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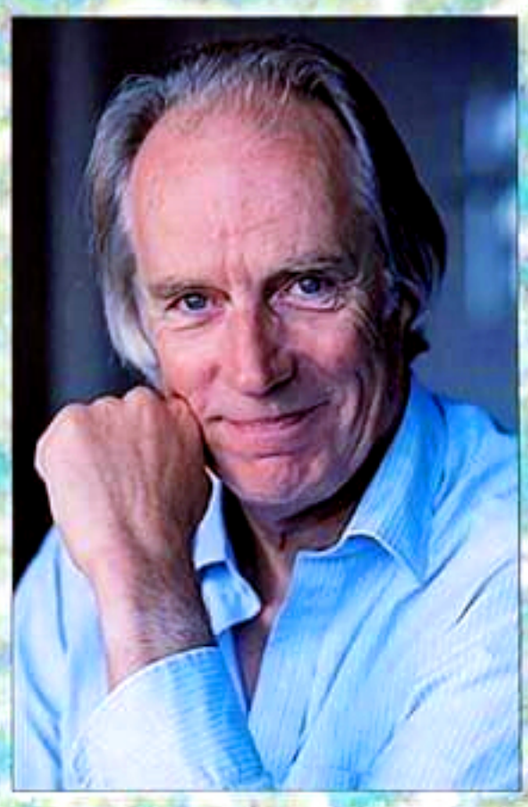
CONVERSATIONS WITH TODAY'S TOP RECORD MAKERS



FROM THE EDITORS OF MIX,
THE WORLD'S LEADING RECORDING MAGAZINE

FOREWORD BY BRUCE SWEDIEN

EDDY OFFORD
Yes Man

"You must stop copying other bands."

BY MR. BONZAI

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IF YOU PULL out a few of your vintage Yes albums, you'll notice the credits read, "Produced by Yes and Eddy Offord." Starting out as a musician in the late '60s, Offord quickly switched to engineering and then assumed the new and coveted role of engineer/producer.

Offord was at the center of the seminal English sound of the early '70s, producing and engineering seven monsters for Yes and a couple for Emerson, Lake and Palmer. He engineered Pink Floyd for Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* and worked on *The Last Waltz* and Showtime's *Synchronicity World Tour* for The Police. Other notable credits include several tracks on John Lennon's *Imagine*, riding herd on the R.C.O. Allstars (featuring Dr. John, Booker T., Levon Helm, Steve Cropper and Donald "Duck" Dunn), as well as respectable projects with Todd Rundgren, Thin Lizzy and the Dregs.

Ah, Yes. The band began its classic rock odyssey in 1968, progressing through various line-ups, including distinctive vocalist Jon Anderson, keyboardists Rick Wakeman and Tony Kaye, drummers Bill Bruford and Alan White, guitarist Steve Howe and bassist Chris Squire.

When I think of Yes, I hear the angelic choruses balanced with the dark rumblings of British power rock. The music cranks up a mighty machine and then drops down to Earth with delicate acoustic passages and baroque synth excursions. You're allowed to catch your breath, leaving space in the drama. The rhythm and dynamics slap you around, creating an operatic, quick-cut cinematic effect. Let's meet the man behind the experience: Eddy Offord.

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BONZAI: You're most associated with Yes...

OFFORD: Along with Emerson, Lake and Palmer, I would say so.

BONZAI: Do you like that identification?

OFFORD: Yes, because that kind of music was very acclaimed for its sound: the clarity. That music really lends itself to exploration for an engineer.

BONZAI: When you refer to that clarity of sound, what years are you thinking of?

OFFORD: The early '70s, 24-track and sometimes even 16-track recording. I've seen the whole recording scene change in the time I've been involved.

BONZAI: Let's go back to your formative years. You were a musician first, a guitar player.

OFFORD: I used to play in a band, starting out in the English equivalent of

high school. I always loved music. And just by coincidence I was looking for a holiday job and saw an ad for a sound engineer trainee. I thought I'd give it a shot, and when I got in the studio and saw the musicians playing, and those big speakers, I was sold.

