# Ecology Now!

## Organic Recording with Chris Tsangarides

by Jonathan Saxon
photos courtesy of RecordProduction.com

**legendary producer/engineer Chris Tsangarides [pronounced tang-uh-reed-ez] opened his studio, The Ecology Rooms, a few years ago. located on the southeast coast of England and perched atop the famous White Cliffs of Dover, this extremely well equipped studio also provides clients with lodging facilities on its fifty acres of picturesque landscape. All anyone has to do to see the studio is watch the new documentary film, *Anvil! The Story of Anvil*, in which Chris and his studio are featured at length. The film received glowing reviews at film festivals across the U.S. for documenting the brotherhood, dedication and (oftentimes hilarious) adventures of the Canadian heavy metal band, Anvil. Chris's recording career started over thirty years ago at the renowned Morgan Studios. He has worked with some of the biggest names in hard rock and heavy metal such as: Gary Moore, Thin Lizzy, Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Loudness. Don't paint Tsangarides in a corner, though. His talents have led him to work with artists ranging from Japan, Depeche Mode, Killing Joke and The Human League to Tom Jones, Joan Armatrading, Concrete Blonde and The Tragically Hip. Upon his return from making an appearance with Anvil at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival, he spoke with me about his unique recording techniques, the importance of apprenticeships and the current state of the recording industry.**

**Tell me about The Ecology Rooms. What's with the name?**

It's quite funny. This is where Lord Baden-Powell [founder of the Scout Movement/Boy Scouts] lived. Many international Scouts would come in the summer, camp and do activities. It's such a beautiful area - it literally is on top of the cliffs. Of the buildings that I took over, one of them was [called] The Ecology Rooms because it's where the scouts would learn about ecology. It's [still] The Ecology Rooms because of the sign outside. I couldn't be arsed to move the sign and I thought, "You know what? It's a cool name!" Some friends of ours bought the estate. I asked, "Have you got any rooms you don't want?" You couldn't ask for a better building for a recording studio. It was built during the Second World War and the roof is four-inch thick, poured, reinforced concrete. The walls are twelve inches thick. From a point of view of a solid structure, it's absolutely perfect. Then to boot, we have a crew lodge here where the Scout leaders used to stay, and that's where the bands get to stay. So they get to stay on site with all fifty acres of gorgeous scenery - three seconds from the studio.

**That's a dream recording place!**

Absolutely a dream, and *really*, *really*, reasonable.

**It's a really unique name.**

It *is* kind of organic here. If you can't play you ain't gonna sound any good in this place. I don't use Pro Tools as my main thing. Mixing consoles – valve console of course – decent microphones, a new [iZ Technologies] RADAR system and there you go. You play it, I record it. If you're out of time then we do it again 'til you're in time, likewise with the singers. People say that Pro Tools is gonna be this magic thing that saves us. It's just a recording platform. Anything that you can do on Pro Tools we could do before in an analog system, except we couldn't Auto-Tune something or put drums in time. Flange, phase, compression – there's all outboards of this [that] the plug-ins try to emulate. What the hell is the point of emulating them when I've got rackloads of this stuff? Unless you're willing to spend a gazillion bucks on [Pro Tools] with some decent A to D [converters], the word clocks and all the rest, it doesn't sound anywhere as good as RADAR or tape. Even when you spend all that money it doesn't sound as good. It doesn't mean to say you can't make great records on it, because amazing records have been done on all sorts of recording systems. It's not really about what you have - it's about how you approach *everything*, in my book. I just happen to prefer this system. I'm more hands-on with it, because I have to listen to stuff. I can't [say], "Oh, well I can tune it up." No. I have to [record] it in tune. The RADAR allows me to do all manner of things – levels up and down, cut, paste, whatever – which is fantastic. And the wonderful undo button so your drop-ins never mess up. I am such a huge fan of that recording platform.

**Do you prefer to use digital as opposed to analog tape?**

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I actually prefer the sound of tape, to be honest, but because of the way the economy has become [musicians] can't afford the tape budget, never mind the studio these days.

