



MICHAEL WAGENER'S MUSIC CITY METAL

Nashville may seem like an odd base of operations for a man who made his name producing or mixing such hard rock and metal acts as Dokken, Extreme, Ozzy Osbourne, Alice Cooper, Metallica, Megadeth, and Motley Crüe.

Not so, says Michael Wagener, speaking during the brief downtime between completing a Skid Row album and starting one for King's X. "Sure, I used to live in LA. But after three earthquakes, seven floods, six fires, and two riots, I came to Nashville. I love it here."

Wagener's musical journey began in Germany, where he took up guitar as a teen. But he soon learned that he had more

affinity with the technical side of music and shifted his focus to mixing and recording. He came to the States in 1980 to work with Dokken and never looked back.

The sleek hard rock that made Wagener's career fell out of fashion during the grunge era, but now it's back with a vengeance. Michael says he isn't surprised: "Musical styles change. But once a style is introduced, it will always be there, even if it's bubbling underneath. Now those types of rock and heavy metal are being rediscovered. I doubt if we're going to see a lot of bands with Spandex and puffed-up hair onstage, but the sound of rock is getting a lot closer to what it was in the '80s."

Many rock producers were slow to embrace digital audio, arguing that heavy guitars and drums are best captured on tape. "Not me!" says Wagener. "I've loved digital since the first machines came out in 1982. I'm not a big friend of tape, because it doesn't give me back exactly what I put on it. Sure, I have lots of analog outboard gear that I've collected over the last 35 years, but I like the recording medium to be digital."

Wagener is a recent convert to Steinberg's Nuendo recording software. "A Nuendo setup came bundled with my mixing board," he recounts. "As soon as I was exposed to it, I realized I had to get deeper into it. Now I've moved over completely to Nuendo as my main software. I've used every recording program at some point, but the design of Nuendo just appeals to me more than any of the others. For one thing, Nuendo is incredibly intuitive. Everything makes complete sense. There is no hidden stuff. I may have opened the manual three times since I got the software. Nuendo looks good, like a real mixer. It's easy to handle. It sounds great. I love the things you can do with effects, panning, and editing. There are a lot of big people in Nashville using Nuendo as their main platform."

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But despite his digital enthusiasm, Wagener's goal is to capture great music, not fabricate it. "The musicians should create the music, not the engineer," he insists. "That's why I'm not a big friend of things like editing drums to the grid. I believe that the source has to be right. It's easy to say, 'Let's just put a plug-in on it to fix it,' but if the source isn't right, you're just polishing the proverbial you-know-what."

The solution, argues Wagener, is practice, practice, and more practice. "If you're an aspiring musician, it's essential to practice and develop your sound. In the '80s, guitarists like George Lynch would sit in a room full of amps for three days, trying to find the perfect tone for a guitar solo. Nowadays some players put that entirely on the producer's head. A guitarist may walk into the studio with one guitar, two picks, and a cable, and say, 'Where do I plug in?' I don't mind helping a guitarist get a tone, but I believe a guitarist's playing changes according to the tone of their guitar. You can only develop a style if you develop a tone along with it."

The same goes for bands, says Michael: "If you've practiced and you have your style in place, then a producer like me can help create something outstanding. If I have one piece of advice for bands, it's this: Music isn't a hobby. It requires 100,000-percent effort. Don't rely on the engineer or producer to make your record. Practice. Get your own tones. Be able to perform your music, and then stand behind it. Even today, the bands that make it are the ones who truly stand behind their music. You can't have an attitude like, 'I work all week, and on the weekends we play a gig here and there.' Music is an intense, full-time, 24/7 job."