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Reduced By Rick Rubin:

Production Process, Pitfalls, and Impacts

by

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INTRODUCTION

"I don't even know what a traditional producer is or does," Rick Rubin once told the Washington Post.[1] Many people could not provide a very precise answer if asked what a record producer does, but it may seem surprising that one of the most successful producers of all time would not have a ready answer. Since the mid-1980s Rubin has produced over 100 albums, many of which are platinum, and just as many of which are highly critically acclaimed.

My aim in this paper is to determine quite specifically what he contributes to the records he produces. What does "Produced by Rick Rubin" mean, exactly? Through analysis of his records and other sources, I explore the different roles he played in their creation, why he and his records are so successful, and how they are significant in the history of popular music production. I discern some of his strengths and flaws as a producer, and how other producers can learn from them.

WHAT IS PRODUCTION?

Music journalists and enthusiasts often records for "good production," or criticize them for bad. What exactly does this entail? Often people are referring mostly to the instantaneous fidelity and sonic impact of a record, which can be more directly attributed to the engineer than the producer.[2] This is still one of the most important aspects of a production, and even though the producer is not the one twisting the knobs, the engineer's work typically is aligned with the producer's direction. However, a qualitative evaluation of an album's overall "production" must

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[1] J. Freedom Du Lac, "The 'Song Doctor' Is In," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2006, accessed November 28, 2010.
[2] Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 163-70.

also consider many other factors, such as the selection of songs, arrangement choices, and things that are less clearly defined, such as cohesiveness, ability to stand the test of time, and how well it captures the artists' "essence".

No two producers are alike, and the same producer can play very different roles on two different projects.[3] Some are deeply involved with the music, actively and frequently giving input to the artist on how to play a song, even doing instrumental arrangements.[4] Others may relegate themselves to organizational duties and keeping the sessions on time and budget.[5] A producer's working style can be influenced by pressures from the label or the industry to shape a record a certain way. Always, though, a producer must adapt to the project: he or she must be able to deal with the personalities and idiosyncratic processes of the artist, and manage the working dynamics with the engineer and studio staff, record label, and anyone else involved. This may be why Rick Rubin says he "doesn't know what a traditional producer is or does"—because the job requires originality, and a great variety and flexibility of skills.

The role of the producer has greatly changed through the years, as technology and the music industry have changed.[6] As record production has evolved from the documentation of a live performance to the construction of an event that may never

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[3] Ibid.

[4] George Martin, in particular, is known for his major role in crafting the Beatles' arrangements, and being very involved (even responsible) for some of their most legendary sonic innovations. Further reading: Mark Lewisohn, *The Beatles Recording Sessions* (New York: Harmony Books, 1990); George Martin and Jeremy Hornsby, *All You Need Is Ears: The inside Personal Story of the Genius Who Created the Beatles* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); George Martin and William Pearson, *With a Little Help from My Friends: The Making of Sgt. Pepper* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).

[5] This style of producton is the more traditional role of the producer, pre-George Martin. Further reading: Ted Fox, *In the Groove* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Dunstan Prial, *The Producer: John Hammond and the Soul of American Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

[6] Virgil Moorefield, *The Producer as Composer* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005).

have happened exactly the way the record tells it, the lines have blurred between producer, arranger, songwriter/composer, and performer. Often, producers could arguably be credited as composers for the way they affect records.

METHODOLOGY

In dealing with Rick Rubin specifically, my most important sources are the records he produced. Since he has produced over one hundred albums, I have carefully selected a representative few to discuss in depth. Each record I address illuminates something important about Rubin's production work. For some it may be a sonic feature that remains continuous across many Rubin records. Other times I illustrate musical features that are closely tied in with stories of what happens behind the scenes. Some of the records I discuss are some of Rubin's most commercially successful and critically acclaimed; others less so. My selections represent several of the many genres within which Rubin has worked, and several different stages of his career. Most of my analysis focuses on these few records, but I also reference other records for comparison purposes: to demonstrate continuities and differences among Rubin's productions in relation to each other, to compare with other records by the same artists not produced by Rubin, and with production conventions at the time of the records' release.

My musical analysis focuses on describing production aesthetics—a concept around which there is not really an established academic discourse, and which is difficult to define in concrete terms. Elements of production aesthetics include the combined visions of a producer, artist, and engineer, and their distinct processes of how to translate these visions to the medium of a record. Each of these players has a

different job in realizing this aesthetic. The artist has the initial vision and writes the music; the producer must know what to do in order to translate it optimally into a recording. The engineer must provide the technical skill to make this translation happen as seamlessly and efficiently as possible. To describe Rubin's role in crafting such aesthetics, I primarily consider elements of the records that are commonly affected by producers' decisions: arrangements, song forms, distinctive performance choices, overall timbral quality, and mixing decisions.

Rick Rubin is often described as favoring a stripped-down sound.[7] Many of his most notable records emphasize performance and live authenticity, seeking to recreate the feel of an artist playing for you in your own living room. They avoid excessively dense arrangements and effects like reverb. Through the records I study, we see how Rubin developed and implemented these aesthetic preferences in different musical situations. We see how this is not a rigid production doctrine that Rubin imposes on the artists with whom he works; rather, he is usually adaptive to their artistic visions and helpful to bring out their distinctive styles. However, we will also see some cases in which Rubin's ways of working were less successful in bringing out the best in the artist, and why.

Not all of a producer's impact on a record can be heard with the naked ear. To better understand what Rubin has contributed to these records, I have researched the stories behind each record, including video footage from the studios, interviews with parties involved, and secondary literature. Some albums have much more information available than others. For instance, there is an entire documentary of the making of Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, and other albums'

[7] Jake Brown, *Rick Rubin: In the Studio* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2009), 3-16.

processes are well documented in books. For other productions there is less information, and we are left to rely more on the records themselves and other contextual knowledge. In any case, combining written sources with close listening of the albums illuminates some of the dynamics between Rick Rubin, the artists, the engineers, the record companies, and the studios, and how Rubin interacts with many other factors that can affect the final product.

My studies of Rubin are augmented by contextual research of other producers, and production history and techniques: biographies, memoirs (George Martin, Quincy Jones); interviews with professional recordists (some in collections, such as those by Howard Massey, others in online sources, magazines, and videos); studio logs (Mark Lewisohn, John McDermott); documentaries and assorted video footage, and my own recording studio experiences.[8] Surprisingly little academic study has been devoted to record production, but notable work has been done by Zak on the record-making process, Moorefield on the changing role of the producer, Edward Kealy on the sociology of engineers, Joseph Schloss on hip hop production, and Eric Tamm on producer Brian Eno.[9]

This paper is divided into three main sections. The first deals with Rubin's years with Def Jam. Looking at some of his hip hop productions, I address what

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[8] Martin, *All You Need is Ears;* Martin, *With a Little Help From My Friends;* Quincy Jones, *Q: The Autobiography of Quincy Jones* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Howard Massey, *Behind the Glass : Top Record Producers Tell How They Craft the Hits* (San Francisco: Miller Freeman Books, 2000); Mark Lewisohn, *The Beatles Recording Sessions* (New York: Harmony Books, 1988); John McDermott, *Jimi Hendrix Sessions: The Complete Studio Recording Sessions, 1963-1970* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995).

[9] Zak, *The Poetics of Rock;* Moorefield, *The Producer as Composer;* Edward Robert Kealy, *The Real Rock Revolution: Sound Mixers, Social Inequality, and the Aesthetics of Popular Music Production* (Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1974, Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1975); Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*, Music/Culture (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Eric Tamm, *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989).

sonic innovations and business decisions helped elevate him quickly to the top of the music industry, and how these early productions show the development of his production aesthetics. Second, I delve into Rubin's productions in his Def American/American Recordings years, discussing what he brought to some of his most successful rock and metal albums, and some of the specific ways he and his artists and teams continued to push the sonic envelope. I also show that especially in this time period, Rubin's best productions were often the ones he was personally most passionate about. Third, I challenge some of the problems with Rick Rubin's production work: his hands-off approach in many of his non-top-priority projects, the controversy surrounding some of his productions, and the role Rubin and his albums play in the "loudness wars."

