

EXCLUSIVE: YAMAHA MINIDISC STUDIO

EQ

THE PROJECT
RECORDING &
SOUND
MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 1996

IN REVIEW
E-MU
TC TOOLS
DSP-FX
ALLEN &
HEATH
HUGHES &
KETTNER
GAS
COOKER

NASHVILLE'S NEW SKYLINE

STARRING:
TONY BROWN
AL KOOPER
RAY KENNEDY
MIKE CLUTE
BILLY RAY CYRUS
DINO ELEFANTE

**AES
NEW PRODUCT
PREVIEW**

**EVERYTHING
YOU NEED TO
KNOW ABOUT
SURROUND**

**SEX PISTOLS IN
THE RAW**

Photo: Dennis, MCK, Nashville





Nashville State of Mind

WHAT WAS A nice guy like Tony Brown, president of MCA Records Nashville, doing in Nice, France last week? Could he be following the lead for an undiscovered talent hiding out in the hills of the Alpes-Maritimes? *Not*. The award-winning producer of quality songs and tasty tracks was taking a well-deserved break.

The helm of the MCA flagship is charting right on course with Brown steering the creative wheel. MCA generates the largest piece of the two-billion-dollar (gross sales) country music pie, and Brown served up half a billion of those sales.

This year alone, Brown is delivering first-class product from Vince Gill, George Strait, Wynona, Bobbie Cryner, Todd Snider, David Lee Murphy, and Tracy Byrd, as well as tracks for a Mark Chestnutt "greatest hits" release. He has

*The Demo Queen
takes on the King of the
Nashville Music Scene straight
from Music Row*

also produced hit albums for Reba McEntire, Lyle Lovett, Trisha Yearwood, Marty Stuart, Rodney Crowell, Patty Loveless, and Steve Earle.

With 62 number one singles and 50 million units circulating around the globe with his name as producer, Brown knows his way around a session and a studio. James Burton, of Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, & Rickie Nelson fame — not to mention the coolest paisley guitar around — worked with Brown on early Mark Collie sessions. "Tony had an easy way of explaining his ideas to mu-

sicians and a sharp ear," Burton says. "He took care of biz."

"I like being around talented people," Brown, dripping with executive vibe, confessed to the Demo Queen during a recent interview in his plush corner office overlooking Music Row in Nashville.

"Working with Emmy Lou Harris,

Cash, and Crowell represented the 'hip' factor, and when I got a chance to work with Reba, I thought everyone's going to think I've sold out." Brown explained, "But guess what: Reba is cool, too. If somebody is esoteric and I think they are really good, I will stand up and fight for them, and if somebody is mainstream and they reach me, I'll do the same. It was eye opening to me, the art of mainstream and the art of left of center, and the sooner that's understood the more fun you have."

Such focus and love of music led



GETTING DOWN WITH BROWN: Tony Brown stands in the control room of Reba McEntire's Starstuck Studios.

Brown to what he calls "my greatest moment" when he played keyboards with the Cherry Bombs, a band spearheaded by Rosanne Cash and Rodney Crowell. It was this gig that introduced Brown to a then unknown guitarist who sang backgrounds by the name of Vince Gill. Following the Bomb stint, Brown took a job in A&R for RCA and signed Gill, but left three months later for greener pastures at MCA. He still believed in the laid-back tenor, and hooked Gill for MCA after he was dropped, sailing on to produce seven albums with Gill, two of those triple platinum. Defending his

signing of Gill and the deal with it to an L.A. co-worker that asked, "Who do you think you are signing...Elvis?" Brown responded, "Maybe!"

Vince Gill has gone on to win more CMA awards than any other entertainer, including vocalist of the year for the past five years. Reminiscing about signing Gill, Brown says, "Every A&R person's dream is to sign one of your friends."

Sporting a green malachite ring Elvis gave him from his early days of playing piano in Elvis's gospel group, The Voice, Brown spoke in a slightly

Southern, yet sonorous baritone. "What I have going for me is my gut, and I love to work with engineers who are on the leading edge like a Roger Nichols or a George Massenburg. Any technical advantage I have comes from the engineer I work with."

Gene Eichelberger, early audio pioneer and famous for wearing T-shirts that said, "When You're Good, You Don't Have To Be Friendly," was one of the first engineers Tony worked with when he hit town. They recorded Shirley Caesar, a Grammy-nominated gospel project, at Quadraphonics Studio on the

Quad 8 console with 2-band EQ or, as Eichelberger put it, "hi and low."

These days Brown has a bigger budget and says, "If I have my way, I cut on a Neve console and mix on SSL. Engineers love SSL consoles because it's a user friendly format and easy to remix on. I initially worked on SSL because of [Jimmy] Bowen. To work with Bowen was a career making move for me."

Jimmy Bowen, who was a successful leader in the push to put country music on the profit ledger sheets, now lives in Hawaii, but maintains an office in Nashville. The unorthodox Bowen took a technologically stunted Nashville by storm and is credited with bringing state-of-the-art recording to Music City. Brown labels Bowen "The Great Professor." Bowen started in the music business as a singer on Roulette Records in the '50s, and went on to work with Sinatra and Dean Martin before the Nashville years. "He taught me how to do a lot of things at once," Brown continues, "and at the end of the day, nine times out of ten, the artist is right." [Jimmy Bowen was profiled in our April '92 cover story.]

