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Pro View

David Frank

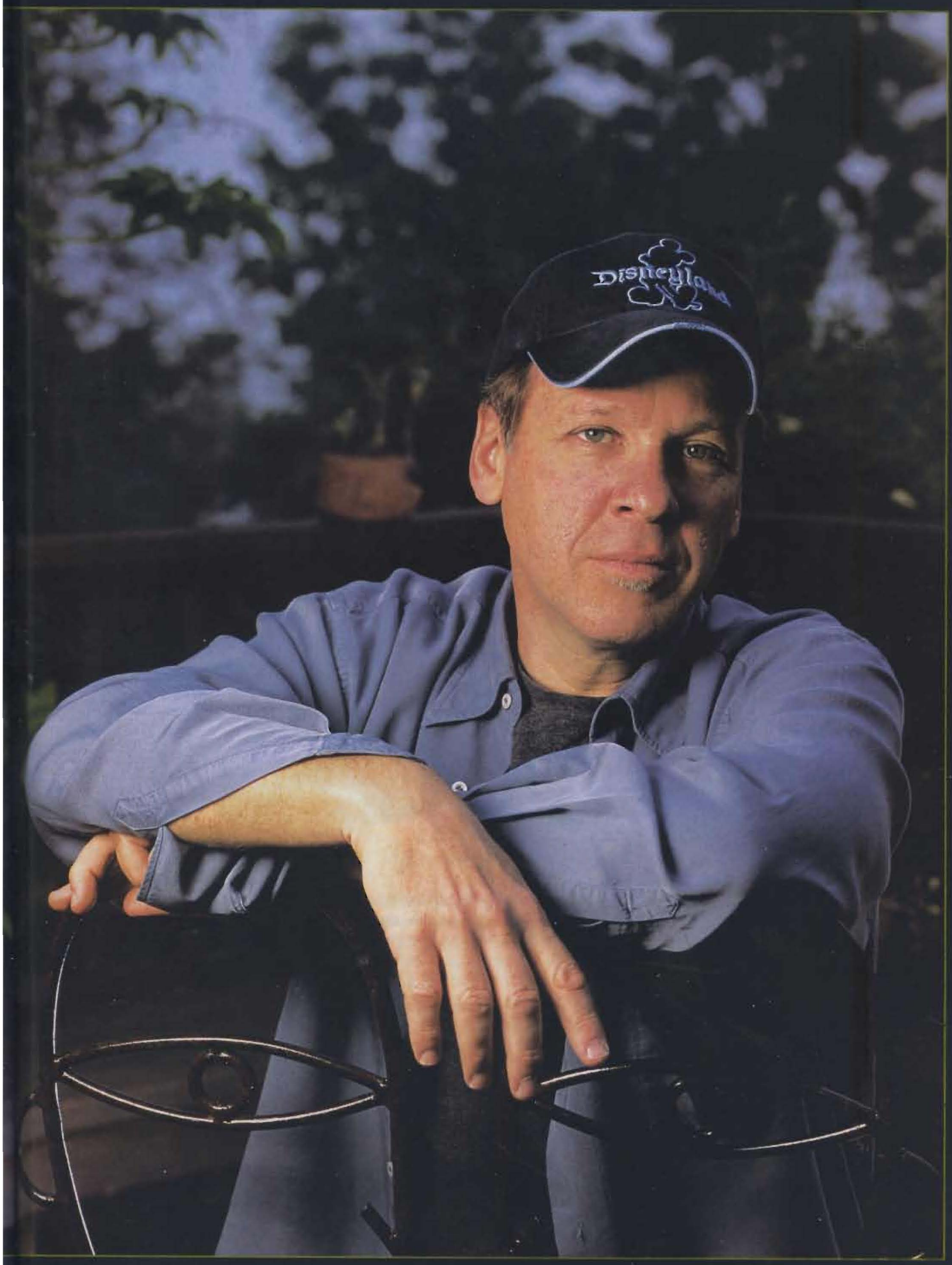
The Making of a Hit Record

By Howard Massey

IF YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER THE '80S, YOU SURELY REMEMBER THE techno-pioneering group the System. Its innovative hits—records like "It's Passion," "You Are in My System," and "Don't Disturb This Groove"—dominated the charts in what was an otherwise musically bleak time and propelled the duo of Mic Murphy and David Frank to stardom. By the late '80s, they were a major force in the industry, working with artists like Phil Collins ("Sussudio"), Chaka Khan, Robert Palmer, and Angela Bofill and contributing to the soundtracks of two Eddie Murphy blockbusters: *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Coming to America*.

