

Steve Evetts

“You don’t have to have a bad sounding hardcore record”

by Jesse Cannon

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Punk rock is often considered a genre of slackers pretending they are doing something exceptional, but actually doing something pretty insignificant. Producers often have to make excuses to justify the poor quality of their final product, such as budget constraints or limitations in resources. Steve Evetts is an exception. I remember being 17 years old and totally immersed in dissecting every recording that all my favorite punk and hardcore bands made. Most of the recordings were pretty unimpressive. One day I bought the Lifetime album *Hello Bastards* and for the first time heard totally sweet sounds mixed with not overly slick production. This record stood so far out ahead of the heap to me that I took note of the producers name: Steve Evetts. In months to come, it seemed like every time I heard a record that blew me away, Steve's name was attached to it. He turned out amazing records in very short times from bands like Snapcase, Hatebreed, Deadguy, Saves The Day and The Dillinger Escape Plan. In the coming years Steve moved up from local producer/engineer to making high profile records in studios around the world. Watching him work is totally inspiring. He always maintains a very clear vision and his attention to detail is unparalleled in punk/hardcore. Many people have a sound based on the gear they have, while Steve's sound is based more on the type of performances he gets from people. His records have a feel that maintains pop leanings while being totally aggressive and over the top. He's worked on releases by some of heavy music's finest and most innovative bands like Sepultura, Glassjaw, At The Drive In, A Static Lullaby, The Misfits and Earth Crisis. I caught up with him while he was working on three different records.

**Let's go through the recording process. What are the essential things you need in a studio when you're going to track there?**

The equipment list! As long as the equipment is halfway decent. The wonderful thing about today is that you can rent just about anything you need, budget allowed. I'm just looking for something halfway decent, even if they have a few outboard good mic pres for important stuff. The physical space of the room definitely means a lot to me.

**What are you looking for in physical space in a room?**

It doesn't have to be huge; it just has to sound good. Wood rooms, to me, sound the best. I prefer higher ceilings. I don't like tracking in dead rooms, I like live drum sounds. Just the feel and the vibe of the studio is very important. To me, it's just being comfortable, but not to the point where you're lazy. Small control rooms really are the pits. Large control rooms to me always feel cavernous, but nice-sized control rooms are the best. You feel you can breathe; you're always at ease. Too nice, too ornate - some of the really expensive A rooms - I don't like tracking at them. It's like going to one of those museum homes where you feel like you can't put your feet up. I like to feel home-y. Aside from the drummer, if you're doing all the overdubbing in there, the guitar players - and even sometimes the singers, depending on how comfortable they feel - will be right in the control room with me, 'cause I don't like to have that wall between the drummer or whoever and myself. That's why a lot of the time I'll be out there in the room with the band with headphones on too. I don't want to feel like, "I sit behind this wall of glass and you must listen to everything I have to say." You want to immerse yourself into the record

and the band and almost be like that extra member. I just wanna be in there with the people directing them, just how I'm talking to you, relating to them this way, rather than [as] a figure of authority.

**Well that's important. Bands definitely don't like when you work against them.**

It's true, they don't. Ultimately it's their record. I feel it's my job to maximize their potential and make the best record possible rather than to imprint my sound on their record.

**That Hatebreed record you did in nine days. Do you have any advice on how to get good results quick?**

It always starts with the source. Obviously, with a lot these bands, like on Victory, there wasn't a huge budget, we're struggling and they come in with crappy equipment. They'd come in with Crate amps and we will call someone and borrow a Marshall or a Mesa. The drummers come in with crappy drums? Let's use the house kit. "Let's put new heads on the drums, guys, let's tune 'em right." That is the single most important thing you can do to get a good drum sound. Get the drums in tune. Everything becomes so much easier when the drums are tuned right.

**Any equipment specifications that you need?**

Neve desks are always tops for me as far as tracking. API would be a close second. You can make anything work, but if I had my choice it would always be an old Neve. Any 80-series Neve. And at least a couple of [UA] 1176s. To me that's like the desert island compressor. The [AKG] 414 for me is like the desert island mic. Actually, you can't use the 1176 on everything 'cause you can't strap it together and use it on a mix. You could, [but] I wouldn't advise it.

**I've never liked it on drum sub mix, either.**

I have liked it on there.

**Really? I've liked when I've mixed it in on overheads, but I don't like it directly on cymbals.**

No, I do not either. LA-2As, if anything for directly on the cymbals. But there's something about an 1176. They're very hard sounding.

