzai: What was it like working on their first album?

Yakus: Well, at the time they called themselves The Crackers, and they became The Band by the finish of the album. People were saying to me, "What's that shit you're working on? What is that stuff?" I said, "This is the next big thing, this is the kind of music that's gonna take over." People thought I was crazy, but I knew something good when I heard it.

Bonzai: After *Moondance*, did that mean you were a solo engineer?

Yakus: When that album came out, I started getting calls like crazy. I was halfway between assistant and engineering on my own. The day after it came out, I became so popular that it was kind of annoying to me. It showed me a lot about the business. I was no different, but suddenly the phone was ringing off the hook.

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A&R was an amazing training ground. Bob Ludwig, Elliot Scheiner and myself were hired within a few weeks of each other. Bob went right into mastering, but I knew that if they got me in mastering, I'd never get out. I wanted to make records, and part of the program was supposed to be mastering, to make you a "well-rounded guy."

Bonzai: Did you do it?

Yakus: No, I escaped. I also escaped commercials, which I hated.

Bonzai: Was your next step moving over to The Record Plant?

Yakus: Yes. Roy Cicala got an offer from Chris Stone. I think Roy had temporarily burned out and had been giving me all his clients. When he got the offer from Stone, he said I had to come with him or he'd shoot me—"You have all my clients." He wanted me to come with him and work as a team. I had been at A&R for three years and loved it, and didn't think I could quit. So I asked him to record something over at Record Plant so that I could listen to it. I figured if it sounded as good or better than what we were doing at A&R, I would be interested. Well, it was great work they were doing over there, so I decided to leave in 1970.

I started working with groups like The Raspberries, Alice Cooper—records like *School's Out* and *Billion Dollar Babies*—and stayed for ten years. Jimmy Iovine was my assistant engineer, but around 1976 he had begun producing on his own. It's funny, but he went to Roy and asked him if he would ask me to engineer this record he was producing with Patti Smith, with a song from Bruce [Springsteen] called "Because the Night." Because he was my assistant, I guess he was shy, but I told Roy I would love to work with him as his engineer. In those days, it wasn't uncommon for a young guy to get the confidence of an artist and have a shot at a hit. Anyway, I mixed the Springsteen song, and we had this huge hit. Jimmy felt we could do some great things together because we complemented each other so well.

Then the next four records we did were stiffs. [Laughs] I was vice president of Record Plant getting a check every week. He looks at me and says, "There's this guy Tom Petty out in California. Listen to this—tell me what you think." I think it was something from his first album, and I just said, "Whoa, this is fantastic." So, I decided to take a leave of absence so Jimmy and I could work together. I was about 30, and he was 23. People told me I was crazy going off with this lunatic kid nutjob. But I believed in him, and we stayed in L.A. for nine months. We did [Petty's] *Damn the Torpedoes*, around '77-'78. For the next four years, from 1978 until 1982, we worked in Los Angeles during the winter and in New York during the summer. We started picking up more and more work with each hit. From Tom Petty to Stevie Nicks, Dire Straits to Bob Seger.

By 1982, we decided to make the move to California. The artists that we worked with were always unusual—they weren't the run-of-the-mill, "happening" stuff. The unique artists we worked with really propelled our careers: Dire Straits' *Making Movies*. Three albums for Tom Petty; three for

Stevie Nicks. I recorded that song "Like a Rock" for Bob Seger.

Bonzai: So, how did you get to the A&M chapter of your career?

Yakus: Well, Herb Alpert and Jerry Moss were looking for someone to rebuild and operate their studios. They had made great records, but the facility was getting a little rundown, and the technology had changed so much over the years. So they approached Jimmy and myself. We met and really hit it off. It was unusual for us, because we weren't in construction. We hired an architect who could understand our crazy ideas, Vincent Van Haaff. I explained what I wanted to hear and he would figure out a room with that sound. We also had George Augspurger on the project, too. It worked.

Bonzai: Everyone knows you're a great engineer, but did you ever produce?

Yakus: I don't like producing. I've been asked quite often to produce, and people are surprised when I turn them down. I just feel that I am a better engineer than a producer. I like helping people make their records.

Bonzai: Do you ever have a piece of the action?

Yakus: Yes, I get points on what I mix. So, I have points on all those records that Jimmy and I did together, and what I've done since.

Bonzai: You've been here at A&M ten years—and you're still in construction.

Yakus: [Laughs] You never stop, or you fall behind. It really started with Herb Alpert as the driving force behind having a state-of-the-art studio. Jerry supported Herb, because he wanted to have great music on this lot. Sure, we might attract a good unsigned group that might come to A&M, but a great studio was the goal. Jimmy and I helped that dream come true, and a lot of my wishes came true as well. I never expected to be in the studio business again because it's difficult to make money.

