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In Conversation with Steve Levine

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Abstract

This interview with internationally acclaimed music producer and sound engineer Steve Levine explores numerous pertinent issues surrounding the changes within the music industries over the past forty years. With more than four decades of experience working with ground-breaking artists and groups like The Clash and Culture Club, Steve presents a first-hand account "from within" into the social and cultural impact of gender, race and ethnicity on jobs within the music industries, and the changes in sound production and technology since the 1950s, alongside personal stories from Steve's own career and his views on the current developments in music recording equipment with a look towards the future of the music industries.

Introduction

Simone: Good morning everybody and welcome to 'In Conversation with Steve Levine'. Before we invite Steve officially onstage, let me briefly introduce Steve and his work to contextualise today's event. Steve has worked in the recording industry since the mid 1970's. His early days were spent as an engineer working with The Clash and pop bands such as Layla, produced by Bruce Johnston of The Beach Boys – a group that Steve would eventually produce himself. Steve found the title of engineer confining for his talents and took the step into both production and song writing at the time, signing a publishing deal with Rondor Music and using the money from his advance to buy what was then the very latest in studio gadgetry, the Lin Drum. Steve's reputation as a producer in the 80's was second to none. He was responsible for Culture Club's classic hits and the band's first three albums, which included the multi-platinum *Colour by numbers*. Culture Club have sold well over twenty-million records worldwide and 'Karma Chameleon' still remains one of Virgin Record's biggest ever selling singles. Since then, Steve has worked with artists as diverse as Stevie Wonder, China Crisis, Ziggy Marley, Gary Moore, Motorhead and the aforementioned Beach Boys. In 2005 Steve was instrumental in the release of the charity record 'Grief never grows old', following the horrific Tsunami on 26th December 2004. His status ensured that Brian Wilson, Barry and Robin Gibb, Rick Wakeman, Sir Cliff Richard, Boy George, Russell Watson and Steve Winwood all contributed to the song, which was a top five single in the UK chart and a number one on the Independent Charts. Steve's love of music has never diminished and he is constantly listening to new artists and bands, looking for emerging talent that he would like to work with. Steve is busy producing exciting new bands for his label Hoobres Records, whose first release was Six Day Riot. He is currently in the studio with new signings Daytona Nights, Natalie McCool and previously the Glitches and Patch Williams. Steve has won a number of prestigious awards, including *BPI* 'Producer of the year', *Music Week* 'Top Singles Producer' and a Grammy Award for his work with Denise Williams. Away from his production duties, Steve is a regular contributor to [BBC] *6Music* where he reviews new releases and is a resident expert on digital downloading. He also sits on a variety of boards within the UK Music Industry and is a respected speaker on music technology, particularly with Apple, for whom he has given talks in lectures not only at the various UK Apple stores, but also at key events such as *Mac Expo*. In 2011, Steve received the prestigious Bronze Sony Radio Academy Award for the BBC Radio Show 'The Producers'. The show explores

the work of legendary record producers who reveal the studio secrets behind the creation of their classic recordings. Today we are extremely pleased to welcome Steve Levine to Liverpool John Moores University – Please welcome Steve Levine.

Becoming a Music Producer

Simone: Steve, we just wanted to start by talking more generally about music production. Tell us a little bit about how you got involved in music production; which skills and experiences did you have and why did you want to do this job?

Steve: Well...it's interesting because it's 2015 so it'll actually be forty years since I started, but I did start young. I didn't go to University and I only did one year of sixth form, so I started when I was seventeen in the studio because in those days, there just wasn't the kind of great University facilities that there are today. I look around here at places like LIPA [Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts] and in London – there's just so many great opportunities to learn your craft but they just weren't available then. The only thing you could do in those days was either be a tape opp, which I became, or there were one of two apprenticeships. The BBC for example used to run a Sound Engineering Apprenticeship and that didn't feel to me that was the way to go. I went to...well I guess I was lucky in one sense that in my generation it was still the Secondary Modern, Grammar and Technical schools. I passed my 11+ so I was able to choose between a Grammar School and a Tech School. I went to a Tech School in Canterbury called Canterbury Technical High School for Boys, who at least did specialise in separate Physics, Chemistry, Biology and then within the Physics there was a separate Electronics. It was actually after school but I really enjoyed that, so I guess my love of technology and music combined then I guess from maybe the fourth year onwards. I remember in the fifth year particularly, so I was fifteen or sixteen... that was when I really absolutely loved music, but also because of my beginning to understand the process I thought – I want to be a sound engineer. I applied for a job at all the studios. There used to be a book called *Kemps* which listed all the studios. It was sort of like, a *Yellow Pages* of studios. It listed all the studios around the country, which in the 70's, there were a lot! There's unfortunately so few now but there were a lot, so I wrote to all of them and had no replies back of course. One of things I did do was I took the opportunity that during my exams, the first group of my O-Levels as they were, they were grouped together so I think I had a week where I did all of them and then nothing...so I used the nothing period to go to the studios physically and literally just knock on the door and see if they'd take me. That actually surprisingly worked quite well; probably wouldn't work today but it did work well, and it ultimately led to me getting a job as a tape opp at CBS Studios in London. The good thing about that type of studio is that it was a fully commercial studio, even though it was aligned to CBS Records. So you've got a lot of day to day work, which was the CBS stuff, but because it had three studio complexes... the downstairs studio was huge so they'd be able to record an orchestra there. I learnt my craft assisting on setting up microphones for the orchestras. Studio two was about this big [*Steve refers to the size of the current venue*], so that was the kind of cool studio where the bands would record and then Studio three which was about half or less than half this size, was the demo studio and that was where all the junk that was removed from Studio one and Studio two was put for a second life. By the time 1976 came, I had started working on assisting downstairs in Studio two so they felt that the next stage for all of us – there were about five of us – that we would go upstairs as a full engineer on the demo sessions. That was then the period where the first of the demo sessions was when XTC came through...that was '76. As the time went through, all the bands that CBS were interested in signing would have a week of demo time and that was how I got to work with The Clash. They