**It's the sound of a middle finger!**

[laughs] Yeah, pretty much! But for aggressive rock you can't beat it. It's the most "in your face" compressor, if you ask me, aside from some of the Pye compressors, which are *way* in your face, but also *way* noisy.

**When you get started with a band, what are some of the initial ground rules you have to lay down?**

Rule number one [is]: We try everything! Anything I'm gonna suggest, we just try it. I'm not saying we have to like it, I'm just saying we have to try it. Whether it's producing or life in general, people complicate things way too much. Does this work or does it not? I've been in so many situations where, "Well, why don't we try this here?" and then they argue about it and they give you a five-minute explanation why it won't work. By the time we finish with the argument we could have tried it and listened with our own ears to determine whether we like it or not and moved on to something else. I just go, "Does it feel good to me?" Yes, then let's do it. Because of ulterior motives, hidden agendas, whatever, those things tend to complicate matters so much and especially when it comes to something from a creative and an emotional. My thing is that I go by my gut, and if I feel it maybe could be better - I don't even know what it is half the time what I'm doing, I'm just like, "It doesn't feel right to me, I don't know what it is yet, but let's try some alternatives to see if that feels better."

**How do you explain your gut feeling?**

Right. I don't. I've always gone by my gut. Half the time I just stop myself in the middle of what I'm doing and say, "What am I doing?" And really, I am just trusting myself.

**You do records on a large and small budget. What are the first sacrifices you're gonna make if the budget is lower than you want?**

If the budget's a little lower you're obviously not gonna get to work in the best studio with all the best equipment. That's the main thing. You just have to figure out, "Well, we can do this here..." One of the key things is to get the drum tracking in a good room. At least you have that really good-sounding foundation. Because the main rule for me is that bad drums or bad vocals ruin records.

**Yeah, how often do you hear people say, "Wow, the guitars really suck on that record"?**

Exactly. But with the drums you really notice it. At least if you can get the drum tones that are killer for a couple of days. I always have the band record live for feel sake, but I'm really only trying to get the drums. I would never make the drummer just play to a click with nothing. That's just completely not human and stale. But if you're gonna be overdubbing stuff you can go to a cheap overdub room with a couple of good mic pres and that's definitely a way to do it on a smaller budget than mixing at home. If I'm doing it in Pro Tools, I can mix it at home and it's gonna come out great and then we're eliminating a lot of fixed costs. I've worked on multi-hundred-thousand-dollar budgets where half the time the bands don't realize it's their money and they're throwing a lot of it away, because we can do it so much cheaper.

**But you're doing it 'cause you can and they're like, "Wow, they're giving us all this money!"**

Part of the problem is that the labels like the dog and pony show. They like to see that their money is being spent wisely, so they go into X room in L.A. and everything is completely gorgeous and it's \$2,000 a day for a 10 hour lock-out and then \$250 an hour overtime. And there's *no* house equipment! No house guitar amps or anything, and you gotta rent all that stuff and it's amazing. Like one of the last records I worked on we did a four-song sampler thing, which was also kind of a test for me to see if I was gonna get the record, and we spent close to \$40,000 on a four song demo. Those tracks wound up on the record, getting re-mixed, but could we have done it for ten [thousand], or eight or five for the same quality? Of course! But we had to go to blah, blah, blah, big name studio in L.A. for \$2,000 a day. You go upstairs and there's this lounge that I would kill to have as my apartment. I mean, it's gorgeous! Huge, huge lounge with a pool table, a stocked kitchen - not a kitchenette - a full kitchen with a giant refrigerator all stocked with food. Every morning there's fresh bagels there. Soda, little jars with chocolates in them. Great! But that's what you're paying for. You're paying to be a prima donna, and most bands don't need to do that. Subsequently, the second phase when I got the record and we had to record the other eight songs for the album we tracked the drums at a great place, and we went down to a less expensive studio, which was still an amazing studio called Big Fish with an API desk and an arsenal of vintage amps, great old tube mics and they had a Telefunken 251 for the vocals. The owner, Paul, was great. It was beautiful! Wouldn't trade it for the world!

**So what are you looking for when you're doing pre-production for the band?**

I'm looking for complete song structures, whenever applicable. I was never much of a songwriter in my band. My function in my band was kind of like what I do now. I was always kind of like the producer, even though I wasn't a producer then, but I would always work on arrangements with the band. I would change small things and maybe I'd write the bridge. That would be about it. I would come up with parts, but I was never much of a songwriter.

