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Recording-Engineering-Production (08/1992), Interview with Lindsey Buckingham

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Dan Levitin (Stanford University), Interview with Lindsey Buckingham

"Dan Levitin, the Music 192D instructor, holds a doctorate in cognitive science and has worked as a producer and engineer for more than 75 musical recordings. He has also worked as a musician, a rock journalist, a music production editor and a record producer. He has also been awarded four gold records."

214. Lindsey Buckingham. Recording - Engineering - Production, 22(8), August, 1992, 16-21.

He has kindly given us permission to post this interview in the Blue Letter archive (Thank you so much for letting us post this!!) I also want to thank Marty and Les for helping to retrieve and format the file he sent me (Thanks guys!).

On to the interview:

LINDSEY BUCKINGHAM

by Dan Levitin

As the arranger/producer behind Fleetwood Mac from 1975 - 1988, Lindsey Buckingham is largely responsible for that group's superstardom and megasuccess on the five studio albums, Fleetwood Mac, Rumours, Tusk, Mirage and Tango In The Night. As a songwriter, Buckingham's own compositions are some of the high-points in the group's long history. From 1975's "Blue Letter" and "I'm So Afraid" through 1988's "Caroline", he consistently combines pop elements into songs with depth.

Out of the Cradle is a true solo album, and finds Lindsey playing all the instruments, save for occasional assistance on bass and percussion from Larry Klein, Buell Neidlinger and Alex Acuña, and Mitchell Froom playing organ on one track.

Buckingham's two greatest strengths, his abilities as a songwriter and as an arranger, are on exhibition here. As a songwriter, he has the ability to write songs that sound like you've heard them before but that hold your interest over multiple listenings. As an arranger, he brings in lots of musical ideas to his songs. Countermelodies, harmonies and clever melodic nuggets adorn the spacious halls of his songs like fine paintings in a house. It is easy enough to pass them by them and pay no attention to them; but if one stops and reflects on them for a moment, each supporting musical element reveals itself as being able to stand easily on its own as a complete song. Indeed, two of Buckingham's greatest talents - as a virtuosic guitarist and vocalist - are often overlooked because of his sharp instinct for balancing song elements so seamlessly that none stands out and takes attention away from any other.

Buckingham spoke to REP's Music Production Editor Dan Levitin about the new

record, and his approach to production.

REP: You told Timothy White in 1987 that you considered your main contribution to Fleetwood Mac as an arranger.

LB: Yes, if I were to pick one thing as my main contribution to the group, it wouldn't be as a guitar player, a singer or a songwriter, it would be as someone who could take raw material and forge it into something complete. I guess to some degree with more success than I can do with my own material a lot of times. If you heard the way some of their songs sounded in their raw state, and tried to make sense out of them...my contribution was to give them form and balance these things with what they would all have to offer ...

REP: Yes, and the thing I like best about your three solo albums is similar. It's your idea of the song as containing an enormous number of musical elements - not just, you know, the rhythm section, guitar and vocal lines, but all these other musical parts that swim in and out of each other. That sense of craftsmanship and creating something is still there.

LB: Yes, definitely. A lot of times the message is in the form of what's going on as much as anything else.

REP: How do you prepare for a career doing that? Clearly, if you want to be a guitarist, you practice guitar; if you want to be a songwriter you write a bunch of songs. During, say, the five years before your first record, how were you woodshedding and preparing to be someone who does this?

LB: Well that's tough. I started playing at such a young age. I'm forty-two and I started playing when I was about six. I never had any lessons and have never been taught, and I don't read music - and that's why talking to you guys makes me nervous, 'cause you could always tell me what I'm doing wrong!

I didn't start writing until I was 21, but having had the guitar as an appendage, in a way, was so ingrained in me, that by the time I got into the idea of listening to parts and seeing how they fit together I wasn't also trying to overcome all the hurdles of learning to become a guitar player. The first thing that got me into the line that I'm on now is that I went out and got a Sony two-track tape recorder that had sound on sound, and you could bounce back and forth.

REP: So you practiced multi-tracking...

LB: Well, since I was twenty-one, yeah. I remember at that age going down to Eber Hi-Fi and asking "do you have like 4-track tape recorders?" and they're looking at me like, "what are you, kidding?" Because at that time something like that didn't exist. And when I finally did get a 4-track, I got an Ampex AG440 with 1/2" tape which I managed to buy because an aunt that I never met, left myself and my two brothers a house which resold for about \$40,000. We split that three ways, so out of the blue I was able to afford a \$4,000 tape machine.

REP: What year is this now?

LB: 1971. So I put that up in my father's coffee plant in Daly City and every night I'd drive up after he left and I'd just work until midnight or 1:00 putting my own material and some of Stevie's down. And I guess that whole Les Paul sensibility really just sort of became that much more a part of me. Then you start to understand how parts fit together and the jigsaw of all of it. You know, you can apply that back to a band situation pretty easily.