**It's almost as if the artist or producer is sometimes forced to use digital.**

That's absolutely right. It's very cheap. You can find a real cool 16-track or 24-track 2" machine for not a whole lot of money, but it's the tape [costs]. On bigger projects I'll go to the tape. I might then go on to a digital platform afterwards, maybe. It depends on [the] fiddlin' about I need to do with it. I've just done the most technical, heavy, mad album [*Cannibalised*] with a band called Biomechanical. It's a cross between Devin Townsend with John Williams and his orchestra on top of it. [It] was such an amazing challenge to try and get all these things heard. Can I hear the flute behind the thirty-eight guitars? [laughs]

**Did you actually use a large orchestra?**

No, they were synthesized. They were the most amazing samples and programming that John K. [Yiannis Koutselinis] from Biomechanical did. I've never heard programming like that in my life. The drums were put together with samples for a lot of it. It was a very technical album in that respect, very modern, but it had this ridiculous heavy brutal sound and it's clear as a bell. After that I then went on to do this band from Canada called Matt Mays & El Torpedo, whom are kind of like Arcade Fire and Tom Petty. That was totally organic. We played it until they got it right and then we moved on. Whatever it takes to do the gig, I'll do.

**What are your thoughts about recording live?**

If they can, that's the best. Certain types of music gain from that interplay. With a heavy metal band, we'll have a scratch guitar go down with the drums and bass; then we'll replace all the guitars. You have to have some kind of vibe for the drummer and bass player to play along with. From a sonic point of view, I need the big room [later] for the guitars to open up in. I can't get the guitar sound I want in a live scenario. Whereas if it's a more rock 'n' roll based, where we're using combos or whatever, then it's possible with a few screens here and there. A bit of bleed enhances all that.

**The sampling and programming of symphonic instruments with Biomechanical reminds me of back in the old days with the Synclavier.**

That's right. Absolutely.

**You had done some work with bands such as Japan and Depeche Mode.**

I used the Fairlight [CMI] a lot back in the day. That was the big deal. There was this mythology around it like, "This is gonna save everything!" I've got more power in my little digital watch than that thing had. I was with Zomba Management at the time, which was with Jive Records and Battery Studios. It was both in London and New York. We became Dreamhire as well, a [pro sound] rental company. But it all started from us, which was basically a team of producers that were managed by this company. It was myself, [Robert John] "Mutt" Lange, Martin Birch, Tony Platt and Nigel Green. Zomba bought Battery Studios, which used to be Morgan Studios, where I began my apprenticeship back in the day. They had the ethos of, "Whatever you need..." When you've got somebody like "Mutt" Lange on board, whatever you need to do your gig you will have. Dreamhire started because we had so much equipment. "Mutt" would see I had a couple of Manley microphones bought for me. "If Chris has got two, I want two." [laughs] Bottom line – what we come out with is amazing. With that behind you it really did help. I can't stress how important, how grateful I am, for having that kind of support back in the day when there *were* budgets for records. Things have changed somewhat.

**In the Anvil documentary there was a scene where you and Anvil's guitar player, Steve "Lips" Kudlow, were being interviewed on a radio show. It was nice to see the producer going around helping the artist talk about the project.**

Absolutely. If any of my bands need anything – speak to somebody, go on a TV program – no problem. I believe it's all part of the greater picture, which is trying to get the name spread so people get to know them and buy the record, hopefully. It's amazing how the role has kind of changed and in a way we're kind of becoming a bit more like producers in the movie business, as opposed to being the equivalent of a director. We now try and find money and places to do records.

