BY THOMAS CONRAD

Okay, We're Rollin'

IN THE STUDIO WITH ANTHONY WILSON, DIANA KRALL, AND JOE HARLEY

Anthony Wilson is listening to playback, leaning in low between Joe Harley and Michael C. Ross, who are seated at a 48-channel console with as many knobs and meters and switches and lights as the cockpit of a Boeing 737. "I kind of stepped on Gilbert there. On the gig, I usually come in sooner."

"You got another one in you?" Harley asks quietly.

When Wilson goes back into the studio, he is visible through the window that runs the length of the control room. He picks his way through a jungle of cables and microphones and shipping cases and his own guitars, erect on their stands. He assumes his position, seated on a high stool in the center of the room, picks up one guitar, and says, "Let me hear those chords again in measure seven." He is speaking to a five-man horn section seated on folding chairs, microphones and music stands in front of them, mixers on low stands behind them. On Wilson's hand signal, the horns release two chords in a rich, complex blend. Wilson nods at Harley through the glass and puts on his headphones.

Harley nods at Ross, waits, then says, "Okay, we're rollin'. 'Quadra 3,' take 3."

PHOTOS: JOSEPH O'NEIL/OKEH

I KNEW THAT WATCHING JOE HARLEY AND MICHAEL C. ROSS work could teach me a lot about how good records get made. Neither is exactly famous. Harley is not even a full-time record producer. (His day gig is as vice president of product development for AudioQuest, the high-end cable company that once had its own record label.) But within that part of the audiophile community tuned in to jazz and blues, Harley is a cult figure. His portfolio contains major artistic and sonic achievements with artists such as James Newton and Bennie Wallace and Charles Lloyd and Robert Lockwood Jr., on labels such as AudioQuest and Enja and ECM and Telarc. Harley usually records in analog, live to two tracks, but he was also an early supporter of SACD; Eden Atwood's *Waves*, which Harley produced for Groove Note, was probably the first successful application of surround sound to a jazz vocal recording.

Earlier in his career, Harley had worked with different engineers on different projects. Then he found Michael C. Ross and stayed with him. "We're like an old married couple by now," Harley told me. "At a session, we barely have to talk anymore."

THERE WERE OTHER GOOD REASONS TO CHOOSE THIS particular session besides the producer and engineer. The leader was Anthony Wilson, one of the most brilliant young guitarists in jazz, also widely acknowledged for his achievements as a composer and arranger. Wilson would use his working nonet, containing some of the hottest emerging players in Los Angeles and New York City. The label was Groove Note, founded by Ying Tan in 1998. Tan's small catalog was already full of albums (most of them recorded by Harley and Ross) that had won audiophile awards in the US, Asia, and Europe. The Wilson recording was planned for release on 45rpm LP as well as two-channel hybrid SACD/CD.

THE LEADER WAS ANTHONY WILSON, ONE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT YOUNG GUITARISTS IN JAZZ.

Above: *Stereophile*'s Tom Conrad (background left) making himself useful, while Joe Harley (standing) and Anthony Wilson make a record. Below: Diana Krall and Anthony Wilson.

Another reason was Diana Krall. Anthony Wilson is the guitarist in Krall's current touring quartet, and she had agreed to guest on the album and sing one song—a particular song. When she was very young, Krall had studied in Los Angeles with Jimmy Rowles, and revered him. Rowles had once showed her a song called "Looking Back." Krall had always remembered it and wanted to perform it, but did not have the music. By coincidence, Joe Harley had the sheet music in Rowles' own hand. Shortly before his death from emphysema in 1996, Rowles had given the song to Harley in the hope that he could "place it." Harley finally had.

ANOTHER REASON WAS THE STUDIO, although I did not know it until I went there. Sunset Sound has been in the same location, on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, since 1958. On the night before the first day of the session, I watched Harley and Ross set up in Studio 2.

