

The Music Producer's Survival Stories

Interviews with Veteran,
Independent, and Electronic
Music Professionals

Brian M. Jackson

Cengage Learning PTR



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**The Music Producer's Survival
Stories: Interviews with Veteran,
Independent, and Electronic Music
Professionals**

Brian M. Jackson

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About the Author

Brian Jackson is a musician, audio engineer, music producer, teacher, and philosopher. He is co-owner and director of education at Devotion, an art gallery and community space in Brooklyn, NY, that also serves as his Ableton Certified Training Center. Brian's involvement in DIY, independent, and underground music culture started in Detroit more than two decades ago. He has produced various styles of electronic music, played bass in bands, promoted club events, attempted a record label, and DJed after-hours parties. From award-winning experimental video to TV shows such as *24*, his sounds have been heard worldwide. He uses the pseudonyms Infinite Volume and Cyphony for solo works and remixes, was half of the conceptual retro-future electro synth A/V duo Memory Systems, and co-founded the genre-bending band I Am Spoonbender (1996–2000). He is the author of multiple tutorial DVDs on Ableton Live and technical editor of books on Live and Pro Tools, among others. Brian is also a creative-technical consultant with clients including Ableton, Access, and multiple Grammy nominees/winners. With a B.S. in Sociology and Philosophy already under his belt (WMU, 1994), Brian went on to earn an M.A. in East-West Psychology (1999) from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. He lives in Brooklyn, NY, and is reachable through his website, www.formlabsnyc.com.

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Introduction

The first thing, to me, is you've got to have an open head.

-Hank Shocklee

Welcome to *The Music Producer's Survival Stories: Interviews with Veteran, Independent, and Electronic Music Professionals*. The knowledge, wisdom, and experience shared herein is solid gold. Both the selection of questions and people interviewed were carefully considered for this book's primary goal of helping you with your career as a technical-creative music professional. I have a lot of professional respect for each of these people, but at least as important is the respect I have for them as individuals. In addition to their experience, skill, and knowledge, they are all great role models in their own way. Everyone interviewed in this book carved their own path to a lifestyle doing what they love for a living. As you read their personal anecdotes, which illustrate different paths to success, you will also come across numerous tips, thoughtful advice, well-considered suggestions, and keen insights. One size fits all is not a reality in our profession, one composed of logic, intuition, beauty, dedication, and chaos.

About the Interviews

The interviews in this book were originally intended as part of *The Music Producer's Survival Guide: Chaos, Creativity, and Career in Independent and Electronic Music* (MPSG for short). After submitting all of them, my total page count went way over the top, and there was only room for one interview (Hank Shocklee). Fortunately, my publisher saw their value and realized that they were worthy of their own book. I immediately agreed. So, the inception of *The Music Producer's Survival Stories: Interviews with Veteran, Independent, and Electronic Music Professionals* (MPSS) was as a companion book to *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*. Make no mistake, however: It can stand on its own. In fact, for some of you, it might be more accurate to say that *The Music Producer's Survival Guide* is the companion book to *The Music Producer's Survival Stories* rather than the other way around.

These complementary books cover much of the same terrain, but from different angles. At least half of *The Music Producer's Survival Guide* is very practical, but it is also unapologetically intellectual and philosophical and is contextualized by a big-picture

historical view of music, audio technology, innovation, and creativity. My motivation for taking on the challenge of these interviews was simple: to provide you with multiple perspectives. Beyond offering different perspectives, these interviews also serve a practical purpose. They are practical in the sense that they represent living illustrations, which beautifully exemplify unique manifestations of infinite possibilities. Herein we have eight different personal histories, eight different sets of experiences, and eight different paths that all lead to eight different realizations of a similar goal. Just as the butterfly effect teaches us that small variations at the onset of a trajectory in a complex system often led to vastly different outcomes, it also implies that vastly different beginnings can lead to a similar outcome, especially if the requisite passion, determination, and dedication are there to drive the vectors toward that goal.

