NIGEL JOPSON meets a storm of boundless enthusiasm for music, audio and learning

A prototype for the modern production professional, Huart began his career as a musician, moving to Los Angeles from the UK in the late ’90s after his band Star 69 struck a record deal. He switched to ‘the other side of the glass’ to continue his career as an engineer and producer for acts The Fray, Daniel Powter, Marc Broussard, Korn, Disturbed, James Blunt, Rick Springfield, Ace Frehley, Aerosmith (with Jack Douglas producing) and Better Than Ezra. Huart wrote the score to the 2004 documentary following Joe Strummer, Let’s Rock Again!, his work has since featured in TV and movies including Inglourious Basterds, Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen, The Hills, Lost, Scrubs, and Grey’s Anatomy.

Huart works from his own Spitfire Studio in Los Angeles, and has carved a parallel career for himself as an educator, with the YouTube Channel Produce Like A Pro, which boasts over 372,000 subscribers and over 34m video views. This idea morphed into the Produce Like A Pro Academy (currently $169/year to join), and in 2019 Huart’s concept was validated when the Academy won the NAMM TEC Audio Education Technology Award.

You started as a guitar player, was that a blessing for your versatile future career?
I think I was blessed to start off in England… let’s be honest! My band got signed from my demos and the label put out one of my demos as the first single. Jeremy Lascelles (who ran Chrysalis) said “Yeah, this sounds great. Let’s put it out.” And it was a modest hit.

I came to America, I developed an artist (this is late ’90s), took it to a label. They absolutely loved it — fired me immediately and hired one of their friends to make a record. It sounded to me like the most boring copy of my demos. There was a different mentality in England at that time based on creativity — in L.A. there was creativity but there was also just a lot of ‘business’… Nowadays the whole world is the same — whether you’re in America or somewhere else developing an artist — it’s 90% that you’re going to be able to release it.

/ Huart hosting his Masterclass at Sunset Sound Studio 3 with Artist Christian Vegh

Pictures courtesy of Kasia Huart
somehow. But it wasn’t that way when budgets were so big. Lack of budget is actually helping the creativity! When we were kids making music, there were two types of music career outcomes — feast or famine — and there was nothing in between. If you’re an independent artist now, it’s a really, really good time.

As an engineer/producer, was there a key moment for you?
The Fray were two very big records for me. The first one, I came in and did like lots of fixing and re-tracking and I tracked ‘How To Save a Life’ drums. They’d recorded the drums originally with Hot Rod drumsticks. We didn’t want John Bonham, but we just wanted something that was a little bit more hard hitting, so it could get on the radio. Ben [Wysocki] flew in and arrived at my studio at 11:00am in the morning. Half of my gear was out on rental, so I had a Rogers 24” kick, my Ludwig Supraphonic snare, no toms, the crappiest high hats I own and one cymbal — and we re-cut the drums for ‘How To Save a Life’.

I think we did two or three takes, a super quick comp, and then we took the hard drive and drove over to Scream Studios [Ventura Boulevard]. Mark Endert was waiting there — it’s about 3:00pm — he pulls up the mix, drops in the new drums and the rest is history [joint seventh longest charting single on the Billboard Hot 100, 3x Platinum, 5m downloads]. I love those kinds of things. Flying by the seat of your pants is how the records we grew up listening to were quite often made. You hear the stories of the Beach Boys or the Beatles finishing a recording and then driving to the radio station and playing a copy of it. I love that stuff. I mean — it’s why we got into the music industry — to live those kinds of stories.

The Fray debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200, but I gather the recordings were not without incident?
The second album was a big deal, I made the album over nine months with them. We started in Sausalito at the Record Plant. We’d been there a week and decided to go out for lunch one day — we’d been ordering-in before. Let’s go for lunch. Just going to see the town, ten minutes’ walk. So we go to this little diner and have lunch. Ninety minutes later we come back with the assistant and the studio door key doesn’t work. So the assistant calls the “owner”. But turns out he wasn’t the building owner. The actual building owner had found out that ‘this big band’ were coming in (at this point they’d sold four million copies of the first album) — and had probably just written out a massive cheque for some studio time. The “studio owner” apparently hadn’t paid his mortgage or something. So for

We came back from lunch and found the studio locks had been changed

of drama in. You can’t bring the band into the argument because if they’re comfortable, and they want the experience of recording in a room that did Songs In The Key Of Life, a room that did Sly and the Family Stone’s Fresh, they want that experience. If you start telling them “Oh, there’s all this drama”, all they hear is that you’re being dramatic. It’s a key production thing to realise that drama is only in the head. So if I’m going ‘OMG the bad channels in the console, and now the lock has changed...’ We just made light of it. Obviously I was annoyed and those responsible were dealt with later, but for the band, you have to be a professional. You

Did you stamp your foot?
What do you do? You want your artists to feel really comfortable and you can’t bring a bunch

We couldn’t stop the drama...
Where do you see music production going in the future?

It’s really strange because I feel like everybody’s talking about the album being dead. That’s all I hear. Every person, every talking head says “don’t bother doing an album, only do an EP” — and probably you should just do three singles and put them out — one every couple of months. That’s a mantra you’ll hear if we just open YouTube now and flick around.

The history of the music industry, as you and I know — having been through a few decades of it — is that there’s really no predictability. And even when you can see the future, it doesn’t mean that anybody’s actually going to take notice of it. We all knew when Napster was around and MP3s first started becoming a thing that record companies were going to have to figure out how to do more. And they didn’t. Talk about Napster — they took a big ‘nap’ on it. They just thought they were too big to fail.

