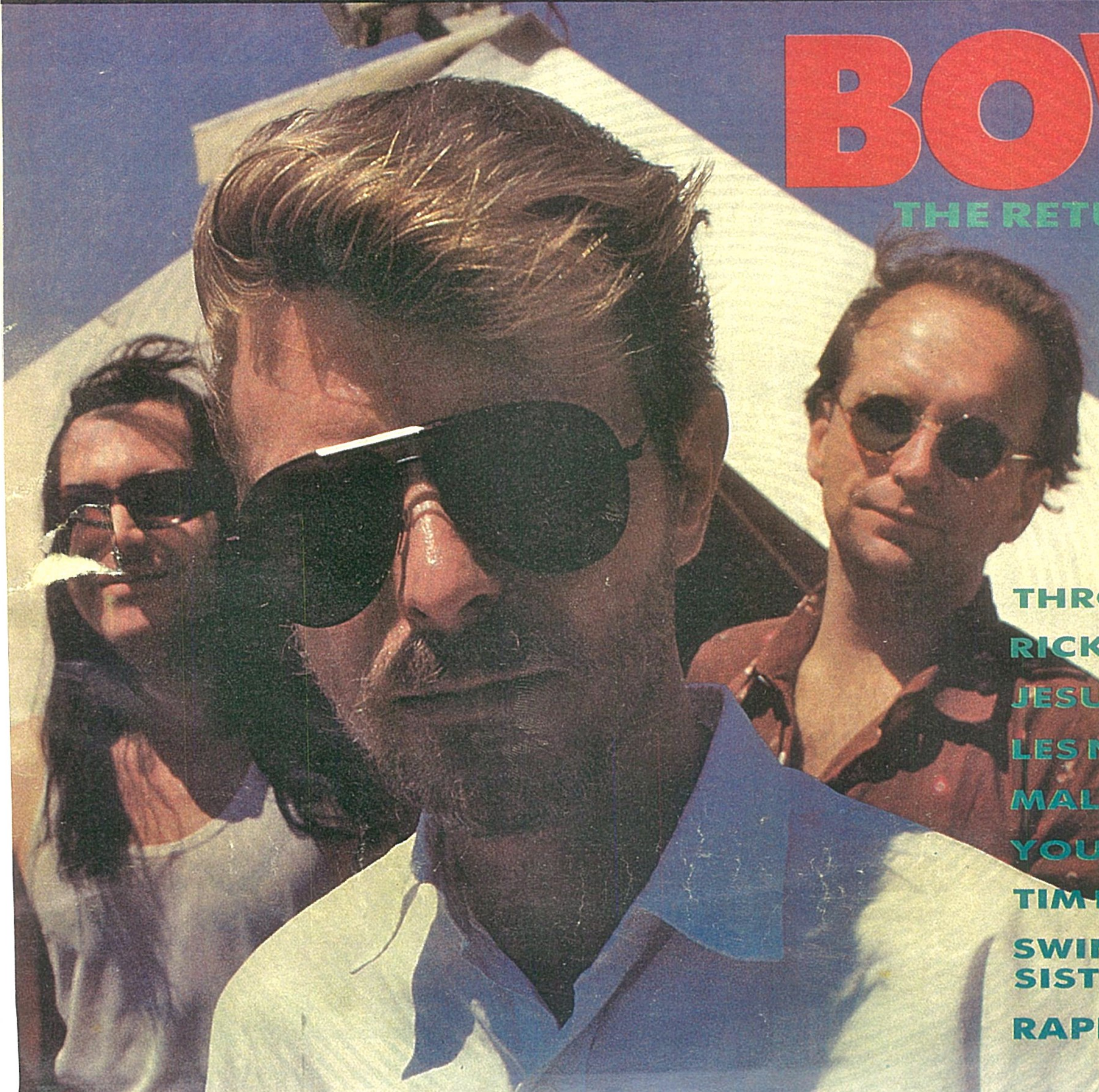


# MELODY·MAKER

## BOWIE

THE RETURN OF THE TIN  
WHITE DUKE



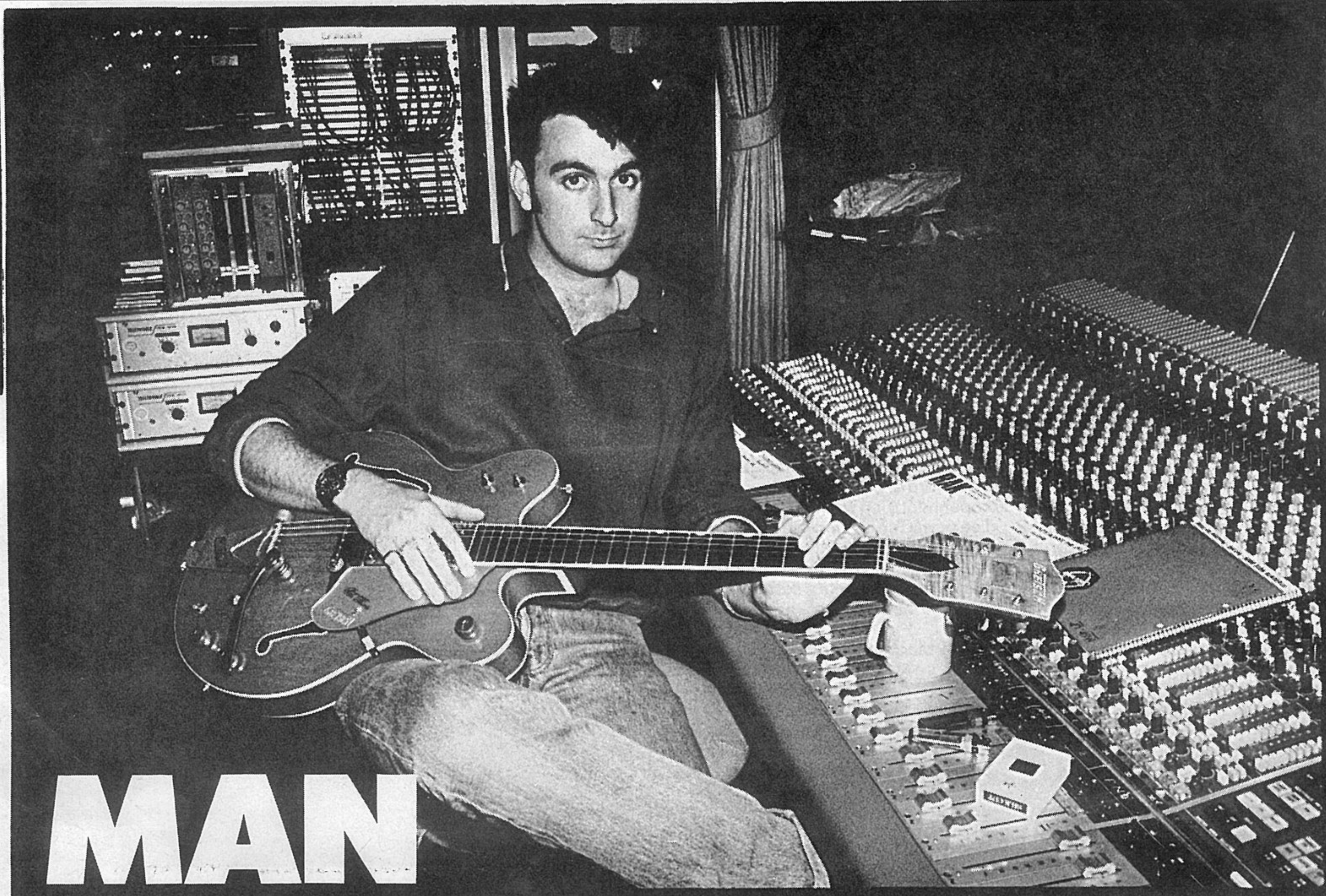
THROWING MUSES  
RICK RUBIN  
JESUS JONES  
LES NEGRESSES VERTES  
MALCOLM McLAREN  
YOUSSEU N'DOUR  
TIM PALMER  
SWING OUT  
SISTER  
RAPIDO



# CONTROL ZONE

**TIM PALMER IS REGARDED AS ONE OF THE FINEST PRODUCERS OF THE DECADE, COMBINING TECHNOLOGY WITH A HUMAN TOUCH. MAT SMITH TALKS TO HIM ABOUT HIS RECENT WORK WITH THE MISSION, TEXAS AND DAVID BOWIE'S TIN MACHINE. PICS: TOM SHEEHAN**

## THE TIN MAN



AS FAR AS POP PRODUCTION GOES, MUCH OF WHAT'S HAPPENED IN THE EIGHTIES CAN BE viewed as a reaction to or against that big drumsound Steve Lillywhite pioneered with U2 at the turn of the decade. Stock, Aitken & Waterman may have had more hits, but Lillywhite actually furthered the idea of record production as a creative art in itself. However, in his search for the big music, Lillywhite nearly always sacrificed the humanity of expression in his awe-inspiring overview, which is probably why we all ended up hating the bands he worked with.