were booked in for a demo session initially, so we recorded the demo session and on the demo session we recorded 'White Riot', which ultimately became the first single. The A&R department came to the session, saw how great the band were and then that morphed into the first album. There were almost no gaps between the demos. The range of bands that came through...I mean London particularly at that time was a very exciting time for bands and there were a lot of bands playing around London. It's very different to how it is now with the internet, as what happened in London was very London-centric – we had no idea what was going on Liverpool, what was going on in Sheffield or Manchester; they were very separate. It's probably fair to say that XTC from Swindon was about as far west as they went. Most of the bands we worked with were from central London and the home counties areas; I don't recall there being anything that was further afield. Then as it moved forward in the success I think, because The Clash became quite a good advert for that, more bands did travel south. As the years went on in '77 and '78 some northern bands came to London, which for me as an engineer was a fantastic experience. What was fascinating to me was that we'd be recording upstairs in Studio three with those sort of punk bands and then downstairs, in a story I've told before, Supertramp were in Studio two downstairs. In the time that we made certainly The Clash's first album, they were still working on the snare drum sound downstairs. Every day you went past and it was like (*makes snare drum noises*) and then at the end of the week they left. They never recorded anything and that was the way the industry was then. The punk ethos was "oh my god – it's got to change, this is insane spending a week getting a snare drum set up", and as great as Supertramp is and was, the times were definitely changing. The big fat corporate rock period that we were having was on its last legs and then there was this new, young generation of bands. There were lots of studios across London; there was a great studio in Fulham where there was Generation X and The Stranglers, so dotted across the city where these new pockets of music with brand new teams of producers and engineers. That was pretty much my start point.

Simone: That's very interesting – how much does being at the right place at the right time play a role in establishing yourself?

Steve: It's important but I think you have to make your own luck. The reason that I got offered the Bruce Johnson session for example, was because during the process of the upgrade for Studio two, there was this new way of recording. Sixteen track finished and twenty four track was the new big thing and the consoles that they had then were in-line desks. The older engineers who were used to the old-fashioned way of "here's the microphone, here's the monitors" found the fact that channel one, which could be the bass drum microphone, could also be the return of the guitar. They found that really confusing, but because I'd only just started I didn't have the baggage of how it was done in the olden days. I just put a piece of tape on it saying "here's my drums and here's my guitar" and because I helped install the desks, it was the best way of learning. Today that is still my ethos. Whenever I buy a new piece of equipment I have a look at it, read the manual and find out how the thing works, because when you have that skillset...I mean because I helped to install the BBC tape decks, the logic of how it worked seemed bleeding obvious. Then when they put this engineer on the session, he had no idea how it worked and the sessions were taking ages. Bruce Johnson was getting so cross and he brought an American engineer with him as the main engineer, as the Americans were already used to using MCI desks. Bruce was very brave and he just said "Look" to the manager of the studio, "this guy has to come off the session and I want Steve do the session, or I'm taking the sessions elsewhere". They said "well Steve's not an engineer, he's only an assistant" and Bruce replied "yes, but he's knows more about the desk than

the guy you've put on it". We had this weird thing then where I was about eighteen or nineteen, but my tape opps then were twenty five. I left school straight away so I'd already had three years of experience and they hadn't, so it was fairly clear that I'd have to leave fairly soon after. So Simon and I left CBS...well we actually got fired in the end because we started using the studios for our own productions. Then we had this ridiculous situation where Simon and I were employed as freelance engineers in the same studio by our clients, doing the same job we did the week before, but now twice the salary because we were now freelance. That was a valuable lesson – to have good clients and work well the clients, so the clients understand what you have. I have clients that I have worked with for my whole career. I mean one of the clients who I worked with on my first day in the studio; I worked with a month ago in Liverpool. Relationships can last a lifetime; if you work well – and I work very well with this client – I mean...it was my very first session ever and I was an assistant on the session and I work with him to this day. My other clients who I work with... in fact one who I work with, Bobby Blue who is also a record producer, we laugh at the fact that he's on the *PRS* Board with me and I would engineer some of his records. I think forming great relationships, the same as if you are in a band or if a band works with a producer or an engineer, if you get a great relationship then that can last your life – which is really important.

Simone: What attributes or experiences should students bring into a position such as this, from your experience?

Steve: Well I think in the case of musicians, I find it really interesting because I also sit on the *MU* Board [*Musicians Union Board*] and the *MU* Board is fascinating because there are a lot of old musicians there and a lot of younger musicians. There seems to be currently that we're at real crossroads, and I have to fight very strongly for the rights of the newer breed of musicians, because there are some old musicians who... just because a new musician uses a computer or a sequencer or indeed a hip-hop musician who uses loops, they think that it's not being a musician. I totally disagree. I think that being creative is however you want to be creative. It's same in the art world; you can't say that Andy Warhol doing screen prints is less creative than Van Gogh or something, because he used oil colours. There's no difference – it's all art. I think that creating music is art and if you happen to use a sample, now I will then say "I expect you to get clearance on the sample and acknowledge the person's sample that you've used", as I totally hate it when artists have a total disregard for the samples they've used. If you wish to use a sample, then you acknowledge the team that made that sample, which you have incorporated in your work. I had a similar thing to this with the *MU* – if you are a musician and you come to a session, you have to leave your ego at the door and you have to leave your taste at the door, because you are now being employed by the client. They are employing you for a certain thing you might do. You might be good at guitar sounds or you might have a particular way of playing and that is absolutely essential. What I find frustrating with a lot of musicians is that I have seen musicians who still bring their baggage to the sessions. That is not what you want. When you look through history at some of the greatest recordings... let's take someone like David Bowie and 'Heroes' Robert Fripp – that 'Heroes' creation of those guitar sounds is a combination of David Bowie, Toni Visconti the record producer and Robert Fripp. If you listen to Robert Fripp's own records, that's not what he does, but they used his thing to be very creative. I think that's really important, whereas I see a lot of guitarists say "I haven't got any work" and the simple answer is that you're not bring anything that people want of you – you're just being an arse. You might be a really great musician but you're not contributing and it's the same in the reverse way. If you're a record producer or an engineer, you've got to bring the very best out of the people that you're working with and very

often that means doing nothing. There is a tendency with some producers to always feel that they have to do something or over produce. If you assemble a group of people in a room and you create a vibe, that's as valid as doing the entire track and getting the singer in. Those are the two extremes; being a kind of vibe master is just as important as presenting a finished thing, because when you are working in a studio it is a strange environment. Strange things happen and moods take place, so sometimes just creating the right atmosphere – and that can even be just making sure that the fridge is stocked with water – those silly little things make people feel more comfortable. Here's what we're doing the studio this week – we're wearing slippers! Now it's cold at the moment so I have the radiators on and it's nice and cosy, so we want to get cosy doing vocals and we made a decision this week that we'd wear slippers. That's a very small thing but I recommend it to everybody. You take your shoes off at the door, you put your slippers on and when you're listening back to things, you kind of relax and we've done some great vocals today. We're going to continue after this with some more vocals. These tiny things...as important as on Monday when we started putting up five different microphones and listening to them, to decide which one I was going to use. Oddly enough my very first choice that I thought was not the right choice, so I ended up using something that I hadn't used in ages. I went through them and his voice sounded better with this microphone and it just seemed to sound right. It wasn't technically perfect but it did suit his voice, so that's the other thing about being open to changes. I woke up thinking right I'm going to put this microphone up and that's going to be the one, so be prepared to constantly change.