RICK RUBIN BIOGRAPHY

Frederick Jay Rubin was born and raised in Lido Beach, Long Island, in 1963.[10] He was the only child of wealthy and adoring parents, Mickey and Linda, who supported him in all his interests, such as magic tricks as a young child, and rock and roll as a teenager. His favorite bands were AC/DC and Aerosmith, but he also liked obscure punk bands. In high school he began going to punk shows in New York City, while his mother would wait in the car to drive him home afterwards. He enrolled in NYU's film school, where he did little coursework but grew in his passion for music. Rubin's taste spread from rock and punk to hip hop He began deejaying and met DJ Jazzy Jay, who taught him how to make beats. He produced records out

[10] Biographical information compiled from: Brown, *Rick Rubin: In the Studio*; Alex Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam: The Radical Rise of Russell Simmons and Rick Rubin* (London: Omnibus, 2002); Stacy Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.* (New York: One World, 2005); Barry Walters, "The King of Rap," *The Village Voice*, 4 Nov 1986, 19-25.

of his dorm room for artists like T La Rock and LL Cool J, when he first came up with the Def Jam logo.[11]

When Rubin met up-and-coming hip hop promoter Russell Simmons in 1984, they officially formed Def Jam Records. Rubin and Simmons each invested only $4,000, but within months they had achieved enough buzz to get a six- or seven-figure distribution deal with CBS Records.[12] Def Jam quickly became wildly successful and was instrumental in bringing hip hop into the mainstream.

Due to creative differences, Rubin parted ways with Def Jam in 1988. He moved to Los Angeles and formed a new company, Def American Recordings (later American Recordings), in order to focus on heavy metal, hard rock and hardcore rap. Simmons, meanwhile, was still deeply involved with hip hop but had begun to embrace smooth R&B more than Rubin wanted.[13]

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Rubin continued to expand his repertoire, applying his studio expertise in still more genres, expanding into pop and country. He worked as much with seasoned studio veterans like Johnny Cash, Mick Jagger, Tom Petty and his own biggest influence, AC/DC, as well as with new acts that he helped popularize, such as System of a Down. Since 2007 he has been a co-president of Columbia Records, and he still personally produces many albums.

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[11] This was before Def Jam Records existed.
[12] Reports give a wide range of numbers: $600,000 (Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam*, 39); $2 million (Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc*., 60).
[13] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 151-3.

RUBIN AND DEF JAM

Rubin's success as a hip hop producer began with smart business decisions, but perhaps what set him apart most was his sensibility and perspective as an outsider and a rocker. His sonic approach to hip hop records was informed by his musical and personal backgrounds, and some rock-infused hip hop records that Rubin produced proved pivotal in bringing hip hop into the mainstream.

Even in his rocker days growing up, he had always been intrigued by the hip hop scene at his school:

> All the black kids [at school] liked rap records, and one week their favorite would be one group, and then a new single would come out and they would have a new favorite group. It was that immediate. It was a very immediate, progressive audience. It was very exciting, and you could be a part of it. You could go and hear it and see it and feel it and touch it.[14]

When he moved to New York City for college, he discovered just how vibrant this hip hop scene was, and it began increasingly to dominate his musical attention; he would go very often to hip hop clubs like Negril in the East Village, the Roxy in Chelsea, Harlem World, and Disco Fever in the Bronx.[15] At these clubs, he would often be the only white person. He began to DJ and play hip hop records himself, first at parties that he organized himself in his NYU dorm, and then eventually at clubs, where he began to meet the people who would become his important career connections.

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[14] Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam,* 23.
[15] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 6.

T-LA ROCK AND JAZZY JAY, "IT'S YOURS": ENTRY INTO THE INDUSTRY

Rick Rubin produced his first hip hop record, T La Rock and Jazzy Jay's "It's Yours", in 1984. By then he had already met a good number of people in the New York hip hop and underground music scenes, such as Ed Bahlman, owner of small independent label 99 Records, who Rubin convinced to release the EP by his own band, Hose. Another figure he met was Arthur Baker, owner of PartyTime Records, who he got to release "It's Yours". The distribution deal they signed was a big risk for Rubin, and he initially lost money—his parents had invested $5,000 in the production of the song, and he essentially sold the song off to Baker for $3,000.[16]

However, the song gained some buzz, and became a big step in Rubin's career. The record's jacket was as important for Rubin as the song was; he imprinted it with his first design of the Def Jam logo, and included his dorm room address.[17] As the song spread, he began receiving demos from all sorts of rappers looking for a record deal, even though he didn't actually own a label yet. Many were bogus, but one of them was LL Cool J, who turned out to be one of Rubin's most important artists of his early years.

The buzz that grew for "It's Yours" is also what attracted the attention of Russell Simmons. Rubin had heard of Simmons' promotion skills, as well, and finally the two men met at a party. Simmons was surprised to learn that the man who had produced "It's Yours" was white. (LL Cool J, and probably many other New York hip hop figures, had the same reaction.) Simmons and Rubin quickly became

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[16] Ibid., 28-9.
[17] Note that Def Jam Records did not yet exist; Rubin made up this logo to represent himself.

friends and visited each other's workspaces. They shared a passion for the music, and a frustration that they and their artists were not being adequately compensated for their hard work. They decided to form their own label in order to avoid having to rely on other labels any more.

The Sound of "It's Yours"

"It's Yours" was a groundbreaking song in terms of production. Rubin was dissatisfied with rap recordings up until that point; he felt that the records coming out were too glitzy and too close to disco, and that no one had yet captured on a record the pure energy of what he was hearing in the clubs. Rubin set out to produce "It's Yours" with a stripped-down arrangement, driven purely by vocals and percussion layers, with no melodic instruments. Just rhythm and rhymes. On the record's jacket, Rubin printed "Reduced by Rick Rubin," reflecting this aesthetic.

By 1984 hip hop producers had begun using drum machines extensively, and machines like the Roland TR-808 offered kick drum sounds that were booming, with more sub-bass than a recording of a real kick drum could offer. The technique that Rubin employed on "It's Yours" is now a staple of hip hop beats: he constructed his kick drum out of multiple samples playing simultaneously: one of a booming sub-bass kick and at least one with more midrange presence, a bit of a clicking sound, panned slightly out to either side from center. This technique gives the kick much more presence and fullness; to the indiscriminate listener, it sounds like just one drum. Rubin (or the engineer) employed a similar idea with the snare, layering several different snare sounds with presence in different frequencies, and extra hits on specific beats for emphasis. Foregoing instruments such as synth or bass, he added

more rhythmic layers: constant hi-hat sixteenth-notes panned hard left and right, and a clapping pattern halfway right. What results is a beat that is hard-hitting but still sparse, leaving plenty of room in the mix for T La Rock's vocals, Jazzy Jay's scratching (which moves all over the stereo spectrum), and backing vocals yelling the song's title phrase.

With "It's Yours," Rubin proved his abilities for moving up in the hip hop world. He took risks that ended up paying off, and he established a production standard that he continued to develop for years to come.

RUN-DMC, "WALK THIS WAY": SHAPING THE DIRECTION OF HIP HOP

When Rubin teamed up with Simmons, by default he became involved with Run-DMC. They were the star act of Simmons's management company, Rush Productions. Run, a.k.a. Joey Simmons, is Russell's younger brother. Though Run-DMC was never actually on the Def Jam label, Rick Rubin eventually ended up producing their records after he teamed up with Simmons.

When Rubin first met Run-DMC in 1984, DMC was particularly impressed with Rubin's passion for both rap and rock, and his general rebelliousness. [18] When the group was recording their second album, *King of Rock*, they were growing increasingly frustrated with their producer Larry Smith; they felt Smith and their label Profile records put dampers on their creative control, and they were dissatisfied with

[18] Ronin Ro, *Raising Hell: The Reign, Ruin, and Redemption of Run-DMC and Jam Master Jay* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 98.

how the album turned out.[19] Meanwhile, Rubin had begun coming to their sessions, and he made an appearance on the *King of Rock* album on guitar.

On their next album, *Raising Hell*, Smith was gone and Rubin became their official producer. After the lukewarm reception of *King of Rock*, Simmons decided to give the group somewhat more creative control, and Jam Master Jay played a bigger role in creating the beats. However, one of the main hits from the album, the remake of Aerosmith's "Walk This Way", was entirely Rubin's idea. The group often freestyled over the loop of the drum beat at the beginning of the Aerosmith song, but had allegedly never listened to the rest of the song. Rubin, excited to hear this beat, played them the full song, and suggested they do a remake. Run and DMC were opposed, calling it "some hillbilly shit," but Jam Master Jay agreed with Rubin that it would be a good way to expand their audiences. Rubin called up Aerosmith, and they agreed to collaborate on the remake. Singer Steven Tyler and guitarist Joe Perry came to the studio, and for the first time an established rock group and an up-and-coming rap group were physically working together, not via a sample. [20]

Though Run-DMC was accustomed to rapping over a loop of Joey Kramer's drums, Rubin recreated the drumbeat with a drum machine for the remake. This version keeps the same kick, snare, and hi-hat pattern as Kramer's original recording, but with the noticeably different timbre of sampled drums, with heavier hits and a short gated-reverb sound on the snare. Effectively, this subtle change in sound translates the same rhythm into a hip hop aesthetic. Similarly, Joe Perry's guitar line is lower in the mix in the remake than the original; it also has a slightly cleaner tone,

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[19] Ibid., 98-103.
[20] Ibid., 136-8.

with less distortion and midrange. This lighter tone keeps the guitars from dominating the song, and keeps the focus on Run-DMC. Though Aerosmith are along for the ride, the rappers are the song's center of attention.

