

PAUL OROFINO

MILLBROOK SOUND STUDIOS, BARFUNGUL
and the BEER CLUB FOR MEN
by LARRY DEVIVO



I've known Paul Orofino for over a dozen years now. I first met him when I moved back to New York State and a friend of mine was doing a project at his Millbrook Sound Studio. At the time I didn't realize the scope of albums he had worked on, but I could hear he really knew what he was doing by the drum sounds he was getting - not to mention his room was filled with every piece of gear that you would ever want to work with. A truly diverse and skilled engineer, his work can be heard on albums ranging from blues to metal. Bands like Anthrax, Cradle of Filth, Bleeding Through



and Immolation have sought his abilities to get heavy hitting hardcore sounds down. Blues and jazz icons like Ahmad Jamal, Big Bill Morganfield and John Hammond seek his ability to get sweet, searing, soulful sounds, while long term clients like Blue Öyster Cult and Golden Earring have become friends over the years. On top of his engineering and production skills, Orofino is also a savvy businessman, and Millbrook Sound Studios is celebrating its twentieth year in business this year. While studio after studio in the area close, artists, engineers and producers flock back to Millbrook for the comfortable, creative atmosphere that Paul has created.

When I contacted Paulie about doing an interview for *Tape Op* he said, "great, why don't you come down to one of the BCFM meetings?" Knowing most of the industry associations and organizations, I was curious as to what this BCFM acronym stood for and what it had to do with the music business. "It's an impromptu meeting of musicians, engineers, producers, equipment manufactures and the like. You know some of these guys like Eddie Kramer, Gary Burke, Paul Antonell, Joe Bouchard, Geoff Daking- whoever can make it. I email out to a list of like a hundred people, and whoever can make it, comes and brings a dish." A dish? "Yeah we drink, eat, drink, eat, drink, drink, pass out. I supply the beer and everybody who shows up brings something to eat. I call it the Beer Club For Men."

Housed in a very nondescript blue barn is the multi-studio complex owned by Orofino. Upon entering Millbrook Sound Studios you realize it is quite unlike any other dedicated studio you've seen. I mean, you don't even realize you're inside a studio as the first thing you are greeted with is BarFunGul, Paul's own private bar which is stocked with pretty much every beer made on the planet, and complete with a Geoff Daking schematic laminated bar top. And indeed it has served the studio well for a number of years now.

What inspired BarFunGul?

That was easy. At the time I was recording a lot of bands from Europe and at the end of their sessions back home bands would typically go out for a pint. So they were always looking for a place to drink. In Millbrook nothing's open past ten at night. So the bands would have to drive over to Poughkeepsie to find a bar, and then they'd end up getting arrested for drunk driving on their way back to the studio. They'd be driving on the wrong side of the road and shit - being from Europe, England or wherever. I got tired of having to call the record company and explain to them that I needed ten grand more so I could bail their band out of jail. I built the bar so the bands would have a safe place to drink. I think it was inevitable; my first studio was called The Brewery.

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[laughs] But some guys see this and they get the wrong impression. They walk in here and think, "Great we're gonna drink all day and record" and I have to tell them that the bar is only open at the end of the day. Once we've wrapped up the session for the day, everybody is welcome to drink. It's also quite an incentive to get work done.

So how did you come up with the name for the bar?

About six months after I started the bar, I had the first gathering of what would become the Beer Club For Men. It happens about every three months usually on the first Monday night. My friend Eddie Kramer was living up here at the time. We had our first gathering



and were looking for a name for the bar and Eddie said, "I know, BarFunGul," and we knew, it fit perfect and that name stuck ever since. It's hysterical to see these guys, 'cause these guys will bring everything. Anthony DeMaria [ADL] would bring salmon and cook it up. Eddie would bring a casserole during the winter months, and he makes a hell of a casserole. To just hear

these guys talking about cooking and how they made this and that. It's just nuts.

What did we have on tap last night?

Aventinus Eisbock, a German bock beer - 14% alcohol. The middle tap was La Chouffe, a Belgian golden ale - 8%. Right tap was Scaldis, Belgian Ale - 12% alcohol. No Miller, Bud, Coors or any of that other regular crap here. And you can quote me on that. You were mainly drinking the Aventinus.