**Interesting point.**

Bands call me up. The criteria basically is, "Do I like this group? Do I think there is going to be something going on? Is it worth my time to record it?" Then we ask, "Well, what have we got?" They might have saved some money - they've got some merchandise money or they've got an investor. They say, "We've got 'x' amount." I say to them, "With 'x' amount we can do this." Within that time frame we will make whatever it is we decide to make. If we take a few days extra, what the fuck, I'm not gonna sit there and say, "You owe me," because I don't work like that. There's not a daily rate, per se. I had a studio at another building in London. I was asked to record a live project and we agreed on the fee - it was with a big major [label]. Afterwards I said, "Okay, we'll mix it. It's gonna cost you..." whatever it was per day for the studio. They went," No. We can't pay that." Well why is that? "Well, you own it [the studio]." I said, "Let's go to Metropolis," and that's what we did. We went to Metropolis where it cost big bucks. What did we learn from that? They paid more money rather than pay me my fee plus a couple of hundred a day for my studio. If a producer hasn't got himself a studio that can accommodate a band, you're not going to work. That's kind of what I saw happening. Luckily I live in this gorgeous place here.

**Can you tell me about your Vortex mic'ing technique?**

It's a mic'ing situation where I use a close and a distant mic. They are panned completely opposite to each other. You have to find the sweet spot - where you put the distant mic. Frequencies come out certain distances away – standing waves, out of phase. If a guitarist is doing a mad solo, certain licks will cancel themselves out because it's hit that particular frequency where the microphone is, the distance away from the speaker cabinet. It will appear louder on one side as opposed to the other. So it gives this random panning effect, which is just bizarre. You have to have a decent acoustic room so that you don't have it sounding like it's in a bathtub or a sports arena, unless that's what you want. I'll do that with rhythm guitars, and then I'll double track it and reverse the stereo [image on the overdub]. So you get a wall of sound, a basic hugeness, but you can still distinguish that there's a guitar on the left and a guitar on the right. If you take the rooms away it's like, "What the hell happened there?" That's basically the Vortex.

**Are you still discovering sweet spots for the mic?**

Absolutely. It does depend on the amp, the tone and type of distortion. It depends how anal I want to get with it. Whether I set up more than one room mic. Sometimes I'll put gobos [partition screens] on each side of the cabinet, flared out, so it channels the sound, which also makes it louder.

**Speaking of recording guitars, you've worked with some fantastic guitar players: Dave Meniketti [Y&T], Akira Takasaki [Loudness], Tony Iommi [Black Sabbath], Gary Moore [Thin Lizzy, solo], Glenn Tipton and K.K. Downing [Judas Priest] - that's but a few. Do you have a general way of recording with all of these guys, or is it going to vary?**

It's pretty much like I described. I'll do that for everybody. You can put Glenn Tipton on Eddie Van Halen's stuff and he'll still sound like Glenn Tipton.

**I spoke with Steve "Lips" Kudlow and asked him, "What was it like working with Chris?" He immediately said, "He knows how to work with the human element. He has a personal rapport with the artistic mind. He's not just twisting knobs."**

That's lovely. You can't ask for more, really. Satisfied clients, customers, friends - whatever you want to call them. The fact that they've come in and you've managed to make their music [sound] like they wanted it to be, or better than you expected it to be. You never know about anything when you start. You walk in and it's a blank canvas. Then you walk out a few months later with something that could absolutely be brilliant. It just comes from your head and your heart.

**"Lips" said that [*This is Thirteen*] is the best album they've done. At one point in the film you impressively handled a confrontation between band members.**

Like I've always said, this job is ten percent knowing what the dials, knobs, and buttons do - the other ninety percent being is able to deal with the human beings. I pick up a lot of vibes, for want of a better word, from people. I can look at somebody and say, "Well, he looks pissed off," or, "He's happy." Over the years of working with all sorts of people – divas, great people, assholes – you kind of pick up [things] and

observe. The best advice for somebody starting in a recording studio is to shut the fuck up, sit and watch what is going on. Look at the engineer. Look at the producer. Look at the band. Just soak it all in and see how these people interact. See what happens when somebody says the wrong thing to somebody. See how the session's going to be ruined and how they pull it back together. Because of my training/upbringing in the recording world in a major studio, with big artists, I was fortunate to see this kind of crap going on and to see how people dealt with it. Calm things down - just let everyone say their piece, shout and do whatever. Then sit down and talk like individuals should. When this [Anvil confrontation] went down I had to sit there and say to them, "What the hell are you doing? We're here to make a record. You've been together thirty years and you're going to argue over what?" You start pointing out the facts and how ridiculous it all is - how it's a tiny little thing you're arguing over. It's like, "Oh, yeah. He's right. What are we talking about? Yeah, I love you man." And that's the end of that.

