

Three Distinct Approaches to Music Production

The role of music producer is constantly changing and evolving. While producers are often seen as the technical engineers simply manipulating the sound of a recording, many producers influence the work in other ways. In this essay, I will explore three different approaches to music production through the work of three iconic practitioners. Prince, as an artist and visionary, Rick Rubin, as a mentor and minimalist, and Dr. Dre as a collaborator and artist developer.

Prince: The Artist and Visionary

Prince stands as a prime example of a music visionary. His virtuosity over many instruments and ability to arrange and produce his own work independently of any outside influence made him one of the most prolific musicians of our time. He laid the foundations for what is now known as the 'Minneapolis Sound' through his unique fusion of funk, rock, R&B, and pop interjected with drum machines and Synthesizers contributing significantly to the unmistakable pop sound of the 1980s.

Prince often recorded entire songs by himself, influenced by the approach of Stevie Wonder as he states in his 1999 interview with Larry King, "I used him as a role model in trying to play all the instruments, and being self-contained and keep my vision clear..." (CNN, 2016) highlighting his dedication to authenticity and self-contained creation.

His sound was distinct and unique, however his approach to production and arranging was very methodical. In an interview on 'The Roundtable with Drew Demsky' Prince's staff engineer throughout the 80's, Susan Rogers, details his studio process, '...because he was so creative he needed his methodology to be a pretty narrow lane...', 'if his creativity had drifted outside those lanes to finding new guitars and new guitar sounds and all new keyboards and all new drum machines, it would have tapped resources that were being devoted to songwriting.' She also talks about his, 'Watchmakers' knack for understanding how to complete an arrangement with the limitation of 24 tracks.'... 'He said to me, in theory any instrument in the mix, should be capable of being the loudest thing in the mix.' (The Roundtable with Drew Dempsey, 2022), She then goes on to explaining how she had to unlearn Prince's style of arrangement when she eventually moved on to working with other artists, alluding to his unique style of production.

In the 1990s at the height of his fame and peak of his musical career, he entered a legal battle with his then label Warner Bros over ownership of his master recordings. He changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol as a way to reclaim his artistic identity from the label, and would turn up to meetings with the word 'Slave' written on his face. The act would force the media in interviews to refer to him as "The Artist Formerly Known as Prince." further drawing audience attention to the shady practices of the music industry and the stripping of artists rights to their own works. The rebranding was engineered as a show of his disdain for the legal methods of the record industry and highlights his dedication to reclaiming complete control over his

musicianship. Later in the CNN interview with Larry King he states, “I don’t consider it proper that my creations belong to someone else...” and how he re-recorded new master recordings to reinstate his copyright,” We’ve done that with 1999, there’s a new master recording of it...”.(CNN, 2016)

To further his quest for musical independence, he built Paisley Park, his own personal musician's playground and recording complex in Minnesota. The facility would act as an extension of his creativity where he could write, record, rehearse, and perform without any external interference. The facility reflected his desire to eliminate barriers between inspiration and execution. Here, albums like *Lovesexy* (1988), *Diamonds and Pearls* (1991), and numerous unreleased vault projects were created with the oversight of none other than himself. Paisley Park became a living embodiment of Prince’s philosophy of unfiltered vision and a self-contained workflow.

Through obsessive studio recording, genre-defying releases, and battles for creative control, Prince elevated the producer role to one of total artistic expression. His output redefined what it means to be a self-produced artist, demonstrating how production can serve not only as a technical craft but as a vehicle for identity, innovation, and freedom.

Rick Rubin: The Mentor and Minimalist

Rick Rubin is one of the most influential producers of our time, working with artists from across the whole spectrum of musical genres. His approach centres around minimalism, Identity, and authenticity. His lack of studio know-how and musicianship are replaced with the ability to work with artists and engineers to bring the best out of the project sonically. He started out his career co-founding Def Jam Recordings from his dorm room at New York University. He helped to bring hip-hop into the mainstream with Run-D.M.C., LL Cool J, and the Beastie Boys. Unlike most producers who look to interject their own personality and sound onto a record, Rubin takes on more of an advisory role. He brings his experience as an avid music listener to help artists strip away the excess and cultivate their unique artistic identity. His focus is on representing the artist's ideas as authentically as possible, rather than intentionally making hit records.

In his channel 4 interview with Kristian Guru Murphy, when discussing his production approach to Def Jam and early hip-hop, he states,” It’s an art form of montage. If you Listen to early hip-hop records, you don’t hear that yet, because the people that were making the records weren’t hip hop people,’ ... ‘They made them the way they made older R&B records, except they had someone rapping on it. So the music was not yet hip hop.’ ... ‘when you went out to the club, it was much more... It was all types of music put through this DJ filter that made Hip-Hop, and I wanted the records to reflect that as much as the person rapping.” (Channel 4 News, 2023)

He further emphasises his approach to production when he later refers to working with speed Metal band ‘Slayer’. He explains that the producers for the band's earlier works would produce

them in the same way as they would any other Heavy Rock and Metal band at the time which did not cater to the sound of slayers specific style of Speed Metal, in the interview he states, "When you treat everything the same, it waters down what it is.". His approach was to work with the engineers to develop a more bespoke recording and mixing method that would compliment Slayer's fast and driving drum sounds. He further punctuates his production approach, "...in Hip-Hop, If you make it like it's an R&B Record, It's an R&B record with somebody rapping, If you make it like going to the Hip-Hop Club it's Hip-Hop"... With Speed Metal, If you treat it like Black Sabbath... It won't do what Slayer Does."

