

## *Songwriters Market 2005*

### HF Productions - seeking the Human Factor

Blake Althen and Paula Bellenoit started out as recording and performing artists with their Human Factor band project. They received positive notice right out of the gate, including an award in the 2003 Mid-Atlantic Song Contest, but they soon realized their true home was in the studio crafting songs and challenging themselves to develop creative sounds and arrangements. The long hours and cramped conditions of the road also took their toll and proved disillusioning and confining compared to the possibilities of the studio. The duo's love of the studio was also plain to their fellow artists and music business fellow travelers. Says Althen, "The other side is that everybody we talked to was saying, 'You guys should be producers.' "

So back into the studio they went, and the sound they had developed for their own album as Human Factor proved key in drawing the attention of clients. "It started with Jennifer Cutting's Ocean Orchestra," says Althen. "She heard our record and said, 'Hey, can you do some drums and soundscape-type work for me?' We did it, somebody else heard that and it just snowballed. The next thing we knew, managers were calling us and waiting to send their groups."

Althen and Bellenoit's style as a production team is an extension of their writing partnership, which usually flows out of demoed instrumental ideas begun by Althen. Bellenoit then comes in and develops melodies and lyrics over the top that feed off the produced vibe of the tracks. When asked to what degree production defines the direction of a song, she says, "They're pretty much intertwined. We do a lot of our writing right in the studio, and as we're writing we, 'Ah, this would be cool with this effect on it!'" "

Similarly, Althen and Bellenoit take complementary roles when working with an artist. Althen guides the studio process and works directly with the recording artist to develop the initial direction in sound and arrangement, while Bellenoit offers an extra set of ears to the tracks in progress and handles the business side of their relationship with the artist. According to Althen, the process is as much about psychology as it is engineering or musicianship. He says, "With singer/songwriter-type artists, they come in and I say to the artist, 'Play me what you've got.' And they play the piano and sing it with a click track. Then I'll say, 'Hey, have you ever thought about it like this. . . 'And I'll rip the piano out or turn it into a Rhodes, and then I'll put a funky groove and then I'll watch them and watch their expression. It may be a funk groove. It may be a Gregorian Chant I put behind it. And I'm waiting for them to go, 'Yeah!' We put this smorgasbord song, this mess, together. It's usually way over the top, because

I try to find all the things they like, and I try to figure out the artist. Some people like to groove really hard. Other people might want it to focus more on complex chords. Others may want it to be very simple or may want it over-produced. And then, after we get the foundation arrangement in place, Paula will show up and give us her take on it.”

Of her role at this point in the process, Bellenoit says, “I’ll come in once there is a basic arrangement, and I’ll give my opinion at that point, because I haven’t been sitting there the whole time and I’m not attached to it. I’m the fresh ears. I’m the consumer coming in and hearing it for the first time. How I comment depends on what I hear. Sometimes I’ll be very specific and be like, ‘The pronunciation of that word is not good.’ And other times I’ll be more vague and it’s just the general idea of the song.”

Both acknowledge the impact a producer can have on the overall sound of a recording project with the combination of equipment choices and sound preferences. When asked to describe the Human Factor sound, Bellenoit sums it up as: “A combination of electronic and organic – an organic thing combined with new technology. A very full and rich sound. And we like to joke that I’m the human and he’s the factor.

Althen is quick to point out, however, that the final sound achieved with any particular artist is often a compromise made necessary by individual circumstances and his own sonic preferences. Also, he makes it clear he does not consider himself a jack-of-all-trades. “There are two ways we work with people,” he says. “We do project-based stuff where we are creating things from scratch, or you have live band situations. Live band tends to have more of a sound of its own, versus the project stuff, which tends to have more of a Human Factor music experience because you’re in my own studio, with my sounds, my guitars, my microphones, etc. On the other hand, if you track a group, a lot of times we’re going to another studio. Every studio has its own sort of ‘thing’ happening. But with a project in my studio with an individual artist I naturally gravitate to the sounds I like. I don’t think I would be very good recording a group like the White Stripes, but I might be much better suited for a Linkin Park, because I like a big sound. I like incorporating electronics and all kinds of elements like rap when I can.

Having seen the music business from both sides, both as artists and as producers, Althen and Bellenoit note that beginning artists can be dangerously uninformed about how the music industry works. Bellenoit says she finds beginning artists are often “very naïve. They don’t understand what ‘points’ are on an album the first time they talk to us. The baby artists, at least the ones we’ve worked with, don’t know anything about the industry. They don’t realize that getting signed means the you’re essentially getting a loan. They think that once you’re signed you’re a rock star.

Althen also feels strongly that artists can do a lot for themselves to move their careers forward, and that small details count. They can take advantage of network opportunities offered by music business organizations. “Paula and I both have stay up until 2:30 a.m. stuffing press kits and had to go to work the next day. I see bad websites. How many artists have business cards? It’s such a simple thing, yet I think I’ve gotten two in the entire time I’ve been doing this. Or writing your phone number on your CD. People don’t even do that. And if everyone was as serious as the amount of talk I hear, every Washington Area Music Association seminar would be jam-packed, but there are rarely more than a couple hundred, and most of them are lawyers. The music business is very competitive, but look at Human factor. We played three shows and we were nominated for stuff—because we put a lot of work into our press kit and making it sound good.”

On the other hand, Bellenoit points out that the artists should not be afraid to knock on doors and ask questions. They may find advice and help in unexpected places. “A lot of what I know is due to my lawyer. But, being around it and talking to different people, you learn different things, and one way to learn the industry is just doing it. You learn things from a book when you have to, but most of it is sitting in front of an A&R guy at LAVA and talking to him and going online and meeting people. We met a guy who works at Billboard just by sending him an e-mail, and next time we were in New York we went and said hello and sat down in his office. Put yourself out there and talk to people.

When asked about the possibility of using outside songwriters for projects, both Blake and Bellenoit are open to the idea, depending upon the project. “That’s something we’ve never done before,” Bellenoit says. “Typically, the artists we’ve worked with have their own songs, and we haven’t had a need for that. But I have talked with one or two people, artists who don’t write, who have asked me, ‘Do you have a library that I could just pick a song from?’ So, it’s we’re willing to consider.

When it comes to the question of genre, Althen has a strong desire to combine and push the edges of various genres. Says Althen, “I look for hip and cool, and I don’t care what style it is. I like the cutting edge. I like attitude. It can be totally experimental. I get excited about is a cutting edge voice. What it comes down to, in my book, is the voice and the song. And then the thing that will send me over the top is the ability to be experimental and try new things. I like stuff with a hard edge. I think we can definitely fit into rock, electronica and pop. And I like New Age.”

Still Althen acknowledges that production trickery is still secondary to the quality of the song itself. “No A&R guy ever said, ‘I can’t sign your group because the kick drum doesn’t sound good enough.’ So, I want a great voice. I want a great song. And if the artist can let me do my thing and try

to come up with cool and creative stuff, which I hope I can for them, that's what I'm excited about."

---Ian Bessler