You got started in the business as a musician, right? A guitarist?

I was a classically trained guitar player, really kind of the usual way. We had gotten a small record deal and went into this studio [Quadraphonic] with my band in the early '70s, and every time I asked the engineer for something he said, "You don't want that" or, "You can't do that." So I'd reach over and do it myself and I figured if I had to do it myself, I'd build my own place. Then I wouldn't have to hear how it couldn't be done. So I built my own place to get what we wanted - The Brewery in Queens.

Do you think your connection with KISS was why you became known for your work with metal and hardcore bands?

That and the whole Golden Earring recording. When I did that, suddenly I had all these Dutch bands and people contacting me wanting to come to Millbrook to record. I'm known for getting drum and guitar sounds, so I get all these hardcore and death metal bands all the time. On the same hand I do a lot of jazz and blues acts. Ahmad Jamal loved it in here. He felt right at home. I think that's why people come here - people really like the feel.

In capturing these great guitar sounds, you pioneered a few unique and unusual techniques along the way. Can you elaborate on some of these, like your in-the-control-room guitar amp head/studio cab/combo /and multi-mic set up?

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It's a shelf. [laughs] I designed it 'cause when working here I like to be efficient. So if I have a blues band coming in, I'll take the metal heads out and put up all the blues heads. These are hooked up to four different cabinets in the live room with different microphones on them. It's



all wired to a patch bay that I can switch any amp head to any bottom. It's really about efficiency and making it easier to keep the flow going during the session. This is really for the overdub process, as I still like to cut the rhythm section together if I can. But some guitarists just like to cut all their parts in the control room anyway - whatever way they want to do it. The blues guys really love how fast we can change things around and never lose the vibe. It's all about the vibe - the vibe and the emotional content of the song itself. That's what I feel is lacking in a lot of music now. You know, I have the Stones original 8-track, 1 inch of *Sticky Fingers*, right? When I first put on "Brown Sugar" and pushed up the fader, here's the drums, in mono, coming at me and there's all this feeling and emotion and the song is just there in the beat. It hit me like a ton of bricks. Here we are recording all these multiple drum channels, 10, 16, whatever, and he [Charlie Watts] has us all beat with a mono drum track.

Is that part of the reason why you started your own label?

Yeah, in fact this is the first artist that will be on the Retrophile label that we're listening to. I came up with this idea of using a bit of the old - that's the retro - and I've always been a bit of an audiophile, and I wanted that reflected in the music hence, Retrophile. So the idea is my response to people not making decisions anymore, recording drums on 48 tracks and 16 tracks of guitar and all that shit - never committing to anything until the mix. So my idea is to capture the bands and artists using the recording techniques of the past - minimal mics, vintage usually, and capturing it to the most accurate of modern formats - The Genex 9000 series DSD recorder. Now when I say old concepts I mean vintage, like three or four mics on the drums recorded to stereo. If we do overdub, having several parts playing at the same time, things like that - working out the parts ahead of time. A lot of my favorite records as a teenager were recorded on 4- or 8-track machines, so my Genex is outfitted with eight tracks. Finding bands with that mindset - that it's okay to record only to minimal tracks - they have to be into this vibe of cutting only to 8-track. Having that [Stones] tape, playing it back made me decide what I was going to do with this label. Preproduction is now important again. It's key. I'm looking at not only having the vintage recording quality but the vintage emotion - what connected you in the past - the feeling of the record. The cost would be minimal because of only having eight tracks to deal with. I'm also a firm believer that location is very important to creating vibe, so I needed to make the system portable - that's why I went with the Genex DSD. And I need that for my own creativity, to get out of the studio. The location is so important to capturing the performance.

So are you happy with this Genex?

Yeah this one is great, and there are plans for editing software for this system. The reason I actually purchased this one is that I was blown away by the sonics of my first one - the 8500. They had to redesign the architecture, so that's what became the 9000. This one does everything that they promised with the 8500. They pissed off a few people with the 8500 because of that change. The old architecture wouldn't work for the new machine, but I loved the sound so much I stuck with them.

How did the first Daking console come about? You financed that first board?