To this day, David Frank continues to write songs and craft records that help shape popular taste. Co-writer and co-producer of Christina Aguilera's "Genie in a Bottle," Frank is one of the most in-demand songwriters in America. We visited with him recently at his home studio on the outskirts of Los Angeles, where he described his unique compositional and recording process and shared his vision of how one goes about creating a hit record.

Photographs by Edward Carreon


Disneyland

Do you generally write songs to order?
Not really. My collaborators and I just write different songs and then try to fit them to whatever artists need songs. Often we end up co-producing the songs when they're placed.

When you say you co-produce, does that mean you're doing all the playing and arrangements yourself and presenting the artist with finished backing tracks? Or is it producing in a more traditional sense?
Often I'll do a whole musical track. I did the whole thing on "Genie in a Bottle." I had already written all the music that you hear, and then we wrote the song on top of that. Many times there are a lot of things added to the basic track, but on "Genie in a Bottle," there actually wasn't—what you hear is just exactly what was there.

My impression of a lot of other production houses is that they have a lot of guys programming drums or thinking of parts, and they're all working sort of like a factory. I'm basically here just by myself. I have an assistant who sometimes helps me out with technical things, but I'm generally better off working on my own or with other songwriters; I find that my imagination is more fertile when I'm not around other people so much. That's in marked contrast to some of the other camps. They call them "camps," you know—the Rodney [Jerkins] Camp, the Max [Martin] Camp. I don't have any camp. It's just me.

So when you're co-producing, your roles are to write the songs and to create the music. What's the role of your co-producers?
Their role is doing the vocals, and they very often have a large influence over the music too, though in many cases the actual track is done beforehand; there's not much added to it, if anything. Generally, I'm playing everything on every track, but my co-producers have a lot of musical input. We'll all be present when the artist is recording the vocals and decide whether it's the right performance, and we'll comp the vocals together.

Sometimes we even record the vocals here in my home studio, though we often go to an outside studio for that. Christina's vocal on "Genie in a Bottle" was done right here. Steve Kipner, whom I work with very often, has his own studio, and our audio equipment is identical, though I have many more keyboards. When we're working together, we'll sort of bounce back and forth between studios because we get sick of being at our own houses; we just want to go somewhere else. I pretty much keep the music as MIDI data until the day before I mix so that I can keep changing it.

In the end, we record everything to Pro Tools and take the disks to an outside studio for mixing. With "Genie in a Bottle," half of that was mixed directly from Logic and half from analog tape. Until fairly recently, I had a 24-track machine here, and it sounded great—when I listen back to some of the things I had recorded on it, it has a markedly different sound. But Pro Tools sounds great, too.

What's your mixdown format of choice?
I usually still end up using 1/2" analog tape, but that's generally speaking. With [Dream's] "This Is Me," we used the 24-bit digital mix for mastering. Analog just didn't work on that particular song for some reason; the extra compression that it added was sort of overbearing. But I still like the way analog tape sounds. Part of it, of course, is what your ears are used to, and I think my ears are getting more and more used to the digital sound.

What's your vocal mic of choice?
I have a [Neumann] 147 here in the studio, and that's pretty much what we've been using, although Steve has a U 67. We'll basically try to see whether the 147 or the 67 sounds better. We've used other mics, of course. There was a custom-made tube mic that we used with Christina Aguilera, a modification that was done by Mojave Audio. It didn't sound great on everyone, but for her, it was really excellent, because it had a lot of highs and lows, and she has a very boisterous peak in her midrange. When that was reduced by the mic, it made her sound just great.

