

# GLYN JOHNS

BRAD TOLINSKI

## 'I'M PRETTY SURE I WAS THE FIRST FREELANCE ENGINEER'

In sports they say the most valuable athlete is not necessarily the headline-grabbing superstar, but rather the team player who elevates everyone on the field. By that definition, producer/engineer Glyn Johns has been rock & roll's MVP for close to five decades.

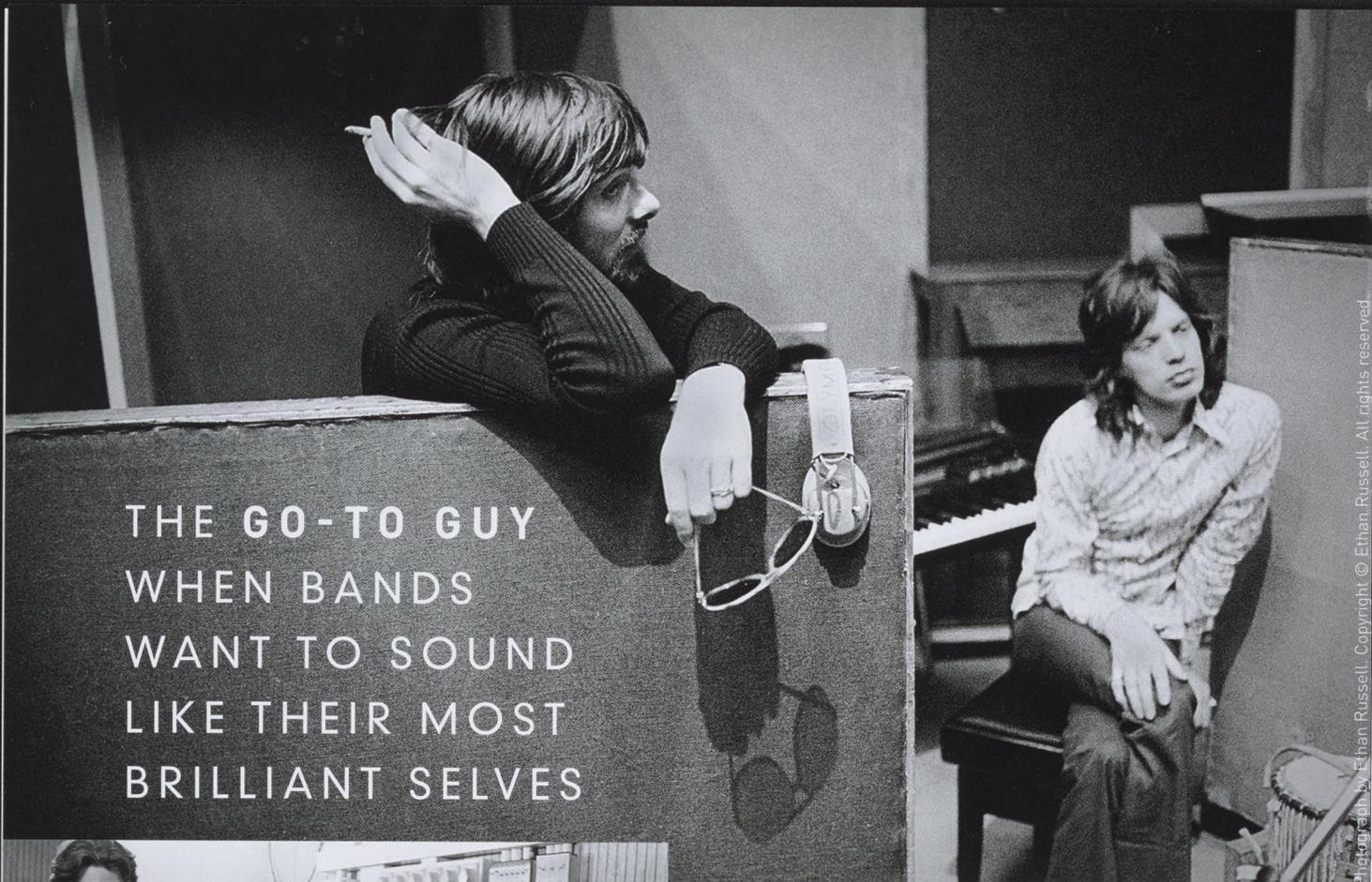
Even at a glance, his discography is extraordinary. As a recording technician, he has captured some of the most exciting and dramatic performances in music history, including the Who's "My Generation," the Rolling Stones' "Gimme Shelter," and Led Zeppelin's "Dazed and Confused." As a producer, he's worked his subtle magic on the first three albums by the Eagles, *Who's Next* by the Who, *A Nod Is as Good as a Wink... to a Blind Horse* by the Faces, and *Slowhand* by Eric Clapton, among many others. Of Johns' work, Pete Townshend has said, "We were just getting astounded at the sounds he was producing."