From the outside, Sunset Sound is old and plain. It has three studios in separate wings. There is a small open courtyard in the center, with a basketball hoop. I wandered out into the courtyard and saw that lights were still on in the office lobby. I went in. The walls were covered with large plaques containing 12" platinum LPs. Sales in millions were noted on each plaque: *Led Zeppelin IV*, 16 million; Prince's *Purple Rain*, 13 million; *Let It Bleed* by the Rolling Stones, only 2 million. It took a few moments to sink in: All of these records had been recorded at Sunset Sound. There was James Taylor (*Sweet Baby James*), The Who, Elton John, Janis Joplin (*Pearl*), the first four Doors albums. I kept getting startled as I kept finding plaques. There were newer works, too, such as Beck's *Odelay*.

(The next day, Sunset's head technician, Mick Higgins, told me that Studio 2 was where Led Zep had recorded "Stairway to Heaven." He wasn't sure which studio Fats Domino had used, but the Beach Boys had recorded in Studio 1 for years. Higgins mused, "If the walls could only talk . . . ")

DAY 1 BEGINS WITH THE CACOPHONY of 10 instruments warming up. (On this first day, the nonet is augmented by Eva Scow, a 17-year-old mandolin prodigy whom Wilson met at a workshop, who will play on two tunes.) Probably the best-known member of Wilson's group is Darek Oleszkiewicz, a first-call bassist in L.A. The others are young and not famous yet, but there is a buzz on the street about most of them. Pianist Donald Vega and the Ferber twins, drummer Mark and trombonist Alan, came in from New York for the session, and also for Wilson's nonet gig at Steamers in Fullerton that immediately preceded it. The L.A. players are saxophonists Matt Zebley (alto), Matt Otto (tenor), and Adam Schroeder (baritone), and trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos.

The busiest multitasker in Hollywood this Monday morning is Ross, with his hands all over the console as if caressing it, while the players blow or strum or drum into their microphones and Ross, in stocking feet, does his final checks. "Mike, I still can't hear the drums," someone worries.

Ross hits his microphone button so that he can be heard in the studio. "You will, trust me."

When everyone is ready for the first take of the session, Wilson, guitar around his neck, counts it slowly down, and his arm sweeps the horns into a blend of burnished colors called "Quadra 2." (This is a working title; final song titles will be decided later.) A moody piece, "Quadra 2" is defined by the powerful throbbing darkness of Oleszkiewicz 's bass. When it's over, Ross is suddenly the most popular man in Hollywood.

"Mike, I missed a chord. Can I punch in?"

"Mike, I need to fix that one measure. It was not happening."

"Mike, I couldn't get to that C-sharp. Can we punch in?"

"Hold on," Ross says. "Let's see if we keep this take."

EVEN PLAYERS AS ACCOMPLISHED AS THOSE IN WILSON'S NONET HAD BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO FIXING THEIR MISTAKES IN THE RECORDING PROCESS.

Above: Anthony Wilson. Below: clockwise from bottom left: Wilson, Matt Zebley, Adam Schroeder, Gilbert Castellanos, Mark Ferber, Kraill, Alan Ferber, Darek Oleszkiewicz, Donald Vega, Eva Scow, Matt Otto.

Wilson comes into the control room and listens to playback over Ross's personal Mastering Lab Tannoy Monitors. ("We use them for every session," Harley tells me. "That way we're always looking through the same pair of glasses.") Wilson slaps Ross on the shoulder. "It's so great to *hear* the band. On a gig you can't hear shit."

They decide to do another take of "Quadra 2." Wilson likes it. Ross discusses additional requests to "punch in" with several players. "Quadra 3," the next section to be recorded of a four-part suite, is harder, and the material is new to the nonet. It is also the first piece with mandolinist Eva Scow. There is a dense guitar/mandolin interface, a tricky bossa nova beat, and evolving horn patterns that kick off a quick-on-quick trombone solo. "Be a bitch to mix," Harley says to Ross.

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, AT BREAKFAST or during breaks in the sessions or at night over dinner, Harley talked about his philosophy. He also explained the players' fixation with punching in.