**It has to be tough on an artist in a situation like that.**

It's always tough on them. I do expect certain moods from people, because it is a tense thing. It's going to be something that is committed forever for people to comment on. If your performance is your art, you want it to be the best it's going to be. Artists can get overwrought about stuff. It's really about trying to create an atmosphere where people are relaxed and they don't even know that they're [recording]. You have to have a good time. You have to be relaxed. Then your music is great and it comes across. All the best records have been done for the right reasons - music, passion, love - all of those things. If they sell, that's the bonus. You know, *that* is the bonus and people seem to have forgotten it I'm afraid.

**What a good point that is.**

We've put more emphasis on the business than the music. When the industry was thriving you had people in record companies that were music people - Clive Davis, Richard Branson and Chris Blackwell. Those people who love music – it didn't matter what *kind* of music it was. Island Records [is] a prime example of a great label. You would buy something because it said Island Records on it and take a risk. You had Free and Mott the Hoople. Then you've got U2 and you've got Bob Marley. I mean come on! There was a guy behind Island that was passionate about music. People don't have the opportunity that I, and my contemporaries, had. We started life as a tea boy, then a tape op and assistant in a studio. You have to learn the way things should be done. When we're all dead and buried, what's going to happen?

**Is that what's happening with the large studios fading away?**

Yes, because of that. I think when I started there were a hundred major studios in London and now there's maybe ten or fifteen. What the hell is going on? You have a situation I heard [with] Townhouse Studios here. A big, big studio complex. Many great mega records have been made there. It's shutting down [but] they can't close it down because they're fully booked.

**That's so ironic.**

Tell me about it. What the hell? I really do not like hearing that a studio is going. I don't see it as competition. I see it as, "Shit. There's another nail in the coffin of our industry." The more studios, that means the more buoyant the whole thing is and that's what we want. The whole point about recording studios is each place has its own individual appeal. Why would I go here as opposed to there? All those classic records made there? Now that's gone - all that history, that atmosphere. If you walk into Abbey Road and you know The Beatles recorded where you're standing – that's pretty cool!

**Now that you have The Ecology Rooms, do you still find yourself traveling to do recording sessions?**

There's not a whole lot I can't do here that I [would] need a larger studio to do. A lot of people want to come here. I still will go wherever I need to go to do it, because sometimes it's cheaper to get me in the States as opposed to getting six guys over here. The dollar-to-pound business is a big crap for American artists. Having said that, I have a band from North Carolina coming over called Blanco Diablo – a cool three-piece band. We're going to do it in fifteen days. We're going to rock.

**You have done a lot of live recordings, such as Aqualung, Human League, Gary Moore and New Model Army. In what ways is it different from recording in the studio?**

Firstly and foremost, you can't go back and do it again. They mess up, they mess up. And you better make sure your equipment's working because that's a performance you've gotta capture. I've done recordings where the budgets have been so stupidly small that you've ended up sitting at the side of the stage with a bunch of [Tascam] DA-88s and a Mackie desk, but a proper mobile truck is always the way to go. I want to [capture] the excitement of a band doing that show at that time. I tend to record a bunch of gigs to get the optimum thing. It's important that you get audience mics out properly. Since the 5.1 [surround sound] scenario, that's been even more important to get room mics out in correct places so that you can get the audience at the back of the speakers. If I'm using a big mobile [truck] it means the band who can afford that will be a fairly large band. Therefore they'll be playing in a fairly large venue. Given such large stages – spill wise it's not much of an issue. You'll get vocals down the drum monitors, bleeding onto the drum mics and guitars, but the whole point is you have to use the spill to your benefit and mix it as a whole. If the guitar player was standing on the right, put him on the right [in the mix]. His bleed is going to be all over the kit on the right hand side. How much of the room do you employ during the song, or do you fade it up at the end so you hear the applause? It's always a fine line of getting the room sound so you feel like you're in a big arena and not in a studio because, quite frankly, you take away the audience mics and you can get a pretty good kind of "studio sound" from a live recording. I love doing the live stuff because it's quite exciting. And I love mixing it in 5.1. I think it's a great, great format.