For Rubin, "Walk This Way" was also a chance to realize a lifelong dream of his own, to work with one of his favorite bands. Though he had already begun to make a name for himself as a clever businessman, he was still only 21 and very new to the industry. The thrill of working with Aerosmith, and gaining credit in the rock sphere, was probably as much of a driving factor for Rubin as money and new audiences.

The music video for "Walk this Way" does not attempt to veil its symbolism: the two groups are practicing in adjacent rehearsal rooms and getting annoyed with each other's noise. Run-DMC begins to play "Walk This Way", to Steven Tyler's confusion. Tyler literally breaks through the wall to sing the chorus, and suddenly both groups are onstage in front of a large crowd. By the end of the song, they have become friends and are dancing in step. This happily-ever-after imagery makes a bigger statement than the song itself. Run-DMC had already accepted rock influences into their music (albeit perhaps with label pressure), but for Aerosmith to dance arm in arm with Run-DMC on video was to publicly endorse the legitimacy of rap music. Aerosmith had been at a low point in their career, and they were freshly clean from addiction. This collaboration was as much a chance for them to refresh their image and make a comeback with new audiences as it was to bring Run-DMC into the mainstream. As Greg Wahl puts it, Aerosmith was accepting "the power of rap simultaneously to corrupt and revitalize their song, just as traditional rhythm and

blues was simultaneously corrupted and revitalized by British and American hard rock and heavy metal in the 70s and 80s."[21]

Raising Hell and "Walk this Way" were both enormous successes commercially.[22] Both Run-DMC and Aerosmith benefitted, Rick Rubin benefitted as much as anyone. He was making a name for himself and his label in the hip hop world, but he had also gotten a foot in the door to the world of mainstream rock. Both the song and the album were instrumental in moving hip hop into the mainstream, and they brought success to a hip hop/rock hybrid that Rubin continued to cultivate.

However, with this success come questions of artistic integrity in Rubin's production. Run-DMC first was attracted to Rubin because of his rebelliousness and enthusiasm. Soon, though, they expressed frustration that Rubin pushed them too far in the rock direction.[23] The Beastie Boys similarly took issue with Rubin going in and overdubbing arena-rock drums and guitars on some tracks on *Licensed to Ill* without consulting them.[24] For one thing, these complaints show that in not knowing when to stop adding guitars, Rubin had not yet fully developed the minimalist philosophy he later perfected. The bigger issue is, in pushing "Walk this Way" even though Run and DMC were at first strongly opposed, did he do what was best for the project? This is a dilemma every producer must face sometimes—the artist's vision vs. the producer's judgment of what will sell (often compounded with yet a different

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[21] Wahl, Greg. "'I Fought the Law (And I Cold Won!)': Hip-Hop in the Mainstream." *College Literature,* Vol. 26, No. 1, Cultural Violence (Winter, 1999), 104.
[22] "Walk This Way" peaked at number 4 on the charts. Billboard 100, Week of September 27, 1986, Accessed April 12, 2011, from http://www.billboard.com/#/charts/hot-100?chartDate=1986-09-27.
[23] Ro, *Raising Hell*, 105-7, 136-8.
[24] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 82.

opinion being pressured by the label). In this case, it worked out well, as "Walk This Way" turned out to be a big hit, but this type of stubbornness and resistance to the artists' goals can often be a producer's demise. Later in his career, Rubin broadened his tastes and developed a long track record of successful records, and since then one would be hard-pressed to find complaints of him being too heavy-handed.

Racial Issues with "Walk This Way"

What is the significance of a wealthy white kid masterminding many monumental tracks in hip hop, a music that arose from poor African American communities? "Walk This Way" is a particularly useful song for pondering this issue, as it was the most direct collision of rock and hip hop to date, and it was allegedly very much Rubin's vision. Greg Wahl discusses some of the racial implications involved in the remake of "Walk This Way":

> Emphasizing the racial component of Rubin's guidance would be in line with the normal critical mode in which the music industry is often read.... Most serious critics at least raise the possibility that musical expressions of marginalized or oppressed groups, especially black Americans, are time and again co-opted to reduce their threat to the mainstream.[25]

The question of whether Rubin is guilty of such co-opting, either intentionally or not, can be debated about any of his work with Def Jam. Critic Frank Owen argued for Rubin's side, that Def Jam was "against the gentrification of black music," that they were authentically "the first Black music that hasn't had to dress itself up in showbiz

[25] Wahl, "I Fought the Law," 103.

glamour and upwardly mobile mores in order to succeed."[26] Rubin himself would argue he was simply bringing together two types of music he loved; he was a punk rocker, and saw hip hop as a form of "black punk."[27]

From a business standpoint, it was in Rubin's best interest to help his artists appeal to as many audiences as possible. Even though Def Jam as a company did preach the importance of the authenticity of their music, Rubin understood the purchasing power of white suburban teenagers. The same racial issues arise when considering the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill*, Rubin's other major hip hop production in 1986. This was the first album by white rappers to achieve mainstream attention, due mostly to young white buyers.[28]

RUBIN AND DEF AMERICAN/AMERICAN RECORDINGS

Though Rubin first gained his entry into the music industry with hip hop, he always retained his interest in hard rock. His work with Slayer in 1986 was his first professional foray into rock, and his first time recording in Los Angeles. With Slayer's *Reign in Blood*, he began to establish himself as a top-notch, bicoastal hard rock and metal producer. In 1988, Rubin made moves—from New York to Los Angeles, and from Def Jam to his own new company Def American.

SLAYER, *REIGN IN BLOOD*: BLASTING INTO METAL LEGEND

Slayer's 1986 effort, *Reign in Blood*, was a turning point for Rick Rubin, for Slayer, and for heavy metal in general. At this point in Rubin's career he had only professionally produced hip hop, but he had quickly gained enough influence in the

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[26] Frank Owen, "Def Not Dumb," *Melody Maker* (March 21, 1987), as quoted in Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop* (New York: Picador, 2005), 231.
[27] Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam*, 23.
[28] Wahl, "I Fought the Law," 106-9.

music industry to push his own tastes. Despite Slayer's disparity in genre from Def Jam's previous catalog, and CBS Records' complete refusal to distribute the album due to its lyrical content, Rubin made the production and release of *Reign in Blood* his top priority, and it became one of the most influential metal albums of all time.[29]

Although disparities in musical interests were eventually a factor in Rubin's split with Def Jam, at this point Russell Simmons was supportive in letting Rubin pursue Slayer. "It was something [Rick] wanted to do," said Simmons, "I trusted him."[30] The band was already signed to Los Angeles label Metal Blade, but Rubin and Simmons convinced them to get out of their old contract and join the Def Jam roster. Rubin met the band after a show in Brooklyn and excitedly told them that he was a big fan and wanted to sign them.[31] The group was impressed by Rubin's enthusiasm, particularly because they had been having many a dispute with their manager and Metal Blade CEO, Brian Slagel. They were also intrigued at being the only metal band on the label: "they're gonna fucking treat us like kings," lead singer Tom Araya told the rest of the band.[32]

Indeed, Slayer and their new label were a good match, and the combination yielded a groundbreaking record. Extreme metal bands in the mid-1980s had been pushing the envelope of how fast and loud they could play; by 1986, Slayer had become one of the most technically skilled of these speed-freak bands, playing at breakneck speeds but still achieving instrumental precision. Unfortunately, like other extreme metal bands at the time, their prior albums had been produced with very low

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[29] For a list of a few of *Reign in Blood*'s disciples across various metal genres and beyond, see D.X. Ferris, *Reign in Blood*, 33 1/3. (New York: Continuum, 2008), 4-7.
[30] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 73.
[31] Ferris, *Reign in Blood*, 64.
[32] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 73.

budgets, and they sounded terribly muddy and lo-fi. Due to the sheer volume, such music is one of the most difficult types of music to engineer and mix; it requires good equipment and a very skilled engineer to achieve any sort of clarity.