I had a few of his preamps like everyone else. I like to be different: Everyone had Neves and APIs and I didn't want to have what everybody else had. At the time Geoff and I had been friends 'cause he lived up here. So I said, "Geoff what would it take to make a console?" I took a loan and the first thing we bought was the

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computer and software just to design the thing. We needed a way to design this thing and these programs were brand new - we had to figure them out. It took seven years from the time we started. It went through many revisions. We took our time and wanted to get it right. That's what's in my B room.

Any special tricks you use to get a good vocal performance?

When we set out to record vocals for the new Cradle of Filth record [*Thomography*] with Dani Filth, I set up a few different mics. Producer Rob Caggiano and I finally settled on an old '70s U87 and the original version of Gefell's UM70s. Each mic had a certain something that we would use for different parts of each song. One was better for loud screaming passages while the other excelled in the sung or spoken parts. The mics were wired to a Universal Audio 2108 mic pre to a Distressor and the other to a Daking 52270 pre into a Daking 91579 limiter. Now when we actually started recording, we noticed that the performances were lacking and Dani seemed uncomfortable singing into the vocal mic. So we gave Dani a Shure SM58 to hold in his hand (not connected to anything) and sing into while he was actually being recorded by either of the other two condenser mics! And that's all it took to get the performances we needed. Sometimes it's as simple as that.

What was your set up for getting that in your face clipping low end bass sound on that record?

While recording bass for any of the heavy metal, hardcore bands we do here, this is pretty much a standard set up. I usually record the bass with a tube DI - Demeter, ADL, Valvotronics, or Evil Twin - and then into an amplifier. The bass amp is usually one of my old Ampeg SVTs with one 8 by 10 cabinet. Depending on the sound I'm after I mic the cabinet, only one of the 10-inch speakers, with either a Beyer TGX 50, Sennheiser 421, Neumann FET 47, or a Soundelux U95, using only one mic. I place that mic pretty close to the speaker, then placed just behind that same speaker I use the Yamaha SubKick. Now at this point I am printing the DI, the mic and the SubKick all to separate tracks. If the bass part has a lot of percussion (slaps, etc.) I will then tape a Countryman lavalier mic to the body of the bass guitar to get all the slaps and resonance off the bass body, and print that also to a separate track so that can be blended in later in the mix. As to where this mic is placed, you just have to listen and find the sweet spot with the best sound. Then during mixdown I usually take the DI track from the recorder, send that out to the ReAmp box into a SansAmp Bass Driver, which I use to get some grit and high end attack, depending on what is required to get the bass to speak for that song.

And the drums?

Recording drums for the heavy, hardcore bands, I'm probably doing the complete opposite then most of the guys out there. I actually record with the least amount of mics that can be used. Almost every heavy record that was cut here in the last eight years has been through the TLA VTC console with no EQ used during tracking. And if it's not really fast, up-tempo material that the band is cutting, I will sometimes mic the kick drum as normal with a mic inside the drum. Then I will place one of my very old, large kick drums (32- or 36-inch) in front of the normal kick and mic that with the SubKick for some unbelievable added low end that just isn't there using the SubKick itself on the regular bass drum - great for slow grooves.

AHMAD JAMAL'S MIC SELECTION

DRUMS: kick - AKG D 30, snare - Neumann KM 84, overheads - Royer SF-12 stereo mic

BASS: Neumann FET 47 mic on the middle of the body

- DI just in case of an emergency

PIANO: Royer SF-12 stereo mic

ROOM: Coles 4038 pair

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KICK: Audix D6 and
Yamaha SKRM-100 SubKick

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HI-HAT: Beyer 160

TOMS: Shure SM98s

- only the top is mic'ed

OVERHEAD: Royer SF-12 stereo mic

ROOM: Royer SF-12 stereo mic
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Any unique trick of late that stands out in your mind?

On a recent record I wanted the sound of a Hammond Organ in the chorus but didn't want to use the actual organ because there wasn't a keyboard player in the band. So I cut the track, and as an overdub I had the guitarist play big open chords on an acoustic guitar similar to what a Hammond player might play in the chorus section. I doubled the acoustic track. I then took those tracks and reamped them one at a time into the studio's Leslie cabinet, just recording the top rotor each pass and there was our Hammond sound with a larger than life spread on the Leslie. Sounds great!