Have you done any acoustic treatment here in your home studio?
Not really, though it's something that I'd like to do. There's some foam on the wall, but that's about it. I pretty much rely on close-range monitoring, and I do a lot of my work at a very low volume, even when I'm working on grooves and things. Sometimes I'll turn it up to kind of hype myself at the end to make sure it really sounds great. Of course, I don't actually mix here. I generally mix at L.A. studios like Pacifique, Larrabee, and Enterprise, often with Dave Way.

With all the synthesizers you have here, how do you make your sonic choices when you're putting a track together?
You know, just the other night I was kind of looking around at my keyboards, and I was thinking, "Wow, this is like a little mountain of different textures." Someone might come in here and think, "Boy, he has a lot of keyboards." But to me, it's not really that many. I look at them as textural opportunities. When I'm building a track, I generally know what I might be looking for, at least in terms of a similarity to an acoustic instrument. But I also know the textural differences between the instruments I own.

For instance, the Virus is kind of a progressive texture. There's something about the sound of the Virus—it has a certain grainy quality. It's distinctly digital, but they've added some kind of warmth to it. The Nord is another useful instrument; in a way, I think of it as being somewhat neutral, though it has a vintage synthesizer texture. But it's certainly neutral in comparison to the Virus. They both have a different feeling, and they take up a different space within a mix of sounds.

The [Yamaha] EX5 is another great instrument. It's underrated, in my opinion. A lot of people don't use it, but I think it's fantastic. To my ears, it has high fidelity; there's a lot of quality to its output signal, a lot of depth. It's almost like an expensive mic preamp.

The [Yamaha] S80 is not like that. The sound quality that comes out of it is not as good, in my opinion, although I think it is a very useful instrument. But the [Yamaha] CS6R, which uses the same tone generator as the S80, is really great; it has a lot of potential for dance-oriented music. It's got really interesting ways of generating little arpeggiated patterns and things like that, yet it has a lot of edge to the sound. So I use that when I want to add a real edgy texture.

I also have two Korg Tritons—a rack and a keyboard. I have both of them because I find the factory programs to be very useful already. When I use synthesizers that have knobs on them—the Nord, things like that—I tweak them constantly, but with synthesizers like the EX5 and the Triton that don't offer so many real-time controls, I appreciate the sound design that goes into these instruments; I see that as being their strongest suit. I might tweak them a little, but I don't start from a raw sound perspective; I tend to go with the presets. The Tritons can serve as almost the foundation of what a song can be, whether it's the drums or a pad or whatever. I have two of them because, a lot of times, the programs and the effects that they put in the programs are really well thought-out. Every time you put it in combination mode and try to use it as a multitimbral instrument, you're sacrificing a lot of the things that they worked so hard to do with the effects and with the overall programming.

Years ago, I used to think, "Why would I want to use someone else's patch ideas?" But now I just realize that these are great tools for doing what I have to do. It's sort of like giving someone else a little bit of the responsibility—and the credit—for having the music sound great. To all the guys who spend their time sound designing and making the patches in these keyboards, thank you!

Is the Minimoog your primary bass instrument?

The Minimoog was for many years my bass instrument. I remember doing the "Sussudio" session with Phil Collins in England. Hugh Padgham was the engineer, and he was saying, "I love this sound—it has a real oomph, but we can get even more fundamental by double-tracking it." But I don't use the Minimoog as much anymore.

What has taken its place?

Very often, Minimoog patches from samplers! [*laughs*]

Why would a sample of a Minimoog be preferable to the real thing?

Well, a lot of times, it was because the Minimoog wasn't plugged in! [*laughs*] If I'm in writing mode, I tend to go for the fastest sound available. I could have definitely gotten the bass in "Genie in a Bottle" on a Minimoog, but I didn't—I used the Minimoog sample out of the Triton rack. Although if you use the Minimoog itself, it definitely has more body to it. I am going to hook it up—I promise!

Do you do a lot of real-time control as you play, using things like pedals and joysticks?