For most current musicians, digital recording is the norm, and software systems such as Pro Tools are extremely popular. Such programs provide vast potential for control and manipulation, including corrections down to the level of individual notes. Even players as accomplished as those in Wilson's nonet had become accustomed to fixing their mistakes in the recording process. Ross was recording this session in multitrack analog. He could provide some capability for redoes, especially for players in isolation booths recording on their own separate tracks: piano, bass, drums, and mandolin. But Wilson's guitar and the five horns were out on the open floor, and opportunities for fixes were restricted by the fact that each player's track had the sounds of other instruments in it.

"You want some guitar in the horn mikes and horns in the guitar mikes," Harley told me. "It sounds *bigger*. We also put up two room mikes so that we can fold them into the signal and enlarge things a bit."

I wanted to know what else he and Ross did differently. The use of analog tape at 15ips on a 24-track Studer deck was an important starting point. The preparation and setup steps were also crucial: drawing up a plan in advance, specifying the type and number and location of microphones and the location of each musician. Harley also used the highest-quality AudioQuest cables in recording (for microphones) and mixing (for signal transfer), "instead of the garden-variety stuff that is hanging everywhere in every studio, like on tie racks." He used Sunset's Studio 2 for the Wilson recording because of its classic Neve 8088 console, whose mike preamplifiers and EQ circuits "give you

that fat, punchy, transparent sound." He also loves the "big, full-bodied" sound of such vintage tube mikes as Neumann U-67s and M-49s and Telefunken 251s. And, in opposition to what he calls "audiophile lore," Harley uses lots of microphones. For this session, he put eight mikes on the drums, including two Telefunken overheads. There were three on Wilson—stereo mikes on his amplifier (behind a large baffle) and a third on his electroacoustic Monteleone guitar, to pick up some direct sound of the strings and fretting.

The room itself was crucial, and Harley regretted that many of the great old studios were going away. A legendary studio, Cello, a few blocks down Sunset Boulevard, had recently closed. "It's because of all the musicians setting up 'project studios' in their homes, with cheap hard-disk systems that allow you to mix your own CD. It's also why CDs in general sound worse than they used to. The sound of the great rooms, like Sunset or Ocean Way or Capitol, with real people playing in a real space that's been designed for recorded music—you're not going to get that in most people's homes."

At the other extreme were certain audiophile labels that proselytized for "minimalist miking" and "no overdubbing or artificial enhancement" and "signal purity." "So often with that approach, the rhythm section sounds disembodied," Harley said. "Think of your 10 favorite records. Were any of them recorded that way?" He puts some players in isolation booths for greater clarity and to eliminate time delay. He believes that most forms of recorded music, like most women, are "more beautiful with a little bit of makeup"—such as reverb, equalization, and compression. "Without any of these additives, it's just too literal," he insisted. "Compression is a dirty word, but on certain individual tracks, compression can be your friend. It allows you to keep a lead instrument, or a vocal, up in the track. Without it, you might not hear certain words."

There is another reason Harley distrusts the "purist" methodology of minimalist miking. Often, such an approach allows the recording *process* to intrude on the musicians. "The way to make musicians comfortable is not by saying, 'Okay, drummer, we're going to move you way back here, and we need you to play a little softer . . . trumpet player, we're going to put you up on this little box . . .' My job as a producer is to work with the artist in advance to identify a given recording's point of view, and then to create the best conditions for creativity. I believe that maximizing conventional studio tools allows musicians to play unencumbered and not think about anything but the moment. It lets them get that excitement, that musical juice."

ALREADY ON DAY 1, THAT JUICE IS FLOWING by mid-afternoon. Three master takes of the *Quadra* suite have been completed, each an intricate layered tapestry. But there is a sense of nervous anticipation in Studio 2, because the hour of Diana Krall's scheduled arrival is approaching. At a straight-ahead jazz session, everyone gets nervous when someone with multiple Grammys and Certified Platinum albums is due to drop in and sing a song.

The sheet music with Anthony Wilson's arrangement of "Looking Back" is sitting on top of the console. I read the lyrics, by someone named Cheryl Ernst: "I still see the meadow come alive with the morning / From the house where I lived as a child / And the sun as it lifted its lazy head / Shining down where the clover grows wild." It's an unusual song in structure and subject—a love song not to a person, but to childhood. Wilson has the band practice a runthrough "to get the blend and the dynamics."