The ideal, of course, is to combine the impressiveness of well-recorded sound, the realism, the power and the sheer force, with the emotion, the imperfection and the personality which created it in the first place — all, of course, without running up a huge studio bill that makes the resultant product hard-pushed to recoup the cost of its expensive birth.

Tim Palmer can do all this, which, coupled with an immensely likeable disposition and an ability to retain the subtleties in an over-heroic translation, has resulted in him becoming, at 26, one of the most sought after producers in recent years. His most recent success was David Bowie's "Tin Machine" project. He started, however, as is often the case, brewing up tea rather than laying down tracks.



'At first I was a little in awe of Bowie, but he's so open, he really lets you be yourself.'

"I could never keep my mouth shut in studios. I was an assistant to Mark Knopfler on the 'Local Hero' soundtrack. You're not really meant to say anything in those situations, just rewind the tape. After a few days of me saying, 'That was great' he took me aside and asked me if I always said so much at sessions."

For Tim, it wasn't so much a case of wanting more control, just a greater level of input. And watching Knopfler, as you can imagine, was a painfully drawn-out process which taught him how he didn't want to do things.

"You learn from almost everybody you work with. Working with David Bowie, I learned that you can take a lot more chances than you think, with Wayne Hussey from The Mish, I learned that if you drink a few bottles of Blue Nun, you fall over, and with Robert Plant I learned that Steve Bull is the top goalscorer for Wolves!"

**AFTER** hearing Tim's work with The Mission and Plant, David Bowie telephoned him earlier this year with the offer of a job producing his next album. After the initial shock, (it's not everyday that someone rings you up and says, "Hi, I'm David Bowie") he accepted the offer. Both had similar views on what they did and most definitely didn't want to do.

"Bowie hadn't enjoyed his last two or three albums and he wanted to get back to his roots. I was interested in the LP as an extension of 'Scary Monsters' and 'Lodger'. I wanted to capture the band as they were at that particular moment. There are very few overdubs on it. It was very much a case of set the sound up and keep the tape rolling all the time. It was incredible to work on in that respect, because there are very few bands willing to take that chance. As it turned out, most of the vocals were done live in one take."

"A lot of the time we were working with limited equipment, but Bowie seems to have a great knowledge of how it will end up. I wanted to record the sound as rough and ready as possible cos I think his voice and his style of singing suit that."

"The last few records have been very polished and produced, and I think he was beginning to realise that that didn't suit him. At first I was a little in awe of him, but he's so open, he really lets you be yourself. That's why his records have always been so interesting. He lets people do their own thing and doesn't get in the way. When he will step in is when he can see the final thing not take the shape he wants."

"It was a performance album and everyone was allowed to perform, including me at the desk. We kept everything that happened rather than think about it too much afterwards. We mixed a lot of the songs in an hour. I'm really happy with it, I think it's a definite return to form."

Many of the reviews didn't think so, however. "Yeah, well, obviously when you're close to something, it saddens you when someone slaps it off for the wrong reasons. That album isn't designed to have commercial hit singles or sell millions of copies. It's wild, exciting and fun, and it seems wrong to rip an artist apart for making records in the right way."

"From a production point it was a real eye-opener. I'd set up all these expensive mikes, but when he sang through them it didn't sound like David Bowie, so we used a Shure SM57, which is the cheapest mike you can find. He opened his mouth and it was amazing — he really is an outrageous singer. The drummer, Hunt Sales, was amazing, too. In the middle of a take he'd be pushing all the mikes out of his way and carrying on playing."

"I've always tried to get a certain clarity and separation on my records, but on this one I resigned myself to the fact that there wouldn't be any. But when I measured what had been gained against what had been lost, it was a good trade off. You've got the personality coming through, the power, and it works so well. There's something about people playing together in a room that can't ever be placed by overdubs."