From the onset of what I'll call the "Music Producer's Survival" project, I wanted the interviews to be conversational and to read like they sounded as they occurred. Therefore, they are not heavily edited. It is also important to note that I don't necessarily agree with everything said in the interviews. And, if an answer didn't meet my expectations or reinforce my goals as an author, I did not edit it out or cut it down in length. In other words, my editorial bias appears only in the selection of interviewees and the questions they were asked, not in how their answers appear in this book. Multiple perspectives are the point, after all.

Many of the same questions appear in each of the interviews, yet each interview has its own texture. The history and background questions at the beginning of each interview are there not only for readers to learn something about each of these individuals, but also to show both the similarities and differences between them. In some cases, you may relate to their stories and backgrounds based on your personal experience. When they are different from your history and experience, realize the potential learning opportunity therein.

There are a few more things to keep in mind as you make your way through the shared knowledge in this book. If while reading an interview you are not familiar with some technical terms or references to specific artists or labels, don't let that distract you from the key points; you can always look those things up later (perhaps in the glossary found at the end of this book). Also, as with the chapters in *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*, each of these interviews has layers in them. There is something here for everyone, but depending on where you are in your life and career, you will appreciate different things about the content. Over time, as you develop your skills, gain experience, and grow wiser in life, you can return to the same material and garner new insights. For as Heraclitus once said, and I paraphrase, you can never stand in the same river twice.

Excerpts from *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*

For those of you who have not read *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*, what follows are a few excerpts from that book to help contextualize this book a bit. Moreover, these excerpts will give you a little bit of info about the person asking all of the questions in the following pages. Even if you have read *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*, you might appreciate a short refresher.

From the Introduction of *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*

Like most of you reading this book, I started out as a music fan and musician. Production and audio engineering came later, initially as a way to help better express musical ideas without having to depend on costly recording studios and later as a way to help pay the bills. I love computers, production, and audio engineering, but first and foremost I am a music fan. Although we all have our favorite styles and genres, I can appreciate something about most any one of them. If an artist truly has something to express, it doesn't matter if the music is released on a major label, an imprint, a boutique indie, self released, or simply just performed live. The music can be techno, electro, house, rock, metal, punk, jazz, hip hop, pop, bluegrass, Afrobeat, funk, gospel, classical, experimental, or unclassifiable. It can be from Detroit, Berlin, London, Morocco, Ghana, Iran, Israel, Tibet, China, India, Brazil, Mexico, or parts unknown. Having said all that, this is not a music-appreciation book, per se. Rather, it is about music production—independent and electronic music production. Moreover, it is as much about being an independent/electronic music producer in the 21st century, and being able to do it yourself, being DIY, as it is about music production.

If I had started writing this book in 1992 and not 2012, the main title would simply be *The Electronic Music Producer's Survival Guide*. Back then, electronic musicians were the only ones you would find toiling away for hours by themselves making music with computers, synths, samplers, and sequencers. The Internet's role in the spread of information and connecting the like-minded from anywhere, at any time, cannot be understated. So this book talks about the computer revolution and the resulting home-studio boom. How they have inexorably changed the game for everyone, given that making high-quality music at home using computers is no longer just the domain of arty rock stars and electronic music producers. We'll deal with the implications of powerful, sophisticated, affordable (and even free) software putting once-expensive, state-of-the-art capabilities from just a few decades past in the hands of anyone looking for it.

...

DIY

Do-it-yourself is a philosophy. “Yourself” is not limited to one person; it can be groups or even collectives of people who share the same sensibility. It implies consciously chosen freedom from dependence on institutional structures for your creations and productions. This choice usually involves a tradeoff of fewer financial or material resources for absolute creative control. There was a time when this tradeoff resulted in poor production quality and lack of sonic fidelity, leading to a common and fair criticism of DIY/indie productions. Nowadays, due to more readily available information, overall production quality is improved, and fidelity is no longer a serious concern because of lower technology costs, increased computing power, and the maturation of digital audio. Note that DIY implies being independent, but not necessarily vice versa.

Independent (Indie)

By independent, I mean music that is not part of the major label, multinational corporation music business. I am not referring to a specific style or aesthetic of music. Although indie music can be very popular and commercially successful, commercial viability is not normally the primary motivation. The modern indie label mold is most associated with the DIY punk counter culture movements of the late 1970s/early 1980s, the electronic music and adventurous/experimental labels of that same period and into the early 1990s, and later labels following in the footsteps of the aforementioned.