An extremely skilled engineer they had—Rick Rubin hired Andy Wallace for *Reign in Blood*, the same engineer he worked with on "Walk this Way." Wallace has since become one of the industry's top mixers, especially in hard rock and metal. Rubin and Wallace had been working together frequently since 1985, when they met through producer Arthur Baker.[33] Wallace's career has largely paralleled Rubin's. Though he is fifteen years Rubin's senior and had been in the industry for a decade longer, the late 1980s were when he became a rising star, hitting the top with his mixing of Nirvana's *Nevermind* in 1991.[34] It is the producer's job to hire the right engineer for the job: one who has the right sensibilities for the style of music, who gets along well with the producer and the band, and who has the most skills and experience possible within the budget of the project. According to the band, the team had a smooth working relationship, yet they note Rubin was distinctly in charge and had a clear vision of the sound. "Rubin told [Wallace] what to do, and he did that," recalls Tom Araya, "Rubin would sit there and listen, and say 'I need to hear *this*. I need to hear *that*.' And Rubin would walk out and come back in and listen to it."[35] In Andy Wallace, Rubin found just the right match; as a result, the engineer, the producer and the band all benefitted.

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[33] Ferris, *Reign in Blood*, 59.
[34] Wallace was hired just for the mix of *Nevermind*; Steve Albini was the recording engineer. Around this time, the industry was beginning to favor using different engineers for the two different processes.
[35] Ferris, *Reign in Blood*, 72.

There are many technical nuances that separate the clarity of *Reign in Blood* from Slayer's muddier previous album *Hell Awaits,* but one is particularly obvious: the absence of artificial reverb. As we will see again in his work with the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Rick Rubin is outspokenly opposed to adding reverb to his records, preferring instead to rely on the natural sounds of the studio. According to D.X. Ferris, Rubin initially refused to consider the band's suggestions to use any reverb at all, telling them that reverb was part of what had destroyed their last record.[36] They eventually compromised and used reverb in very carefully chosen passages, such as the guitar in the beginning of "Jesus Saves" and the kick and snare at the beginning of "Criminally Insane." Slayer ended up appreciating what Rubin's anti-reverb philosophy did for the record: "Once we started hearing what we were doing compared to what we were doing before, he was right about the reverb thing. Reverb's almost all gone, and it sounds a lot better. He knew what he was doing," says guitarist Jeff Hanneman.[37]

That they did not add reverb does not mean *Reign in Blood* is completely dry. For instance, the two guitars are panned hard left and right, but when just one guitar is playing (in the intros of "Necrophobic", "Reborn" and "Raining Blood") one can hear some ambience of that guitar in the center. This could theoretically be achieved using reverb, but given Rubin's strong preferences, this fattening was more than likely achieved with carefully placed ambient microphones, further from the amps than the main (close) mikes.

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[36] Ibid., 75.
[37] Ibid., 76. For a technical explanation of how reverb can clutter a mix, see David Gibson, *The Art of Mixing* (Boston: Thomson Course Technology, 2005), 135-40.

Another feature that gives *Reign in Blood* its clarity and impact is the careful balance of the rhythm guitars and the drums. In most modern rock mixes, drums fill the stereo field quite widely, with kick and snare mikes placed dead center, overheads panned hard left and right, and additional mikes placed in various places across the stereo field. On *Reign in Blood*, however, Wallace used very little ambient sound from the drums, placing cymbal crashes abnormally close to the middle. It is likely that he had individual close mikes on the cymbals, and used very little signal from the overheads in the mix. The two rhythm guitars are panned hard left and right, as is standard practice for metal records. With Wallace's creative placement of the drums, the cymbals are able to "sit" more cleanly on top of the heavy guitars, without masking the guitarists' picking sounds in the high-midrange, "presence" frequencies, between 1-5 kHz.[38] On *Hell Awaits*, the drums have a more ambient sound and end up buried under the guitars. The thick low-end of the guitars and kick drum are characteristic of higher quality microphones and preamps, something to which not many extreme metal bands had previously had access, but even more it can be attributed to great skill in equalization technique. As Mixerman puts it, a strong and clear low-end is "what separates the men from the boys" in mixing.[39]

Unlike many of the albums Rubin produced, he was not present during Slayer's songwriting process for *Reign in Blood*; the music was nearly all written by the time the band signed with Def Jam. Slayer switched from six-minute epics on their previous album, *Hell Awaits*, to three-minute blasters on *Reign in Blood*, and

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[38] Frequency masking is one of the most important sonic phenomena mixing engineers must consider, especially in dense music like heavy metal. For a good scientific-musical overview of frequency masking, see Cogan and Escot, *Sonic Design: The Nature of Music and Sound* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 375-85.

[39] Mixerman, *Zen and the Art of Mixing* (Milwuakee: Hal Leonard, 2010), 106.

they say very decisively that this was on their own accord, not because Rick Rubin and Def Jam told them to do it. Slayer biographer D.X. Ferris asked frontman Tom Araya if it was Rubin's idea, and Araya answered, "No. *No. No. No. No. Reign in Blood* was something we had done. And Rubin wanted us on his label. And Rubin took our material, polished it up, and gave it a nice gold shine."[40] Though Rubin often gives artists input with songwriting and arranging when they want it, Slayer is adamant that he never gave their songwriting unwanted pushes in any direction.

What is clear, however, is that without Rubin's work behind the scenes, the album may not have been released, or it may have at least been delayed. CBS Records refused to distribute the album because of particularly controversial lyrics—the song "Angel of Death" is about Josef Mengele, a physician at Auschwitz who conducted medical experiments that amounted to torture.[41] While the band argues that they are in no way condoning Mengele or the Nazis, CBS drew a hard line. Rubin, however, refused to *not* have the record released. He took it upon himself to go over his parent company's heads and find the album a new distributer, convincing David Geffen to distribute the record through Geffen.[42] This was all done before Slayer even heard about the distribution problem. In this story we see several of Rubin's traits that make him successful as a producer: a dedication to the production with which he wouldn't let corporate decisions interfere, a take-charge attitude and ability to solve problems quickly, and his ability to keep logistical problems from bogging down actual musical processes. We also see Rubin's loose attitude toward offensive content, a topic I explore further in a later chapter.

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[40] Ferris, *Reign in Blood*, 67.
[41] Ibid., 113-5.
[42] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 84-5.

Reign in Blood has become one of the most influential metal albums of all time. Without Rubin's commitment to the album, the stars may not have aligned for the album; Slayer may have fallen apart due to trouble with their own labels, or they could have lost distribution or had to cut some of the content.

RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS, *BLOOD SUGAR SEX MAGIK*: CRAFTING A HOLLYWOOD MASTERPIECE

By 1991Rubin was one of the most sought-after producers on the west coast. He hooked up with the up-and-coming Red Hot Chili Peppers, and the resulting *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* was perhaps the most important album of both the band's and Rick Rubin's careers. It was one of the Chilis' most successful albums in terms of both sales and critical acclaim in their nearly thirty years together. *Blood Sugar* is also the album that most clearly exhibits the new dimension that Rubin's less-is-more production aesthetics can bring to a project. Sonically, *Blood Sugar* is a world of difference from the Chilis' previous effort *Mother's Milk*. Only two years later, they sounded like an entirely different band.

The most immediately noticeable difference is the absence of distorted, heavy-metal style guitar riffs. Most of the songs on *Mother's Milk* prominently feature at least two guitars: a low, heavy riff doubled and panned to either side, and sometimes lead guitars playing funky, high riffs, often also distorted. According to singer Anthony Kiedis, this guitar sound was largely due to producer Michael Beinhorn:

> Michael had a lot of smarts and musical savvy in the studio, but he was also domineering. He wanted John [Frusciante, guitarist] to have

> a big, crunching, almost metal-sounding guitar tone, whereas before we always had some interesting acid-rock guitar tones, as well as a lot of slinky, sexy, funk guitar tones. John wasn't into it at the time, so there was a lot of fighting between them over tone and guitar layering.[43]

On *Blood Sugar,* there is usually just one guitar line, with a clean, natural tone with just the slight overdrive of a tube amp, never full-on distortion. In fact, there is very little layering beyond just drums, bass, one guitar layer, and vocals. Rather than layering distorted guitars, the album hits hard due the tightness of the grooves, the perfect locking of all the instruments. The level of tightness of *Blood Sugar* makes very clear the amount of rehearsal that went into it prior to recording: under Rubin's direction, the band rehearsed the songs for seven months.[44] The tracking period, on the other hand, was only two months. Rubin was very hands-on during the pre-production period; he sat in on rehearsals and gave them advice on songs, especially on song forms, making sure their songs were coherent.[45]

The Chilis praised Rubin for his organic collaborative input, his ability to take them to new heights without pushing his own ideas on them, and his ability to keep a levelheaded balance to their wild rock-band ways. As bassist Flea put it:

> He doesn't try to plug us into a certain formula; he doesn't have a way that he works and try to make us like that. He's just trying to bring the most out of us for what we are. He manages to keep his emotional

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[43] Anthony Kiedis and Larry Sloman, *Scar Tissue* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 239.
[44] Zak, *The Poetics of Rock,* 137.
[45] Brown, *Rick Rubin: In the Studio,* 88-9

> distance and his objectivity, which is what he has to do, especially because we're so caught up in pure emotion.[46]

The band also cites the recording location as an important factor in the making of this album. Rubin arranged to record *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* at a mansion in the hills of suburban Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles, now known as The Mansion.[47] Rubin and the band lived in the house during the recording process, allowing them to focus one hundred percent on the music, without the stress of a formal studio environment. The band speaks very emphatically about the effect working there had on them, and how it made the result more natural yet more magical. In the current state of the industry, this sort of recording process is becoming increasingly rare.