What unifies these groundbreaking recordings, however,

is not a *signature* sound. It's the uncanny way Johns is able to make artists sound like the very best version of themselves.

"The reality is, I was fortunate enough to work with people who were innovative with the music they were writing and the sounds they were making," said Johns. "My job was to simply capture what they were doing. Perhaps my contribution was my ability to understand the qualities being presented so I could record them properly."

Born in Epsom, Surrey, England, on February 15, 1942, Johns left school to begin an apprenticeship in 1959 at London's IBC Studios, considered one of the finest independent recording studios in Europe. His training was detailed and rigorous, and it was here that the young man would learn the craft that would serve him well for decades to come. In a few short years, he went from fetching tea to engineering sessions with some of Britain's most exciting new bands, including the Kinks, Procol Harum, the Small



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Faces, and Traffic. Additionally, he would work with the Rolling Stones across a span of fifteen years, beginning with their earliest recordings and continuing through virtually every session during that period, including 1967's *Their Satanic Majesties Request* and 1968's *Beggars Banquet*.

"The older engineers that had trained me didn't understand the emerging rock culture and didn't want anything to do with it, and I *very much* wanted something to do with it," said Johns, laughing. "Because of the changing of the guard, there were opportunities being thrown my way because I understood the music being presented. By 1963, the average age of a guy on a session might've been 18 or 19, which was unheard of and very exciting."

At the age of 22, Johns achieved the lofty position of Senior Engineer at IBC, but felt he had gone as far as he could go there. He took a break from studio work to pursue a singing career, but after releasing a single that, in his

words, "died a deserved death," reconsidered his options. British Invasion megaproducer Shel Talmy pestered him to come back and work with him at IBC, but Johns had little interest in returning to the grind of his old job and resisted. Talmy then suggested something rather unconventional: He offered to pay Johns as an independent engineer.

"I went to IBC to ask their permission to work as a freelancer," said Johns. "They admitted that they had lost a lot of business since I left and agreed. I'm pretty sure I was the first freelance engineer in the world, and was the only one for quite some years. It allowed me to be self-employed and I could pick and choose whom I worked with. In the ensuing years I got quite a good reputation and worked with a lot of great artists and producers and learned quite a bit in the process."

But Johns was still not quite satisfied. After many years of making everyone else sound great, he desired more creative input and wanted to produce. The only problem was that studio protocol long mandated that engineers remained engineers and did not become producers.

"The worlds were leagues apart," Johns said. "I often had a part in the production, but none of the bands that I worked with, say, the Stones, for example, would ever think of letting me produce—it just wasn't done."

Fate, however, intervened in the form of Steve Miller's 1968 debut album, *Children of the Future*. Miller was supposed to self-produce, but the recording sessions meandered for several weeks until it was mutually agreed to allow Johns to take control. A week later, the album was finished and Johns

was off and running as a full-fledged producer, overseeing seminal albums by Eric Clapton, the Faces, the Who, the Beatles, Joan Armatrading, Boz Scaggs, and Nanci Griffith. As a recording technician, he continued to do outstanding work with Led Zeppelin and the Stones. Additionally, he developed an elegant method of miking drums in stereo that is still widely used in most studios today.

His work with the drums is only one of many attributes that has impressed the Faces keyboardist Ian McLagan: "Glyn Johns was amazing to work with," McLagan recalled. "He made it so quick and easy. He was a big part of our sound and not to be forgotten. It was difficult to replicate our live sound in the studio. But when Johns started producing us on the last two albums, he found a way. He would walk into the studio and listen to the drums, the bass, the guitar, and the piano, and he would tweak the amp a little bit or he would say, 'Turn that down.' And he would move the mics, on the drums particularly, so that it sounded like the drums he'd heard live. That's really his secret: He stands behind the drummer to hear how the drum set sounds in the studio and replicates that. A lot of engineers and producers try to get a sound in the control room that they haven't even heard yet. But Johns would ask, 'How does it sound out there? Why does the drummer play like that?' His way of miking drums is now a standard; it's known as the 'Glyn Johns Method.' It's quite mathematic and exact and involves only four mics."

While it is tempting to think of Johns as quintessentially British, his contribution to American music has been equally significant. As producer of the first three Eagles albums—*Eagles* (1972), *Desperado* (1973), and *On the Border* (1974)—he and the band created a new musical template: a fusion of rock, country, and folk, topped with exquisite four-part harmonies that set the table for what became known as the Southern California sound, a crisp, clean, vocal-heavy production style that continues to influence adult alternative rock and most contemporary country music.