How is indie different from DIY? If you are DIY you are in all probability indie, but not necessarily the other way around. For example, there are artists on indie labels who play on the smaller-venue music circuits, but essentially use smaller, cheaper, less-commercial versions of the traditional project workflows, production processes, and commerce infrastructures. They are indie, but not very DIY. Also, indie labels are often stepping stones for artists hoping to sign with a major label, so they are indie only by definition and DIY only by necessity, not philosophy, until they get signed (if they get signed, and it works out). There is nothing necessarily wrong with this fact; it is what it is.

Electronic Music (EM)

Electronic music is not easy to precisely define, but it is safe to say that it is music primarily created with electronic instruments such as synths, samplers, drum machines, and sequencers. Electronic music production (EMP) is easiest to DIY from a logistical point of view because it can literally just be you and your computer. Yes, there is mainstream, major-label, electronic pop and dance music, but the vast majority of electronic music is aptly part of the DIY and independent music world.

...Here I offer a super short history of EM for context, but know that most of the following is further covered throughout the book [*The Music Producer’s Survival Guide*]. Although electronic instruments first appeared in the 1870s, electronic music didn’t really get going

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until the 1950s with pioneering academics such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Max Matthews. Then, in the 1960s, with the synthesizers of Don Buchla and Robert Moog in particular, various composers and experimental musicians fertilized the ground for the major-label, progressive rock artists of the early 1970s along with the German Krautrock movement that birthed Kraftwerk. By the late 1970s, the U.K./U.S.-led new wave and proto-industrial music's paralleling of synth pop, Zapp and Roger's electro funk, and Giorgio Moroder's chart-topping Italo-disco productions solidified electronic music in the pop and club worlds. Jamaican Dub and Roland's legendary x0x series of drum machines and synths were the final ingredients needed for the largely African-American innovations of house, techno, electro, and hip hop that spawned most of the countless genres thought of as EM today.

NOTE: From a production point of view, hip hop is for all intents and purposes electronic music (as it is a close relative of electro, or "break-dance music"). The exact same technology is used to make beats or produce tracks. If this doesn't make sense to you, just listen to "Planet Rock" (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa or "Jam On It" (1983) by Newcleus. The record industry separates hip hop and other "urban" styles from the rest of electronic music for marketing and distribution purposes. Mainstream hip hop and other styles of electronic music do inhabit different cultural niches, so this separation is understandable.

...

Welcome to the Future

We truly are living in amazing times. I'm not exaggerating when I say that you have more freedoms and opportunities than any creative person living at any time in human history. It is unquestionable that technology is largely responsible for this state of affairs. But as with all technological progress, there are also new challenges. Just because you have more opportunities does not mean they are easy to grasp because anybody can readily choose to compete for those same opportunities. The Internet and the democratization of computing technology enable everyone to have their own media outlet. Even if you've never explicitly thought about the DIY ethos, these challenges include implicit responsibilities and demands on each of us to do more for ourselves. Whether you produce house, techno, hip hop, dubstep, indietronica, or even independent movie soundtracks, we are all in the same boat. Those who refuse to accept the new technologies are being left behind. Those who are too dazzled by all of their possibilities and wonder are ultimately distracted.

Frank Sinatra sang on over 1,000 recorded songs, but is credited as a composer on fewer than 10 of them. Have you heard of Motown? What about the Funk Brothers? The Funk Brothers were the in-house session musicians who played on all the classic Motown

recordings from 1959–1972. Even if you are not a fan of that era’s music, every producer should see the 2002 documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*. It was not that long ago that recorded music was a process accomplished only by a whole team of specialists. First, there was the producer who put the whole team together, including the composers, lyricists, and arrangers—the songwriters. Commonly, studio musicians played the accompaniment. Finally, you had the performers and singers—the ones whose name was on the cover of the album. Additionally, there was an A&R person, recording engineer, mixing engineer, pre-mastering engineer, mastering engineer, manager, and publicist, to name just the most obvious.