At night I'd finish a session and have my band waiting around the corner. We'd pretend like we were closing up the studio, and then I'd play guitar, record and mix in the off time.

BONZAI: I've been listening again to some of those early recordings, and what strikes me is the wham-bam, hard left, hard right, sweep-across-the-speakers stereo. I miss some of those wild things we used to hear, like footsteps going from one side of the room to the other, lead vocals hard right and chorus hard left: a cinematic feeling to the sound.

OFFORD: Obviously, since I first started there have been many developments in the way in which things are recorded. Unfortunately, I think it has become a bit too homogenized. Every sound is so huge that you can hardly tell one band from another. Guitars tend to be multilayered, and the drums might be live, but they have samples added. Everything sounds bigger than life. This is cool, but I think there is a tendency to lose the identity of the band behind that wash of sound, if you know what I mean.

BONZAI: Exactly. In listening to your work, there is an impression of an immense sound, but when you start analyzing it, there are relatively few elements involved.

OFFORD: Yes, you can actually tell what each member of the band is playing.

BONZAI: In the Yes recordings, there is dramatic buildup and then suddenly the bottom will drop out and you showcase one lone acoustic instrument. A lot of dynamics and space. Were you responsible for that?

OFFORD: Yes.

BONZAI: I mentioned to a seasoned engineer, Bill Dooley, that I was going to be meeting you, and he said, "He's my idol! He's the reason I got into this business."

OFFORD: Oh dear.

BONZAI: He felt that you were one of the first engineers to get credit where credit was due. Is that true? Are you one of the guys who elevated the position of the engineer?

OFFORD: I would say so, yes. Way back when I started, the engineer was more of a technician and didn't really contribute that much artistically. He was just told to do things. I think Glyn Johns and myself were among the first crop of engineers who turned into producers.

BONZAI: Did you push for it, or was it the chemistry of the situations?

EDDY OFFORD (SECOND FROM RIGHT) WITH YES MEMBERS (LEFT TO RIGHT) TONY KAYE, TREVOR RABIN AND CHRIS SQUIRE

OFFORD: It was the chemistry. I had engineered one album with Yes, called *Time and a Word*, which didn't do very well at all. Then Phil Carson from Atlantic said that the band didn't really need a producer. I was asked to co-produce with them. The very first album that we did together was a big hit, *The Yes Album*.

BONZAI: How did that relationship fit with the band members?

OFFORD: Basically, there were a lot of different factions in Yes, and they had contrary tastes and feelings about the music. I would try to channel all this high energy of wanting to do everything and act as a mediator, a referee, trying to figure out what ideas were good and which were bad.

BONZAI: Were there ever any arguments?

OFFORD: Yes. [Laughs] And I was the one who was called on to make the peace.

BONZAI: Let's talk about ego—for the artist, the engineer, the producer.

OFFORD: Purely as an engineer, you must have very little ego, because you are dealing with big enough egos as it is and another one just doesn't help. As an engineer/producer, you have to be a little more forceful and stand up for what you think. But I've always been flexible. I've gone by the philosophy that if someone has an idea, it takes just as long to argue about it as it takes to try it. If you try the idea, the speakers don't lie. Either it works or it doesn't.

In the band, 90 percent of the ideas were terrible, but there were that 10 percent that were really great. If you rejected every idea from a particular member, you could lose out on something that might really work. I kept an open mind about other people's suggestions.

BONZAI: So there was a certain amount of experimentation going on?

OFFORD: Yes, we did all sorts of wild things.

BONZAI: Did you keep the outtakes?

OFFORD: Not really. With Yes it was a very different process. Some ot the songs were 20 minutes long. They never played the song from top to bottom. We'd do the first musical section, which might be 30 seconds long, and work on it until they were happy with it. We'd do it section by section, so there were no outtakes. The 24-track was a series of splices.

BONZAI: Didn't that cause trouble in re-creating it on stage?