Then, suddenly, she is there, in the control room, wearing glasses but otherwise looking like the blonde, beautiful Diana Krall of her album covers. There are hugs for Wilson and introductions for the rest of us (her handshake is notably firm). She tells us that she and her husband, Elvis Costello, have just returned from a relaxing vacation in Hawaii. In her black cashmere sweater and perfect black pants and shiny black raincoat and the most pointed black suede boots I have ever seen, and surrounded by unshaven jazz musicians in T-shirts and jeans and Nikes, Krall looks like a royal princess on a state visit to the peasantry. But she acts like one of the boys, laughing easily, bantering with the musicians. ("You're cool if I try to play piano on this piece, Donald?") She name-drops only once: "We went to Elton's wedding."

HARLEY BELIEVES THAT MAXIMIZING CONVENTIONAL STUDIO TOOLS ALLOWS MUSICIANS TO PLAY UNENCUMBERED AND NOT THINK ABOUT ANYTHING BUT THE MOMENT.

She listens to the band track and says, "Okay, let's do it." Wilson escorts her into the studio and gets her situated in the piano's iso booth, already set up with her preferred mike for vocals, a special Neumann U-67 modified by Klaus Hein, with a round black pop filter in front of it. She tries a runthrough with the band, playing piano but not singing, "to get the arrangement." After several changes of heart, she decides to let Donald Vega play the piano part, which means that Krall (and her microphone) need to move to the open iso booth that had been set up for the mandolin player. The booth is in the far right corner, not fully visible from the control room.

Harley finally hits his microphone button. "Okay, we're rollin'—'Looking Back,' take 1." It is an extraordinary moment when Krall's voice emerges from the monitor speakers: "I still see the meadow come alive with the morning . . . " Krall's inflections and hesitations and little rushes of breath suddenly clarify Cheryl Ernst's words into devastating personal meaning. The singer's whisper contains the rapture of innocence and the poignance of its inevitable loss: "Though the years and the worries have changed my life / All the mem'ries of then still live on . . . " The intimacy is made eerie by the fact Krall cannot be seen by the stunned listeners in the control room, to whom she sings directly, one

on one. The take ends with the band's crescendo carrying Krall's voice aloft: "and wherever I go and the grayer I grow / I'll remember that house in the country." Harley says, "Jimmy would be happy."

DAY 2 BEGINS WITH SMALL BUT time-consuming fixes: a bass phrase that had been rushed, a tenor-sax subtone that was missing from a chord. The first take of the day (working title: "Hymn") is a slow sweep with majestic horn blends and short solos floating up, then falling back into the ensemble. With the next piece, "Power of Nine," the soloists finally get a chance to stretch. Matt Otto on tenor, Gilbert Castellanos on trumpet, and Alan Ferber on trombone each get 48 bars, and smoke. But in this band of strong soloists, the strongest is Wilson. On "Ballad," a movement from another suite, *Tokyo Wednesday*, Wilson's single notes on his Les Paul guitar are like points of light just barely moving, but moving in deep tides of feeling as, underneath, the horns whisper. Everyone gathers in the control room for the playback, and Wilson's solo provokes spontaneous murmurs. "Hey, Anthony." "That was sick, man."

As the players file back into the studio for the next take, Harley, not a demonstrative man, says to no one in particular, "It's happening. I'm starting to get that buzz." He is feeling the juice.

AFTER THE BAND HAS DEPARTED, Wilson stays to record his guitar solo on "Looking Back." He had tried to do the solo live on the first day with Krall, but had struggled with it, perhaps because he was trying to conduct the horns at the same time. Harley had recommended that Wilson not solo on the master take, but to leave his tracks open and record his part later.

Later is now. Alone on his stool in the cluttered studio, Wilson listens on headphones, then comes in and plays 16 bars as if arraying raindrops on the air. In the control room, Harley hits his microphone button and says, "That was pretty, Anthony."

"Okay, but I think I can do it better," Wilson says from his stool.

He does a second take, then a third, which he likes except for the last two bars. He makes one more pass at the last two measures. Then another. And another.