THE ACCIDENTAL PRODUCER

Now it is expected, often unrealistically, for the independent musician/artist to accomplish or plan, and pay, for the whole production—in other words, to play every role and be the whole team. For the moment, let’s just consider the writing, recording, and mixing. Most electronic music producers are comfortable wearing all these hats, although they often get assistance in the mixing area. For other independent music producers, whether hip hop or indie rock, writing and recording are often the main goals. Regardless, each of these areas takes years to master, and musicians who want to produce their own music are often thrown right into the deep end of the audio technology pool. So here you find yourself interested in pursuing a creative-technical profession that demands a high level of DIY—buying all your own tools of the trade, learning how to use them, and learning the industry, all by yourself. It may sound crazy, but it is a common expectation, whether fairly placed or not. There are many reasons for this situation, but the advancement of technology and equally drastic decreases in its cost are at the center of it.

FASTER, SMALLER, CHEAPER...EASIER?

In 1979, Tascam released a groundbreaking affordable tape recorder: the Teac Model 144 Portastudio, for about \$1,200. Mix Online’s TECnology Hall of Fame describes it as “an integrated 4-track cassette recorder with Dolby B noise reduction, 3.75 ips operation and a 4 × 2 mixer with pan, treble and bass on each input.” Just 25 years later, in 2004, Apple’s top-of-the-line Power Mac G5 2.5 GHz DP retail price was \$2,999. That same year, Apple released the iLife ’04 software suite, which included GarageBand, iTunes, iMovie, iPhoto, and iDVD. In 2002, Apple had acquired Emagic, makers of Logic Audio. Dr. Gerhard Lengeling, Emagic’s founder, directed the development of GarageBand. Upon its release, iLife ’04 was included free on all new Macs, and for another \$49, anyone could purchase it. Counting for inflation, \$1,200 in 1979 is equivalent to \$3,100 in 2004.

Yes, there have been huge advances in interface design and functional simplification, but it is a mistake to assume that technology is easier to understand or use simply because it is more affordable and accessible than before. As somebody who is a musician, electronic or otherwise, why would you expect to quickly understand how you’re supposed to use all the

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tools you have at your disposal? Nearly every major piece of audio software is standing on the shoulders of a century's worth of history and technology. Just because current smart phones have more computing power than a desktop computer with an Intel Pentium 4 or PowerPC G4 processor, that certainly does not make you think you understand what is inside it any more than the more expensive, larger, older computer.

It is fair to say that somebody just getting into music production might be a little confused and overwhelmed with all the options and information presented by numerous sources of varying reliability. One reason for all this confusion is the separation of the technology from their various trade crafts. Just a few decades ago, if you wanted to learn how to use a recording console, you would have gotten a job or internship in a major recording studio because those audio desks often cost many hundreds of thousands of dollars. A piece of equipment that expensive is not trusted to just anyone, so engineers were brought up in a pseudo-apprenticeship situation. Subjective sonic characteristics aside, you basically have most of the same functionality of the \$500,000 consoles in your personal computer. Why should you be expected to know how to use it professionally without significant training just because technology's advance has made it smaller and cheaper?

From Musician to Producer: An Author's Version

The following personal anecdote illustrates dynamics of decisions and outcomes related to career evolution and should be especially eye-opening for those who are just starting down the path. Although a lot has changed since the 1990s, the underlying structural elements are largely the same....

In late 1995, I decided I didn't want to be dependent on other musicians for my creative expression. I was going to create a bedroom studio using some "extra" student loan money. I went to Guitar Center on Mission St. and bought a Tascam Porta07 4-track cassette tape recorder for about \$300 and a used Alesis SR-16 drum machine. (I didn't keep either of them for long.) I had my Music Man bass, drum machine, tons of Boss and DOD FX pedals, and my all-in-one home stereo as a mixdown deck. This setup was a lot of fun, but I very quickly outgrew its capabilities. I started looking at 8-track recorders but realized that without spending way more money than I had, I would not overcome the limitations causing the creative frustrations.