Simone: In which ways can a producer make money? We talked about that it's very difficult to put a figure on it, so how can a producer live?

Steve: I think that as the market has changed and we have completely gone full circle. If you start at the very beginning and use somebody like Sam Phillips as an example; Sam Phillips discovered and produced Elvis Presley in the mid-1950's. He owned his own studio and his studio was a studio for hire – you could pay twenty-five dollars a session and you took your tape away or in those days, an actual record. If he saw somebody he liked, he would comp them the time, develop it himself and then sell it on, which is what he did with Elvis Presley. So you had a few independent producers and as the sixties progressed, the other producers were effectively record company employees like Sir George Martin. Sir George Martin we all owe a massive thank you to, because Sir George Martin was an employee of *EMI* records. He, after his work with The Beatles, made the point that a producer should have points on a record not just to sell it. From that point on you had the birth of the independent producer. What that would mean is that you would be hired by the record company; you would have a fee per track and a point. The average in the eighties was around two to three thousand pounds per track, so it was ok. An average advance was thirty thousand pounds for making an album and that would be fifteen thousand pounds upfront, then when you delivered the final mixes – and in those days the producer did the whole thing – you would have a percentage on the record that would be from one to four percent. For every record that was sold you would have one percent of the wholesale price of the record, not the retail price. You'd end up with about ten pence a record or something like that. Then as the eighties moved into the nineties and more bedroom dance acts happened, the advances dropped right off and it went down to one hundred pounds a track, but still CDs were selling so there was still a market. Then the point started increasing to even eight percent, but still the sales were going down and people started changing the foundations of the point. You had to be very careful because in the eighties when you did a record you got a point on the album, but as you moved into the nineties

you weren't producing the whole album. What you had to be really careful of was that you produced the best tracks and then they got someone else in to do some rubbish tracks, but you'd be splitting the point. Producers like me had things in their contract that said "It's not pro-rata", so if I produced ten tracks I get a point and if you put three rubbish tracks on there, I still get it as if it's ten tracks. Also when singles were out you had the B-Sides, you had B-Side protection so you couldn't put a rubbish track on the B-Side. Then as the dance era changed you had a lot of independent productions that were outside of the mainstream, so there was this window in the mid-nineties where there were a lot of independent companies making 12" records, pressing them themselves and selling them. They owned one hundred percent of the record. That's when the producer changed, because then they were a business partner in the arrangement. I did a few of those where effectively you're a team – you've got the producer, the label guy and the artist. Between three of us you would get a third each so a thousand 12" sold, X pounds made and split, so today's model is kind of a hybrid of all those things. I have a studio just like the olden days; I tend to be a partnership with the projects that I work on because that is the only way. There is no money anymore. The Holy Grail of signing a band to a label almost impossible and nothing makes any sense anymore. You look at some bands that are signed and you think why the hell have they signed those? Then you hear other bands and you think wow, why haven't they still had a deal? It's a funny old world at the moment and I think we are at a massive change of the times. Look at towns with Coal Mining and lace manufacturing - Those industries collapsed when things moved on and I think the traditional [music] industry is collapsing into a black hole. The future has to be a form of *Spotify* that pays properly, because it is fair to say that while *Spotify* is making a lot of money for itself, artists...I saw the other day that Mark Ronson has had nearly three million plays. I'll have the conversation with him when he gets his cheque for 10p, so that's not right. If you had three million plays on BBC Radio one or Radio two, the cheque from *PRS* would make a hole in your floor because it would be so enormous, but that's not the way it's going. Airplay is really valuable. Sales are insignificant; I mean you'd be lucky if you sold a few thousand although ironically if those few thousand were vinyl, they have a premium price. However, manufacturing vinyl is more expensive today than it used to be and now because it's a bespoke industry, it's quite expensive to manufacture vinyl. In terms of answering the money making you've got to be an entrepreneur, you've got to be a businessman and you've got to think of it outside the traditional model of advances, because you're not going to get those.

Identity Issues and the Music Business

Simone: When we met last time, we spoke about some interesting issues relating to race and ethnicity in relation to certain genres. You came across certain experiences that we spoke about for example...

Steve: One of the big problems of course that I'm finding as a record producer is that most bands have got to have day jobs. You can't survive as an emerging artist in the current climate – you have to take a second job, which means that in order to pay your rent and live, the role of being a musician has to be subsidised. That immediately gives you and I hate to say it a massive advantage to middle class white kids, whose parents are often wealthy and can subsidise a year's worth of sitting there trying to write songs. Move to inner cities where you've got a lot of poverty and especially in ethnic communities, you may have the same level of talent but they don't have resources. One of things that I'm finding is that presumption that a white middle class band is a jangly guitar band and a black kid in Toxteth is going to be a hip-hop artist. That's not necessarily correct. I've got many examples of artists that, just because they happen to be black from Toxteth,

they don't want to be hip-hop artists. They want to be songwriters. We have to educate that being a song writer is probably the most important thing – the genre is neither here nor there. It might develop into hip-hop, it might develop into rock, it might develop into whatever. It doesn't matter. We've got to judge everyone for their talents as a song writer but how do we help kids who have nothing? Nothing as in money as opposed to talent - It's really hard for those kids to come to University. I've done some masterclasses in Nottingham particularly and a large proportion of those kids couldn't read or write properly. They were seventeen or eighteen; some had been expelled, some have had a difficult life and they are now not equipped with the basic things that we take for granted. So how the hell are they going to fill in a form to get a bursary for whatever, because they can't fill the form in? We've got this generation of people, who have just been left outside, through no fault of their own. For the vast majority it's external circumstances that have created this – this has gone on for generations. I think the London-centric thing has been a problem as well, where the rest of the UK has been ignored and then there have been very specific individual things where there have been targeted things. One of the things that this Government has started is this new internship thing, which is making it a lot easier for people who maybe don't want to go to University but can take an internship in the creative industries. That's not just in the studios; that could be in television or whatever. It's helping them [the people] – it's mentoring them and bringing them in, to try and just get them to the next level. Then if they decide even at twenty-five or thirty to go to University then it's fine. We all have to see and help. Everyone who comes to University has been given a very lucky chance, because you're being given this great education and you're leaving with something that's incredible, but that's only part of the industry. The other thing that I've also found, because I do some stuff at my studio, is breaking away from the image of what you're bringing and that's something you can do yourself. You've got to be international in the finest sense of the word – you mustn't be local. If you're from Liverpool great, but you've got to be able to be open on the international market. The one great thing about the internet is that I get downloads on my website from all over the world. That's incredible! People I've never heard of or never met! You can be international, so the positive side of it is...if you have the right presence in the virtual world, anyone on this planet can access your music or your C.V. or any of those things.

