



Michael utilizes the Disklavier DC7A, S80, EX5R, P200 and SU700 in his studio.

STRAIT TALK FROM A SUPERSTAR PRODUCER

the omartian chronicles

Michael Omartian is not only responsible for producing hundreds of hit records, but also a world record: he is the only producer to have scored number-one records in three decades, the '70s, '80s and '90s.

Michael Bolton, Christopher Cross, Amy Grant, Donna Summer, Whitney Houston, Vince Gill, the Jacksons, Cher, Rod Stewart, Barry Manilow, Trisha Yearwood Alison Kraus, Marty Stuart, and Clint Black represent just a fraction of the artists whose records the 54-year-old producer has overseen. He has also co-written many hits, played keyboards for the likes of Dolly Parton, Eric Clapton, Michael Jackson, Barbra Streisand, Julio Iglesias, and Steely Dan, and released several solo albums.

Speaking from his home studio in Nashville, Omartian offered a candid take on today's music business and a preview of his upcoming projects.

You started out as a session player and songwriter. Did that influence the way you produce?

Well, I believe there are three types of producers: engineer-producers, musician-producers, and the sort of producers who act as record company liaisons – people who are good at hearing songs and defining things from the public's buying standpoint. I'm that third type, even though I'm a musician. But it's hard to say, too, because the rules of the game are changing, and I don't agree with some of the new rules.

For example?

There was a time when you could go into a record with no preconceived idea of where you might end up. But now projects are framed in terms of what already exists. Labels are more likely to talk in terms like, we need a Backstreet Boys sensibility, or a Wallflowers sensibility, or whatever.

Few would describe you as a confrontational producer. But I can imagine some young punk rocker voicing the same complaint.

[Laughs.] Well, I've always been very passionate about saying the 95% of what I hear is awful, and I'm responsible for some of that myself! By the same token, you always hope you might tap into something new and meaningful. But there is just less of a sense of discovery than there was 30 years ago. I'd love to hear the next Beatles,

but if there were a "next Beatles," it would be a self-conscious attempt to create a new Beatles. We're a bit stuck, I think. That's one of the reasons rap appeals to so many people. It's immediate and stripped-down.

What are your proudest moments?

Well, I like Christopher Cross's first album, partially because when we were making it, everybody was saying, "What are you doing?" Yet it went on to be a huge hit, and John Lennon once said that the song "Sailing" was the most perfectly produced record he'd ever heard. I'm also proud of playing on Steely Dan albums like Pretzel Logic, Katy Lied, and Aja. But I really don't live in the past very much, and reminiscing doesn't usually interest me. If I miss anything, it's the freer environment of the old days.

Is it good that musicians tend to know so much more about recording technology these days? Or do they just know enough to get themselves in trouble?

Well, sometimes an accident is the best thing that can happen, and interesting accidents can come about through partial ignorance. I know there have been times when I've accidentally pressed a button on my computer and created something cool. To my mind, the only problem with the project studio revolution is that it quadruples the amount of music being produced, so there are more records competing for the few

spaces that exist for it to be heard.

Where do you check in on the analog vs. digital debate?

I was very slow to convert to digital, but now I use it and don't know the difference. I like the ease of digital editing, but I don't believe in digitally massaging all the tracks till they're perfect, like so many of my Nashville brethren do. The tracks may be perfect, but they have no soul.

You've been using Yamaha MSP10 monitors.

Yes, the new MSP10s are nice. They're powered speakers, but they don't hype the highs and lows like some of the other powered monitors do. The MSP10's are much more flat and real-sounding. When I play back things I've done on them the results really hold up. The MSP10 is a great speaker.

What are you working on now?

I'm back in the studio with my old buddy Peter Cetera. I'm also putting together a young black vocal group called the Sons of Soul. They have the sound of an old five-voice R&B group like the Temptations, but with modern touches. And I'm finishing an instrumental record with piano versions of songs I've either written or produced. It's not as easy-listening as it might sound – some of it is pretty askew. It should be out on BMG in the summer.