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Art & Music

Making Records: Danny Blume

by [katskill](#) / December 31, 2020 / 0 comments

(Photo by Janet Savage-Blumenfeld)

Spend some time in extended conversation with record producers, as I have in the three installments of this [Making Records](#) series, and you will be likely to conclude that they are, to a person, consummate individuals, Renaissance people with competences and understandings that go beyond their shared profession.

And it makes sense. There is something about the job of producer that is multifaceted, worldly, and panoramic: nuts-and-bolts, hertz-and-volts technical on one level; magical and big-picture *gestalt* on the other. Art, science, and business meet in the person of the producer.

Success is heavily predicated on honest relationships and the right touch with artists at their most vulnerable, exposed, and volatile. It is a field that has seen extreme tumult and economic winnowing in the last two decades. Anyone who has adapted and survived has a better-than-average chance of being a “real head,” as they say these days.

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Enter Danny Blume, a heavy cat for sure, but one with such a light touch you barely notice it when you talk to him. It is a gradual aha as you appreciate how bright and agile is this guy’s mental flashlight — a streamlined, ergonomic halogen torch to my keychain LED. To talk to him is to see further into the cracks in things.

A Woodstock-based Grammy- and Juno-winning producer, the Ohio native Blume succeeded first as a guitarist, recording and touring Kid Creole and the Coconuts for over ten years and working with countless other names you might know: Iggy Pop, The Lounge Lizards, Jill Sobule, Medeski, Martin, and Wood, Jewel, Lisa Loeb.



Blume launched his first studio in Brooklyn in the year 2000 — a profession and a place right on the cusp of violent change. He soon relocated to the Woodstock area and opened a solo venture, Hidden Quarry Studio, which he has recently transplanted into a new structure of his own design.

JB: You built the new Hidden Quarry yourself. Like, with your hands. For some reason, that inspires my confidence in your command of the physics of everything, including sound, and in the design of everything, including songs.

DB: I grew up around a ton of hippie carpenter musicians in the Midwest. They were always building things, houses, instruments, toys, whatever. I naturally started doing that too in my teens. My dad instilled this idea in me that anything I could think of doing I could do, if only I tried hard enough. Very American, I suppose.

When I became entranced with music at age eight it never occurred to me that I might not achieve any goal I set out to. Of course the reality of life was a bit different but I still live by the same credo. I'm really not a great carpenter, but I'm adequate and in lean times I have always supplemented my earnings with that.

Building the studio was a major dream for me. I have always wanted to build a house, and this house is a temple to music. I designed it myself to flow exactly how I like to work and how musicians like to work. I hired a great sound treatment consultant for general advice: control room dimensions, etc. I hired an electrical consultant to work with my electrician and make all the power properly isolated and grounded to minimize problems. I was basically the boss and the assistant. It's really wonderful to finally have a laboratory that is just how I want it. The studio is an instrument, and it has to be tuned and maintained.

Recording is very much like carpentry or building anything beautiful and functional. It's mostly prep and steady, focused work. The inspiration part is always there, but building a record is a methodical, meticulous process fueled by emotional mystery and magical math. We sculpt sound, moving

air to elicit an emotional response from ourselves and others. It really is about as magic as life gets.

JB: You once told me that in your years as a touring player you sort of caught the end of “the good times.”

DB: When I moved to New York City in 1988 I had only ever played in a bar. I didn’t know anyone, not a soul. It was quite difficult at first, but of course I had no doubt that I would soon be a very famous and wealthy hired-gun guitarist. My first gig was with Kid Creole and the Coconuts, and pan Latino/rock/funk/art/dance band with horns and dancers and costumes and madness. They were in fact one of my favorites (I had many), and it was pretty much a magical dream to get hired to tour and record with them.



I just assumed that they were an unknown, obscure art project that just my friends and I knew about, but I quickly discovered that they were bona-fide rock stars in Europe, South America, and parts of Asia. The tours were extravagant in an old-school rock-star kind of way, complete with roadies, multiple busses, costume and makeup crew, after parties, luminaries, sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

It was amazing and grueling. After that I did several tours with several bands of similar stature (Gavin Friday, Lounge Lizards) in foreign lands. But this was in fact the declining decade of all this, and big changes were afoot. The employment prospects for sidemen like me were already dwindling.