Simone: So people that you discover, do you look online for artists?

Steve: I don't think that I've ever looked for artists on *Myspace* since about ten years ago. For me, the most likely situation is someone will send you a *Sound Cloud* link or a *YouTube* link. Those are two options. *YouTube* has the advantage that it might have some visuals to go with it, which gives you a good overview of what's going on. Some bands still have their *Sound Cloud* links private, which is great, so you're getting a private link. I'm not totally a fan as *Sound Cloud* isn't properly licensed, so it's caught between a rock and a hard place. It's a great place to go as a repository for stuff, but they're not paying the people who've got their stuff up for the service, whereas *YouTube* – for every criticism of *YouTube* – it is licensed and you get something from it. *YouTube* is quite good; all I'd say for bands is to watch the quality, because I saw something the other day that somebody sent me. The band looked great but I have no idea what the song is. Nevertheless at least I could see the band looked interesting, so I might take it to the next stage, but for me as a producer those are the best two routes.

Simone: In terms of gendered aspects in the music business, we talked about different roles. There seem to be some job roles exclusively done by men.

Steve: It's really odd - There are almost no female record producers. There are a few female sound engineers but then if you move back, there's a huge proliferation of great females in music publishing, in music management, in record producer management...it's very odd. For me I feel that's strange, because the very skill that a woman possesses in the role of mentoring in publishing, why can't that work in record production? I see tiny, tiny green shoots - the last masterclass I did for LIPA had three young ladies in it, which is at least a step in the right direction, but it is still insane that it's so bad. When you look at the number of female artists, there's almost an equal share possibly of dominance so I don't understand, I really don't. Oddly enough there are no barriers. The one healthy thing that I've found certainly from my time in the industry is that there is no barrier to sex, genre - it's one of the most open areas of the well. It's just weird. Nothing is stopping anyone coming into it and yet there's this invisible barrier. I don't understand why this is. Certainly the range of artists that I've worked with - and I'm no different to many other producers - covers a wide range of background, genres, sexual orientation and there are no barriers. I mean look at Culture Club; there's a prime example of the melting pot of the industry and that's reflected I think, so I don't know why that is. What is stopping young ladies from becoming sound engineers and producers? I just don't know.

Simone: Sometimes there are academic literatures that say the music business is sexist...

Steve: No, I think the record industry is sexist but I don't think the recording industry is. I think you need to separate the two. The music industry...the record companies are still sexist, but only slightly. There is still that tendency that if there's a girl in the band it's all "oh get your tits out" - that terrible 1970's attitude, but that's not the case in the studio. It's really odd; it's almost like within the circle of a recording studio it's talent that's the most important thing, which is what it should be. No singer is booked for their looks - they're booked for their voice. If you happen to be attractive then that's by the by. It's the talent that comes first and I think that once the record is finished and it comes into the domain, there are sections of the old school record industry that probably are still in the 1970's. Maybe that's the same in certain aspects of television as well. It's wrong and I think there is a vast array of female artists that are making waves, moving forward and fighting. I think also that the UK is quite ageist as well. When you look at European television and you look at the age of some of the acts that are on, particularly in France or even Germany, some of them are even my age. You think, if I was in a band we'd never get signed to a UK label, so I think the UK is also ageist as well. It's interesting that perhaps with *Spotify* and streaming things, song and the production takes precedence over the imagery of the artist. Maybe ultimately that's the thing that will change it. I think the public are far more interested in a great song and a great production than the artist actually. If they hear a track and this is certainly true if songs are used in films, you can have a whole generation loving a song because it was used in a particular film, but they have no idea who the artist is or who the band is. I mean look at those ridiculous things that were tweeted the other day about Paul McCartney. How do you view that? Do you say well, ok Kanye West's audience are all idiots or they are just so young that you forget that The Beatles mean nothing to those people? On the positive side, maybe some of those will then check out *Abbey Road* or *Sgt. Pepper* and think, oh my god, I had no idea. It's weird. I had a very interesting thing a few years ago; there was a young girl group that I was possibly going to work with and it was clear when the manager brought them to the studio that they had no idea who I was, which was fantastic, but then this weird thing happened. A few years ago I had this book out called *The Hit Kit*, which was a home recording thing, and I had one on the shelf. As I was sort of doing my spiel about how we were going to make the record and who was going to be involved,

one of them looked up and went "Oh! You did that!" because someone bought her it [the book] for Christmas and that meant more to her than anything else. I think we also have to remember the cycle of people; someone who is sixteen or seventeen that is buying records today has no interest in anything that was even a couple of years ago, just as when we were sixteen or seventeen. The overlaps are great. I think certainly the music that we play in our household and my daughters are mid-twenties now, we have huge overlaps of music we love, and I think that...I mean my parents were very music orientated and so the love that we had of Motown and what they grew up with was the same, but I think if you go back one generation, then you go from Big Band to Rock 'n' Roll. There was definitely no love between those two. As we move forward, I think time gets compressed but sixteen year olds...they don't know what a Mini-Disc is – they don't care about it. They just want it on their phone. There's this thing with *Sony* launching Hi-Fi; I love that fact that they're pushing the envelope to make things better, but most kids listen on the bus on the [mobile phone] speaker. It's horrible and horrible for everyone else on the bus. If it's horrible they can't possibly be enjoying it, but they must be getting something from it. What is it that they're enjoying? Is it the beat or the lyrics? I just don't know, so I think you can't be a snob – you just have to go with it.

Copyright and the Music Business

Simone: We talked about copyright as well. We talked about the so-called exploitative nature of the music business, copyright issues and the criticisms that surround copyright. What do you think about that?