REP: The jigsaw metaphor is very apt. In your arrangements, a part will come in and then it will stop, and you'll leave just the right amount of space - fitting like a piece of sky in the jigsaw puzzle that fills the space between the mountains you're building. Or another part will come in that locks just right. You don't have the problem of parts just not making sense together...

LB: The only problem I have - one of the things about working alone is that it becomes more like a painting where you're putting strokes on the canvas, and you may start off thinking this is your song, but by the time you're done, the canvas has led you off in a totally different direction. I guess that's as it should be, if your intuitions work correctly. One of the byproducts of that is that sometimes you run into a little density problem. But that's something I'm working on.

REP: Did you ever as an exercise take songs that you admired and try to piece them together track by track?

LB: You mean like Todd Rundgren doing "Good Vibrations" [on Faithful, Rhino Records 70868] or something like that? Not really, that's pretty academic...I certainly have come close to that by ripping off lots of stuff. But you know, I think you should have a good, healthy sense of borrowing. I think that's kind of important.

REP: Speaking of academic and borrowing, there's something I've always wanted to ask you about Tango In The Night. You did something, perhaps unwittingly, that I thought was just brilliant.

LB: It was probably not unwittingly, but we'll see.

REP: The variety of guitar sounds during the solos is very wide. I had imagined that you said to yourself, "I'm going to play guitar like Bob Welch here, and I'll do a Danny Kirwan here, and Peter Green here," and you encapsulated the entire history of Fleetwood Mac lead guitar players in the space of that album. [see accompanying sidebar].

LB: Well you're right - that was totally unwittingly! A lot of that might have been that we were using a lot of midi stuff, guitar synthesizers, so that's probably part of it. I didn't do any of that with Cradle.

REP: I thought that was so hip, to do a group retrospective on your last album with them.

LB: Well that's great - I'll have to claim knowledge of that from here on out! But as far as arrangements are concerned, in Fleetwood Mac I approached the work from an orchestral standpoint. I wanted to find parts that were good for the song itself, and that made sense for the record, but they didn't necessarily stand out. You can listen to Everly Brothers records, for example, where Chet Atkins or somebody is playing a key part for the record but you don't really notice it, it's just in there.

REP: There's a recurring guitar sound of yours I particularly like. It's on the intro to "Wrong" on your new album, and you used it on "World Turning" in 1975. It's sort of a Dobro-ish sound.

LB: Oh yes. That's actually a gut string recorded direct. One of the things we did on this album to prevent it from getting too dense, and not wanting it to come off too Phil Spector, and still dealing with a bulk of things going on, we made the decision to record a lot of things direct because then they are more contained. About halfway into the record, I turned on the T.V. and saw Daniel Lanois. He's great, I love what he does, and I've always thought we'd get along great. But he's kind of got this spacey air about him and he was going on and on, almost like Floyd the barber from Mayberry - [impersonating Floyd] "oh, well, you know, you just don't ever want to record anything di-rect because you lose all the dynamics without a mike..." And I thought, well, that's fair enough, but we were trying to keep things contained not only by recording a lot of stuff direct, but also in mono. The present train of thought is that if you want to record an acoustic guitar you set up a couple of mikes and maybe mix in the direct to get this spread. Well that already takes up so much space, so we thought, "why not try and make these things points?" So even on the densest of songs you've got points of things that you can pick out from left to right.

On "World Turning" that was a Dobro, but this was just a gut-string, recorded direct.

DL: Wow! It doesn't sound like a gut-string. It sounds so metallic.

LB: Well, we put a lot of treble on it! Richard and I are not engineers in the way that Bob Clearmountain is. Our theory is we just turn the knobs until it sounds good. I'm not that well versed in technical things.

For instruments, I'm using mainly guitars, as opposed to my previous solo album, *Go Insane*, where I used a lot of Fairlight, I was very taken with the possibilities of it. This time, it just seemed to me that guitar was an important thing to try and flaunt; my chops are at about the top of their game right now and I feel like I've grown and am coming into a second stage now.

DL: There are a lot of guitar sounds on *Cradle*. I like the cheap distorted sound on "This Is The Time."

LB: There are a lot of things that are guitars that are just used in unusual ways. If you can hear a sound in your head and you can get a sense and understanding of how it might work, it's not so important what equipment you use, it's what you do with it.

When we wanted a fuzzy or distorted sound, most of the time we wouldn't set up an amp, we'd go through the GT pre-amp.

DL: What kind of equipment do you have in your studio?