Like *Reign in Blood*, *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* has very little effects processing. *Mother's Milk* is drenched in effects, most notably a slapback delay (around 80-150ms) on the lead vocals, and the gated reverb on the snare, perhaps the single most characteristically 1980s mixing technique.[48] The dry mix of *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, on the other hand, allows each instrument to cut through more. Any ambience on the tracks is from careful harnessing of actual room resonance of the mansion. Rubin and engineer Brendan O'Brien devised ways of fully utilizing different room sounds of the mansion: the band played in the living room, the amps were in the basement, and overdubs were done in the less reverberant bedrooms.[49] The song "They're Red Hot" was even recorded outside. Some of the recording setups can be seen in the

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[46] Gavin Bowden, *Funky Monks* (Video Documentary) (Burbank, CA: Warner Reprise Home Video), 4:40.
[47] Rubin has since gone on to produce many more albums in The Mansion, and now owns it.
[48] This technique was pioneered by Steve Lillywhite and Hugh Padgham, recording Phil Collins' drumming on Peter Gabriel's *Face Value* album in 1980, and that sound exploded in popularity. Zak, *The Poetics of Rock*, 79-80.
[49] Brown, *Rick Rubin: In the Studio*, 90-1.

documentary *Funky Monks*, such as the recording of Frusciante's acoustic guitar on "Breaking the Girl". Frusciante played near the corner of his very bare-walled bedroom, with one mike on the guitar and another pointed directly at the wall, picking up the bright snap of the room.[50] The resulting tone is unique and adds an extra dimension to the song, without artificial reverb.

Blood Sugar's dry mix is quite historically significant; it stood in firm opposition not only to *Mother's Milk* but to most popular music being released at the time. Mixers follow trends, and in 1991 heavy reverb was in. Of the Billboard top 10 albums on September 24, 1991, the date of *Blood Sugar*'s release, nine of the ten have substantial artificial-sounding reverb or slapback on the snare drum; the other is a jazz album.[51] Many of them also have heavy reverb on the lead vocals, *including* the jazz album. Whether dealing with Michael Bolton or Metallica, and whether following pressure from the record companies or their own ideas of what sounded good, the engineers mixing the top albums were following the production aesthetics that were popular at the time. Rick Rubin, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and their engineers went against the grain with the sound of *Blood Sugar*, and achieved a top 10 album anyway.

The dry mix of *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* illuminates a very central aspect of the album: the lyrics. On *Mother's Milk* and previous Chili Peppers albums, the lyrics are shouted very fast with loads of slapback; one must listen very intently to pick out Anthony Kiedis' lyrics. On *Blood Sugar*, the lyrics hit the listener as hard as the grooves do. Many of the songs on *Blood Sugar* follow classic Chilis themes: sex,

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[50] Bowden, *Funky Monks*, 10:30.
[51] *Billboard 200*, Week of September 21, 1991, Accessed April 4, 2011, from http://www.billboard.com/#/charts/billboard-200?chartDate=1991-09-21

drugs and good times. However, even these songs are more lyrically inventive: "Apache Rose Peacock" and "Sir Psycho Sexy" craft compelling sexual narratives; "Naked in the Rain" toys with the idea of animals being more fun than people, with carefully contained undertones of bestiality. And Kiedis explores new areas of subject material as well, such as the importance of generosity ("Give It Away"), love relationships ("Breaking the Girl", "I Could Have Lied"), and most notably, his own struggles with heroin addiction, in "Under the Bridge".

"Under the Bridge", the Chilis' first ballad, turned out to be one of the band's biggest hits ever. According to Kiedis, "Under the Bridge" may never have come to fruition without Rubin's encouragement.[52] Kiedis had originally written the lyrics as a poem, not even intending to use it in a Red Hot Chili Peppers song. Rubin found the poem in a notebook Kiedis had left open, and convinced him to run it by the band. The resulting success of the song that came out of this incident had a huge impact on the rest of their career, both in terms of the level of fame and fortune it brought them, and in their musical trajectory.

Blood Sugar Sex Magik elevated the Chili Peppers' career to a new level, and they have worked with Rick Rubin on every album since, including their new project slated for release this year.

SYSTEM OF A DOWN: FROM PET PROJECT TO CO-PRODUCERS

System of a Down was not the first group that Rick Rubin "discovered", but they were probably Rubin's most successful pet project. He heard them play around Los Angeles and liked them, promised to make them famous, and did just that. Like Slayer, System of a Down had a strong first impression of Rubin's genuine interest in

[52] Kiedis, *Scar Tissue*, 266.

their music: "Even when we had doubts about signing with American, he still came to our shows as a fan," says bassist Shavo Odajian. "In fact, he even came to our show in New York (at the CMJ convention) when we were falsely labeled as Universal/Cherry recording artists. Rick really believed in us and seemed to have a pretty special interest in the music."[53] Even though this was a decade later than his signing of Slayer, and Rubin was much further along in his career, he was still choosing what music to produce based on his personal taste. In the upper echelons of the music industry, this is rare. As Rubin put it, "most people in this business don't care about music; they're in the banking business. David Geffen openly talks about the fact that he doesn't like music and doesn't listen to any of his artists."[54]

In the case of System of a Down, Rubin's taste correlated with the public's. SOAD's 1998 eponymous first album achieved moderate commercial success, reaching number 124 on the Billboard 200 and number one on the Heatseekers chart; three of their next four albums, *Toxicity*, *Mezmerize* and *Hypnotize*, all hit number one on the Billboard 200.[55]

System of a Down stuck much less strictly to Rubin's minimalist doctrine than projects like *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* did, relying much more on overdubs. For most types of heavy metal, two or more rhythm guitar tracks are requisite. Since he is their only guitarist, Daron Malakian inevitably had to record at least one overdub on each

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[53] Ogg, *The Men Behind Def Jam*, 123
[54] Jory Farr, *Moguls and Madmen: The Pursuit of Power in Popular Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994),110.
[55] *Mezmerize* and *Hypnotize* are conceptually a double album, but were released six months apart.

song.[56] Thus, it was impossible to get anything final with just the full band in the same take.

Furthermore, on some System songs there are lush instrumental arrangements. The band's breakout single "Chop Suey," from *Toxicity*, is a perfect example: it features a string section, piano, acoustic guitars, layered lead guitars, ethnic instruments, and soaring harmonized vocal lines. "Chop Suey" is proof that though Rubin has a clear preference for a minimalist aesthetic, he is willing to stray from that when an artist knows clearly what they want. In fact, Rubin even actively participated in the filling out of the arrangement: he is credited as the pianist.

One thing sets System of a Down apart from other like-minded artists is their ability to usually stay within a live-band aesthetic, but subtly bring in clever arrangement complexities when it suits the song. "Chop Suey" is the densest example; other times it is as simple as an ethic instrument coming in for one section. How did Rubin and System of a Down achieve this delicate balance? One key factor was to make sure they captured a powerful live sound on the basic tracks. The producer and the engineer have the responsibility of planning the band's physical locations within the recording room, in order to make them comfortable, hear and see each other, and feed off each other's energy. As shown in the mini-documentary included with the limited edition of *Toxicity*, the band laid down their basic tracks live, all in a tight circle with singer Serj Tankian in the middle. Even if they ultimately built up a lot of overdubs, the band was working from basic tracks that captured their live energy.

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[56] Tankian sometimes plays a second guitar part live, but the vast majority of the guitar work in the studio is played by Malakian.

