

Joe McGrath

AFI, Butch Vig, B.B. King

By Rob Putnam

Producer, engineer and mixer Joe McGrath studied audio engineering at The Institute of Audio Research in New York City. He relocated to Southern California about 25 years ago and now works primarily from Total Access Recording in Redondo Beach. He's had a hand in many Grammy-winning and/or multi-platinum records including Green Day's *21st Century Breakdown* (he worked with production powerhouse Butch Vig on that record as well as several others), B.B. King's *Blues On The Bayou* and the Taj Mahal live album *Shoutin' In Key*.

His proudest achievement as a producer was the 2009 AFI album *Crash Love*, as well as their two previous albums on which he engineered. Interestingly, McGrath was brought in as a replacement on the record when the band split with the producer with which they'd been working. "Those are albums that I'll stand by," he says. "The band was hitting on all cylinders at that point. But I also loved the Taj Mahal record. B.B. King was fun too."

When artists are having trouble with a take, McGrath takes a breather, sits with the artist in the studio or plays a piano to lighten the mood. But in one case he resorted to physical force: with AFI lead singer Davey Havok. He's vindicated by virtue of the arm-punch enabling Havok to nail the take. "I didn't mean to," McGrath explains. "It just came to me at the last second. ... I just decided I was going to punch him. Not hard. I shocked him. Sure enough, we got the take. But I try not to produce by fear."

His favorite piece of gear is his Chandler Zener Limiter. He uses it on all of the projects that he engineers. "Everything you put through it sounds better," he asserts. "I use it primarily for a drum submix. It adds a punch and fatness that nothing else seems to."

McGrath's been in the business long enough to appreciate the importance of providing a mastering-friendly mix. "Since I come from the days of tape, we had to watch our levels," he explains. "It helps to know who you're mastering with. I work a lot with Gavin Lurssen [featured in *Music Connection's* 2008 Mastering Roundtable]. When an A&R person wants to hear it, I'll juice up the loudness a little bit. But what I send to the mastering engineer is much more like what would be level to tape."

The biggest challenge he's ever faced was the first time he walked into a room full of great musicians and was expected to deliver the engineering goods. "It was intimidating," he recalls. "When I worked with B.B. King in London, the band was Andy Newmark, Paul Carrack, David Gilmour and Van Morrison. There was a lot of pressure to get things right quickly."



The three most important things he's learned as a producer-engineer are:

- With respect to producing, it's more about performances. You're not playing your part. You're performing it.
- With younger or more inexperienced bands, you need to be firm when explaining how to make an instrument sound good.
- Always make time for meals. When the food comes, drop tools. I learned that when working with B.B. King at Townhouse Studios in London. When the food came, I got on the talkback. Before I could get my finger off of it, everyone was out of the room. Well-fed musicians are happy musicians.

McGrath is currently working with several unsigned outfits including New Jersey band Old Wives and L.A.'s Gorgeous Got A Gun. Texas-based pianist and singer Jessie Frye represents a softer direction for him. Also notable: he's producing Santa Cruz punk band Stellar Corpses, highlighted in the September issue of *MC*. In the future he'll engineer for producer Tony Braunagel on a sequel to *Shoutin' In Key* utilizing unused tracks from the original live set. He welcomes contact from unsigned artists.