Rick is also a self-confessed minimalist. Whether it be through meditation to empty his mind, living in an "empty white box" for a home, or stripping back the interior of Shangri-La Studios to allow artists could be free from distraction and feel vulnerable in a safe space. This minimalist ethos permeates not only through his persona, but intertwines with his style of production. In an interview with Newsweek, he states, "There's a tremendous power in using the least amount of information to get a point across." (Romano, 2016)

You can see this stripped back approach to production in his album series 'American Recordings' recorded with Johnny Cash. Rubin stripped away layers of production from the original cover songs that he selected as a means for Cash's voice to give weight and new perspective to the lyrics. The cover of Nine-Inch Nails' "Hurt" (2002) was the most popular song from the series, striking a poignant note with listeners after his passing in 2003. Rubin's minimalist approach allowed the emotional weight of the lyrics and Johnny's vocal conviction, juxtaposed with his personal life experiences, to take centre stage. It earned vast critical acclaim and revived not only the original song but Cash's almost 50-year career.

Rick Rubin is the perfect example of a producer who does not fit the usual stereotype of a tech-savvy engineer and musical genius. He has produced hundred of albums with many of the world's most iconic artists. His focus on minimalism and integrity over traditional practices have broke boundaries in music production and bought us some of the most emotional works of the 20th century.

Dr. Dre: The Artist Developer

Dr. Dre is one of the most influential producers in modern hip-hop. His career began as part of the notorious Gangsta Rap group N.W.A. He would later break away from the group to produce his own work as a solo artist, and later go on to develop many of the legendary hip-hop artists that we are familiar with today. He is one of the pioneers that popularised and refined the G-funk hip hop sound of the early 90s, a fusion of slowed-down funk samples, melodic synth lines, and deep bass lines. His debut solo album *The Chronic* (1992) laid the foundations for West Coast rap and popularised the genre throughout the 90s and 00s.

It can however be said that Dre's greatest legacy may lie in his mastery of identifying incredible talent in its rawest form and elevating it, developing artists through his production methods. He

has helped develop the now unmistakable sounds of many of hip hop's greatest rappers, most notably Snoop Dogg, Eminem, and 50 Cent, curtailing his production to bring homogeneity with their voices and aesthetics.

Dr. Dre discovered Snoop Dogg after hearing a demo tape from step-brother and fellow West Coast rapper Warren G. He was impressed by Snoop's laid-back flow and 'drawling' lyricism. Dre featured him heavily on his debut album *The Chronic*, and the album's success and popularity would lead on to Dre developing and further crafting Snoop's sound in their next collaboration, *Doggystyle* (1993).

When referring to his production with Dre, Snoop humbly states, "Dr. Dre was the perfect, Father figure, role model and mentor and producer for me at the time because I was young I was raw, but I needed direction and I needed some sculpting. And he was able to shape me and mold me and teach me the right way of how to do it...", (Windy City LIVE, 2018), displaying Dre's ability to nurture his raw talent and apply his production in a way to compliment his unique style of rapping. On the album, you can witness how Dre seamlessly merges Snoop's laid back delivery with the smooth G-funk production aesthetic. Dre produced the album in full, further shaping the sound of G-funk and elevating Snoop's status to become the unofficial face of the genre. The album debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 which would further push Dre and Snoop into iconic status worldwide.

In an interview with BigBoyTV he discusses his approach to identifying artists he looks to collaborate with, "I really like working with artists that have interesting voices, If you've noticed most of the artists I work with, you will know their voice as soon as you hear them..." (BigBoyTV, 2015b), this rings true with his next notable collaboration with hip hop legend Eminem.

In 1997, Dre took to producing and developing Eminem. He signed the young white rapper from Detroit after hearing his mixtape at a bachelor party. With hip hop being a traditionally black music genre and Dre's deep roots in the hip hop community, he received much criticism from his peers and was advised not to take Eminem on as it would be a career ending decision.

In the BigBoyTV interview he talks about how he, "...loved the delivery, I love his concepts and what he was talking about, cus it was just crazy" (BigBoyTV, 2015b), showing his ultimate preference towards talent and skill and not concerned with expectation and norms. The duo went on to produce, *The Slim Shady LP* (1999) and *The Marshall Mathers LP* (2000). His production serves as a cohesive backdrop mimicking Eminem's playful delivery style. Dre injects the album with comedic commentary and storytelling. The production was stripped back with minimalist beats to leave space for Eminem's complex rhyming patterns and lyricism. The collaboration catapulted Eminem to superstardom and redefined the sonic and racial boundaries within hip-hop.

Dre would later go on to develop another icon of 2000s hip hop, 50 Cent. Dr. Dre and Eminem cosigned 50 after hearing a mixtape from Eminem's attorney. Dre and Em acted as executive producers for the album *Get Rich or Die Tryin'* (2003), Dre oversaw production on many of the tracks, crafting the production to punctuate 50 Cent's hard hitting vocal delivery with samples of

guns and hard hitting drum beats, elevating the productions with strings to allude to the East Coast Mafioso rap sound of the late 1980s. Like with Eminem and Snoop, Dre's involvement as executive producer involved shaping the narratives, curating collaborations, and polishing the sound of other producers involved through mixing.

Dre's approach to artist development and music production show that the role of music producer is not simply limited to writing the music for a song. He doesn't just produce hits, he identifies raw talent and moulds the artist and music to produce icons.

Conclusion

The role of the music producer can be many things: visionary, mentor, technician, developer. Prince, Rick Rubin, and Dr. Dre illustrate how production can be a deeply personal, philosophical, or collaborative endeavour. Prince's focus on self-production redefined artistic independence and self-expression. Rubin's minimalist mentorship helped artists reconnect with their emotional truths. Dre's developmental genius turned local talents into international icons. Together, their approaches highlight the immense creative and cultural power of the producer and the many forms that power can manifest.

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