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Kenny Greenberg and Scotch Ralston find similar challenges in making two very different live records.

BY JASON ZASKY

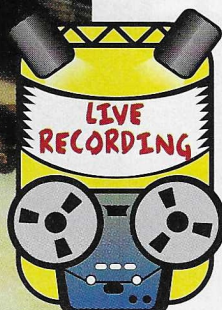
We've all heard the old adage, "It's not what you know, but who you know." It may be true in most areas of life, but in the case of live recording it's the inverse that's relevant. While knowing the right people may enable you to record for less money, *what* you know will prove even a more important role in whether your recording will be worth a damn.

To further your knowledge on the process of recording live, I sat down with Scotch Ralston (seated right, with 311 lead singer Nick Hexum)—who recorded, mixed, and produced *311 Live* (Capricorn)—and Kenny Greenberg (left), who produced and played guitar on his wife Ashley Cleveland's *You Are There* (Cadence/204). Despite the stylistic differences between the two artists—Cleveland describes herself as a "rock & roll gospel singer," while 311 plays a loud brand of hip-hop/funk/jazz-influenced hard rock—both producers had similar experiences recording their respective albums. And while both records were

recorded primarily in mid-size or larger venues, their advice is relevant to rooms of any size. In fact, the success of a recording is in large part determined by what you do *before* and *after* you roll tape.

How did your live albums come together?

Greenberg: In our case, we were out on tour opening for a bigger act [Amy Grant], and halfway through the tour the soundman said, "Here are your DATs of the multitracks." It was like, "What multitracks?" They happened to be recording all the shows so we got all these multitrack recordings of us playing live, and that gave us the idea for a live record.



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Ralston: That's always the best way. When someone else is recording, just pick up on that. When we decided to try some live recording, we started out carrying around an ADAT and an eight-track digital recorder in our sound rack. Those recordings were fairly good, but the only problem is that the EQ you would use to record something and the EQ you would use to make something sound good in a live environment would be completely different. So the recordings turned out okay, but we knew when we actually decided to do a live album we would probably have to pay an outside company to come in with recording devices we didn't have with us.

What kind of a budget did you have to record 311 Live?