DAY 3 STARTS WITH AN 11-MINUTE PIECE from *Tokyo Wednesday*, currently called "E Vamp." It smolders until the trumpet of Gilbert Castellanos lights it on fire. It is a great take, and for once no one needs to punch in, although Wilson decides to try to overdub and play the melody with the horns.

"Bird in the Basket" is an off-kilter Monkish line on which Adam Schroeder takes three knockdown choruses on baritone, then has to play the solo twice more, for takes 2 and 3. Each is riveting and different.

The next to last number is the first (still untitled) movement of *Tokyo Wednesday*. Before the first take, Wilson sings the theme to the horns. Harley comments that no vocal albums from Anthony Wilson are imminent. The last piece is an impossibly fast blues from *Tokyo Wednesday* that this band can play tired.

When it's all over, amid the hugs and goodbyes, I am as exhausted, and as high, as those who did the work. Juice that strong makes you high.

I DID NOT NEED TO FEAR THAT PLAYING THE RECORD WOULD MAKE ME LOSE DIANA. WHEN SHE SINGS, I CAN ALMOST FEEL HER BREATH ON MY FACE.

MIXING, THE NEXT DAY, TAKES PLACE in Burbank. From the outside, LAFX looks like a stark little bungalow on an unpromising residential street. Inside, equipment fills even the kitchen and bathroom. When Harley and I arrive, Ross, again in stocking feet, is already there. A huge console takes up what was once a living room. Ross's personal Tannoys are set up atop the console. He is doing "janitorial work"—cleaning up extraneous sounds, such as a bumped microphone or a cough—which must be completed before the mixing of multiple channels to a two-track Ampex ATR-102 can begin. ("But," he explains, "some noises are organic and I leave them in—like a drummer grunting.")

Harley and Ross sit down at a small table in the kitchen to agree on a track map—a plan of where everything goes. Harley draws a sketch and Ross says, "I don't see the piano on the left and the horns on the right."

Harley looks at me and says, "It's one of the few things Mike and I sometimes disagree about." Then he says to Ross, "But the horns shouldn't be everywhere. They need to be somewhere."

Wilson arrives and listens to the first track to be mixed, "Power of Nine." "I want to keep the urgency of the drums, but maybe back them off just a little. On my guitar, on some of those high notes, there's maybe a sting . . . "

The volume level in the small room, over the bright Tannoy speakers, is intense. The nonet is roaring. Harley and Ross and Wilson will be at this all day, and will be back for more tomorrow. "Gilbert's trumpet kind of bites right there," Harley says.

"Okay," Ross says. "We'll just add a little reverb on Gilbert." He looks at me and smirks. "The last time I used the Lexicon 960 (reverb unit), a reviewer in an audiophile magazine just flipped over the ambience. The guy wrote, 'You can really *hear the room* on this recording!' "

ABOUT A WEEK LATER, A CDR OF THE FINAL MIXES arrived in the mail. Most of the tunes now had titles. "E Vamp" was now "Melatonin Dreams." The album, too, had a name: *Power of Nine*.

I found myself reluctant to play it. I was afraid that, if I heard it, it might replace my memory of those days in the studio with Anthony and Joe and Mike and Ying and all the guys and blonde Diana, singing directly to me.

Of course, I did play it. The sound is clean, vivid Harley-Ross, and the music lives in a three-dimensional space, my knowledge of those iso booths notwithstanding. As for the music, of course I feel as if I own it. I was there, after all, when "Melatonin Dreams" was still called "E Vamp," and when the trumpet entrance of Gilbert Castellanos cut through its tension like a knife. On the record, Gilbert's cry is as much of a rush as it was in the control room. And Adam Schroeder's eruptive baritone solo on "Bird in the Basket" sounds like a personal best, even though I happen to know he played two others just as good. And Wilson's guitar on the piece still called "Ballad" moves in ways that I did not remember, one long arc of grace.

As for "Looking Back," Wilson's solo on the record is seamless, a contemporaneous response to Krall's existential encounter with the loss of innocence. And I did not need to fear that playing the record would make me lose Diana. When she sings, I can almost feel her breath on my face. ■