Steve: It's really interesting how people's view of copyright can change when it's their own copyright. People are very cavalier on the internet – "Oh it's free speech, everything should be free" and then the moment it's something of theirs, it's actually normally journalists who moan on about music should be free, but if you copy their article talking about moaning about copyright they go "oh that's my article or my picture, you can't use that without permission" – it's the same thing! You can't use someone else's work without permission. I think the internet is like the Wild West at the moment and as soon as an artist is aware of copyright...another example I will quote is that my daughter went to University. One of her gentlemen friends, gentlemen friend as opposed to partner, was very cavalier with copyright. Unfortunately and I don't know if it's the same here, but certainly a couple of years ago as the Universities had uber-high speed broadband but no one else did, most students of ten years ago were downloading the entire world content on their laptop. This one particular chap had thousands and thousands of songs and not paid for one of them, so he was in the position of perhaps having to pay for all them. He was in a band, a very good band and I did do a couple of tracks with them. When none of his friends bought his track and he had no money, I said to him "well there you go, there's copyright for you". It hurts when it's on the other side, when it's you trying to make a living from your efforts. We have to protect copyright. Without copyright we have nothing. It's not just music – I think the problem is that people presume copyright is just music, but it's not - it's everything. It's from design; it's for the shape of that bottle (*Steve points to a bottle in the room*) and the logo on the bottle. Someone was paid to design that. Whether they paid a fee and gave that fee to whoever this company is and they own the copyright – fine. That's how important it is. It's really important that we protect copyright because without copyright, nobody can earn money for their creative efforts. Whether its song writing or art and design or manufacturing something, we have to protect it otherwise we cannot monetise the efforts. Also...yes it will cause a demise. I don't think it'll ever be the demise that people say because human beings are naturally very creative, but I think it's

important that we work really hard to protect it and realise that your BBC licence is incredibly important, until there's another model of doing it that works. People get paid; the BBC has means to fund it. If your hairdresser buys a *PRS* licence and a *PPL* licence to play music while you're having your hair cut, all that music is being paid for and they can pay for everything. It's really, really crucial. When you get hairdressers moaning about not having to pay for a licence to pay music, they should just shut up. What, your supplier is giving you all that conditioner for nothing? Or the electric company is giving you the electric for nothing? It's part of your business! Don't play music then. I'm not saying you have to play music. Have an empty salon and see how jolly the atmosphere is. It's terrible! There was a situation a while ago with one of the major supermarket chains wanting to not play music at night to save money, when all the students were there stacking the shelves for them. Within a few days there was a revolt, because possibly one of the most mundane jobs in the world must be stacking shelves. At least give them some music to listen to while they're doing it. Music helps your soul, it enriches your life but it does need to be paid for. The musicians and the writers and the producers and everybody that's involved in it need to be paid. Universities can help by discouraging use of the internet to download stuff free of charge, but also you're educating the next generation of engineers and producers. How are they expected to earn a living? That's really important. I think that's the clarity, you're being gifted with this knowledge and now try earning a living from it. It's very, very hard. If copyright goes then everyone is stuffed. It has taken a while for Governments, successive Governments, to realise how important it is. *Google* ride rough shot over everyone, but then you copy one thing from *Google* and then they're onto you that second. Copyright is really important when it's your own copyright and you can be cavalier with everyone else's.

Liverpool's Music Scene

Simone: Steve, you're running your own record label and recording studio in Liverpool and I'm sure that there are quite a few young people in the audience who would dream of the opportunity of working with you.

Steve: A couple of them have! (*Laughs*)

Simone: Is it possible and how?

Steve: Well it depends on the circumstances. I think those that have ventured in, that are sitting in this room, were part of the *Liverpool International Music Festival [LIMF]* and I think we have to thank the fact that this city has a mayor and a council who understands how important creativity is and how really important it is the soul of the city. The whole *LIMF* Academy that they set up last year was a great success and it gave a number of bands the opportunity to record a track for broadcast on Dave Monk's *BBC Introducing* Radio Show. That was the premise because a lot of bands are recording terrible quality recordings and not really broadcast quality, so with *BBC Introducing*, the council, my studio, we had just slightly around three hundred entries – fantastic, as it was really restricted to only this area...under twenty-ones as well. So the winners got a day to record a track, which Dave Monks then broadcast. In fact he's broadcast them probably about three times so that's fantastic, so they should receive a tiny bit of *PRS* from that and a bit of *PPL*, but more importantly they're getting exposure and they all got the opportunity to play live as part of the festival [*LIMF*]. Its things like that I need to be involved in, because I think that's a really great way of bands getting a chance. We can find a way of making them work so it's great that the council have that vision, because it's really, really important. The soul of music or the heart of the

music that's in this city is incredible. With regards to my own label, I really just have that more by default because sometimes I need to release things and it's good to have. As I was an early adopter and I was involved with Apple when iTunes first started I've got an account, so I'm in the fortunate position of having an account. That was literally being in the right place at the right time. We did an event when Regent Street first opened in London and I did a live recording with one of the very first versions of *Garage Band* or something. We did a live recording and when we finished the thing, people in the audience said "ooh, can we have a copy of that? It was really good". I did it with the guy from *Dirty Vegas*; we just did this kind of weird track that turned out great. Then this guy from Apple was there, one of the sort of 'big wigs', and he said "well if I fast track you an account, you can download it", so that's sort of how it happened. I don't release that much on it but it's very valuable to have, because at least it means I can get something out quite quickly, but that's really what it's for.

Simone: So who are your artists currently, because I did mention all of them...

Steve: Well those are all previous artists. Trying to find a way forward with all those artists...so Patch Williams we signed a deal with *Chrysalis*, Daytona Lights we managed to get them into *Hollyoaks*, which was good and bad. Like with every act, you've got to try and find a different way of doing things, because the normal way of doing it is broken. It doesn't work, so I don't have the answer. I will record and make great recordings. Natalie [McCool] I guess is the most current one and we have been successful in some areas, but it's been incredibly hard. We've had so little airplay, so little sales but in her particular case, and I mentioned this before, massive piracy. A level of piracy that is just so depressing. If we'd have had all of those copies of her album paid for, we'd be in the position to do a second album, but unfortunately we can't. We just can't afford to do it. Now there's lots of people out there loving Natalie and enjoying her – great, but they needed to have paid for it and unfortunately that has caused us financial meltdown a bit. It just isn't tenable, which is a real shame. She's a fantastic artist and she's carrying on and she's incredibly talented. I love her to bits, but it's impossible to make any money from it in the normal, 'here's the record, go and buy it' market. It's very, very hard.

Simone: You've chosen to live in Liverpool. You've come over from LA I believe?