In 1995, the World Wide Web was only a few years old, and there were not yet many audio forums. Using my state-of-the-art 28.8 Kbps dial-up modem and taking advantage of new free AOL trial offers every 30–60 days (they sent CDs to everyone like junk mail back then), I found a few useful forums. I noticed a lot of discussion (flame wars) about all the advances in digital audio on the Mac. By the summer of 1996, I sold my Performa 6116 (60 MHz) and 14-inch CRT monitor, upgraded to a used Power Mac 7600 (120 MHz) with a used 17-inch CRT monitor, and decided to get into this fairly new thing called Pro Tools.

Most of my friends either didn't know what I was talking about or thought I was crazy for embracing computer-based audio. One of them had spent a lot of time in recording studios (his previous band was signed to Metal Blade Records), so I asked him to meet me at Guitar Center for the purchase. Skeptical of making a computer the center of my studio, he tried to convince me that I would be better off with the new Roland VS-880 digital multitrack recorder (\$2,900). My gut told me that Pro Tools was the future, and that it might even lead to paying work at some point down the road. Fifteen minutes—and \$1,500—later, I was the proud owner of Pro Tools v3.4 w/DAE PowerMix and an Audiomeia III PCI card. Looking back, I can say without hesitation that it was the single best career decision I ever made.

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One Thing Leads to Another: Positive Chaos

Getting into Pro Tools ahead of the curve was my most important career decision from a tradecraft point of view. Inspired by a tip from a friend, the most consequential decision was the selection of my part-time job during freshmen year at college in 1990. At that job, I established important relationships, which are key to any fulfilling career (and of course life in general). The second-best career decision was adding Ableton Live to my repertoire shortly after moving to Brooklyn in 2002.

These three decisions and their combined outcomes beautifully illustrate sensitive dependence on initial conditions, what is commonly known as the butterfly effect. Seemingly small changes in the system amplified each other to produce unpredictable results, a system with radically different characteristics. In this case, the different characteristics are appreciated opportunities and positive outcomes, not a tornado in Texas set off by Lorenz's hypothetical butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil. Each opportunity opened the way for subsequent ones, but this deterministic process did not resemble a cascade of falling dominoes or even a Rube Goldberg machine. In hindsight, a visualization of the process more resembles...fractal, branching patterns....

For now, I am omitting stumbles, dead ends, sacrifices, and questionable decisions with variable outcomes, so what follows is a simplified, sanitized, bare-bones yet accurate description of one thing leading to another. Learning Pro Tools helped lead to a job at Harmony Central, which directly led to a job at Rocket Network, which certainly led to a teaching job immediately upon landing in NYC in 2002, which directly led to a better one in 2003 (working for Richard Termini). Also, knowing Live directly led to writing an online article about using ReWire with Live and Pro Tools for the now-defunct *DigiZine* in 2005. This in turn led to authoring Ableton Live tutorial CDs for Thomson Learning's CSi CD-ROM series and then starting in early 2008 to work as a technical editor for their Course Technology division (mostly Pro Tools- and Ableton Live-related books).

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In tandem with developed professional relationships, the previous gigs led to an invitation to the very first Ableton Certification testing event in the summer of 2008, hosted at SAE NYC. I was the only one not sent there on behalf of an existing school and therefore the only one paying out of their own pocket to get certified—a no-brainer DIY decision. After two days of presentations and tests, I became the first person on the planet to be handed an Ableton Certified Trainer certificate—an honor for which I will be eternally grateful. (The four other attendees were also certified at that inaugural event, as was Laura Escudé shortly thereafter in L.A., who helped design the program for Ableton.)

After the Thomson Corporation and Reuters Group merged in 2008, they spun off Thomson Learning to a new company, Cengage Learning, the publisher of this book. Orren Merton, the acquisition editor who made it possible for this book to happen, was the technical editor on the very first Ableton project I did for Thomson Learning in 2005.

Conclusion: If you like this book, make sure to thank my long-time friend Dave. I am a fan of non sequiturs, but the previous statement is not one of them. Although he was living in Bloomington, IN, while attending Indiana University at the time, Dave mentioned that when I moved to Kalamazoo, MI, I should check out this music club that his band had played at while on tour. It was well respected nationally by booking agents for its “new music” Monday nights and all-ages weekend matinees. A few days after moving into the dorms, I went into the club to see if they were hiring. One position had just unexpectedly opened up. I worked there part time as a doorman (ID checker) and occasional bouncer during my freshmen year at Western Michigan University. With such a high-visibility job, I was able to meet and socialize with everyone of significance in the regional music scene and beyond....