**Improving upon ideas that are already there.**

Yeah, and basically just trimming the fat, unless you're that type of band that has that stuff already worked out. The biggest mistake that bands make is just making a song go on forever. They'll have these great hooks, these chorus hooks or whatever, and it takes you two minutes to get there. Why? Most of the time it's because the drummer has to show off. [laughter] It's the truth and you know it! The pre-production to me, more than anything, entails working with drummers and making sure that they play something that fits the song. Because a lot of the time that's the biggest problem with bands: drummers that don't think about songs. More so than any other instrument, the drummer is the guy that lives in his

own world. It's like, "Hello! What about the song? Who cares what you're doing there?" Not to say that I don't appreciate technical drummers who can play. I love The Dillinger Escape Plan, but that is part of their music and, at the same time, why Dillinger Escape Plan works is because the drummer and the guitar player write all the songs and the songs are written around his drums. It's not like he plays over those songs; they're written around what he's doing. When the drummers are involved in the songwriting, you can always tell, because the drums fit the songs. Or maybe the songs fit the drums, whatever came first, but there's a synergy there that works. The Snapcase album, *Progression Through Unlearning* - Tim wrote a good portion of that record and that's why that record has that thing to it. And the Foo Fighters records, of course, because Dave writes everything. He understands song structure and the relationship between each instrument.

**You've done two records with Sepultura and they're a band that has a history of these groundbreaking, amazing recordings, and yet they don't do the same thing from record to record. I imagine that in pre-production you guys go in with some sort of plan?**

They're a very unique situation, because there is such an openness in that band. Everybody always wants to do something different. They're always into experimenting. Brazil is so rich in culture and styles of music. Andreas listens to so many different things. They're all such diverse people as far as their musical tastes, but somehow they all bring that influence together and it just makes for this synergy. They're never afraid of doing anything. They bring a lot of their outside influences into their writing.

**That song, "Border Wars". The first time I had heard that I just got done doing a dance hall record, and I was like, "That's dance hall." It's like dance hall metal, but not cheesy.**

That song we did with Dr. Israel, "A Tribe to a Nation" - if I played you the original one without the dub parts, the main beat, Igor stole that from some techno thing. The beat itself. He does this crazy thing because he has a beat where he has a ride cymbal and then a china upside down right above it.

**Oh, so it bounces?**

Yeah, he wings the stick and he goes tic-a-tic-a-tic-a... and it's like a techno beat. Derek and I were out at this club in San Paolo one night and we heard this little keyboard [imitates] and me and Derek looked at each other like, "Yeah. Imagine if this was heavy." We were humming it all the way home so we didn't forget it 'cause we didn't have a tape recorder and then finally got home and then the next day at rehearsal, we were like, "Andreas, play this." [imitates riff] They do keep reinventing themselves and it's good that they got away from the tribal Brazilian thing. They did it a little bit on the intro to that song "Saga", to kind of tie it in, but they did enough of that on the last three records. *Roots* was the epitome of that, which was great, but do you go there again? Not really. What's the point?

**You do a lot of your own engineering while tracking. I find many times I have to go back multiple times and listen, take in all the elements - pitch, time and energy.**

As long as I get the tones right in the beginning I don't think about that kind of stuff. I just go for what feels good. I still consider myself an engineer first, but it's kind of balanced out a lot more, especially in the past few years. I was definitely more of a technical engineer a few years back, and then working with Ross [Robinson] really taught me a lot, just from the few times we worked together. The performances and the feel [of his records] are outstanding and very far above what other people are doing. Sonics - sure they are important, but I'd rather do something that affects people in a certain way. While we as engineers care about sonics, most people have no idea. They put something on and they either they start bobbing their head or they don't. They're not going, "Oh, listen to the sheen on those cymbals. That's great. I wonder what they used?"