**It's phenomenal.**

I've heard it all before, back in the day. It's Quadraphonic with a sub-bass. If [the record companies] don't "get their finger out" it's going to go the same way of Quadraphonic, because they couldn't figure out a system they were all happy with then either. They better figure it out because there's an opportunity here that is just going to go bye-bye I reckon – as far as music goes, anyway. There hasn't been a template for a 5.1 studio album. Where do you put the bass drum? Is it in the middle where you're sitting, or is it just in the front, or is it in the back? Is the snare drum on the left hand side? For a stereo recording: the bass drum in the middle, bass guitar in the middle, guitars left and right, stereo overheads - you're done. That's the template. What do you do in 5.1? Where do you put the keyboards? We haven't experimented enough yet because they haven't been forthcoming with the demand. It's bigger than stereo. What I'm trying to do when I'm making a [studio] record is give you an illusion, by using the effects and the sonic detail. When you're at a gig, there are less instruments going on because there are no overdubs. The volume, the lights, the pyro, the atmosphere – that more than makes up for it. So when you listen to that same song on a record, if it was just the live recording, it'd be pretty boring. You need all these little bits and pieces that you're not aware of initially, but the more you hear it [you will say], "You know, I never heard that little acoustic [guitar] underneath." I think that's part of the producer's job.

**In 1976 you engineered Judas Priest's album *Sad Wings of Destiny*. Then in 1990 you produced, engineered, and mixed their album Painkiller. Was there a big difference between the ways Judas Priest recorded those?**

There was for them. For two or three albums preceding *Painkiller* they'd used programmed drums.

**Was that before they got their newest drummer, Scott Travis?**

That's right, before Scott. When I came along, they played live in the studio again. I did use analog tape for the drums and bass, then transferred it over to 48-track digital and worked on it from there. They'd seen a video of a band that I had done from Minneapolis called Slave Raider on MTV. They were like, "Wow! Check that sound out." Then they found out it was me. "Bloody hell, it's our Chris. Fuckin' great." [They] called me up and said, "How did you get the bass sound?" Well, I just double tracked it with a Moog. "Can we do that?" Yes you can. That's what we did on *Painkiller*.

**They're a band that has a really identifiable guitar sound, but they were thinking bass sound first?**

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They were never happy, apparently, with getting a good low end. Now, try and get a low end on something as fast as *Painkiller*. It's either going to be a big old mush, or it's not going to be a bass - it's so damn fast there's not enough time for the thing to speak, for the sound wave to do its thing. It just doesn't happen. The slower the song, the bassier you can get it. The faster the song, the thinner it's going to be. By using the Moog, we could use the attack from the [bass] guitar and the lows from the Moog. Check it out next time, and you'll hear it.

**You've also worked with some incredible singers, like Bruce Dickinson [Iron Maiden], Ian Gillan [Deep Purple], Dave Meniketti [Y&T] and Rob Halford [Judas Priest]. How do you go about recording vocals?**

I'll start off with a [Neumann U]87 and if that doesn't cut the mustard then I'll go to a [Neumann U]47. If I'm in a situation where I've got an old valve mic lying around – a valve [Neumann U]47 or 67- what I will use depends where I am . One of the most transparent and most beautiful vocal sounds ever has got to be from the Manley tube [Reference Gold Multipattern] microphones. You push the fader up and it's like someone spent five years EQ'ing it for you. It's just marvelous. It's a hell of a load of money [$5500], but worth every damn penny. I still my use my favorite compressor, as you saw in the Anvil film, the one that goes to eleven [Chiswick Reach Valve Compressor].

**I was going to ask you about that!**

I bought that thing ten years ago and it was going to eleven then! Chiswick is an area in London. There's a studio there [Chiswick Reach Studios] and the engineers designed and built the compressor. It's like a Fairchild. There are a billion tubes in it and it's wonderful. In the [Anvil] film they used it as a Spinal [Tap] reference [laughs]. It's my favorite compressor of all time. I also use it for vocals. It is a fairly expensive piece of [equipment], but well, well worth it.