Described in his own words as a benevolent dictator, Jimmy Bowen is finishing up his biography, tentatively titled, *Roughmix*, (Simon & Schuster). When asked about Brown, who he recruited to



"At the end of the day, nine times out of ten, the artist is right."

the A&R staff at MCA in the mid '80s with a promise to let him produce, Bowen said, "The key to Tony is he knows a quality product. I believed in him and his ability to help the artist do the music."

during the overdubs I want to be there for every note that's struck and I want to do every vocal comp myself.

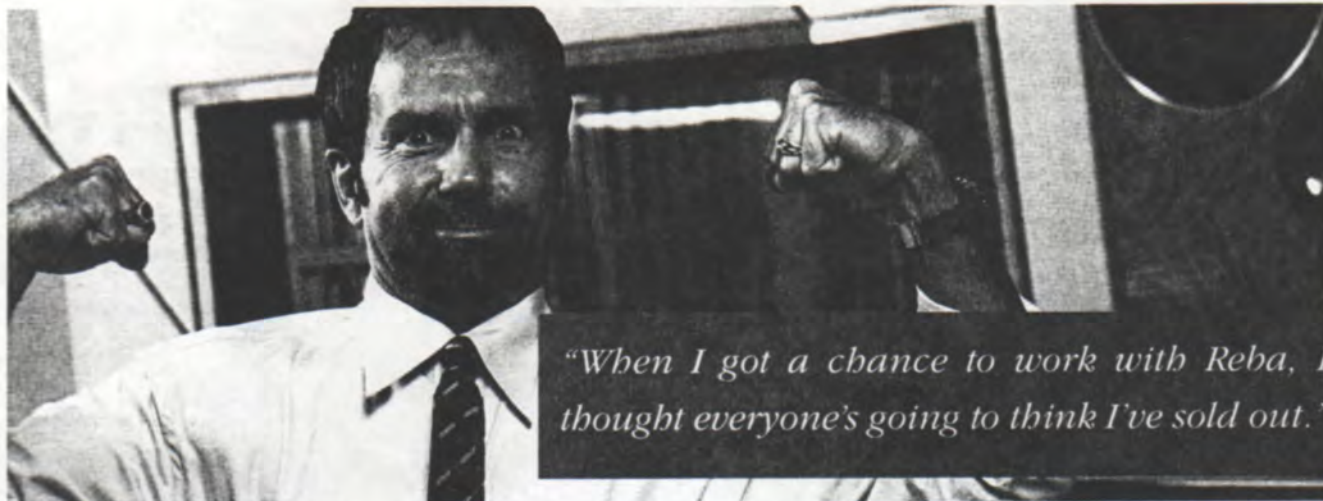
"What intrigues people is how fast country music can be recorded, but when I listen to interviews with the Stones and Eric Clapton they talk about the great recordings they've done in two

days. George Strait and Reba McEntire record tracks in four days, start at noon and end at seven." Brown continues, "And after each song I send the musicians out and do four vocal tracks. I once asked George, who likes to get back to his home in San Antonio, what do I do if I don't get your vocal in those four days? George said, 'Have I ever let you down?' After five albums, I had to say no."

"Tony doesn't twiddle with the knobs," said Chuck Ainlay, an engineer who works closely with Brown. When



"I want to be there for every note that's struck and I want to do every vocal comp myself."



"When I got a chance to work with Reba, I thought everyone's going to think I've sold out."

asked about recording specifics, Ainlay went on to say the team usually mixes one tune a day through the HDCD Box (20-bit) to a Sony PCM 9000 and does not EQ. Recording great vocals is another thing they do well, and, according to Ainlay, it's easy to do with a "good mic and a good environment."

Brown, being a self-proclaimed "dig" (digital) man, uses his gut feeling to pick microphones, sometimes going against the status quo. For picking gear, Brown offers, "If someone says you can't use this mic with this voice, then I say, why not? Let me hear it." On a recent Tracy Byrd project, the Audio-Technica (4050) caught Brown's ear. For Gill he prefers the AKG C12, and on Wynona the Neumann U47.

As far as a good environment goes, there is no shortage of great studios in Nashville. The newest entry (and location of our photo shoot) is Starstruck, affectionately known as Reba's World by the locals, since McEntire et al funded the complex. Designed by Grant and Associates, the same company that brought us Peter Gabriel's Real World Studio and all five rooms at the Hit Factory, Starstruck stands out on Music Row with crisply modern architecture, unique privacy windows that can switch from translucent to opaque, and no corners cut in the gear department.

Both studios in the complex are 100-percent linked together with MIDI, SMPTE, digital, analog, and video, and fully stacked with outboard gear, much to the dismay of the rental companies. If that doesn't phase you, each room contains the SSL 9000 J series console sharing the 48-channel DiscTracker. Being a Demo Queen, the elevated platform in "The Gallery" tracking room for those performers who want to "feel high" won my vote in the "something new" category.

Speaking of demos, Brown was not impressed when asked if mastered

demos caught his attention when looking for material. Songwriters, grasping for anything that might get their material a listen by the right ears, spend money mastering demos, hoping to attract attention to their better sounding tapes.

For Brown, "What makes me like something is the song—the demo could be done on a boom box. Sometimes I copy licks from the demo, but if I like the song, I can hear the band playing it in my head."

Sounds like music to the Demo Queen, and Brown angled in one last important point. "Working with musicians is not unlike talking to a woman. You have to be nice." Nice.

Hey ho...

EC