**So do you have to do anything in particular to get prepared to do a mix? Are there things that have to be in line, or a mindset?**

I freak out. [laughter] Mixing to me is like this weird love/hate thing. I definitely freak out when I start mixing because it gets to the point where nothing sounds good and then I step back from it and realize it sounds pretty good and then I start to make changes from there. I throw a lot of the things I preach to the band about performance anxiety out the window when I start mixing. Then I get past that point and it's fine, but when I first start mixing I tend to overthink things too much. A lot of the records that people know and like me for were when I wasn't overthinking them because I had to mix the whole record in two days, so I just let it fly. Saves the Day's, *Through Being Cool* I mixed in two almost around-the-clock, 24-hour days. I slept for like five hours in 48 hours. We had to finish the session at noon the next day and at 11 I was just starting the last mix, completely tired, just burnt out, wired on coffee. I went and got my eighth cup of coffee and a breakfast burrito and mixed the last song, "Shoulder to the Wheel", which wound up being the single on the record and one of the better sounding songs on the record. Because I did it in an hour I didn't think - I just let it fly. I was just lettin' it rip and that's the thing I always try and get bands to do when they're in there playing and they're all nervous. What's the big deal? Especially with modern technology. If you screw up we can stop, go back and do it again so just let it go, let it rip, go for it. Who cares? Go on 100 percent. Don't be afraid, don't be timid.

**You've now mixed on tons of different formats, from cheap desks to "in the box" Pro Tools to Neve and SSL. What do you like these days and what's making you make your decisions about what you like?**

I like to have two sets of speakers in the control room, at least. They have to be good monitors. I have to get used to them. Both being near fields. I rarely use bigs, ever. Maybe to check bottom end or something. Unless you work in a big studio, it takes years to get used to bigs. To me, the bigs at Trax East sound great for the most part, and the bigs at Larabee in L.A. sound really good. Most of the time it's, "Let's hear what these sound like... [music plays back] Okay, not using them." And that's the last time they're used. I always bring my monitors around, so it's always between the Genelecs, the KRKs, NS10s. You know they all have their different merits. It's just like consoles. I'm not one of those guys who's, "I'm a Neve guy, or I'm an SSL guy." I guess you could say I'm a Neve guy, but at the same time I love the way the old SSLs sound. Not the new one, not the J series - they're too damn clean. The problem with the SSLs is that there's no way to gain stage on them. The mic pres overload way too easily and they don't go into good distortion the way Neves do. For mixing the line-amps on SSLs are great and you can overdrive them and the compressors. I'm talking about the VCA ones too. They definitely color the sound and they have a sound that's cool, especially for hard rock. It sounds great and that has its merits, but then again I love the depth and the openness of the old Neves. They're way more three-dimensional. It depends on what you're going for. Even though you may mix through an old Neve and throw an SSL comp into the chain and you're still kind of getting the best of both worlds. The three-dimensionality of an old Neve like an 8078 or an 8038 - mixing on it with flying faders is great.

**So you made the jump from a studio where you were pretty much the house engineer and now you jump from studio to studio. Were there any complications when you first got out of that room after so many years?**

No. Put on some CDs, listen to the room. Just listen. It's really simple. It's also not about hearing. It's about listening. A good engineer may be blessed with above-average hearing, but that doesn't mean anything. It's listening. You don't have to have the best hearing in the room to be a great engineer, you just have to listen.

**When you're mixing, are you trying to get as close to the final product as possible or are you leaving some work for the mastering engineer to do?**

I go back and forth with it. I definitely leave room for mastering. I am not one of those guys who sticks an EQ at the end of the chain. Generally, I'm using a touch of two-bus compression in the mix but I

never slam it. I never make it sound like it's on the radio coming through the two bus. I am compressing it a decent amount. It's kind of like that glue and you're mixing a little bit to the compression, especially with vocals and stuff like that and that's fine. But it's like Rule number one: If it doesn't sound good in there without sticking an EQ on the end of it then I'm doing something wrong in the tracks.

**You make a lot of hardcore and metal records and at the same time you're a huge fan of pop stuff and you do that as well. All over your home there is Beatles paraphernalia. What has pop done for your heavy production, and visa versa?**

Well, it's funny you ask that 'cause I always think people like the work that I do, as far as heavy records, because I really take a pop approach and apply it to heavy records. Where it's very vocal-oriented I am a firm believer in vocal performance. And even the way things sound in terms of quality more than anything. I used to hear all these hardcore records and I loved the music and I loved the energy but they sounded like crap. I think that's why a lot of people were drawn to me when I started, 'cause it was like, "Hey, guys, you don't have to have a bad sounding hardcore record."

**Recently we discussed how a really great producer said he would retire after working with his favorite band. What would make you retire?**

Doing a Jellyfish record! If Jellyfish got back together and I got to work on the record for a year or whatever and made this ridiculous thing, then I'd be happy.

**So for you it is about making the perfect record.**

It's never gonna be perfect. I'd probably retire, then six months later be itching to get back in. I love doing this.

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