OFFORD: No, not at all. Once the album was finished, the band would have to learn how to play it. [Laughs] At some point after the *Fragile* album, they talked me into coming on the road with them and doing live sound and making them sound like they did on record—even better, hopefully. I had two tape machines so that I could just cue in—although it

wasn't a Milli Vanilli-type thing—certain overdubs that they couldn't accomplish all at the same time. Maybe a church organ here or a vocal part there to add a touch of the record.

BONZAI: This was in the period of the *Yessongs* live triple album?

OFFORD: Yes, and I was on the road with them for four or five years. It changed my life totally. I was just this young kid who had grown up in a recording studio. All I'd seen in my life were those four walls, and suddenly I was touring America, Japan, Europe, Australia. Doing a lot of partying, meeting girls. One thing it did teach me was that when you go out on the road with a band, when you do the same show every night, most times it's good, a few times it's terrible and a few times it's really magical. You can't forecast it. On those magical evenings, you come off feeling so uplifted.

BONZAI: Does "Roundabout" have a backward tape at the beginning?

OFFORD: Yes, a backward piano. It took quite a long time to assemble it, because it meant picking the right notes and editing it all together.

BONZAI: When you take it apart, it's a pretty strange combination: an acoustic guitar with a backward tape, a technical maneuver. One of the most distinctive instrumental hooks in popular music.

OFFORD: Well, in some ways, people were a little more daring, more creative back then. I love the bigness of the sounds today, but like anything else, it gets overdone. After the flange was invented, you heard flanging on every record. I guess the first ones were Small Faces on "Itchycoo Park." They did a very tasteful thing, but then, of course, it was all overdone and everyone phased everything up the wazoo. Every new recording technique that comes out usually starts very tastefully and then gets overdone. I would like to see the new technology right alongside some of the earlier technologies, so that you get the feeling of hearing a band. I'd like places in the song without huge drum sounds—clean and clear, so you can hear what the drummer's inflections are. And maybe in other parts of the song you can go for the wall of sound. But to have that wall there all the time gets extremely boring.

BONZAI: In that era of Yes; Emerson, Lake and Palmer; Pink Floyd; Moody Blues; and Genesis, there was a very powerful thing happening in England. I imagine that there was a healthy competitiveness, of trying to top one another, which resulted in all these seminal records. What's your take on that time?

OFFORD: I think we took more chances back then. We really got 110 percent out of the equipment, which was pretty meager. We were forced to be innovative. Yes, there was competition. Especially for me, working with Emerson, Lake and Palmer and Yes at the same time. They were jealous of one another when I was working with one or the other. They all had their own individual sounds, but they were competing to a certain extent.

In general, my success comes down to my ability to get along with people and make them feel good and create the right atmosphere, more than it is my engineering expertise. That's the most important quality that someone in my position can have.

BONZAI: Right now you're doing a boxed set, a Yes collection?

OFFORD: You know, it's a funny situation. I worked with a band a few years back called Platinum Blonde and they went five times platinum. Some albums go straight up the charts and then straight down. You never hear from them again.

With Yes, I keep hearing this bloody music on the radio. It does sound a

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bit dated to me nowadays. On this boxed set, I'm actually going in and remixing a few tracks, like "Close to the Edge." I don't want to lose the integrity of what was happening back then, but I know that with the modern devices around today, I can make it sound even better.

BONZAI: So you're not going to offend the religious fans?

OFFORD: I'm going to be extremely careful not to! [Laughs] No, I'm not going to put drum machines all over it. I just want to do it tastefully, but better.

BONZAI: That was an interesting period. Do you think audiences today are as profoundly moved? Back then the music was a lifestyle. You locked onto bands then.

OFFORD: I think the younger generation have their heroes as much as we had back then. And I also think that things are starting to change a bit in the music business. Bands like R.E.M. don't go for this heavy production stuff. They just want to do their thing. I think there is a cycle, and as each generation comes up they go through what we did. I have a 20-year-old stepdaughter, and she cries when she sees some bands. She went to see a U2 concert, and she was crying all the way through it. It was so emotional. So, I guess it's the same for them, too.

BONZAI: Let's touch on some of the other people you've worked with. Tell me about the *Synchronicity* world tour.