Translation: If not for being told about that club before moving there, I likely would not have applied in time to get the job, since there was just one opening at the time and it was a highly desirable job. I would not have come to know many of the people who led to all the things that made it possible for me to write this book, and therefore for you to be reading it wherever and whenever you may be. So be sure to thank Dave if you like *The Music Producer’s Survival Guide* [and *The Music Producer’s Survival Stories*].

From Chapter 2 of *The Music Producer’s Survival Guide*

A producer is either/and/or...a really good musician. Someone that’s not a musician at all but has instincts. Someone that has neither of those things but knows how to navigate through a record label. Someone who’s a great engineer. Someone who

doesn't know a fader from a hole in the wall. Someone who has a lot of money. Someone who has a megalomaniacal personality.

–Bob Power

Grammy- and Emmy-nominated Bob Power is a New York–based producer, musician, composer, engineer, composer, performer, and educator with more than 20 gold or platinum records to his name. He's worked with De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, Common, JayDee, Run DMC, Jungle Brothers, D'Angelo, Miles Davis, Spike Lee, Erykah Badu, David Byrne, The Roots, and Pat Metheny, among others. The preceding quote was transcribed from an interview that was posted to YouTube in March 2008 as part of a series called *Technology Today* (Magnet Media Films). Later in that same interview, Power shared his personal philosophy on the role of a producer:

It's really about the artist and the music and not about me. I am a facilitator, I am supposed to help people. And ideally, after working with me, maybe those people won't need me anymore. And that's a good thing.

Not all record producers are cut from the same cloth as Bob Power, especially at the same level of success and accomplishment. There are many other philosophies out there, but his is one I fully resonate with. It is also consonant with the views of other notable producers who are great role models professionally and as individuals. One such example is Hank Shocklee, who is interviewed in *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*.

The term “producer” has evolved over the decades along with the changes in music, technology, and the business side of the industry. Even now, it has different implications, depending on the scene and situation. Producers define their roles according to any number of criteria, such as those cited in the quote at the beginning of this section. Some are collaborators who work with talented songwriters to best help them produce their original music. Perhaps they are even a friend or member of the band. Others mold raw talents and are involved in directing every aspect of the music and production. This involvement falls on a spectrum of motivations, including genuinely wanting to help launch an original artist or band, or molding the act at the behest of the label and A&R, as exemplified in the unfortunate phenomenon of industry-created “boy bands.” On the flip side, electronic music producers largely evolved outside of the major label world and do most everything themselves.

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From Chapter 10 of *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*

[As its title] suggests, *The Music Producer's Survival Guide: Chaos, Creativity, and Career in Independent and Electronic Music* is about a career in music production. But it is about a lot more than just the words in the title. It is about figuring out how to make a living while pursuing one's passion for music and production. It is about choosing a life that is meaningful and rewarding, even if it is a constant balancing act full of ups and downs. It is about making your mark. It is about surviving in a constantly shifting landscape. It is about having fun and following your heart. It is about taking what you do seriously without taking yourself too seriously. It is about patience and persistence. It is about taking part in the creation of a collective soundtrack to life and history. It is about collaborators, scenes, communities, peers, mentors, teachers, students, fans, friends, and a lot of other people. It is also about the big picture.

Outro

If you have read *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*, hopefully you will notice that what these folks have to say quite often reinforces what is stated in various chapters, especially Chapter 3, “What Is Your Plan?”; Chapter 4, “Master Your Craft”; and Chapter 9, “Lifestyle Tips.” But, just as often their answers add to the conversation in a way that only they could do. And if you have not yet read *The Music Producer's Survival Guide*, your starting point for the conversation is *The Music Producer's Survival Stories*, which is just as good a place as any to join in. The following interviews offer the perspectives of eight full-time professionals doing what they love to do—as a record producer, electronic music producer, DJ, promoter, label owner, audio engineer, performer, musician, educator, culture/community builder, and/or technology consultant. It is my sincere hope that what they have to say is as inspiring to you as it is to me.

Companion Website Downloads

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