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A Session with
Santana



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Santana

The Studio Layout

The recording is over. Producer David Robinson sits down and lights up a cigar. It's 4:00 A.M. and he has been at Wally Heider Recording Studios since nine in the morning, working on Phoebe Snow's new album during the daylight hours and shifting into Santana at night. But, then again, this is not exactly out of the ordinary. "I've been on a very difficult schedule lately. Everybody has been recording. Everybody. The Pointers, Herbie Hancock, Phoebe and Wah Wah Watson."

Well, who needs sleep? After all, what's so difficult about undergoing a two-week span of rehearsing Santana in San Francisco from 11 A.M. to 5 P.M., flying to Los Angeles at 5:30 P.M. to record Phoebe Snow at 7:30 that same evening and then back to San Francisco and Santana on a 3:15 A.M. flight? A philosophical attitude helps. "It isn't easy, but the point is that when things are ready to be recorded, they should be done."

The time Santana spent in the rehearsal studio was designed to facilitate the recording process because this album is being recorded "live." The way Robinson likes best and the way he says engineer Fred Catero shows his true professionalism. "If you want to see Fred Catero at his very best watch him on a night like tonight or at the Phoebe session tomorrow—thirty mics wide open, with everybody playing all at once, and getting a good sound on every instrument. Making sure that the interior dynamics of all the instruments on all the tracks are working constantly."

Such is the case this Wednesday night as Catero sits calmly behind the 28 input, 28 out MCI board, overlooking the crowded 20'x 34' Studio "C." Robinson adds that this is his favorite room to do tracks in. "You can control the ambience of the room very well. You can listen and deaden portions of the room, the bass is nice and above all you can get a 'live' sound."

A chief reason for the "live" sound in Studio "C" is the parquet hardwood floor. Also, as David stated, the room can be tuned through the use of large plywood panels. These asymmetrical boards are hard (reflective) on one side and soft (absorbent) on the other. Carpeting, baffles and foam pads of various sizes are also used to tune the room. The room, being relatively small creates an intimate atmosphere for a "live" session like tonight's.

While Robinson conducts an organizational band meeting, Mike Lerner and second engineer Chris Minto (aka Dr. D.) help Fred explore his new 24-track MCI tape machine. Fred and David both are ecstatic over the new tape machine, and this is the first session on which it has ever been used.

Soon the musicians trickle in, along with Mike Carpenter and the amiable Joel, core of the road team. The band is composed of Pablo Tellez, bass, Gaylord Birch, drums, Tom Coster, keyboards, Leon Patillo, keyboards and lead vocals, Jose "Chepito" Areas, timbales, Raul Rekow, congas and of course, Carlos. Everybody in the band plays percussion and sings background vocals.

The studio's Steinway piano has been moved out—replaced by Tom Coster's keyboard set-up: Moog synthesizer, Hammond organ, ARP Odyssey synthesizer, Wuritzer piano, two Fender Rhodes electric pianos and a string synthesizer. There are two mics on the Leslie speakers and eight other inputs running direct.

Nearest Coster is Pablo, bass player and author of "Give Me Love," the tune the group is recording tonight. Pablo wants some "riva" on his headphones, and the multilingual Catero obliges with the necessary "reverb." The bass is being recorded by direct input into the console.

Gaylord is fortunate to be the recipient of Catero's unmatched skill at setting up and miking drums. Fred is not worried about drum noise leaking on to the other tracks. On the contrary, the key is to prevent leakage from the other instruments on to the drum tracks, as it is the quality of the rhythm tracks which determine what is or isn't a "take." These are the tracks which must be preserved. "Everyone plays with the drummer," adds Fred. "He is the heart of the song."

Not one to keep his recording techniques trade secrets, Catero gladly explains his approach and reasoning. The first point he makes is that it is not always the most expensive mic which gets the desired sound. "You use condenser mics overhead for the cymbals because the cymbals are very high frequency and the dynamic mics won't do it. One listen will let you know.