From *Toxicity* onward, Daron Malakian is credited as a producer along with Rubin. On *Mezmerize/Hypnotize* especially, Malakian says he took much more creative control:

> When we were making the first album, I was afraid to open my mouth in the studio, because it was like, Wow, we got the legendary Rick Rubin! …But on the second record, getting to know Rick better, I felt more comfortable coming in as a producer… I had the guitar and drum sounds in my mind for this new album. I paved that direction.[57]

Indeed, the guitar sound on *Mezmerize/Hypnotize* can be attributed totally to Malakian's experimentation. He devised an elaborate method of thickening his guitar tone: he pointed the amps at a wall covered entirely with unstrung acoustic guitars, miking their resonance and combining it with the amp's close mikes.[58] Meanwhile he turned his amp's distortion down, using instead what he describes as a "natural kind of balls."[59] The tone he achieved through this novel technique is unique, and fuller and more harmonically rich than his tone on the previous albums. In metal, guitar tone is of the utmost importance, and to develop a powerful and recognizable tone is a landmark of a great metal guitarist. *Mezmerize/Hypnotize* also features more extensive overdubbing than the previous albums, particularly of guitars and Malakian's vocals. Overall, the double album clearly fit Malakian's production aesthetics more closely than Rubin's, though Malakian still describes it as a collaborative production effort:

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[57] Alan di Perna, "Daron Malakian: 21st Century Schizoid Man," *Guitar World*, July 2005, Archived September 28, 2008, Accessed March 20, 2011 from http://www.guitarworld.com/article/daron_malakian_21st_century_schizoid_man?page=0%2C4, 4.
[58] Ibid., 5
[59] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vu8b8YU4M0&feature=fvwrel

> It's funny: when we first worked with Rick, a lot of people said, 'Oh, he doesn't even show up.' But with System, he's very hands-on. He cares. But he's also hands off enough to let me see my vision through.[60]

PROBLEMS WITH RUBIN'S PRODUCTION

HANDS-OFF

As Malakian mentioned, some artists have complained that Rubin can be rather hands-off. Rubin's inconsistent reliability dates all the way back to his Def Jam days, when he developed a tendency to commit to so many projects at once that he has trouble allocating time to all of them. In 1987-8, Rubin directed the urban-Western *Tougher Than Leather*, starring Run-DMC as the heroes and Rubin as the villain. Parties involved, as well as the critics, agree that Rubin was rather incompetent as a director.[61] Meanwhile, his relationships with some of his main artists, the Beastie Boys and LL Cool J, were suffering.

Though he did not make the mistake of continuing his directing career, Rubin continued to bite off more projects than he could chew. While he was living and working in the Mansion with the Red Hot Chili Peppers for *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* in 1991, he was working with one of his pet projects, blues band The Red Devils, on the side.[62] Rubin and the band recorded their debut album, *King King*, live at the club by the same name where they played regularly. With Rubin's connections, the band also had sessions backing other Rubin-produced artists Mick Jagger and Johnny Cash, as well as sessions for their own sophomore album. The Red Devils complain Rubin

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[60] di Perna, "Daron Malakian," 4.
[61] Gueraseva, *Def Jam, Inc.*, 104-106.
[62] Dan Leroy, *The Greatest Music Never Sold* (New York: Backbeat Books, 2007.)

was absent and non-communicative in this time, and ultimately, none of the sessions after their first album were released. The Red Devils were also facing inner tensions and drug problems, so it is not necessarily all Rubin's fault that the band's prospects died away. Still, he certainly did not make it a priority to see them through their struggles.

As Rubin's stature and demand in the industry have grown, his ability to be present for each project has continued to decrease. Even Slayer notes a difference throughout their many years working with Rubin. Although Rubin flew across the country to Los Angeles for the entire recording process of *Reign in Blood*, his involvement apparently decreased through their careers. In a 2009 interview, Tom Araya said,

> "Rick Rubin, on the first three albums, worked with us close[ly].… Since *Divine* [*Intervention*, 1995,] he sort of just sat in the back, and then we would work with producers, and then when we would have a finished product, he would listen and say 'you need to do this, and you need to do that.'"[63]

Asked whether the band planned to work with Rubin and American Recordings again after having finally fulfilled their contract, Araya responded nonchalantly and noncommittally, saying that they were interested in shopping around.

Slipknot worked with Rubin on their 2004 effort, *Vol. 3: The Subliminal Verses*. In an interview with *Headbangers' Ball*, when asked about Rubin, the band members chuckled to themselves and frontman Corey Taylor answered, "Once in a

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[63] "Slayer's Last Album with Rick Rubin?" [Video]. Accessed 28 Feb 2011, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQyz7jEa7vI&feature=fvwrel. Artisan News, 2009.

while… he came, kicked it on the couch, stroked his beard a little, and was out… But it's the end result that matters, and I think the album will speak for itself."[64] Still, Slipknot's opinion of Rubin is more lukewarm than actually hostile. "I love the guy, he's a really nice dude, and very artistic. I'm just a little more, well, hands-on," said Taylor in another interview. Guitarist Jim Root added, "To say he produced the record… well, you have to get into your definition of what 'produced' means. And I guess that's different for different people."[65] For Rubin, it may often not mean much at all.

RUBIN, CONTENT AND THE ETHICS OF PRODUCTION

Journalist Jory Farr scathingly attacks Rubin in his book *Moguls and Madmen: The Pursuit of Power in Popular Music.* [66] The book is a collection of thoroughly-researched profiles (or exposés) on a selection of top record executives. Farr makes no attempt to hide his anti-record executive bias, stating at the end of his prologue that the book is "for all the musicians—and the musicians to come—to know what they're up against."[67] Farr paints Rubin as evil, brooding, money-grubbing, vicious and malignant in the music industry. He challenges Rubin's golden media image, characterized by frequent profiles in major newspapers and magazines that paint him as a peaceful, mysterious and eccentric musical prophet, a "bearded Buddha" who just by sitting on his couch and nodding can magically turn any record

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[64] "Slipknot talk about Rick Rubin RARE" [Video]. Accessed 28 February 2011, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMkNzTa6IpE&feature=player_embedded#at=72. MTV, 2004.
[65] "SLIPKNOT LOVED RECORD, NOT RICK RUBIN" [Video]. Accessed 28 February 2011, from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pULuIhbzUzc&feature=BF&playnext=1&list=QL&index=6. Artisan News, 2004.
[66] Farr, *Moguls and Madmen.*
[67] Farr, *Moguls and Madmen*, 22.

into a masterpiece.[68] Farr argues that this image is something that Rubin carefully calculated and constructed.

On the one hand, it is refreshing to see someone challenge this image that the media has so consistently bought. On the other hand, Farr's writing is tactless and does not lend itself to credibility—many of his attacks on Rubin rely on quotes from anonymous Hollywood sources, obvious twisting of excerpts from his own interviews with Rubin, and unnecessary tangents like attacks on Rubin's parents' childrearing beliefs.

Nonetheless, Farr's views should not be completely disregarded, and some of his points raise important discussions. In particular, he addresses one issue that many people would consider a stain on Rubin's career: his affinity to extremely offensive lyrical material. As we know, it was Rubin who took Slayer's *Reign in Blood* to David Geffen when CBS records refused to release it due to Satanic and Nazi-related content. Later, when even Geffen wouldn't put out controversial Rubin records by the violent rappers Geto Boys and the racist-homophobic-misogynistic comedian Andrew "Dice" Clay, Rubin again shopped the records around, ending up with a new distribution deal with Warner Bros. Farr accuses Rubin of deliberately seeking out such records in an attempt to capitalize on America's fascination with vulgarity:

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[68] Du Lac, "The 'Song Doctor' Is In"; Lynn Hirschberg, "The Music Man," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 2, 2007, Accessed November 24, 2010, from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/02/magazine/02rubin.t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&ref=rickrubin; Robert Hilburn, "A Balance of Rattle and Om," *The Los Angeles Times Envelope*, February 28, 2007, Accessed November 23, 2010, from http://theenvelope.latimes.com/entertainment/env-grammys-rubin11feb11,0,3119586.story; Corey Moss, "What's up with That Bearded Guy in the '99 Problems' Video?" *MTVNews.com*, 2007. Accessed March 1, 2011. http://www.mtv.com/bands/r/rubin_rick/news_feature_040503/; Josh Tyrangiel, "Rick Rubin: Hit Man," *Time*, February 8, 2007, Accessed April 12, 2011, from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1587248-2,00.html.

> America, the most violent of Western societies, was a country that celebrated psychopaths and worshipped guns. And what sold in the last years of the twentieth century were entertainment experiences that shocked and appalled. In that realm, Rubin had a genius. Trolling the margins of society, he found misfits who served up such visions, no matter how creepy or downright depraved.[69]

Rubin's counterargument is that he was fighting for his artists' livelihood and free speech, an argument Farr is quick to dismiss as an excuse. Rubin also cites his own taste as his reason for his attraction to such types of artist in the first place: "Maybe I'm the worst case of American youth, but I sign things out of passion… If something entertains me, then I'll support it, regardless of what it's saying."[70]

METALLICA, *DEATH MAGNETIC*: RUBIN AND THE LOUDNESS WARS

As early as the 1960s, record companies began competing to get their albums louder than the rest. The idea was, if a record came on a jukebox or radio and was louder than the previous one, people would turn their heads. Even George Martin in the early 1960s spoke of how he was baffled how loud American records were and how he wanted to get the Beatles albums to sound like that.[71] The "Loudness War" was already underway, and has escalated ever since.