Yeah, I do, quite a bit. Usually, as I record the parts, I'm turning the knobs and recording the MIDI controller data, too. It's a performance, and these are performance-oriented instruments. In fact, one of the reasons why I don't have an EX5 module is because it doesn't provide all the modulation controls. The guys who design the sounds assign specific controller information to every sound, with different setups for each. So I really need to have the actual keyboard instrument itself so that I can use what they were thinking would be great variations on their sounds.

In terms of outboard gear and audio processing, though, you seem to have a pretty minimal setup here. Does that mean you use a lot of plug-ins?

I use a lot of plug-ins [*leans over to microphone and speaks in conspiratorial low tone*], and I buy them all, by the way!

Have you come up with any unusual applications of plug-ins?

Well, on the Dream song "He Loves You Not," I made a lot of use of Bruno and Reso. There's a section where it sort of sounds a little like a vocoder, but there's also kind of like a high-frequency thing. I would take the odd vocal part and run it through Bruno and Reso, record it on a different track, and then cut pieces of it that I liked.

There's another song where I wanted to change the chordal structure of a vocal part, so I would record two passes with Bruno spelling out different chords, because you can latch keys on it to make the vocal be a specific chord. Then, in Logic Audio, I cut pieces out that I wanted to be one chord or another and turned one or the other track off so that it would change chords. I was sort of using them as compositional opportunities—which is what they are. There are so many possibilities of what you can do with plug-ins.

That reminds me of the auto-panning technique that some people use, where they duplicate a track, pan the two tracks hard left and hard right, and then just cut out bits wherever they want it to shift position.

Absolutely, and I do that very often. A lot of the echoes are created by

just copying a piece of audio to a separate time-shifted track and then reducing the volume. Or I might set up three or four different tracks with the same piece of audio but apply different plug-in effects on each. It can be something as simple as setting up the same echo but using a different plug-in for a slightly different tonal quality. On "He Loves You Not," during the guitar solo, I have a real-time echo that sounds like "*eh eh eh eh*"—not just a regular echo, but one that has a whole rhythm to it. It just came from experimenting, by moving the audio in different places on the Arrange window at different volumes and with different effects.

As someone who's been making records since the '80s, do you find that all this fine tweaking sometimes drives you up a wall? Twenty years ago, you could make a great record without having to edit at the microscopic level.
I know exactly what you mean, and I have to say that there have been times when I've been frustrated by that—because it seems like as time goes on, that sort of microsurgery gets deeper and deeper and deeper. I've had to readjust my ears to recognize it.

When I started to work with my band, the System, I had an Oberheim DSX, DMX, and OB-8 and the Minimoog. I had all the gear plugged in to a Peavey PA speaker that had a piezo tweeter in it and some kind of very cheap 15" speaker, and I would just listen in mono. I didn't know anything about high frequency or bass. I remember an audio engineer coming in and saying, "David, what are you listening to in here? Let me EQ it a little bit for you." My response was, "Why would I want that much high end? No. Shut that off; I just want it flat."

What I'm trying to say is that over the years, people have sort of turned my head and called my attention to the fact that I may have been missing some of the possibilities of subtleties. And a number of times, I've had to reorient or reeducate myself to go along with some of those things that people were recognizing. Just learning Pro Tools—it took me a long time before I actually dove into that, and I had to completely relearn everything. Before that, I had been doing everything on an MPC60 and with analog tapes. So, yes, there are those aspects. But then, of course, there are the musical aspects of having all the possibilities.

But do you think there are perhaps too many possibilities available today?
Let me put it this way: I think that in light of the amount of possibilities that there are, there's not enough really innovative music being made. You can have too many keyboards. A couple of times, I've taken a whole bunch of them out of my setup and restricted myself to working with just a few different instruments. But right now, I'm very comfortable having a lot of instruments to choose from, and I'm not overwhelmed by the amount of possibilities.

Even if you have a lot of sonic textures at your fingertips, the most important thing is that you realize the basic harmonic structure or beat or the sort of essence of what you're doing in a musical composition. If it doesn't have a real essence, it's nothing; it can just become a diffused, expendable thing. But if you spend time trying to get even one part to have real substance, that's the most important thing. That is what, in the end, allows a record to transcend all the other music that's out there, and that's what will make it popular.