But my background was in staying with a studio for years, and you *knew* those rooms. Freelance engineers in those days were highly unusual. When Jimmy and I became independent, going from studio to studio, it began to screw with our heads. It really is unnerving being in a room that you have never been in before, trying to mix an important album. Actually, each album is important, and by the time you get to the mix it is the most important album of your life. When you are in a place you don't know, you are at a tremendous disadvantage. This was a great opportunity to build our own place, a studio with no surprises for us. And I didn't have to travel all over the world while raising a kid. There were a lot of pluses for me, besides the association with Herb and Jerry.

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Bonzai: What are the significant advances in recording since you began?

Yakus: It's all been downhill since the late '70s, in my opinion. It's only now starting to come back up to something that makes sense to me. The use of vintage gear with modern equipment is the way to make a record now. Modern equipment on its own has no sound. They've worked so hard to take the personality out of this new stuff, that it has no sound. The theory is that if the equipment has no sound, then you get the sound of the instrument. Well, that's a nice idea, but it doesn't fly so well. What *does* work, for example, is an old Neve console, which has a personality all its own. It makes a sound with the instruments. Okay, it changes the sound, but it changes it in a way that makes a better record. But if you know how to use the new consoles you can make a great record. You combine vintage gear with the new gear and get a tremendous sound, because you have the presence of the modern sound with the warmth of the '60s.

Bonzai: Are you talking about tube mics, tube limiters, preamps?

Yakus: Yes, and things like Neve modules, Fairchilds, Pultecs.

Bonzai: Do you track to analog?

Yakus: Yes, I try to never use digital. In my opinion, digital is not ready yet, although the Sony 48-track is the closest. That's a big statement, but my feeling is that digital is not as good as it will be in five or ten years. When I listen to one instrument off a digital machine, I multiply that sound—the buzzy top and that hard digital sound—by 24 or 48 tracks. And what will that sound like in a mix on a record? It isn't going to sound good. It'll be like fingernails on a chalkboard. It's annoying, but if you combine it with outboard gear and microphones that have a warm sound, the two together are fantastic. You can actually make a more present record than you could in the '60s and the '70s. That period had a lot of depth to the sound, which is missing today. Today's records don't have what I call the "front to back," the depth. They have a sound, but you hear them one after another on the radio, the modern records sound small next to older records.

Bonzai: Who is the most amazing artist you've worked with?

Yakus: So hard to say, because I've worked with so many great people. But it was amazing working with John Lennon on *Walls and Bridges*: Jim Keltner was the drummer, Klaus Voorman on bass, Jesse Ed Davis on guitar, Ed Mottau on acoustic guitar and Nicky Hopkins on piano. John was producing. He was the kind of person that even if you didn't know who he was, and he was standing in a crowd of a thousand people, you would pick him out first. He just had this aura, and he was also a very kind person. He'd come in after each take and look at the musicians and say, "Anybody have any mistakes they want to tell me about before we play this, so I know what I'm listening for?" During one take I had the Fairchild on the overhead tom-tom mics and somebody kicked the plug out of the wall in the middle of the song. When the tom-tom part came during the break it sounded like they were down at the end of the street.

But it worked, just one of those lucky things. John was definitely an amazing person to work with.

Bonzai: How would you like to be remembered in history?

Yakus: As a guy who made records that people really enjoyed listening to. I get a lot of compliments, and I enjoy that. When somebody sits down and listens to a record I've done, and they get the essence of that band like they never got it before, that's how I'd like to be remembered—someone who made a difference.

Bonzai: We can't go back to the days when you were starting out, but what advice do you have for people starting today?

Yakus: Actually, today it's happening more like it did for me than any time since. We have a program here at A&M where people start as runners, then become assistants. We build from within and rarely hire from the outside. Believe me, I couldn't run a successful operation like this without Mike Morongel, my head tech; Ron Rutledge, studio manager; Colleen Harris, my trusty assistant; and the entire A&M staff, who are simply the best—no more, no less. Because of the talent that comes through this studio, they recognize the value of the people we have here.

Many times, they take away our best people, which is good. I hate to see them leave, but I love it when they come back as engineering clients at A&M. The dream is still alive, and many of our people are now very successful, like Rob Jacobs, Randy Staub, Mark McKenna, Mark Desisto. You couldn't go to Harvard for four years and make what these guys are making now.

I say to the assistant engineers that I wish I could be an assistant again. I wish I could assist some of the great engineers of today, to understand how they make such terrific records. I don't get to see this anymore, and I can't learn from these guys. If I could be an assistant again, I could pick up some more tricks—and I've picked up some good ones over the years. The new people have the advantage of learning from the best of our time, just as I did when I was starting out. ■

Roving editor Mr. Bonzai ponders the musical question "What's for lunch?"