Steve: We're quite nomadic; I've lived all around. I was born in London, lived in London, started my career in London. During the early nineties, we moved to Los Angeles and lived there for a few years. It's interesting – that was another change in the market, so towards the end of the eighties when the very early Acid Dance music was starting...I loved soul music but I was necessarily in love with that music, but importantly my own career, I was doing more and more film and television work and the place to do film and television work is not London, it's Los Angeles. I had to be there to be where the work was. Oddly enough the strange, strange thing was that the marketplace in Los Angeles in the early nineties was the Nirvana, Garage Band, Rock thing so I'd come away from dance music to actually a sort of retro band. My skillset was more required for that, so I ended up producing a number of bands and one I noticed you listed, a band called The Beauties, who I thought were fantastic. Nothing happened with them unfortunately. They were like...kind of Black Crow-sy. They were a rock band – kind of Nirvana-esque. They were of that kind of rock era that was happening in Los Angeles, but that was very Los Angeles-centric or West Coast, because Nirvana were from Washington State. I think you've got to look at the way that things have changed, so that was a good period in that respect; because it was a different way of working, different studios...I have a huge love of that. Then we moved back to London and I had

a very different model of studio, because the equipment had shrunk dramatically, so that period ended up with me producing The Honeyz, which I did almost entirely at home. That whole album was produced in a room the size of...well this big (*Steve gestures a size*). It was absolutely minute, but that's the way the technology was. Then I set up my first studio in the home, because it seemed at the time that was the best way of working and it was. That was when we started the radio shows, which we had to do at home; there was no other way of doing it. Then over the same sort of period I started coming to Liverpool. It's odd – I'd never really been to Liverpool much before. Certainly during the period of Culture Club when they were touring, I don't even know if we played Liverpool and also oddly, I produced China Crisis but they came to London to record. I never came up here. Even when I did that album with Sonia; she came to London so I'd never come to Liverpool to record. When we did Daytona Lights, we were trying to find a studio but over the period of the last eleven or twelve years, just after LIPA had opened – half through Eddie and half through Mark – I started doing some masterclasses. In those days it was still quite a trudge to come up here because the train service wasn't what it is today and it was a big old journey in the car, so I'd have to come up the day before, do the masterclass, sometimes stay and then go back. It was quite an effort. Then slowly but surely Hope Street opened and the trains got better, so it became much more of a pleasurable experience to make the trek up here. What with all the various projects I had going on here and then the other thing was that the BBC had moved to Salford, and a lot of the productions – including the productions I did last year – all have to come from Salford. I guess our hearts with Liverpool, not Manchester, so Liverpool seemed to be the obvious choice. I've got a lovely studio here which you've seen. I couldn't do that anywhere else. I like the fact that Liverpool seems to be in a changing period; a period of great creativity and a period of moving forward. Whatever has gone before, there's the line. Let's move forward to a new generation of arts and crafts and that's videos, internet...so where I am, there is that hub of new businesses coming through that are very much the creative industry that I would like to be part of. Hopefully I am. Like I was saying about Los Angeles, when we went there it was very much you lived and breathed film and television. What I like about Liverpool is that it sort of lives and breathes music. I love that. It's a sort of little micro-thing and everyone is so much jollier here you know. It's lovely. People are nicer – a lot more talented I think. Everytime you're on the bus or I drive the studio...I take the bus a lot. I love going on the bus. I've got free Wi-Fi on the bus and the paper! Has anyone been on the Tube recently? It's hell. I have to travel to London quite a lot for some of the [Music] Boards. It's the most unpleasant thing; I get off at Euston and get on that Tube and it's like 'Oh my god'. Whereas on the bus, reading *The Metro* or whatever, it's very refreshing the amount of people I see wandering around with a guitar case. That's lovely. Whether they're a pro or whether they're having a lesson, I just the fact that people wander around this city with instruments. Nearly everybody has somebody that they know who is in a band, even if they're not in the band. It's great – that's the healthy thing. We just need to somehow be bigger than Manchester. I'm getting Liverpudlian myself – why does Manchester get all the best bits? We need to address that but maybe it'll come. Maybe there'll be a wave of new Liverpool based artists who will change that mould. The great thing about The Beatles is the heritage, but the negative is that it overshadows everything else and I think what Paul [McCartney] is doing up in LIPA is great; to try and get another lot through but it's still this big shadow of The Beatles who never recorded anything in Liverpool. They recorded it in Abbey Road in London or somewhere. It's ironic. Let's record, produce and manage and have it [new music from Liverpool] stay here and not go elsewhere. That'd be my dream. Something that is one hundred percent created in this city that becomes world beating – that would be fabulous. I hope...I don't know who that band is yet but who knows.

Simone: So is that your future plan?

Steve: Yes, that would be so great. I think you only need a couple of really big things to change the course of things.

Audience member: Hi Steve, it's two questions really but I'm sure you'll be able to answer them both. What was the last CD you heard or last bit of music you heard on the radio that you thought 'I've got to go and buy that'? The second bit is – what was the last gig you went to where you actually paid for the ticket?

Steve: The last gig I paid to...let me think where that was. Do you mean little gig or big gig?

Audience member: Any.

Steve: See 'cause there's a difference. If you go to something big, invariably it's a ticketed event. I would say...I'm genuinely trying to think what it is and who it was. Unfortunately I think it was London and I think it was in the summer, because all during the *Liverpool International Music Festival* I had a pass, so I could pretty much get in anywhere. We did buy passes for [Liverpool] *Sound City* for our other relatives and people, so that might count. So it was in London, and it was only because my name wasn't on the door so I thought 'I'm not going to make a fuss, just pay the five pound and get in'. In terms of CD, I'm still avidly buying CDs and records so...some I do download because I can't be bothered to go and get the CD and it'll just be a quick fix. Then there are others that I do buy the CD and my taste is vast, so one that I heard and immediately ordered on Amazon because I wanted to listen to the guitars was that Atlas thing. That was fantastic - A Brooklyn band; kind of guitar, jangly thing because I listened to it. Huey Morgan played it and I thought, 'Oh that sounds really good. I know I'm going to have to listen to that on CD', and I was thrilled by it. Then I heard Todd Tursch, the Norwegian guy on the radio and I just downloaded that because it was kind of retro, disco. Then the most recent thing I bought was only a few days ago, was I bought a jazz album from *Probe* [Liverpool record store] on vinyl. I find that listening to Jazz - I love Jazz as well - so I bought that just a few days ago - £14.99 on vinyl. I'm happy for all formats depending on my mood, so I'm still an avid purchaser. I love all sorts of music. Actually John Grant at Liverpool Phil [Liverpool Philharmonic Hall]...not only we did we go to see that and loved it; I also bought his double vinyl and a bag just before Christmas. Now there's an interesting thing because the vinyl came with a CD and a download, so in one package I had everything I could possibly need. The vinyl to enjoy vinyl, the CD to enjoy John Grant's music at its fullest and a quick download for the iPod.

