

guy what to do, but, by the time I told him and he did it, it was too late,' Schmitt recalls. 'So, I would sometimes reach over and grab the fader myself, but that was a no-no and I would be turned in and read the riot act.'

Still, the times were changing fast and this kind of procedure was soon to be part of a bygone era. Within a few years engineers were wearing kaftans instead of white coats and Schmitt was producing The Jefferson Airplane... as well as crooner Eddie Fisher.

'This was towards the end of my time at RCA and it was crazy,' he now says.

'I'd be doing orchestral overdubs with Eddie from two until five, then I'd go up to my office and meditate a little before working with The Jefferson Airplane until four in the morning. After that I'd grab a little sleep, come back in and do my paperwork, relax a bit and then it was back to Eddie Fisher. It was very weird. I loved Eddie, he was fabulous to me, but he wasn't particularly my cup of tea.'

Schmitt subsequently quit RCA to go

'For three years I hardly did a thing,' he recalls. 'Then, one morning, I went out to get the newspaper and I heard this bird singing. Something about it sounded different and I suddenly realised I could hear again in both ears. Apparently the nerve had healed itself, and it was like putting two wires together'

independent. Meanwhile, the albums that he produced for The Jefferson Airplane were *After Bathing At Baxter's*, *Crown Of Creation*, *Bless Its Pointed Little Head* and *Volunteers*, and he now describes this all as, 'a great experience for me. Janis Joplin; the Mamas & Papas; Crosby, Stills & Nash; all these people would come and hang out. There was very heavy drug use, and a lot of debauchery. It cost me a marriage, but I had a good time. *'After Bathing At Baxter's* took five-and-a-half months, and I had never ever worked for more than two weeks on a project. We'd play stick-ball in the studio, they had tanks of nitrous oxide [laughing gas] in there, somebody would be continually rolling joints, they'd bring their motorbikes into the room, and it was just bizarre. At the same time we did some strange stuff, reversing tapes, multi'ing things together, bouncing down; all things that we'd never done before. We were using a Neve 8048—and we left the tracks on most of the time, so if you're wearing headphones you can hear somebody taking a hit off a joint, people talking, and so on. We left that kind of stuff in for those who really wanted to get into it.'

Getting into it was one thing; getting out of it was another. While working on a live album by Airplane-offshoot, Hot Tuna, at a small club in Berkeley, California one night, Schmitt sipped on a glass of apple juice while setting up the equipment. Then he climbed into the remote truck and sat down beside engineer Alan Zentz.

'The next thing I knew the truck started to expand,' he recalls, but what he was witnessing was not an early version of hydraulics at work. 'My apple juice had been spiked with LSD. I turned to Alan and said, 'You're on your own. I'm outta here!' That's the kind of thing they used to do. I mean, when Tom Donahue got married up at The Jefferson Airplane's house they spiked the wedding cake! Old ladies were walking out into the Golden Gate Park, totally zonked.'

WHILE STILL PRODUCING Al Schmitt enjoyed renewed success as an engineer throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Then, in 1983, everything ground to a halt when a fall off a ladder caused nerve damage and the loss of hearing in his left ear. 'I worked as the music supervisor on a couple of films, but for three years I hardly did a thing,' he recalls.

'Then, one morning, I went out to get the newspaper and I heard this bird singing. Something about it sounded different and I suddenly realised I could hear again in both ears. Apparently the nerve had healed itself, and it was like putting two wires together.'

Since then Schmitt has grabbed hold of his second chance with both hands, producing contemporary artists, recording large orchestras and working almost every single day of the past five years. Presently a consultant to Village Recorders in Santa Monica, he appreciates the advantages that modern studio technology has to offer, yet he still looks back over his shoulder with more than just a passing fondness for the spur-of-the-moment methods of years gone by.

'Without automation a mix was still basically a performance,' he says. 'I can tell you on some of the Steely Dan records I'd be doing one thing, Gary Katz would be adding echo, Donald Fagin would be moving something else, and we'd all have our little roles to play in putting this stuff together. If somebody wanted to move a guitar a little bit we'd have to do the whole mix over, and then there'd be a problem with something else.'

'What we were dealing with in those days was a performance and a feel, and I have to tell you, as much as sound is important to me as an engineer, it is the performance and the feel that sell the record. I know a lot of bad-sounding records that were huge hits because they moved people emotionally, and some records that sounded perfect, but didn't sell shit. I still feel that people have trouble relating to things that are perfect.'

'I recall a story where Steely Dan walked into the control room and saw me mixing with the monitors off, just using the meters. Then, when I turned the sound up it was perfect and they were going, "Jeez, the guy mixes without even listening!" However, that's just folklore. What really happened was that I'd already done the mix and had turned the monitors off to check what the meters were doing.'

That's how legends are born... 

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