I’m happy I did it. I probably did it for five years too long. I love playing, but I like making records far more. It allows me to have a home life and relationship and (gasp!) kids, while still making a living and spending my life making music.

J.B. Producer can be a vague term, covering everything from an old school electrical engineer all the way to something more like career manager/guru. How do you define your position on that spectrum, and what kind of relationship do you offer clients?

DB: The way I work is very much about understanding what the artist needs to thrive, and providing that. Sometimes it means programming, playing, co-writing, choosing the right musicians, tuning the guitars, suggesting sounds and parts, writing horn charts. Sometimes it means simply engineering and listening, letting the artist or band work it out, only speaking if there is a creative log jam.

I'll never be stingy with ideas, but I try very hard to not say things just to get my personality on the record or have songwriting credit or whatever. It's all about serving the music and sometimes that means keeping quiet.

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JB: While you have done a ton of label-footed records, the majority of your clients these days are self-financed. On one level there's something I really like about the idea (I would!) of a mature artist in a post-industry age looking at recording as a personal mission, bringing in "the best help they can afford" to make something fine and special but also market-competitive out of their songs.

DB: Absolutely. This is a huge deal. As a producer, your boss is the person or corporation paying you. This can put you at odds with the artist if the label's vision is different than theirs, which it often is. It's a tough position to be in. You need to form a creative bond with the artist but you are beholden to the label to produce a "hit." If the A&R team is amazing, then it's great, but that's not often the case. With the artist financing the record, you are working for the artist and I'm much more comfortable with that. The artist has the last word creatively and I believe that is as it should be. There are certainly downsides. Mainly, the money.

JB: For most artists, the dream of recouping recording expenses, let alone profiting, is just that. Aside from syncs (which my friend Rhett Miller described as a Christmas bonus, not a living), there's almost no Holy Grail for records any more. So, are audio professionals living off the lavish personal indulgences of people of independent means? As the seminal guitarist Marc Ribot has argued, is the music industry increasingly and exclusively for the well-to-do? If so, what are some of the consequences?

DB: Marc Ribot is never wrong, but that assessment is a bit cranky. Having been around for the alleged glory days, I can say that musicians have always been screwed. The old-fashioned dream of the magic record deal that would pluck an undiscovered genius from the gaping maw of poverty and propel them into the shining palace of fame and fortune was always a myth. Yes, it did happen, but the dark side of those business deals are well documented and legion.

Old-fashioned record deals destroyed more careers than they created. I think that there are just as many pop stars today as there ever were. The money generated was always stolen by the people at the top, and that is true today as well. It's just different.

One of the differences is that access to making a record is vastly expanded. It used to be literally impossible to create something sonically competitive without prohibitively large amounts of money. Clearly no longer the case. So of course the market is flooded with more music than we can possibly digest. Of course the cream rises to the top if the artist is able and willing to promote. That's another story.

Contrary to popular opinion, the artists and writers hold all the power in this game, which they are losing badly. The hurdle is that in order to wield that power they must work like an ant colony with one mind, Essentially unionize informally. Step 1, they need to stop giving away their work for free or next to it. Step 2, they win. The end. The music economy would turn 180 degrees. But of course this requires musicians, who historically apply magical thinking to their business models, to work in unison. Perhaps an impossible task.

JB: There is a paradox in your work. You have deep credentials in experimental, avant-garde, art music, yet you are adamant that your main value these days is pop — suggesting even that you attempt to find the "pop," the hook, even in a skronk jazz record.

DB: In order to answer that, I have to first define "pop" as I (and only I) use it. To me it means appealing to the populace. That can be Captain Beefheart, Suicide, or Justin Bieber. To me it means the music must have something that humans can naturally latch onto. It's not a genre or a style, it's an attitude towards composition and arrangement. I think perhaps the reason the alleged avant-garde (oh how I hate the pretension of that term) is comfortable with me is because I respond to it the same way I would to a folk song.

I look for the emotion, the soul, the magic, and the hook. Anything can be a hook. It could be a dog barking. If it repeats, it draws you in. The listener becomes a participant because they get it. It happens again and again.