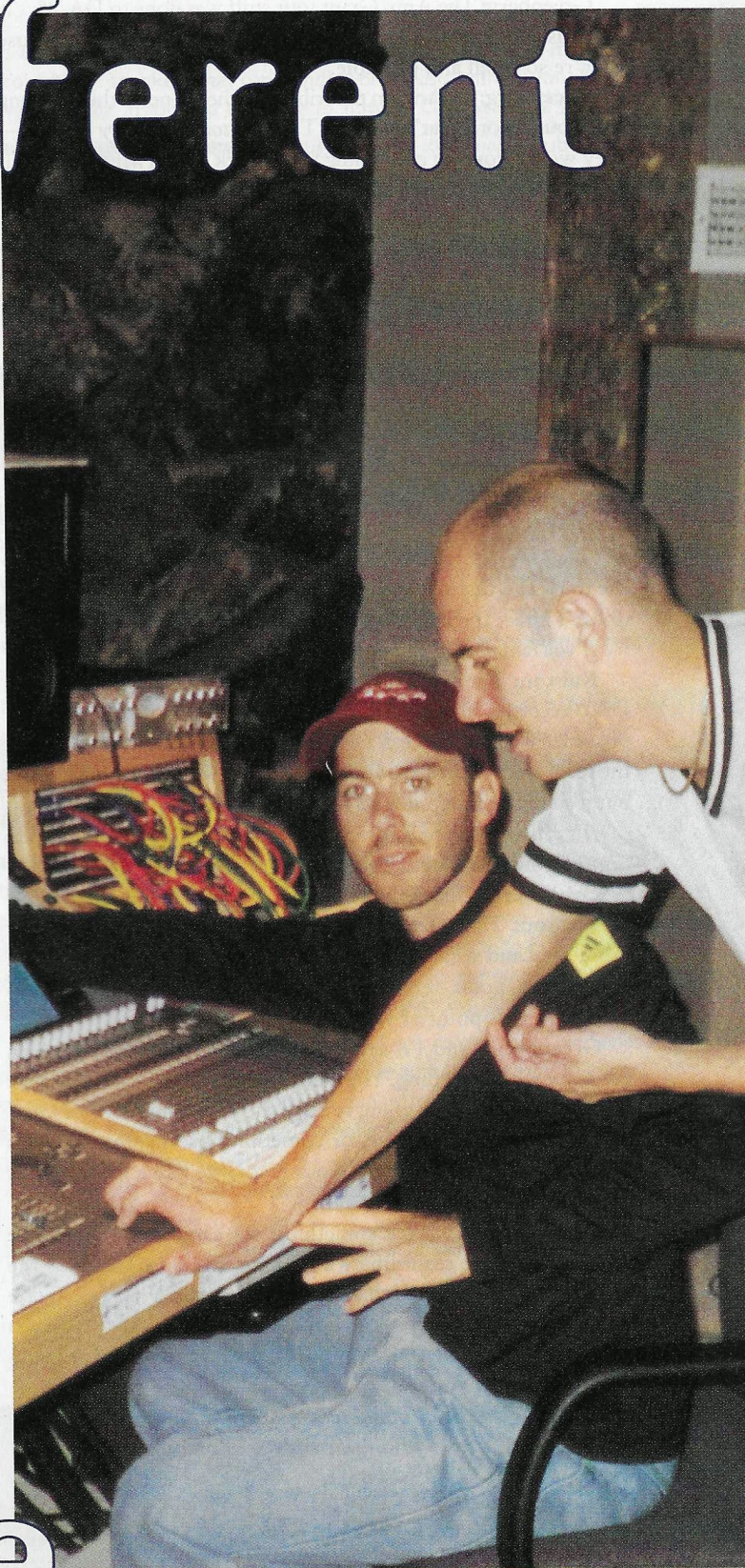
Ralston: Our budget was basically, "Hey, spend some money, but keep it as small as you can." We investigated our options and found that it was most cost-efficient for us to hire a local recording truck. It pulls up behind the stadium, records you, gives you the tapes, and leaves. Fortunately, by the time we did that, our concerts started to get a little bigger and we could afford that. But I don't think it's too outrageously expensive.

And for You Are There?

Greenberg: We didn't have a budget and so our deal was basically done on a favor basis. We happened to get these live recordings, and then we did a TV show, and the producer [of the TV show], Michael McNamara, let us use the tapes, and we had a couple of acoustic vocal performances that didn't cost anything to do. Then Richard Dodd, who's a mixer here in Nashville, as a favor to me assembled it all and dumped it to 24 track . . .

Ralston: Well, you lucked out.

Greenberg: . . . In the process he said, "I've just got one free day, and I'm not gonna really mix it, I'm just going to assemble it and dump it over to 24 track and push up the faders." But he's a great guy and started tweaking around a little bit. And I used three of the mixes he did; he just spent a half an hour on each tune. Then I did some sessions for this other guy, and he had a little mix room and a couple free days, and I said, "Well, what if we trade and I bring my tapes over?" So he mixed those and then for the remaining things we needed to mix we paid an engineer. I spent a total of about \$3,200 for studio time, mixing, and multitrack tapes. In mastering I spent another \$3,000, so I



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did the whole thing for \$6,200.

What equipment did you use for recording?

Greenberg: The Amy Grant tour stuff was done to DA-88s...

Ralston: That's a popular format for live recording because they're so small and portable.

Greenberg: ... And on the tribute to the Stones—the one song from our record that's on that [TNN's *Stone Country* tribute]—they were recording everything to 32-track digital Mitsubishi, but we dumped it all to analog 24, just because there's so many studios that have 24-track tape machines. We felt like that was our best bet once we started to mix.

Ralston: That was a good plan. Usually the best plan is to try to get a good recording of some kind, and go somewhere else to mix it later. As far as equipment goes, we tried to keep it simple for recording; just a console and tape machine. We used the same microphones we use for our live setup, but they have these little splitter cables that send one signal to the track and one signal to the console, so the live recording EQ doesn't affect the live sound EQ.

If you had no budget but wanted to record, how would you do it?