The Ahmad Jamal session [Picture Perfect] you did here really stands out in my mind. What was that like and how did it come about?

Ahmad recorded here previously one time before I engineered a record with him. At that time he used another engineer, and together they produced a beautiful sounding record. Some time passed and I got a phone call from Ahmad about cutting a new record, and he was wondering if I'd be into doing it. He had some reservations about the vibe of that earlier record not really sounding like his trio. He thought it was too clean, and sterile sounding. So he asked me if I would be interested in recording his new record, and if I had a grasp on how to capture his band's vibe and spontaneous energy in the studio. What could I say? I remembered what the setup was for the previous record and thought that I would go for a simpler setup, allowing for better sight lines and communication for the musicians. During that first record the engineer wanted to isolate everyone as much as possible, which meant Ahmad and his Steinway Grand in the main room, with Idris Muhammad [drums] in the larger of the studios two booths and James Cammack [upright bass] in the smaller booth. But I was going to do things differently and try to address Ahmad's concerns with the last record. That being said, I positioned the piano in the center of the room and had James with his bass stand slightly back behind Ahmad's left hand in the doorway of the booth, but not actually in the booth, obviously leaving the door of that booth wide open. I then set Idris's drums up at a 90-degree angle to the piano with his kick drum just a foot away from Ahmad's left hand. Leaving the door open in James's booth helped to block some of the drum leakage into the bass mic. And the window in the door allowed James to see Idris behind the drums at all times. According to Idris, this is key to him and James locking up with Ahmad's piano! So now both James and Idris could watch what Ahmad was doing with his left hand and see each other with no problems. In the previous recording the engineer mic'ed up everything separately - for example: Kick beater, kick front, snare top, snare bottom, four toms, over left, over right, hats and room. Bass neck, bass "F" hole, bass stereo, bass direct, piano stereo, piano stereo room, piano stereo close, piano Stereo far. I had another approach... [see sidebar] The band rehearsed for a few hours, went to dinner and came back and cut the entire record in a few hours. Done! There was just the right amount of leakage in the room to give the recording the live sound that Ahmad wanted and the fact everyone could see each other gave them the comfort they needed to perform as they do live. I gotta tell ya, it was a blast to watch as they cut each track. I was totally in awe of these guys.

I ran into you at an AES show with Mark Bingham from Piety Street Studios. Talking with the two of you, I learned that you had Mark's family staying with you after hurricane Katrina. So you opened your studio up to the Piety Street crew?

I was in New Orleans at TapeOpCon. I just love the whole music scene down there. Around here no bands are recording in the wintertime. So my logic was to go to New Orleans for the winter months. I was going to buy a condo. I'm not independently wealthy - I need to work. So while down there I called around to all the studios, but the only person that got back to me was Mark Bingham from Piety Street. It seemed like we were cut from the same cloth, how he felt about the industry and everything. I go down a few months later and find a little condo on St. Charles Ave. I'm going to buy. So I work out the details and I go back again this time for TapeOpCon. Mark Bingham is having a party the night before the start of it and I finally get to meet Mark in person, and he's great. We hit it off like I knew we would. His room was great, real funky and much like mine. So all the pieces are falling into place. I come back to NY again, get the mortgage all set, I'm ready to send the money down - then Katrina hit. A few days later I get a call from Paul Antonell from the Clubhouse [Studios]. Mark's studio is down, he has no power and he needs a place to record. Mark and Shawn



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[Hall] are on their way up to New York and they have no place to go. I told him, "You tell Mark I have a second studio available here and a house attached and the place is theirs for as long as they need it." They had already left New Orleans and only Paul had their mobile numbers. So sure enough an hour later an SUV with trailer attached pulls up and out jumps everybody, including the family dog. It was great. They lived here for about six or seven weeks in the band house while doing sessions in studio B and a bunch of other studios in the city. The whole irony is here I am spending a year researching moving down there for the winter months and working out of Piety and just the opposite happens. I assume Mark and I will be friends for life now! ☺

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