**Speaking of mixing, when you are engineering, producing and mixing the same project, do you find that you need a break between the recording and mixing stages in order to keep your ears fresh?**

Yeah. I am a fond believer in much tomfoolery and breaks. It's a real important part of it. We record and take a little break at the end of the recording. It's in stages: Backing tracks - take a couple of days off. Overdubs done - a few days off, then mix it. I prefer doing it all because I know what I want to do, unless it's a creative thing where we'll get somebody else to remix it just to have a different angle. I'm kind of old school like that, where the guy that starts it finishes it. You've recorded it. It sounds great when you play it back in the monitor mix. You don't have to fix anything. You know full well that it's all doing what it should do. So, just sit there and figure out what kind of delay you want. I'm also aware that, depending on the types of music, the [labels] like to get some other kind of input in because there's so many different sorts of marketing scenarios these days. But I much prefer to mix my own stuff. I do get projects that I'm asked to mix. Unless it has been professionally done, it's normally a bit of a nightmare because you're having to deal with fixing badly recorded music, rather than concentrate on a creative mix.

**I noticed you have some songwriting credits. Does that come about through collaborating with artists or is that something you've done on your own?**

It depends. The most successful one for me was "A Touch of Evil" with Judas Priest [from *Painkiller*]. That started out life as a piece of library music I had done. I was playing it in the studio one day, checking the monitors or something, and they said, "What's that? Do you think we could use it?" Zomba owned Bruton [Music Library] at the time, and they told me to do a heavy metal record library. That gave me the impetus. I was always a musician, but this side of the career took off more than the other side. I've written loads - at least fifty songs have been published, recorded and [are] out there.

**You've managed to work with such a diverse range of artists from Joan Armatrading to Black Sabbath to Jan Hammer to Tom Jones. How does that come about?**

I developed such good friendships when I was working at studios. As a "house dude" you've got to do whatever the hell is booked in. I liked it. When I started producing, again totally by fluke, I was asked to record a Gary Moore solo record called *Back on the Streets*. He said to me, "You can produce this, by the way." I thought he was joking and realized he wasn't. I said, "Okay. You play it and I'll record it." That's basically what we did - with a guitar player as awesome as him and a drummer like Simon Phillips. Then he brought in Phil Lynott and Brian Downey from Thin Lizzy, and we recorded a track called "Parisienne Walkways" which got released and becomes a fuckin' massive, huge hit. Suddenly I was a successful producer. I did what I always did – made people laugh, we recorded and had a great time. I was very, very fortunate to have that break. People get interested in coming to you after that. Anything to do with an "art" kind of job, whether you're an actor or a musician or whatever, you never know if you're going to be successful or not. Anything that's been really successful for me has never been contrived. We just do it because that's our music. One of the biggest records I ever had was Concrete Blonde [*Bloodletting*] and that's hardly heavy metal by any stretch of the imagination. They were into Thin Lizzy, so that's how they got in touch with me. After doing Concrete Blonde, I got to do Exodus [in part because they] liked Concrete Blonde – go figure.

**That's so cool.**

That's what people don't understand. Just because you might be perceived as one thing, it doesn't mean you don't do anything else. That's the way we like to compartmentalize our lives. "You're a heavy metal producer." Well, yeah I produce heavy metal records, but... I see the merit, the work, the love and the rest of it for everything I do. I've been very lucky in that respect. Another band from Canada, The Tragically Hip, are an absolute monster act over there. It's opened up avenues of alternative styles of music, which keeps me working. It wasn't by design. I'm not a guru that looks into some crystal ball, knows what's going to go on and follows the route. It's just that I've been incredibly fortunate in being to able to work with such diverse acts. I've been lucky that people have been open minded enough to realize there's a lot of things you can learn from heavy metal records, or from country and western records. ☮

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*Thanks to Mike Banks at RecordProduction.com for the fine photos. See Chris' video interview here.*