How do you craft a hit song? What are the elements that go into it?
[*Long pause*] Wow. That's a big question. But I've had the feeling, through the years, that I've gotten closer to having an understanding of how to craft a hit song. I don't completely think that I know, of course; I can't

say that I'm confident that every time I do something, I'm going to hit the bull's-eye. But I do have more of a feeling for it than I used to.

I tend to go at composition from the standpoint of what I love. Even if it's just a beat, I have to love it, or else I don't believe that it will be a hit song. If I can think of it in any way as being common or ordinary, then it almost always really is common and ordinary. But if I can listen to something and go, "Wow, I really, really like that, and that does sound original to me and different from other things than I've heard," then I know I'm on to something. So I'm always looking to come up with something that sounds original. I might write 20 tracks, and three of them might be that great, where I feel that [they are] original enough, that [they have] enough of a harmonic basis to write some kind of emotional message over the top of [them].

I've spent most of my life listening to classical music. I love classical music; I've been taking classical piano lessons now for the past couple of years. I was classically trained when I was a kid, and I went to the Berklee College of Music. In fact, I was obsessed with practicing piano 10 to 12 hours a day for much of my life! So I have a lot of musical background, and there's been a lot of music that I've heard that I've loved—it's not isolated to pop music, or jazz, or classical. It's a blend of everything, and it's all sort of a backdrop in my mind. When I try to think of something that will be a hit song, I think of it in reference to all of those things. Some people might say, "Well, that must be a pain in the ass to always have to think that way," but I believe that I'm doing some kind of artistry, and my whole sense of reference is people that I've admired—composers and music that I've believed [were] artistry. Not business—artistry.

So even now, trying to write hit songs, I'm trying to create some kind of artistic accomplishment here. But, having said that, I have learned that a hit can be almost isolated into two separate things: a rhythm backing where people will say, "Whoa, that's a different beat than I've ever heard; there's something different about that," and then a musical track where, harmonically and melodically, people will say, "Wow, there's something about those three chords going together that makes me want to cry or makes me want to move or makes me have feelings of all different varieties." I try to find all those things: in the beat, in the harmonic structure, and in the melodic quality of the backdrop of the music.

I'm not as good with the actual top line melody and the lyrics. But over the past few years, I've gotten better. Steve has really taught me a lot about lyrics, about making a lyric into something that can be really meaningful to people. I never used to concentrate on the lyrical content of [songs]; I was always so happy when they were good, but I was never actually able to help them be good. [*laughs*] Now, I definitely can. Although I can never be a primary lyricist, I can really help out with the lyrics and even sometimes think of great lyrical ideas.

So in the last few years, I feel like I have gotten a much better understanding of how to craft a "hit song." Again, a lot of it has to do with meeting Steve. Steve is just the quintessential songwriter. He is a songwriter; I'm a composer. My mom held up Beethoven, Mozart, Bach—[*laughs*] "You could be like them!" That's sort of my orientation—to be a composer without lyrics. But Steve has a total feeling for lyric and melody being together, and he's really taught me a lot about that. I have learned to look at a song both as a whole and in its individual components—every single detail of a song. Transcending the ability of the artist to perform it, you have to be able to look at a song and go, "That is a fantastic idea." It doesn't have to be complex, but it has to really, really be something awesome in the end.

Mechanically, is that the order in which you approach things? The beat, then the harmonic structure, then the lyric, and then the top melody?
No, not necessarily. I often wake up at night and have an idea of a melody and the chords in my head, and then I come in here quickly before I forget it. I put my ideas down on a cassette so that I can wake up later and go, "Whoa, that was pretty good!"

With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, what advice would you pass along to the reader who wants to follow your career path?
I would have to say that I really value my musical education and background. When it comes down to it, the foundation of what I do is my musical background—being able to play an instrument with my fingers. So I guess the key to my success has been listening to a lot of music and analyzing it: taking it apart, learning how to play the parts that you love, learning how to imitate all the parts on records that you think are great. Even if they are just electronic things that are derived from within the computer and they're not played, it's important to learn how to do them.

Howard Massey's latest book, Behind the Glass, *is a collection of interviews with record producers.*