Things haven't always gone so smoothly. The House Of Love single "Never" was met with the predictable "Oh, they've sold out and used a big producer" kind of indie snobbery. Tim is understandably defensive.

"I get pissed off when people say that The House Of Love went into the wrong hands. I can see it with some producers, but knowing the way I work, I always have the band in mind, so at the end of the day what comes out is what we've both wanted. Both me and The House Of Love wanted to make a bigger-sounding record with a cleaner sound so that you could hear everything going on. The thing is, unless the song is there in the first place you can put a 100 fancy treatments on, but it doesn't mean a toss. You can't make mystery out of Meccano."



'With Wayne from The Mish, I learned that if you drink a few bottles of Blue Nun, you fall over'

**TIM** admits he hates hearing about bands being unhappy with their record — something he consciously tries to avoid by discussing everything as he goes along.

"I feel strongly about the way bands get led astray by producers who won't allow them to do what they want to do and also the way record companies force bands to work with producers who they're completely unsuited to. Too much money is wasted on recording. Before I did Texas, they had already been over to LA to work with Bernard Edwards. That hadn't worked out, so then they worked with someone else and nor did that. So by the time they got to me they'd already spent a lot of money."

Tim's production is one of the most transparent to be heard, or rather *not* heard, today. He doesn't so much stamp his own sound on a band as allow them to stamp theirs on him, which, of course, is as it should be.

"I think having a 'sound' is wrong. The most important thing to do is to look at the band you're gonna work with, assess what they do well and aim to bring that out. When I look at The Mission, I don't make the same record that I would with Texas or Robert Plant. I like the George Martin approach where you look at the band and take a step forward."

"Making music should be so easy. I cringe when I hear about Tears For Fears taking two-and-a-half years making an LP. Spending that long on something means you iron out all the curves and the sex in the music. Everything becomes so precise. It's much better to have that human side to it."

**WHEN** we met, Tim was working in Jacobs studio on the next Mission album. Listening to some of the tracks, it's clear that he's managed to recapture the brittleness and 'life' of their sound which, in retrospect former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones exorcised from the last LP "Children".

"The nicest thing about The Mish is that we did the first album together and now they've come back to me for the third. It's almost an orchestra approach with them — their sound is very layered but at the same time the power is very important. Being a sound man it's nice to work with a band who are aware of different textures. With John Paul Jones and the last LP I just think they lost their power. I don't think it was very good and they spent far too long on it. There was none of their usual dynamics."

Capturing those dynamics is, of course, depends as much on the room and desk used, as the producer himself.

"I like the drum room at RAK. It's got a big, wooden and full sound instead of these very fizzy, hi-fi sounding rooms you get nowadays. I like working on different desks for different reasons. I like Neve boards and API desks, I like a fuller warmer sound. I absolutely hate these idiots who put tissue paper over the NS10 monitors. If you don't like the speaker don't fiddle around with it, just find one that you do like. It's only a point of reference anyway. People like that should put the tissue paper over their ears if they're that stupid."

"I like to mix on a Solid State desk cos you can take things to the extreme. You have to be careful, though cos the sound can get too thin and brash. Basically I like an old-fashioned warm sounding room. When we did the Tin Machine LP we set everyone up in the middle of this huge casino in Montreux. You could put the mikes as far away as you liked, cos there were no treatments or reverb. You just had to make sure that the sound was good, cos that was all that was going onto the tape."

### DISCOGRAPHY

**LIMAH**  
"Don't Suppose" (EMI)

**ROBERT PLANT**  
"Principle Of Moments" (WEA)  
"Shaken 'N' Stirred" (WEA)  
"Now And Zen" (WEA)

**THE MISSION**  
"God's Own Medicine" (Chapter 22)

**WIRE TRAIN**  
"Ten Women" (CBS)

**GI ORANGE**  
"GI Orange" (CBS/Sony)

**MIGHTY LEMON DROPS**  
"World Without End" (Chrysalis)

**TEXAS**  
"Southside" (Phonogram)

**HOUSE OF LOVE**  
"Never" (Phonogram)

**TIN MACHINE**  
"Tin Machine" (EMI)

Plus additional work recording and mixing for ZERRA ONE ("Domino Theory" LP) CUTTING CREW ("Died In Your Arms Tonight", single), BIG SUPREME ("Don't Walk", single) and PAUL YOUNG ("Why Must A Man Be Strong", single).