In today's mastering practice, nearly every professional album is applied a master peak limiter, that attenuates the loudest peaks of an audio signal above a certain threshold, and turns up entire signal to bring the average closer to the peak

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[69] Farr, *Moguls and Madmen*, 108.
[70] Ibid., 109.
[71] Martin, *With a Little Help From My Friends*, 45-7.

level.[72] In effect, the perceived loudness of the entire song is increased. Heavy limiting, also known as "brickwalling," makes the quietest parts of a song very nearly as loud as the loudest. Brickwall limiting deliberately obliterates the dynamic range of music. The industry is deep in a vicious cycle—when two songs with similar production quality, but mastered at different volumes, are played in succession, the louder one will catch the listener's ear more, and will likely be perceived as sounding "better." This is actually a short-term effect, but major record companies hold the belief that louder sells better.[73]

In 2008, Metallica's album *Death Magnetic* received international press for being one of the worst victims of the loudness war. Metallica had parted ways with their longtime producer, Bob Rock, after their previous album, 2003's *St. Anger*, had been received atrociously by critics and by the public. Some of the biggest complaints about *St. Anger* were about its production, especially the very ugly drum sound. Being one of the biggest bands in the history of rock, Metallica enlisted the biggest-named producer they could find—Rick Rubin. And yet, *Death Magnetic* fell under the fire for its production once again, bringing the often-publicly-ignored Loudness War to the attention of the likes of the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Guardian*, and *Wired.*[74] 22,000 Metallica fans signed a petition for the album to be re-mixed or remastered.[75]

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[72] A limiter is the same principle as a compressor, but with an attenuation ratio of 10:1 or more, meaning that if a signal goes 10dB over the threshold, it is attenuated at least 9dB.
[73] Bob Katz, *Mastering Audio* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2007),167-80.
[74] Sean Michaels, "Metallica Album Latest Victim in 'Loudness War'?" *The Guardian*, 17 September 2008, accessed March 1, 2011 from http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/sep/17/metallica.guitar.hero.loudness.war; Ethan Smith, "Even Heavy-Metal Fans Complain That Today's Music Is Too Loud!!!" *Wall Street Journal* (2008), Accessed March 1, 2011 from http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122228767729272339.html; Eliot Van

Where does Rick Rubin come into this? One cannot be sure if he had any say in making *Death Magnetic* the most famously over-compressed album ever. It is the mastering engineer, not the producer, who applies the final compressors and limiters. Yet unsurprisingly, many mastering engineers are opposed to adding processing that is detrimental to the audio quality.

Mastering engineer Ted Jensen does not take credit for the heavy limiting, allegedly telling a Metallica fan in an email: "The mixes were already brick-walled before they arrived at my place…Believe me, I'm not proud to be associated with this one, and we can only hope that some good will come from this in some form of backlash against volume above all else."[76] Jensen's colleague at Sterling Sound, Chris Athens, was blunt and quick to place blame, in the informal setting of the internet forum of gearslutz.com:

> Rick Rubin and Metallica are solely responsible for the end product. They gave the directions, they approved it. They are not rookies and no one at the label can ever bully these guys into anything. Both parties are 800 pound gorillas in the music industry. These guys are smart and in control. You and I may not like their taste, but it's not a Chris Athens record. It's a Metallica record and this is what they want

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Buskirk, "Analysis: Metallica's *Death Magnetic* Sounds Better in *Guitar Hero,*" *Wired*, September 16, 2008, Accessed 1 March 2011 from http://www.wired.com/listening_post/2008/09/does-metallicas.
[75] "Re-Mix or Remaster Death Magnetic!". Accessed March 1, 2011, from http://www.gopetition.com/petitions/re-mix-or-remaster-death-magnetic/signatures.html.
[76] Michaels, "Metallica Album Latest Victim in 'Loudness War'?"

> to give the record buying public. Only Metallica and Rick know why it sounds like it does.[77]

When asked about the controversy, Rubin declined to comment to the *Wall Street Journal*.[78] However, there is a noticeable pattern of heavy brickwall limiting on some of Rubin's biggest albums. The Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Californication* (1999), as well as System of a Down's *Mezmerize/Hypnotize*, were limited to the point of occasional audible digital clipping.[79] Whether or not Rubin is encouraging such heavy brickwalling, he is certainly allowing it to happen.

CONCLUSIONS

Rick Rubin has played many different roles throughout his decades in the music business. At best he has been an important enabler, integrated into the core of the project. At worst, he has simply slapped his name on some records, knowing that his industry clout allows him to get away with that, and listeners will hold him responsible for the quality of the album.

Perhaps the biggest mystery in Rubin's career is what he does as the Co-President of Columbia Records. Much of his executive work with Def Jam and American Recordings is well documented, but it is very difficult to find any information about specifically what he does at Columbia. A 2009 *New York Times* article suggested he was doing a poor job, but equally expressed confusion as to what

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[77] Chris Athens, Response in "Death Magnetic" thread, *Gearslutz.com Forum*, 15 September 2008. Accessed 2 March 2001, from http://www.gearslutz.com/board/mastering-forum/327786-death-magnetic-3.html.

[78] Ethan Smith, "Even Heavy-Metal Fans Complain That Today's Music Is Too Loud!!!"

[79] Clipping is when a signal exceeds digital zero, chopping the peaks of the transients and distorting the sound.

exactly his job was.[80] He has continued to produce, although as we've seen, many accounts from the mid-2000s onward complain of his absence. What else is he doing? Major label executives are notorious for often being secretive and backhanded.[81] As A Tribe Called Quest famously put it, "Record company people are shady."[82] Except for Jory Farr's account, Rubin has scarcely been characterized as such. Has Rubin remained organically involved with music, or has he gone to the dark side?

Though this paper only skims the surface of Rubin's catalog, my analysis provides a framework within which to interpret Rubin's other records. In listening to other Rubin productions, one can now estimate what he contributed to its production. For instance, perhaps Band X got rid of their synthesizers and choirs and went to a power-trio format. Rubin's influence? Or perhaps Band Y is a relatively unknown band from the 2000s, hailed by critics as having a great new Rick Rubin-produced album; in reality, did Rubin work with band Y much at all? In this paper I provide a framework for how to think through these questions.

This paper is also intended for aspiring producers (me included). Through discussing these particular albums, I show that Rick Rubin is successful for many good reasons, especially with his stripped-down approach that guided some of his most successful albums. At the same time I have shown pitfalls of Rubin's career that a producer should not fall into: letting stubbornness or nonchalance hinder a

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[80] Arango, Tim, "Producer's Track Record as a Label Executive is Raising Questions," *The New York Times*, February 6, 2009, Accessed 10 April 2011, from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/07/arts/music/07rubi.html?ref=rickrubin.

[81] The classic exposé is Frederic Dannen, *Hit Men: Power Brokers and Fast Money Inside the Music Business*,New York: Vintage, 1991. Farr, *Mogugls and Madmen* expands on Dannen's work.

[82] A Tribe Called Quest, "Check the Rhime." *The Low End Theory*. New York: Jive, 1991.

project, or falling into the industry trap of the loudness war. For these reasons, anyone with an interest in music production should listen to more Rick Rubin albums; they are a valuable lens with which to better understand any producer's job. Besides, they rock.

APPENDIX A: TIMELINE

March 10, 1963 – Frederick Jay Rubin born, Lido Beach, New York

1970s – Rick Rubin becomes rocker

1981 – Rubin enrolls in New York University, begins going to hip hop clubs and learning how to deejay

1983 – Rubin's first production, of his own band Hose. Very, very underground.

1984 – T-La-Rock and Jazzy Jay, "It's Yours"; LL Cool J, "I Need a Beat"

1984 – Rubin creates Def Jam label; meets important people such as Russell Simmons, LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys (for whom he becomes the DJ)

1985 – Rubin's first film appearance, in cult hip hop classic *Krush Groove*

1986 – Run-DMC, *Raising Hell*; Slayer, *Reign in Blood*; Beastie Boys, *Licensed to Ill*

1987 – *The Village Voice* calls Rubin "The King of Rap"; Rubin directs *Tougher Than Leather*

1988 – Rubin splits with Def Jam, moves to Los Angeles, and starts Def American Records

1988 – Danzig, *Danzig;* Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* (exec.)