Another important thing about miking drums, or about miking anything when you are using more than one mic, is to check for phase relationship between mics. This is more important than which mics you choose because whenever you use more than one mic, unless the mics are exactly the same distance from the source, there is going to be phase cancellation of various frequencies. It's an acoustic phasing phenomenon having to do with the length of the wave. Since every frequency has a different wave length, by computing that frequency and the speed of sound, and by knowing the distance of the mics from the source you can estimate which frequency will be cancelled. You don't sit there with a slide rule, but you listen and pick the sound which is best, by reversing the phases if necessary. I had to reverse the phase of the snare and bass drum tonight, because the bass drum was picking up the low tom-tom. By reversing the phase of the bass drum I was able to get a much bigger tom-tom sound."

"The last thing you do is fool around with the controls. First check microphone placement, and make sure the musician has the correct sound in the room. If he can't get the sound, then you come into the control room and try and get it."

The timbales and congas are opposite the drums, and the microphones are suspended around them like a giant mobile.

Carlos Santana sits on a stool in the far corner of the studio. His nylon-

strung guitar is being both miked and taken direct. While Fred obviously is into Santana's sound, having engineered both the *Abraxas* album (which he is remembering tonight in the form of a miniature gold record around his neck) and the *Amigos* album, his approach to recording Santana is basically the same as it is with other artists. "The material dictates itself. Whatever feels right dictates. Plus, it should be the producer who makes the decision as to how the record will sound. The producer has the right to tell the engineer what he wants, and it is up to the engineer to give it to him."

Fred sends the musicians in to get ready, while David explains that they never expected to be recording this song. The reason for this turn of events is quite a pleasing one: "We recorded 14 minutes of music in a row Monday night, and got four tunes down on Tuesday night."

Take 1

"We're ready" comes the cry from the studio. "Rolling" is the reply. "Give Me Love" is the elusive goal.

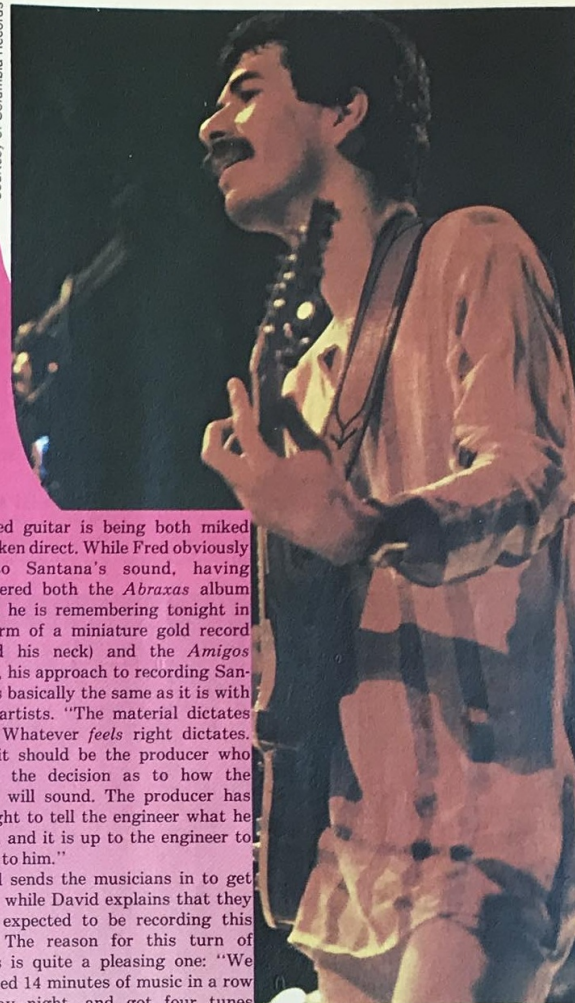
It's a smooth version of this mellow song with a Latin overtone. The band comes back into the control room to listen to the playback, singing along in high spirits. Robinson, who had been out in the studio cueing various musicians, comes back into the control room. The food has arrived from "Little Joe's," and it's time for a break.