Repetition brings immortality and we all want that. Cycles and patterns mimic the rhythms of our body, the repeating cycles of the earth, the tides, the fluctuation of sound waves, everything. When we play a beat and that pattern repeats we time travel for those moments. It's physics, math, art, and magic. And it's pop.

So, yeah, it's all the same to me. The language and culture of any given style doesn't matter to me. Nor does dissonance and sophistication, nor does simplicity. It is the feeling that matters.

JB: One can argue until the actual cows come home over whether we have a live music scene in the Hudson valley, but the fact of our studio scene is beyond dispute. Collaborative? Competitive? How do you experience it?

DB: It is rich indeed. Considering the size and rural setting, there is a stunning amount of musical talent up here. It's weighted more towards producers and studios and musicians than live. The live music scene, while good, is not sustaining, and the critical mass of audience for live gigs isn't quite there yet, though it's clearly growing. I'd love to name check all the top-flight producers and studios, but I'd probably leave someone out and kick myself for it.

Competition is a constant in the music world and it's healthy. I embrace it. Someone will always be perceived to be doing better than you. Deal with it. Learn from it. We lift each other up and we compete. Collaboration and competition are not mutually exclusive.

JB: Have you already felt the business effects of the Covid upriver flight? Are you excited to see who lands here, who will be looking to make records here?

DB: Yes and yes. It's remarkable. It very much feels like the gentrification of Brooklyn in the Nineties and onward, but vastly slower. Decades instead of years. There is always a sweet spot with gentrification where a good balance is reached and it's quite exciting. Then sadly the scales tip and that which we loved is gone, old communities pushed out, newer richer ones displacing them.

There are positives and negatives to it, mostly the former at the moment.

This area is both bolstered and hindered by the Woodstock nostalgia thing. Worship of The Band and their deservedly incredible influence has been dominant and that can cut two ways.

I'm not a nostalgia guy and I want this area to be associated with the new music coming out of it. Don't get me wrong here, I too worship The Band. Levon's Ramble was an incredible thing. I was fortunate to attend a bunch of them and even play at least one. All the folks that were involved in that scene are still killing it every day. I want that to thrive, but I hope the Woodstock scene will get recognition for the current sounds coming out of it every day.

Learn more about Danny Blume and Hidden Quarry Studio at dannyblume.com.

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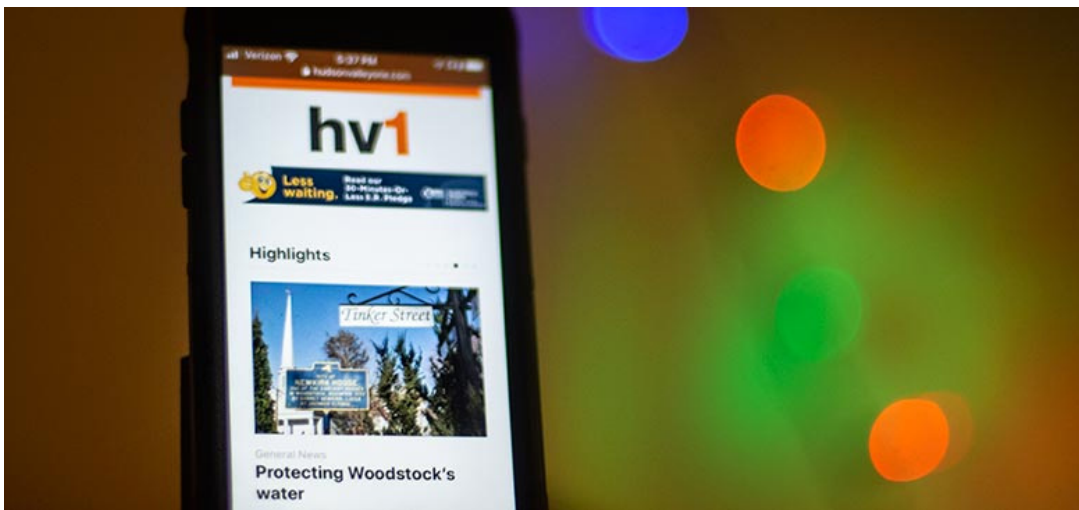


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