Major Label or Independent?

Audience member: Hi Steve. Rick Rubin recently did an interview with Zane Lowe [BBC Radio 1 DJ] and he stated that he doesn't think it's possible for an artist to plan to really succeed, unless they're on a Major [Record label]. I just want to know what you think about that.

Steve: I think that I'm afraid I have to agree with him, but not exactly for the reasons that you think. The problem – and I totally agree with that – back to my thing I was saying earlier about different producers...there's a classic example of Rick Rubin, who is ninety-nine percent vibe merchant and I would probably say that he doesn't know what end to plug a microphone in, but you cannot absolutely take away what brilliant records he's been the catalyst to make. He found the greatest recordings that Johnny Cash has ever made in his career, when everyone was

ignoring him, so I think Rick Rubin is up there in my list of Producers. The reason I think it is a shame is the monopoly situation that *Universal* [Record Company] have created for themselves, meaning that no-one else has a chance. The problem is the marketplace, the gatekeepers – Radio one, Radio Two, 6Music, Capital, XFM – there's a giant gate and if you walk in with your Universal outfit on, the gate is opened to you. If you walk in with your own thing then the gate is firmly shut and that is the problem. We're not having access to the marketplace. Anyone who is independent, it's a massive struggle to get that gate open and Universal can get the gate open, because Universal can use all sorts of other additional methods of promoting their acts that no one else can touch. He's absolutely right. It's a shame and I'm hoping that it will change, but unfortunately I think it's actually going to require some form of re-look at the various policies. When they charter renew comes up at the BBC for example, I'm hoping the Government will actually make it part of that, or maybe the EU will. They were saying that when *Universal* combined all the companies together, they were going to have to break certain parts up and change it. Unfortunately I don't think that's really happened properly, so *Universal* is far too dominant at the moment and it's stopping other people. I'm afraid I do agree with him. It's a problem at the moment but it can't go on forever. At some point something will change. Even Microsoft was told to break the giant thing up at some point. When something is a monopoly, it's really, really dangerous for everyone else.

Producing The Clash

Audience member: Hi Steve. You came across The Clash very early on and they were very different I imagine to what was before and it kind of changed the rules in a way. What was it like working with The Clash at that moment? Were they studio savvy?

Steve: The thing that's interesting about them - you're absolutely correct, it was day one of the first session – and I've quoted this story before, because we had such limited time on the demo sessions we'd always set the studio up the night before. There was normally a ten o' clock start and the way they did the demos, not just The Clash but any of those bands, it was really tight rules. Ten O' Clock start, six o' clock finish, allow an hour for lunch and that was it. If you didn't have those rules, all the bands would take advantage of it, so for us as engineers it was easier to set everything up the night before. Set a number of drum mics up...we'd have a list so we knew what the bands would want. There was a big wall chart that would say 'The Clash' and it would say 'Drums, bass and two guitars', so we'd roughly know and set the thing up the night before, but Joe Strummer's first words to Simon were...as he walked in we'd put these screens up. We had the drums in the corner and then the bass amp and then they both had Fender amps, so there were two amps and a Marshall as well. We put some screens in between them, set up a vocal mic and that was it. Joe walked in and said "what are they?" and we said "they're screens", so he said "what are they for?" and we replied, "to get a bit of separation". His famous reply was "I don't know what separation is but I don't like it", so we moved the screens away, but the other thing we found with them is because they had just come from playing live is that Mick was absolutely obsessed with Mott the Hoople and the whole concept of overdubbing. He was aware of how he would break his guitar parts down and what would be double-tracked and all that. I found that quite fascinating that he was aware of what went into making a record and not necessarily how to do it. In the way of learning, he learnt his craft, and I think that's apparent from the first album. Certainly when Terry Chimes left and then they had – and it's fair to say – a much better drummer in the next generation of sessions. Terry was good for what he was, but that was a band coming off the road and into the studio, Topper was...oddly enough, I'd worked with Topper before. I worked at a small studio in London called *Rick Street Studios*, which was an eight-track studio and there was

a guy called Nicky Graham, who is still a friend of mine to this day and a producer. We were working with a couple of artists and Topper played drums and indeed actually played some percussion things on this. Our paths had actually crossed. He was kind of a young up and coming session guy, so he didn't really have a band, so the thing he brought to the party was that he'd been to loads of studios and that's a really important thing with a young band. If you've got studio experience, so when he set his kit up...he knew what he was doing, which was really important, and also he was a much tighter drummer. I think the whole thing got better when he came on board, because he made them sound more like I guess they wanted to be. If you think of Mott the Hoople, they were quite a tight sounding outfit and I think that the band [The Clash] progressed as they moved on. They learnt their craft. I worked with them up until 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais' – that was the last track I did with them. We never mixed that; Bill Price mixed that. Up until that session...that session was split between the two studios so we still cut the tracks upstairs, because although they were then in the position to move on, they liked the vibe that they got upstairs. We'd move to twenty-four track upstairs by then as well, but we'd take them from upstairs to downstairs. Downstairs had the better piano as well so we used to do some overdubs downstairs. There were a couple of times where the session would sometimes be split into two where Joe was upstairs with Simon doing guitar dubs or vocals, then I'd be downstairs with Mick doing acoustics or piano, which is probably why my relationship with Mick was strong and is to this day because I put more hours in with him. Our relationship with Joe was really odd, because after The Clash finished Joe – when he was still alive – his daughter went to the same pre-school as our daughter and we got this great famous thing of the Christmas play with this great punk legend taking pictures on his camera of his daughter. That was quite funny. I had no relationship with Paul Simmonds at all and he was hardly there at the studio in the early days, so I have no recollection of much of a contribution to the sessions in certainly those early days. Mick was the one who spent all the time in the studio, because even after the tracks were done, Mick would be there when the mixing was taking place. He put in the man hours and learnt to craft to become a producer in his own right. It was great to have been there – we had no idea in the first block of sessions how successful they would become, and it's probably fair to say that they're more successful now than they were at the time. There's two or three generations of people who have enjoyed their records, in a way that they weren't appreciated the first time round, because they were amongst many other bands of the time. Their records were not hugely successful. I remember that piece of footage that they show a lot; talking about getting into free gigs...Simon and I went to that gig at *Rainbow*. There's a lot of footage that they seem to use as archive and I have two really great memories of that gig. I did pay for that gig, I did go backstage and I remember Bob Geldof being in the queue, trying to blag his way into that gig and I remember seeing that gig. It was almost empty. The *Rainbow* is a big thing and it was virtually empty, but you never see it because the cameras only ever show the stage. It sounded terrible and they were really tired, because they'd gone there from working with us. We were in the studio in the morning, they'd gone for the sound check and we said we'd be down later to see the gig and people remember things so differently. I remember it not being a very good gig; not sounding good, really horrible, but when you see the footage cut into these documentaries you think 'if only the camera could turn the other way'. I remember the front being like really empty. Conversely, as my wife will testify, I remember going to see Culture Club at a really early gig and it was like being in a sardine tin – it was so packed. It was like...you know, ridiculous and so hot and sweaty. George's make-up was running and it was one of the most unpleasant experiences...but yes. People do remember gigs very differently. I have to say if I'm being honest; the numbers of really great live gigs I've seen are few and far between. I'm super critical anyway and the sound is getting better