LB: We have a black velvet Elvis, which was very important. We had that up on a wall, so it was like the Elvis shrine. The console is a Neotek 48-track; it has real nice, flexible and eq. An SSL and compression on every channel isn't something we felt we needed. We did not mix the album at the house, all of that organization was done somewhere else. I have an Ausberger system, a JBL system and some NS10-s. This is all in what was my garage. I've got a couple of old AMSs, Yamaha Rev 5 and Rev 7, Lexicon PCM42, PCM70 which is wonderful. The direct we use for all that stuff is a Bertech ITR1. We've got four LA4's which I like because they're really soft sounding. We've got some other compressors which aren't soft sounding, the DBX160 limiters.

DL: You used that on that lead guitar, I'll bet.

LB: Yes, that's right. I probably used that on most of the leads, 'cause it has a little more of an aggressive thing to it. I've got some Drawmer S201 gates.

DL: What do you record your vocals on, an 87?

LB: Yeah, and also that smaller one that looks just like it, the 89. That's another thing, I have a few mics, but we pretty much just used one or two mics for everything. You can do that because you're not trying to get an array of colors all at one time so you've got a lot more control. A lot of it wasn't, "how do I get sounds through miking," it was more of a thought process - if you hear the sound then you know how to approach it. It's sort of the same psychology as using the same guitar for any number of sounds. It's not what you've got, it's what you do with what you've got. There were a couple of special tunings that I used. I have an older Strat and for a lot of the chimy kinds of sounds, or for figures that I wanted to play that were in a more delicate vein, I would restring the Strat with all high Es and Bs - the first three strings would all be strung at high E and the lower strings at B. Then you can make a figure of six strings that would all be either a half or a whole step apart. You can get this whole kind of koto thing going, and fingerings where everything is open all the time.

DL: How do you know, as the songwriter, performer and producer, whether you are being too self-indulgent? Whether you're being a good judge of how many parts to put in a song?

LB: Well, with respect to density, I think sometimes that is a problem for me. Having left a group situation, this [solo album] was the way I thought I could get my

orientation back. So that I could get to the point where I wanted to work with musicians again. But in a general sense, I think that there were two things that helped that. Richard Dashut is my best friend and he co-produced; he has been through everything since Rumours, so he understands a lot of the process and he understands me. Because he's not a musician, he's great with the big picture. I can get lost in details sometimes and he'll walk in and cut through that. Also, he can sit down with a guitar and come up with a great seed for a song. He just has a general, good sensibility about things.

Also, Lenny Waronker, the president of Warner's, was coming up every month or so, and he's made the project one of his own things. He was reacting to everything that was being done. He was a producer for many years, too, so he and I have a lot in common and I respect his judgment. Between those two things I think it was easier to keep myself from going over the top.

REP: You left one of the greatest rhythm sections in rock and roll history. At some point, don't you think you should hook up with another great rhythm section?

LB: Most definitely. For all the construction on this you could certainly make the case for that being one of the weaker parts on this album. There definitely is something to be said for having somebody else playing - I'm very aware of that.

That's why I say that getting through this album was only a step in getting out from one group and into another. I'm planning on touring, so that's going to come up soon anyway. There's no replacement for five or six heartbeats all beating at the same. It was a question of timing and whatever my own needs were at the time.

The rhythm section is very important. When I put a band together, I want to first find a bass player and drummer who are on the same wavelength; it's important to have the core as the bass and drums.

* * * * *

Sidebar:

Lindsey Buckingham as chameleon: Uncovering production and guitar influences on Tango In The Night.

"Big Love": The lead guitar here is total Lindsey - it is definitely his distinctive lead style, with the drenched in reverb sound. It reflects back closely to 1975's powerful and angst-ridden fade out solo on "I'm So Afraid."

"Everywhere": This is done up like a Christine song from the Heroes Are Hard to Find era, but with some modern sounds, like analog synth (probably Juno 106) and triggered drum sounds.

"Caroline": This song is done as if from Tusk. The multi-layered unison vocal in the chorus, the stark rhythms and toms sounding like the field drums on the song "Tusk."

"Mystified": Like Bob Welch's 1973 "Hypnotized," the hypnotic quality is similar. Solo is totally like Danny Kirwan, as on "Show Me A Smile." Not just Kirwan's tone, but even his approach to what notes he plays. Maybe it's because I always imagine Christine in the Future Games era, her first appearance with the group.

"Little Lies": Sounds like Mirage era Christine. Lindsey had to have been responsible for those (guitar?) synth leads in the solo section. They carry his rich melodic personality.

"Family Man": Lindsey is an incredibly talented guitarist, here on just gut string, playing a bit that Bob Welch would have killed for on "Bermuda Triangle," or Bob Weston on "Why." Lindsey's is twice the talent of his worthy predecessors.

"Isn't It Midnight" guitar solo: If James Honeyman-Scott had been in Fleetwood Mac in 1978. An angry, fear-inspiring oratory, eloquently delivered.

Thanks to Karen for posting this to the Ledge and to Anusha for formatting and sending it to us.

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