Ralston: The best way is to get a stereo microphone and a DAT recorder and record from the best spot in the room, if possible. We've done that a couple times to experiment. Some of the recordings we got are not too shabby. I wouldn't release them, but it's kind of interesting to hear the audience's perspective.

It's probably a good approach to do something like that a few times before you actually go and spend money.

Greenberg: Oh, definitely.

Ralston: That's something good because you can see how you sound and what you need to improve on before you record. Also, it's a good reference to listen to your material from someone else's point of view.

Greenberg: And I'd say record as many shows as you can get away with recording. You can go back and fix—we didn't fix anything—but you're going to have shows where there's a lot of tempo weirdness, or noise, or something breaks down. That's the main thing that worked in our favor; we had a lot of shows to choose from.

Ralston: Yeah, that's something we came up against. We took to doing the recording we've done, and on some tapes the quality was a lot better than others. And when we found the ones that were quality recordings, we didn't have as much to choose from as we thought. So it's a great idea to record as many performances as you can.

Kenny brought up the subject of overdubbing...

Ralston: Yeah, we didn't do any fixes on our stuff, because we wanted to keep it live. But it's real tempting.

Greenberg: It is tempting. I totally agree with that. But there's something sacreligious about it, because there's so many live recordings you hear that are just too perfect, and it kind of pisses you off a little bit. What's the point? So we consciously said, "It is what it is, mistakes and all." Once we assembled the

live stuff that we liked, we played it for people, and the stuff they liked was some of the stuff with the most mistakes, and it was like, "Hey, this could apply to studio recording as well."

Ralston: It's kinda fun to hear some mistakes now and then. If you're going to start overdubbing and do a perfect product then you might as well just do a [studio] record. We just tried to mix it the best we could to make it sound like a pro product.

Is there extensive overdubbing on most live albums?

Ralston: It's hard to say. It just depends how bad it really is [laughter]. Sometimes vocalists will be sharp or flat and say, "Oh, I don't want to put that out. People will think I can't sing."

What about recording crowd noise?

Ralston: That's something I wish we'd done more of. Because it's great to hear the audience's response. Sometimes you can even hear one person screaming something hilarious, and we get a big kick out of that. One thing that we did—maybe we didn't tell everyone—but we sampled a little bit of crowd, moved it around.

Greenberg: We did a similar thing. We had problems on the shed shows. As the opening act on shed shows you're playing for the few people who are walking in, and there were a couple performances where the first couple songs in the set, we finished the songs and you could hear two or three people [claps slowly] clapping, but it was the performance we liked, so we took clapping from the end of the show and sampled that and put it in.

Ralston: And that's no big deal. It adds hype to the record.

Greenberg: The other thing about the sheds: They're not really great sounding places to play.

Ralston: I hear that.

Greenberg: We found that compared to the club shows, the ones in the outdoor sheds, when we tried to use the room mics, they were so tinny sounding that we had to use a lot of EQ. We listened to the club room mics and tried to match with EQ the shed ones. Even though you wanted to have the room—the excitement of playing in a big place—they just sounded lousy.

Ralston: Yeah, we had to fade our mics up and down a little bit. We had the same problem.

So you suggest recording in clubs?

Ralston: Club recording can be really good because it's usually a smaller space and there aren't as many reflections, and if they're filled with people, the people soak up a lot of the reflections.

Greenberg: That's exactly right.

Ralston: Either that, or the best type of recording is completely outdoors, with no roof or anything. That sounds great.

Most bands don't have too many opportunities to play in an open-air space though.

Ralston: But I would tell a band if they have a chance to perform in an outdoor venue without a roof or walls, then that would be a good show for them to record, if possible. So if they have a show like that coming up, start practicing recording with a DAT player and get ready.

Scotch, how much interaction did you have with 311 before recording the shows? What kind of direction did you provide, if any?

Ralston: Nothing, really. It was, "Hey, we're recording tonight, so play good [sic]." They just did their thing and I did mine. I didn't really emphasize that we were recording, otherwise it might be, "Oh, gosh, we're recording and I'm going to suck."

For the most part, Kenny, you guys weren't even conscious of being recorded.

Greenberg: Yeah, and for us the best stuff was from when we didn't know we were recording, because we didn't care.

