MONTELL JORDAN:

D.I.Y. R&B

Singer/songwriter/producer Montell Jordan would be an R&B giant even if he weren't close to seven feet tall. Like clockwork, Jordan has delivered one Gold album per year since exploding onto the scene with the million-selling *This Is How We Do It* in 1995. Jordan has racked up hits in a variety of styles, from sophisticated, Armani-suited soul to risqué bedroom ballads to full-bore party anthems. Now he's busy at work on album number five.

While most million-selling artists rely on small armies of songwriters, producers, studio musicians, and engineers, Jordan covers many of those bases himself. Working with only a few key collaborators, Jordan truly builds his records from scratch at his small Atlanta studio. Jordan recently shared some of his literally lofty thoughts on songwriting and production.

Why do you prefer to do so much of your production work yourself?

Because I feel like I have "consumer" ears. When I produce, I evaluate a song from that perspective. I ask, will this make me dance? Would I purchase this? That sort of hands-on process allows me more control over what the final product sounds like. I work with great engineers, producers, mixologists and programmers, and I hope they respect me more because I am hands-on and do so many things myself.

Has it always been that way? Were you a gearhead from the get-go?

Before my record deal, I was dependent on my partner at the time for beats, loops, equipment info, and so forth. But once I had the budget to pick up some music equipment, I became a gearhead and have been one ever since. Oji Pierce, who produced my first album, set up my small home studio and gave me a few brief instructions, and then I had to learn myself. "This Is How We Do It" came from such experiments with new equipment.

Do you tend to write over a rhythm pattern, or do you search for the perfect beat after you've written a song?

It's always different. If I have a hot rhythm playing, I make a vocal rhythm to fit it. Then the melody falls into the vocal pattern, and then come the meaningful lyrics. But at other times, a melody comes first, and then I create music around that melody, and then come the words. Either way, the hardest part is going with my first instinct. I have a tendency to rewrite and refine too much.

You must hear a lot of demos. What are some of the biggest mistakes new artists make in putting themselves across?

People always tell new artists to just make a demo. But it has to be a good demo, because most A&R simply aren't looking for potential — they want to hear a hit record. It all begins with the song and the lyric, so don't put anything out just to have a complete demo.

You work with a Yamaha S80 synthesizer. How do you use it?

I use it both as a master controller and for its sounds. Some of its old, analog-style sounds are priceless! There is a patch that's just like the original sound the Ohio Players used to create the bouncy funk in "The Funky Worm." But I can't tell you which one — it's a secret!

You've also begun to work with Yamaha's SU700 Loop Factory and RM1X sequencer. How do you think they might fit into your productions?

I'm experimenting with the SU700 and RMX1 for my fifth album. I want to use them to make new sounds that will grab the listeners' ears, and I believe that using individual pieces like these makes sampling and editing feel more creative. I want producers to say, "How did he do that?!"

You could certainly afford a big studio at this point. Did you make a deliberate decision to keep things simple?

Many big things begin small. My current facility has only one small room, but many big hits come out of there. I am currently building another medium-small room, a MIDI room, and a master studio for my Atlanta-based company, the Enterprise. But even as we grow, I prefer to keep it simple. Put me on a desert island with just a couple of key pieces of gear — including my S80 and Yamaha NS10 monitors — plus an electrical outlet, and I will give you a hit. And maybe even a new theme song for Gilligan's Island.