1990 – Slayer, *Seasons of the Abyss;* Andrew Dice Clay, *The Day the Laughter Died;* Geto Boys, *The Geto Boys*

1991 – The Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*

1993 – Rubin literally holds a funeral for the word "Def" after seeing it in a dictionary; Def American becomes American Recordings

1993 – Mick Jagger, *Wandering Spirit*

1994 – Johnny Cash, *American Recordings;* Tom Petty, *Wildflowers*

1995 – Nine Inch Nails, *Further Down the Spiral;* AC/DC, *Ballbreaker*

1996 – Donovan, *Sutras;* Johnny Cash, *Unchained*

1998 – System of a Down, *System of a Down*

1999 – The Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Californication*

2001 – System of a Down, *Toxicity*

2003 – The Mars Volta, *De-Loused in the Comatorium*; Jay-Z, "99 Problems"

2004 – Slipknot, *Vol. 3, The Subliminal Verses*

2005 – System of a Down, *Mezmerize/Hypnotize;* Neil Diamond, *12 Songs*

2006 – Dixie Chicks, *Take the Long Way*

2007 – Rubin named Co-President of Columbia Records, wins Grammy for Producer of the Year, Non-Classical

2008 – Metallica, *Death Magnetic*

2009 – The Avett Brothers, *I and Love and You*

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APPENDIX B: NOTES ON *UBEATQUITOUS*

Ubeatquitous is truly a culmination of my personal musical pursuits throughout Wesleyan. Since my first week at Wesleyan I've set up makeshift recording studios in my various campus residences. These "labs" each became centers of musical activity, where I have recorded not just my own but also my friends' projects. Each year I've spent progressively more time in the lab, until this year when it evolved into something quite nearly resembling a professional studio (minus the part where I get paid.) Just in the next few weeks, we are releasing several student projects that I produced in my house, one other full-length album and two EPs.

I wrote and recorded the songs that ended up on *Ubeatquitous* throughout my time at Wesleyan, and I mixed or re-mixed them all this spring. Until this year my solo material was essentially a side project that I'd work on when I had extra time (which, being at Wesleyan, is not a lot.) The opportunity to make an album as part of my thesis work gave me the chance to devote much more time to this project, to have a clear goal and deadline to something that otherwise may have continued to get put off while I worked on other projects. As the year went along, I spent more and more time in front of my computer, tracking and mixing. Though early versions of a few of the songs date back as early as my freshman and sophomore years, all of them really evolved into their final forms just this year.

Production and engineering are fields that can only be learned through experience. Through my other recording projects , I have gained a variety of skills a well-rounded producer/engineer must possess, many of which affected *Ubeatquitous*

and will be applicable in any future production work I do. Through working with rock band Fly Machine, I gained the experience of working with skilled and meticulous performers, who were always ready to do another take before I even suggested it. We sometimes had fourteen-hour sessions in which we barely noticed the time passing. Recording a full-length album with singer/songwriter Mel Hsu, I had the experience of working with a very talented solo artist with no prior studio experience, and helped facilitate her development into an accomplished recording artist. Her album is coming out in two weeks, and is a big achievement for both of us. With Mad Wow, I faced several big challenges: recording a thirteen-person band, working under big time constraints (trying to fit it into finals week in the fall semester), and capturing a sound that fits within a Motown/soul idiom with only modern digital gear.[83]

Meanwhile, with my band, Josh Smith and the Concert Gs, I traveled to upstate New York for a long weekend to record an EP in a world-class studio, Dreamland Recording. It was a hugely beneficial experience to be on the other end of the process, to be the performer working with big-name professional producer and engineers. Just watching their process was immensely helpful both for my own production experience and for better understanding my Rick Rubin research.

Mixing is most importantly learned by doing, but the books I have read on the subject have also been an important influence. David Gibson's *The Art of Mixing* is the book that taught me many fundamental mixing skills, as well as specific tricks. Mixerman's *Zen and the Art of Mixing* made me reconsider my mixing process from

[83] We recorded this project, unlike the others, in the Electronic Music Studio rather than my house. Like the rest, though, I am mixing it in my house.

many different angles. My mixing skills have grown exponentially in the past few years; particularly salient is an A/B comparison between my new mixes of "Why You No Good?" and "You Guard Truck" with my ones from two years ago—they sound almost like entirely different songs. One of the most glaring differences in these songs is that I removed the reverb—an idea I got from Rick Rubin.

From Bob Katz's *Mastering Audio* I learned the basics of mastering. Though I am not nearly equipped with the gear, room, or experience to call myself a qualified mastering engineer, I learned some very useful principles and tricks that I applied in my "mastering" of *Ubeatquitous.* I made a conscious decision not to fall into the trap of the "loudness war" that Rick Rubin and so many others in the music industry have, choosing instead to preserve dynamic range and depth in the music. Katz taught me how to use tricks like parallel compression to bring up my perceived loudness without musical detriment.[84]

For my recital, I assembled an ensemble to play live arrangements of songs from *Ubeatquitous*. Some of the songs translated quite naturally to a live setting, others took significant reworking, and some would have been utterly impossible to perform live.

Tracklisting

1. **Thames**

   This is the one song on the album that I wrote while living in Brooklyn last summer. Its sound reflects the location—synths and extra drums are common features of the synth-pop scene that is popular in Brooklyn right now (a scene which is closely tied with Wesleyan—MGMT was one of the first bands from

[84] Katz, *Mastering Audio,* 133-5.

that scene to go mainstream.) The drums were recorded in two layers: a basic beat, and an overdub of just tom-toms. Live, I had the luxury of two drummers.

I keep an E drone going through most of the song, which lifts only at the end of each section on the V/V-V. In order to translate this wall of sound to live, I had a cello play the low E drone, and a violin double my vocal lines.

Nate Mondschein – Drums.

2. X-Factor

This is the newest song of all of these. From my first conceptualizing of the song, I considered the mix an important aspect of the song. I knew I wanted there to be a drastic shift in sonic space for each section. For this reason, it was one of the most difficult songs on the album to mix.

Nate Mondschein – Drums. Spencer Hattendorf – Saxophone. Mike Rosen – Duck.

3. All I Really… (Feat. Josh Smith)

The lazy, "on-time-off-time" feel of this song is inspired by the late hip hop producer J Dilla. The samples are from the Joni Mitchell song "All I Want," chopped up and looped until they are nearly unrecognizable. I have worked with Josh since freshman year, producing his debut album, *Of Mics and Men*. This song seemed appropriate to go on one of my releases rather than his, since he wrote his verses specifically to enforce the strange otherworldly feel of the beat, rather than writing to a beat that matches the feel of the verse.

4. **Why You No Good?**

   This one, along with "You Guard Truck," are tracks that I "completed" in my sophomore year, revisiting them this spring to realize that the mixes were utter garbage by my standards now. Completely starting over on the mix, I transformed the song significantly.

   James Crosson – Drums. Tyler Schaafsma – Vocals. Mel Hsu – Cello. Emily Hunt – Violin.

5. **Brobama**

   Contains samples from Barack Obama, Dreams from My Father *[Audiobook], New York: Random House Audio, 2005.*

6. **Xtreme Shredfest Xtravaganza**

7. **You Guard Truck**

   This song is constructed entirely by sampling my own vocals. (Except the lead vocals, which I simply sang.) I made noises, put them in a sampler, and turned these collections of vocal sounds into my instrumentation.

8. **Brobama**

   Contains samples from Jacques Offenbach, "Orpheus and Eurydice."

9. **Rivor**

   This song is based on what I like to call "an instrument that doesn't exist." I strummed just a single E major chord on my acoustic guitar, which I then loaded into a sampler and composed the whole song around. Since I was avoiding using a sampler live, I instead wrote an arrangement for a real guitar, tuned to open E-sus4.

The song's static rhythm and harmony, and ethereal voices, sound to me like a river. Constantly flowing, powerful yet peaceful. If one was to think any more representationally, one could say that the "B" section (first at 1:06) is like the current diverting around a rocky patch.

James Crosson – Drums. Louis Russo – Bass.

10. I'm Joey

Joey Martin – Joey; Hillary Paul - Naysayer

11. Futurecops

This is the most harmonically complex song on the album. The changes between A minor and A major drive the song along, but the real curious point is the seemingly paradoxical harmony of the main riff. The main riff quite clearly features a low G natural over an E major harmony, yet somehow it works and doesn't seem dissonant. This little hidden chromaticism adds to the "mysterious" vibe about the song, which matches its murder-mystery themes.

Nate Mondschein – Drums; Louis Russo – Bass

12. The Neighbor's Dog

A fun song whose real punch comes from a lyrical twist. Listen carefully**.**

Written with Lucy Strother. Lucy Strother – Vocals and Cello; Nate Mondschein – Drums; Louis Russo – Bass

13. Jesse Is Crazee

This one originated my sophomore year, while I was making a lot of hip hop beats. This one is very characteristic of what I was doing at the time—video

game-esque synth sounds mixed with Southern-minimalist rhythms. Like many of my other beats from that time period, it sat as a musical fragment for years without ever becoming a full song. This year I came up with the bridge and the vocal parts, finally completing it.

14. The Dinosaurs

Contains samples from Fantasia. *Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Pictures, 1940.*