Let's talk a little more about budgets. Scotch was explaining what he would do if he had no budget. Well, what if you had a minimal budget? Let's put it at a couple different levels.

Ralston: With a minimal budget you could go with an ADAT or a Roland VS-1680, something that's portable that you can record quality on. I would interface that with the live recording console and just record directly from the microphones. That's pretty cost-effective. All you have is the cost of the unit itself, but you can get ADATs pretty darn cheap these days. Also, once you have it on ADAT you can go somewhere else and mix it. That's how we did it for a long time, and we got some pretty good performances that way.

And the next step up would be to go with the truck?

Ralston: Yeah, the next step up would probably be the truck. I don't know if there's anything in between I can think of right off the bat.

Let's say you're at the point where you're finished recording, you're finished mixing. Mastering a live recording is a big production, isn't it?

Greenberg: Most of the money we spent was on mastering.

Ralston: Yeah, if you're going to release it, you usually have to master it. That's kind of a standard.

Greenberg: We found that with multiple shows, and also with multiple mixes, that to get a cohesive professional product we had to spend three days in mastering. And once you compress and EQ—especially with a live thing—all the crowd noise and white noise affects it. I was surprised by how much it affected it. So mastering was a real struggle.

Ralston: We had to master three separate times to get everything to match up.

If you record, say, six different shows and use all different equipment, was a problem getting the consistency between all the recordings? It sounds like you may have to spend more on the back end if you record a lot of shows.

Ralston: We concentrated on the mix on trying to match up the sound between shows, but we still had to master a lot to get it to match up.

Greenberg: And then we would try to compare them to studio albums we liked. It completely didn't work. Eventually we just stopped doing it.

Did you try to do that with other live albums too?

Greenberg: I eventually went to the Stones *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out!*, also because we did a Stones song ["Gimme Shelter"] on

the record.

What about you, Scotch?

Ralston: The whole time we were doing ours, the band kept saying, "Listen to the Bad Brains album!" I myself, didn't have any particular album in mind. We just went with what we thought was right. When we put our tapes up, we found it sounded a lot better than we thought it would, so we didn't have to search too far to find something to reference.

What kind of advice do you have for bands who've never recorded before?

Ralston: Rehearse before you record, and plan ahead which songs you want to get the best recording on. If there are any in particular you like the most, try to contour your set so those songs come when you're warmed up and have the energy flowing. Usually, [with] the songs at the beginning, there are problems getting everything together with levels and the vibe.

Greenberg: Also, try to go for as much separation as you can get. In retrospect, I would probably not have had the guitars quite as loud. Guitars often record better when there's smaller amps. Everybody has that same experience.

Ralston: Yeah, but tell that to the guitar player [laughter].

What would you do differently if you were doing your albums again?

Greenberg: There's a guy named Buddy Miller who plays with Emmylou Harris, and he recorded their live record, and he was saying that once he realized they were really going for it he got a bunch of really good mic pre's and carried them around. I would get some really good mic pre's to try and get better quality in the sound.

Ralston: That's a good one. In retrospect, my big change would be the placement and the attention we paid to the room mics. I'd say, between shows that was the biggest difference, and the only thing that may have been lacking on a few shows is the sound we got on our room mics.

Any suggestions about placing room mics?

Ralston: That's one good thing about going to a venue before you record, is to find a good place to put the mics. Somewhere where there's a good stereo image, but don't put them in the empty spots in the house or they'll sound really weird. Try to put them where people will be.

Where they're hopefully going to be [laughter].

Ralston: Yeah, "Imagine people here!"

Final thoughts?

Ralston: If it's something you're going to release, spend the extra dime. If it's something that's going to be a limited release, like a demo, save your money as much as you can.

Would either of you like to record other bands live?

Ralston: If I'm going to do recording, I'd prefer to be in a studio, to be honest.

Greenberg: I don't think anyone wants to spend a lot of time making live recordings.

Ralston: Yeah, it's tough. You're fighting the elements. You have to have a big slab of glass between the recorder and the band [laughter].

"If it's something you're going to release, spend the extra dime. If it's... a demo, save as much money as you can."

—Scotch Ralston