as the years go on, but the sound often lets a lot of bands down and I think their tempos let things down. It's sort of break neck speed but when a gig is good, I'm happy to compliment it. For example the John Grant gig we saw at the Phil [Liverpool Philharmonic Hall] – brilliant. Even bearing in mind that there was a couple of technical problems as well, it was a fantastic gig and his performance was superb – really superb. I will certainly blow my own trumpet; I thought our Liverpool Festival [LIMF] gig in St George's Hall [Steve Levine's Assembly Point Sessions] with the most challenging acoustics was fantastic. I recorded it and listened back to it and there are some fantastic performances on there – Really, really good. So it can be done but a lot of work had to go into...you almost have to think of it as a theatre production. To get a good performance now requires everyone at the top of their game from the road crew, to the lighting, to the sound, to everyone. The audience need to be entertained and that's where the market is at the moment. I think if anything that all needs to improve. You can't just do a pub gig anymore – even if you're in a pub – because that might be the decision people make on whether they buy into you or not. The chances of being heard on the radio are nil and the chances of being heard in a pub are very high.

The Importance of Listening

Audience member: Do you feel like you get much opportunity to be creative in the studio or are you only given a duty or a role?

Steve: It's totally creative. In fact having my new studio it's even more so. Just as I was saying earlier, just even being able to choose between different mics and things, I find that incredibly creative, or if a guitarist has a sound that they're trying to describe and that's often the case. "Well I want this kind of distortion or this kind of chorus", that's a great creative moment. I find that almost the most pleasurable part. Mixing is tiresome at times and very fatiguing, whilst it is another creative process, if you haven't recorded it correctly then mixing is...I'm still in the old school that I believe that the recording should be it. There are so many people who send me demos or even if I get the files, everything is being done in the mix, which I think is wrong. We had it the other day; we were getting quite an important guitar sound and one of the guys in the band said "Oh why don't you just leave that to the mix?" Well if we're going to record a vocal on top of that, the singer needs to understand what he's singing to. You can't just have a clean guitar that's ultimately going to be this...whatever it is isn't, so I think that creative process I find absolutely fascinating. To try and create the sound that somebody is hearing. It's really odd because people use the word visualise, but it's audio, but people do have this visual image of what a sound should be. It's a weird thing; whether it's a delay or an echo and I do find that lovely, to try and help create that sound. It's more creative than ever. There's more opportunities, more pedals, more plug-ins – so many things. It's more creative than ever before, which is great.

Audience member: You mix many different ways of listening to music. Does it change when you've done your final product?

Steve: Yes it does, so when I mix I listen. I've got about six or seven pairs of headphones, six or seven pairs of speakers and it's a good idea when you're nearly finished with the mix to just quickly listen on those different facilities. In the olden days, one of the things we always used to do was to mix it to a cassette and go listen to it in the car or mix it to a CD and go listen to it on the CD in the car. Then very fancy producers used to have those little mini transmitters, so they could transmit it from the control room to the car and then listen to it in the car. I did really used to enjoy listening to mixes on a cassette in the car, for all sorts of different reasons. Especially given

that most car systems back then hyped the sound, so it was quite interesting as you'd get weird things happening on the bass. Then when I had a nice car system there was no point anymore, because it sounded so good in the car versus the studio. Today I will essentially listen on the different audio facilities. I might take a CD home and listen to it in the car on the way home or at home, or I might mix it down to an MP3 so I can see roughly how it's going to be degenerated and then listen to it on my laptop or on my phone or something - Just to get the sense of it. There are plug-ins now that you can mix in real time, which will show you how it's going to sound, but there is a difference. The best way then to do it is to really separate the mastering process rather than the mixing, so do the best mix you possibly can and then when you master it, bear in mind what's going to be lost as it goes down to an MP3. Hopefully the MP3 end game is disappearing, just like Mini-Disc and like cassette. The reason we have MP3 is because we couldn't afford storage; we can afford storage now. I think the days of MP3 are rapidly numbered. We've been asked for the past two or three years on iTunes to upload at full quality, twenty four bit so iTunes somewhere has got this repository with all those files at twenty four bit. That's been a requirement that you had to upload it at full quality, so it is only a matter of time. I find it insane when you look at people on the Tube in London and they've spent three hundred quid on a pair of headphones, but then they're listening to a piece of rubbish on a phone. Whereas when you have the full quality file and full quality experience with decent headphones, it's a wonderful thing. It really, really is. Listen to your mixes carefully and edit accordingly.

Audience member: What speakers should you use?

Steve: Well I've got big JBLs and little Aura tones, which I've had for years and I was going to sell them, but then so many of my records have been mixed on Aura tones that I thought I'd hang on to them. I actually do quite like listening to them on Aura tones. They're also really good to check reverb on because it's less apparent on those small speakers. On the other side I've got big Yamahas and I've also got some Neumann speakers, which I have to say are breath taking. I use those a lot because they really focus your hearing on the detail. My hearing – despite my age – is still pretty damn good. I certainly don't have tinnitus. I've always worn hearing protection at gigs and so there are many people of my age who have ringing in their ears. I certainly don't have any yet, so I do try to work hard and protect...I'm not saying it [my hearing] will last forever, but at the moment I'd say I'm still pretty good. A lot of listening is learning to listen, which is very different to actually listening. I can hear things that someone with better hearing might not even notice; because I'm listening for those certain things and when you point the thing out, anyone they're like "Wow! I never heard that".