

“I was never seeking great new electronics for their own sake. The passion for the music drove me.”

Step One:

Make a list of the world's most beloved singers and songwriters.

Step Two:

Make a list of the artists Phil Ramone has produced or engineered. Or just skip step two, since you've already completed it.

Phil Ramone

OF TECHNOLOGY AND TASTE

PAUL SIMON, FRANK SINATRA, BILLY JOEL, STING, JAMES Taylor, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Tony Bennett, Liza Minnelli — all have benefited from Ramone's sterling taste and famously unflappable studio temperament. Furthermore, Ramone has consistently pushed the boundaries of music technology. From stereo sound through the introduction of compact discs and DVDs to the latest advancements in surround sound and digital downloading, Ramone has stood at the vanguard.

We spoke to Ramone shortly before he commenced work on a Carnegie Hall concert featuring Elton John accompanied by a large orchestra and chorus.

You've always been an early adopter of new technology.

It started when I was a kid. I was a gadget freak. I became fascinated with the pursuit of better sound. Before long I was experimenting with ways to reduce tape hiss and improve signal-to-noise ratios. I wound up working with many different companies, including Yamaha, with whom I developed the first electric grand piano for the film *A Star Is Born* because we needed something that could work both in the Arizona sun and in a chilly arena. My career has always been balanced between music and what I call electronic art.

Yet you're not known as a technologist, but as a producer of warm pop vocal records.

I never sought new electronics for their own sake. The passion for the music drove me. I would think, "Wouldn't it be great if the record sounded exactly like what we hear when we're standing six feet away?" It's amazing, the improvements we've had in the last 30 years. Digital in particular has really improved in the last 20 years.

What about changes in consumer electronics?

Well, one challenge for anyone making a CD is to make sure that what you hear in the control room sounds as close as possible to what people will hear at home. For a long time, the Yamaha NS10 was the monitor speaker for checking what a record might sound like on the radio. But cars, homes, and boom boxes have all graduated to a higher sound quality. The manufacturing and mastering of CDs has improved immensely. So it was

time for speakers that gave a fair evaluation in light of that evolution. We've done three or four albums on the Yamaha DM2000 board, monitoring through Yamaha MSP10 Studios, and every time I hear the music away from the studio, it sounds the way I thought it sounded in the studio. That's the critical thing for me.

What advice can you share with young producers about working with vocalists?

You have to be objective, but not a critic. Your comments can't sound phony — they have to come from your heart. If a singer is not performing well, it's your job to help them find the passion within themselves. You have to be patient and work through it with them. You never want to sit in the control room and sing the part you want the performer to sing. But sometimes you do have to teach or, at least, help with phrasing. You might communicate that with words or by playing something on the keyboard. You use whatever comes to mind to make them see the light. It's like directing an actor. You can't just say, "Yeah, we'll fix it later." You have to create an environment for them to do a real performance. Maybe they need to turn off all the lights or face north or whatever. I'll go to any extreme to make the artist comfortable!

You have a reputation for staying on a very even keel in the studio — a voice of calm in a high-pressure environment.

You want to ask my kids about that? [Laughs.] But seriously, I don't believe you need to have storms raging around you. Technology screws up. Hard drives crash. Those things drive you up the wall. Humor helps. Keeping phone calls out of everyone's way definitely helps.

How do you do that?

[Laughs.] Surround the studio with a Faraday screen [a solid metal box that blocks transmissions!] Or just let everyone know what a bad interruption it is. If there's a truly important call, someone can man the phones and deliver messages. That will stop the 93 interruptions. It never used to be a problem — musicians used to have to use the payphone in the hall!