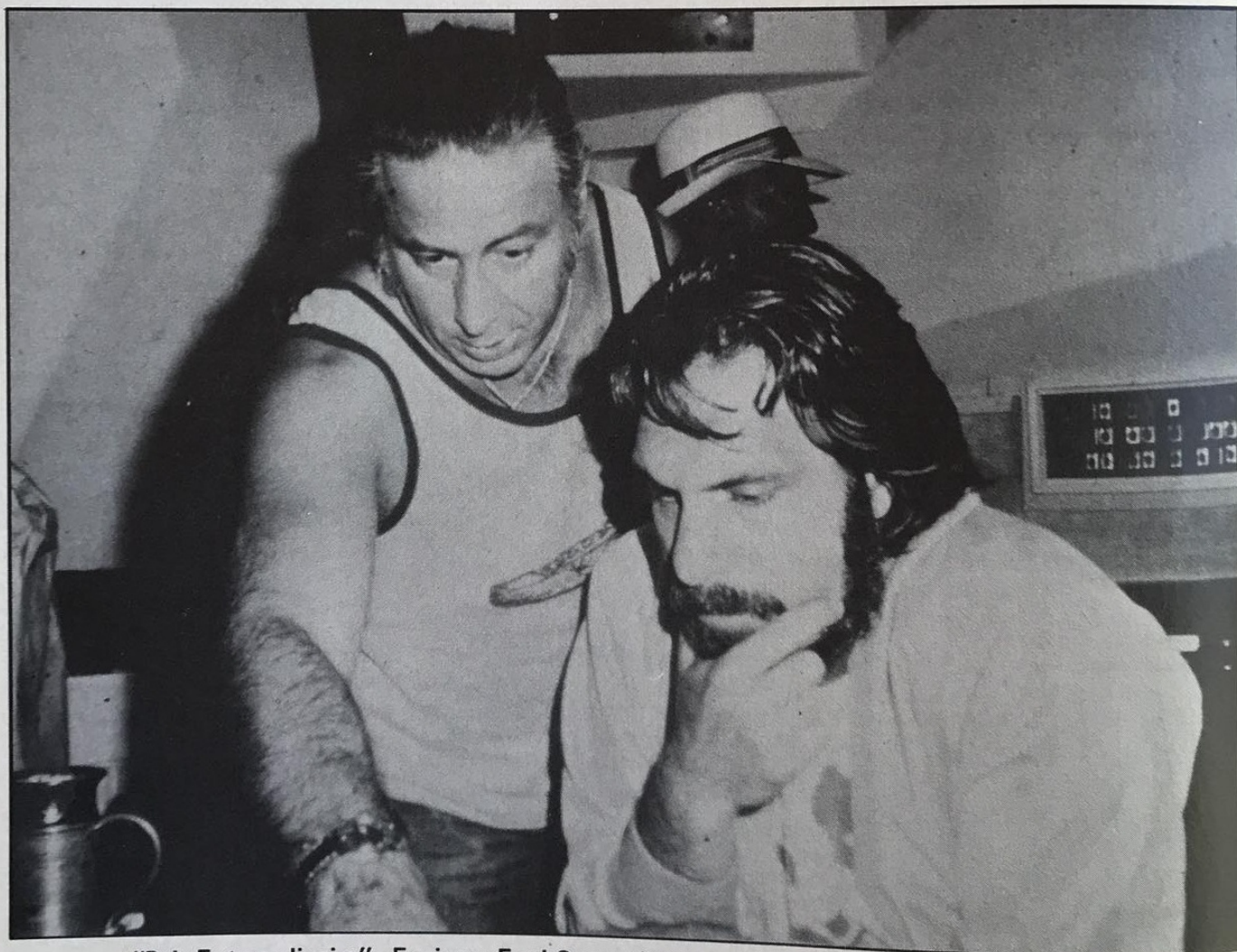
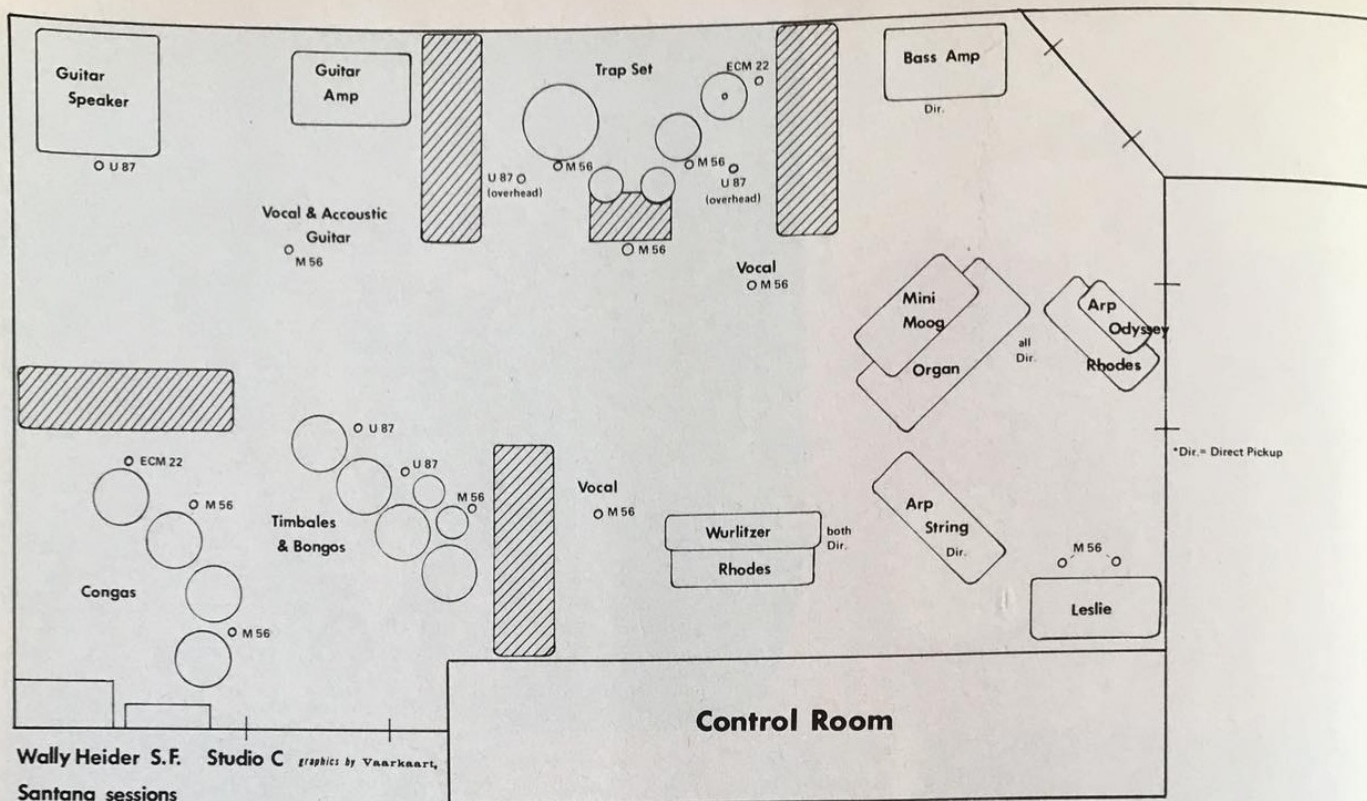
"This album is going to be a little different from *Amigos*, says Robinson,