OFFORD: We did live recording. I went out on the road with The Police and studied all the musical cues for four or five dates, made notes, and when I was together on it we brought in a huge truck and recorded for two or three weeks. Then we went into the studio and fixed a few bum notes here and there, and Sting resang some vocal parts. We had women singers on that tour, and we double-tracked them back in the studio. I think it came off very well.

BONZAI: John Lennon?

OFFORD: I recorded "Jealous Guy" and "I Don't Want to Be a Soldier Mama" for the *Imagine* album. What happened is that I started the album out and it was going really well. It was a very magical experience for me, but I was so into the progressive rock thing at the time that I told John and Yoko that I couldn't continue on with the album because I had prior commitments. I started the album and then had to withdraw from the project.

BONZAI: What was it like?

OFFORD: It was really great. He had a sixth sense and an awareness about him that you could feel. Although he hadn't gone to great schools or studied and wasn't extremely sophisticated in terms of some things, he had this soul that just shone through everything. Yoko was the intelligent one in the family: a smart lady, and a nice lady. I liked her, although I hated it when she sang.

BONZAI: You've worked with a few other people whom I greatly admire. What about Dr. John?

OFFORD: Oh, yeah, it was great working with him. It was up in Woodstock, N.Y. I had my own studio there for about 15 years, a unique place in the sense that I set up in the same room with the musicians. And Levon Helm had this huge barn and house, which we used. Levon played drums. Steve Cropper on guitar, "Duck" Dunn on bass, the *Saturday Night Live* horn section. It was a great assembling of musicians and a lot of fun. The hardest part was getting them all to be in the same room at the same time to play. Before we started recording, Dr. John actually did an hour's

"There were a lot of different factions in Yes, and they had contrary tastes and feelings about the music. I would try and channel all this high energy and act as a mediator, a referee, trying to figure out what ideas were good and which were bad."

ritual where he went around the outside with incense and blessed the studio.

BONZAI: I bet it helped.

OFFORD: [Laughs] I think it did, yeah.

BONZAI: No doubt you're fairly wrapped up in today's technology. Have you got any new tricks up your sleeve?

OFFORD: There is a whole array of toys out there. So many signal processors, which I think people tend to overuse. I would like to mention the speakers that I'm using, though—Radian.

BONZAI: These are close-field monitors?

OFFORD: Yes, but while using them I've heard comments like "Let's hear what it sounds like on the little speakers." And I say, "Well, those are the little speakers." I think they give you a tendency to put a little bit more middle and high-end than you would with the Yamahas, which are sort of the industry standard.

I'm also using a processing thing called Spherical Sound. There are other systems that are similar, like QSound, which Madonna used. Roland is supposed to be bringing one out. This one is quite sophisticated. It's a nice addition as a processing thing, to space a sound out.

BONZAI: Of all the people you've worked with, who is the most outstanding, the most amazing artist, the genius?

OFFORD: There have been a few, but David Sancious is one for sure. He's not very well known, but he's an incredible keyboard player: one of the best ever. He toured with Sting, and he's played with Peter Gabriel. I did two solo albums with him. They weren't phenomenal commercial successes, but a lot of musicians enjoyed the albums.

BONZAI: Any advice for those aspiring to your position? Is there any shortcut?

OFFORD: You must stop copying other bands. I have this theory: England is about the size of one of your states here in America, but so much innovative music has come out of England. The reason is partly the lousy weather, that the pubs close at 11, and that the TV and radio are totally screwed up. You can't just switch on the radio and get whatever you like. They play a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and it drives you around the bend. So, bands go into their garages and come up with things that are new.

American bands are so exposed to radio and MTV that they try too much to copy. Obviously, you have to draw from your influences, but there is a fine line between that and sheer copying. You have to believe in what you are doing, and you have to have your own sound and approach to music. Draw influences, but don't emulate.

I also think that the music business has changed a lot. Earlier on, people were more daring and adventurous. Today, if Yes was a new band and they came along to the record company with 15- and 20-minute songs, they'd say, "Get outta here!" The record companies are responsible for saying to an artist, "Listen to Madonna, Michael Jackson—that's what you should be doing." They are also culpable.

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