"The Eagles were an interesting combination of musicians," said Johns. "You had Bernie Leadon, one of the finest acoustic guitarists I've ever heard, playing country on one side of the stage, and on the other side was Glenn Frey playing straight-out rock & roll. When I first saw them, I wasn't sure if it worked. It was when I heard them sing a ballad with a single acoustic guitar and their

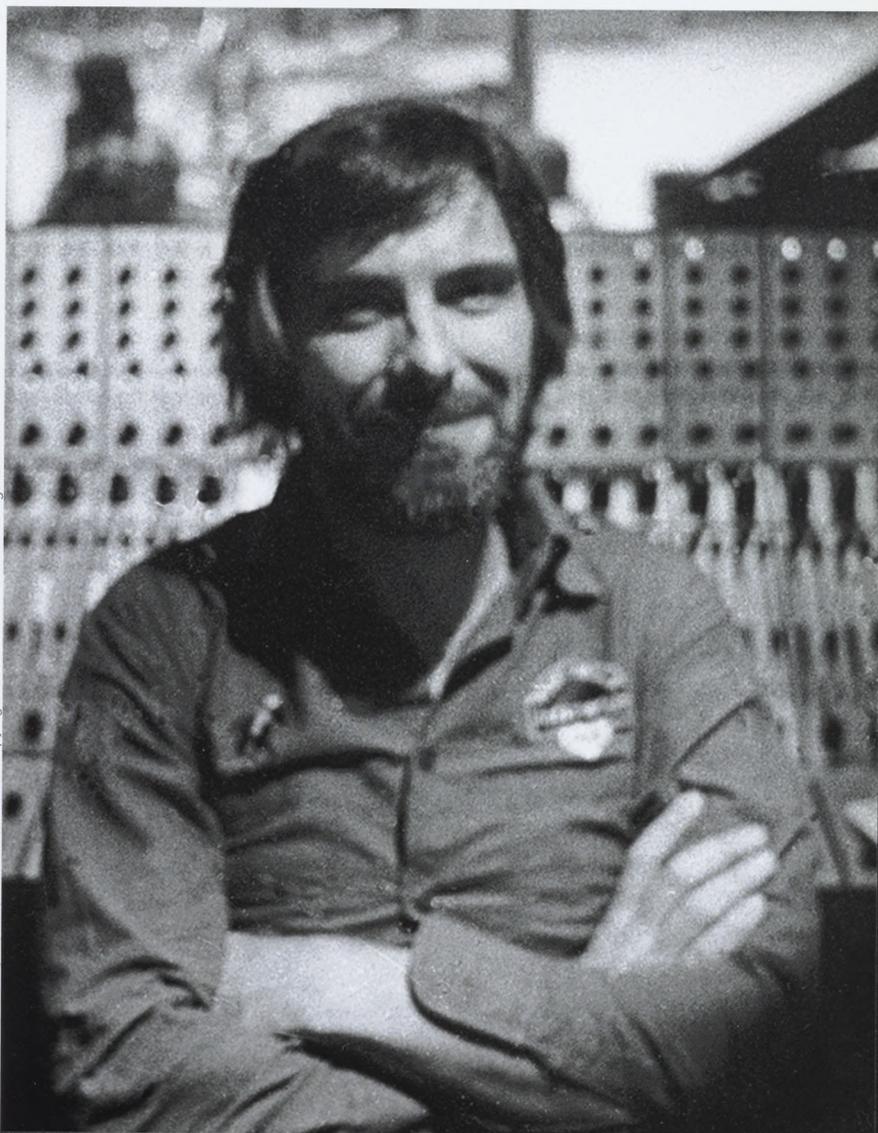
four-part harmony that bells went off very loudly in my head. I tried to take advantage of what I thought was their massive advantage, which was their incredible vocal sound, and build around that. The Eagles had three great lead singers—Frey, Don Henley, and Randy Meisner—that gave them tremendous choice and flexibility. And their songs were bloody good, too."

Johns' work in the next decade and beyond would include mixing *Combat Rock* for the Clash and producing Bob Dylan's *Real Live*, as well as return engagements with the Who, Pete Townshend, Ronnie Lane, and Clapton, and work with John Hiatt, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Emmylou Harris, Linda Ronstadt, and many others. Most recently, Johns produced the exquisite-sounding *Ashes & Fire* for Ryan Adams.

Despite his accomplishments, Johns insists the artist reigns supreme: "You have to help an artist make their statement," he says. "It's my job to facilitate that. I have big respect for musicians . . . without them I'd be mowing the lawns."

Spoken like a true MVP.

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP Johns with the Stones, Olympic Studios, 1970; with the Beatles, 1970. THIS PAGE In the studio.



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