"because we're doing everything right now. There's not going to be a lot of overdubbing. We're recording everything but the final vocals and a guitar solo here and there. What we're really doing is capturing an event in the studio."

The second take is cut short after thirty seconds, but the third take is a totally different story. Robinson is in the control room this time. Suddenly he becomes very excited. "Did you see what just happened? Something just happened out there that could never happen in an overdub situation. The musicians were communicating. The energy transfer was incredible." The

Courtesy of Columbia Records





"Pair Extraordinaire"—Engineer Fred Catero (left) and Producer David Rubinson (right)

band is jamming on the song, producing the most dynamic music of the night.

The jam trickles to an end, and Carlos leads the musicians back into the control room, apparently feeling something was not exactly right. Robinson, however, knows that something unique has just occurred. "What we're really trying to get is a heart-beat. To tell you the truth, I don't care if all I get is the basics. The bass drum, congas and bass are all I need to get. If it's going right, those instruments will be playing along with Santana really well, so if a solo happens, like tonight, everyone *feels* it and we can get the *real* solo. Then you can put the rest of the layers over it."

Take 4 is abbreviated at mid-point, and the tape keeps rolling for Take 5. Both this and the next take are uneventful, but nobody is upset. The previous two nights were so bountiful that the law of averages was bound to enter into the picture. Indeed, the band had not rehearsed this song for quite a while, and with "live" recording one must assume these risks. Robinson is still high on this method, preferring it to the now more standard overdubbing approach. "The 'live' recording method is a lot freer and more spontaneous. I work completely differently with Phoebe, LaBelle and

the Pointer Sisters. With them we literally write out the rhythm tracks."

Communication

"I perform a completely different function with Phoebe. In that situation I am the means by which the musicians understand what Phoebe is going to do. We use session men, and with them you first have to have them understand the structure of the song, which is why we write out the charts. You must then have them relate to the song, and then play what you need within a time structure which is very short. To get them to play *expressively* and *sensitively* is a whole different process than people remembering the chart in a self-contained group."

"This relates to the two ways a recording studio should function. First is the old, traditional way which is as a real-time storage device for an event. The other conceptual way a studio functions is as the event itself, which is as a *means* of expressing a series of events which don't coincide, and where the use of the tape itself becomes a performance. With 'live' recording the energy transfer, the synergy, is much greater than when you're trying to overdub. You can feel it."

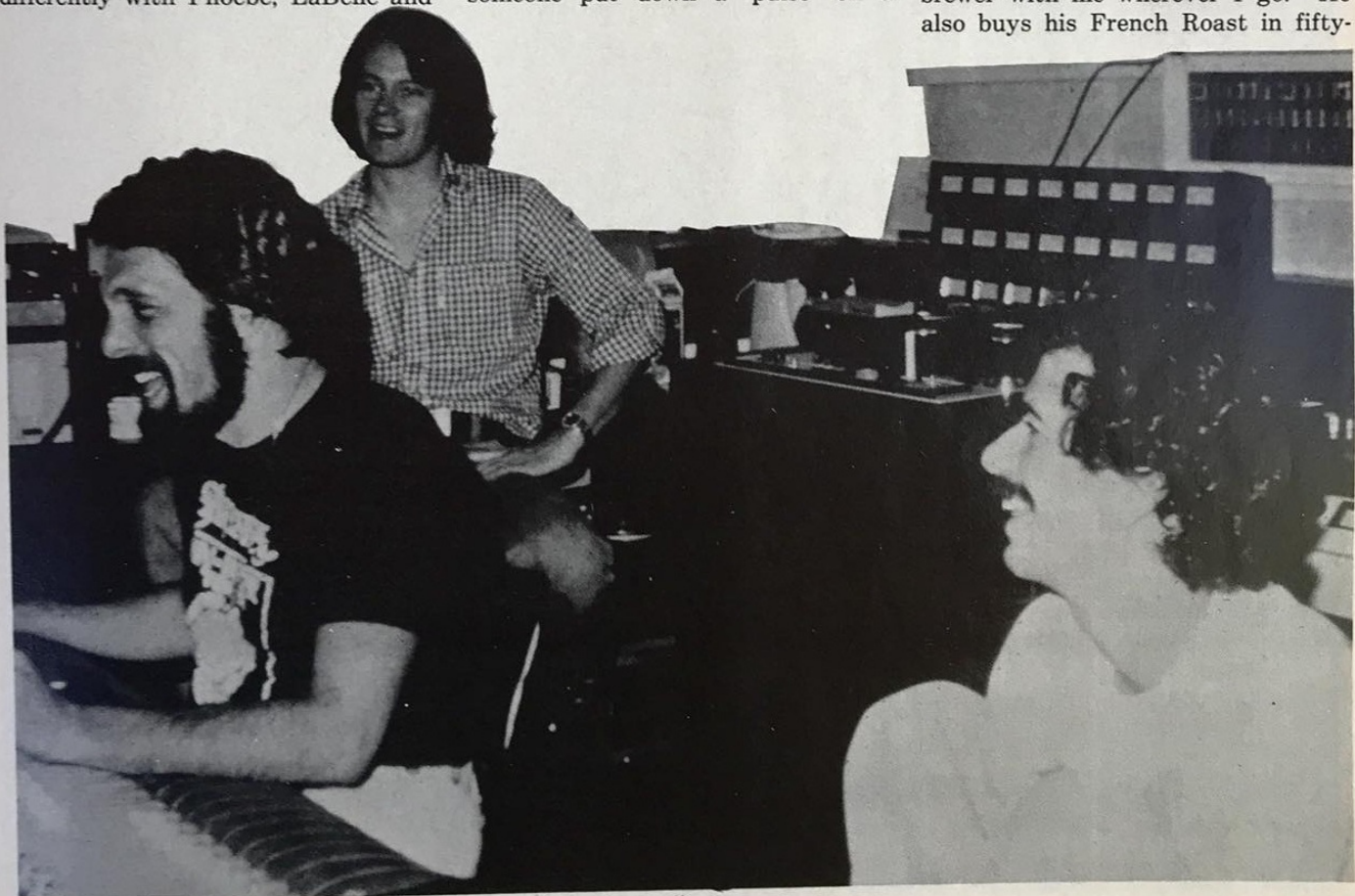
"There's a whole style of making records today which is very *cold*, like someone put down a 'pulse' on a