Now Spotify has come along and everybody likes to complain about it. Let’s be honest, Spotify has saved the music industry, because if we didn’t have streaming, then everybody would just be sending the music for free. So to complain about streaming is really, really naive. The reality is that the people who are complaining about streaming are people who predominately have old-school contracts, with 13% royalty rates, and they don’t like 13% of a stream.

But young artists… I have lots of young artists, they make about $2,500 a month off modest amounts of Spotify plays — they don’t have to go and work in a bar now — they can go out, play gigs, promote themselves. They’re not making millions of dollars a year. But if you could tell somebody they can make $60,000 or £60,000 a year being an artist, how many musicians do you think would take it? Of course they’d take it.

There are plenty of vociferous streaming royalty-rate complainers…

Put your contract up — then we can read how you only have 11% of the royalty rate from your label — if that. I have a song with an artist that had tens of millions of plays. He has one song that was in the highest tens of plays, and we worked out the income coming into the label on that one song was $157,000. The song has never been on the radio. So like — who’s complaining — you know what I mean? And yes, I only get three points of that, but still somebody is making a living. A modern artist is making a living and it’s paying the bills.

Did the business Produce Like A Pro start organically?

Sort of. I didn’t build the Academy until three years later. I had 18 months of zero monetisation. Nothing. I didn’t even put ads on YouTube. So for the first 18 months is was like 150 to 200 videos. We were doing three a week, so probably with the first 50 to 200 there was not even an ad or banner on them, because I just wanted to get people involved. The process was quite interesting — obviously I had to film the video at nine in the morning before starting sessions every other day, so it was quite exhausting! But in the meantime, after we saw how much interest there was, we decided: this feels like it could be an online environment, where people can interact and share multitracks. But that was a year and a half later.

How would you explain your core concept of getting production pros to interact?

John Krivit asked me to do a day of panels at NAMM for the AES. My idea is to connect two groups of people. Production professionals who have made albums that are undisputedly the greatest albums of all time. Not necessarily biggest selling — not ‘sold 5m copies in 1997 off one single’. But the people who made the albums that we listen to for pleasure, people like Shelly Yakus — who made Tom Petty’s Damn the Torpedoes, and recorded Blue Oyster Cult’s ‘(Don’t Fear) The Reaper’ — connect those guys with younger people. Producers and engineers in their twenties or early thirties don’t really give a crap about seeing another guy who made a record in 1997 that has ten songs that sound exactly the same. They don’t! But they do want to meet a guy like Shelly Yakus who can tell them what it’s like to get a great vocal performance out of John Lennon. They want to hang with people who are artists themselves, creatives who understand the dynamic.

What is it that Produce Like A Pro offers which other online concepts don’t?

Total community and collaboration. There’s 3,249 people in our Produce Like A Pro Academy. I know the exact number because I need to know who our audience is and what their concerns are. We have people from different backgrounds and walks of life, and 20% of our membership are women. But we don’t do that thing where we say: “Today, we’re going to focus on women in rock”. That’s so patronising, although it’s currently really fashionable. If you’re just good at your job, that’s all that really matters. Anything other
than that doesn’t matter — this human being (of whatever shape, size, ethnicity, gender, or whatever) is really good at their job. That’s why we’re talking to them.

How do you see Produce Like A Pro evolving in future?
I think it’s all about community, bringing in more people, making it less centred around me. Making it more about members. It’s Produce Like A Pro, it’s not ‘Warren’s thing’. My name’s not on it and it was never supposed to be about me, none of the sites have my name on. Is it centred around me interviewing people? Yes. Would I be happy if we brought in other personalities to do stuff like that? Absolutely. There should be something for everybody because it’s not centred around any particular genre.

How large is the team working with you on Produce Like A Pro?
The team has grown as we have several facets to our business. Myself and Eric Gonzalez are at the core, John McLucas is new to the team and works in Los Angeles with Eric. There’s a marketing group of three people (in Canada), then I have contributors in England and Germany.

Is there any synergy between making records and your career as an educator — I mean, do new clients come to you now thinking — ‘that’s the guy who does Produce Like A Pro’?
Possibly... I don’t think I’ve personally found a whole load of new clients in that way. But the part I really enjoy is — I get to hang out with and talk to people like you! How else would I get to interact with people in the industry that are part of the wider world of music production? When you’re working in isolation in the studio making a record, that’s great. But you know, the fact that I can go and hang out with EveAnna Manley and talk about the great equipment Manley Labs make is special. That’s been a massive upside, spending time with some of the incredible characters in our business.

Meeting up with other producers, engineers and mixers — who I was friends with already — because I’m able to showcase them and build even better relationships, because I can bring them more to the front. And getting to know audio pros I had never met before. I didn’t know Bob Clearmountain, for instance, a year or two ago. Now I’ve interviewed him. It’s Bob fricking Clearmountain!! You know there’s mixers in the world, and then there’s Bob Clearmountain...

What motivates you to keep up such a hectic work schedule?
I like people that make music, but I also like people who make the tools for music as well. I like the fact that I can review something new that’s either ground-breaking technically — or better — technically great plus financially more accessible. Accessible equipment is getting more people to make music so they can potentially become professionals.

Did you sit one down one day and think to yourself — I’ve got to build myself a career as an educator?
A great question — and that’s another big message. In the digital world in which we all live — whether we want to admit it or not — you have to pivot! You hear that word all the time with the techie guys... You do something. It doesn’t work. You have to be willing to say: “I’m going to try something different”. I like kicking down barriers and getting rid of the stereotypes that foster any sort of negativity in our industry. To me it’s all about bringing people together. I feel like my journey as a guitar player, turning into producer and engineer and mixer... songwriter, mirrors what everybody has to do these days.