rhythm machine and everybody played along. Something like what happened tonight on Take 3, something magical, cannot occur with overdubbing." No, David Robinson did not produce "Disco Duck."

During the Santana sessions Robinson is rarely in the control room, but instead is out in the studio with the band. "It's not up to Carlos to have to count sixteen bars and come back in. This way I can cue him, and he can get more into the music without worrying when to come back in. I don't have to conduct a Santana or a Herbie Hancock because we've already rehearsed the tunes."

What Robinson and Catero are doing is combining two basic disciplines. "We are using the studio," says David, "to capture a real-time event, a well-rehearsed but spontaneous energy exchange, and then using the 24-track tape to best advantage after that—splicing it, cutting it together. Then if we have to put on a guitar solo we can, or if we want to put a whole different keyboard idea on, we can. Some of the keyboard work done tonight will later be split apart onto acoustic piano and Arp."

There's time for some coffee, one of Robinson's great loves. "This is my one idiosyncrasy. I bring my coffee brewer with me wherever I go." He also buys his French Roast in fifty-



pound lots.

Fred relaxes by telling the true, if somewhat sardonic story of the lady who put her damp cat in a microwave oven to dry it off, and then had a heart attack when she found it with its insides burned out.

This accomplished, Fred and the able Minto set the MCI auto-locator to the exact desired spot on the tape, and almost instantaneously the band is listening to a playback of Take 3. They head back into the studio, and Robinson, looking out over the studio, offers a few comments on the inimitable Santana. "I think Carlos is one of the three greatest guitar players I've ever heard, with one of the greatest senses of phrasing, timing and syncopation. The thing which most people do not realize about Santana is that he is a killer rhythm guitarist. Three quarters of what makes him great is his rhythm guitar. Listen to 'Oye Como Va' or 'Dance Sister Dance' (which Robinson co-wrote). It'll shock you! He's playing bass on 'Dance Sister Dance' and on four tunes on this album."

Santana picks up the bass for a little while before the next take, while Robinson sits behind the drums, play-

ing the rhythm track of "Give Me Love." Neither of the next takes, however, after Carlos and David have resumed their regular stations, is really what Robinson is looking for. The recording over, Chris runs off cassette copies of Take 3 and the previous night's takes.

Robinson rubs his eyes, and begins to talk about the role of a producer. As he speaks, tonight's session presents itself as a testimony to his words.

"The producer must be able to relate to anyone involved in the production of a record, in that person's language. You can't explain bass and pitch to a session bass player 'soulfully.' You tell him you need a sforzando on the 'C' at Bar 61. With LaBelle you talk a different language. Now you're talking 'oohs' and 'wows,' or 'Patti, take it from the out-chorus.' Finally you have to be able to say, 'Fred, it sounds too light—we have a real strange peak at 500 cycles on the snare. What'ya think?'"

"So to me there's a soulful, musical, down language, a literate language, and a technical language. People need to communicate to the other side, and you have to translate and relate."

Communication is the name of the game. It's only fitting that the next time I saw David Robinson he communicated these words to me: "You should have been here an hour ago. We got it on the first take."

