Roy Thomas Baker is one of the world’s most renowned record producers and his recent super effort recording The Darkness’s One Way Ticket To Hell... And Back has his production signature all over it. Strap yourselves in for a rock ‘n’ roll ride like no other.

**Text:** Paul Togan

The pairing of Roy Thomas Baker and The Darkness is a one-way ticket to heaven. Take a lead singer (dis-)graced with leotard suits and a balls-in-the-bench-vice falsetto, add music that takes its inspiration from 1970s hard rock, season with lots of operatic bombast, and you have a Darkness that can lay claim to being a genuine 21st century heir to the likes of Led Zeppelin, Queen, AC/DC, Slade, and other rock bands from the ‘70s and ‘80s, outrageously rock music from the ‘70s and ‘80s, known for its ‘70s and ‘80s sound. And now, in the year 2005, The Darkness is back again with a new album, One Way Ticket To Hell... And Back.

One Way Ticket To Hell... And Back is a tale of endless studio lock-out sessions, 50 odd guitars in the control room (“don’t touch ‘em, don’t even point at ‘em”), up to 160 guitar overdubs per song and a similar amount of vocal overdubs, and endless rows of guitar amplifiers, cabinets, microphones, preamps, and so on. There are also orchestras, bagpipes, a sitar, and a purpose-built pan flute, with everything ending up on 400 reels of two-inch tape. Some songs expanded to 1000 tracks when loaded into ProTools which were then whittled down to 72-tracks for final mixing, and… well, you get the picture.

Roy Thomas Baker’s story of the recording of One Way Ticket To Hell... And Back frequently conjures up images reminiscent of Spinal Tap. The band’s website plays on this, enabling “the exhibition and the first, the pressure, the paranoia, and pan pipes, the breakdowns and the breakdowns, the taking of the word” over-the-top production, excellent mixes, and endless studio lock-out sessions. “This kind of self-mockery would go down like a lead balloon if it wasn’t for one crucial detail: the fact that the album is, actually, astonishingly good. Its secret lies in the combination of its fantasy (in both senses of the word) over-the-top production, excellent songs, and the Darkness’s refusal to take itself too seriously.

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Meanwhile, Roy Thomas Baker is, of course, the man behind much of the most innovative and outrageous rock music from the ‘70s and ‘80s, including several Queen albums, one of them containing the perennial Bohemian Rhapsody.

**ROUND TABLE**

Baker and The Darkness are kindred spirits, and unsurprisingly, when the two parties met at the beginning of 2004, it was love at first sight. Work on the new album began in earnest in the late summer of 2004 in a barn converted to a rehearsal room case studio somewhere close to their native town of Lewes, East Sussex. Baker remembers arriving in October, and elaborates, “We had two stages to the writing process, one was referred to by the band as the ‘round table’, and this was literally done sitting at a round table in the control room where everyone would play acoustic instruments through Line 6 guitar and bass Pods and a Roland electronic drum kit, and put in their 10 cents. We recorded all that with a couple of mice.”

“The next stage was to go into the live room and play the songs with guitar amps and a real drum kit, which we also recorded into ProTools as a reference. Justin and Dan [Hawkins] are pretty unique songwriters and they can churn out a song a minute. We had what seemed like thousands of songs. The main task for me as a producer was to weed out what the best parts were and help evolve them. We were working on arrangements as we went along, and ended up with very clear ideas of the kind of arrangements we wanted.”

That last statement turns out to be of much greater importance than one would initially suspect, but more about that later. First, Baker continues his story, “We decided to record at Rockfield studios, partly for nostalgic reasons — it was where I recorded Bohemian Rhapsody and a couple of Queen albums — and partly because of the way it’s set up. It’s a good studio with unique acoustics, with many different rooms and echo chambers, all with varying degrees of liveliness. Even better was that Rockfield has two studios set in different cottages, and we ended up booking both. It meant that we could lock the door and keep ourselves to ourselves... and record in two studios at the same time!

Other than a couple of times when we went out for dinner, we were there seven days a week,” remarks Baker.

**TRADE SECRETS**

Rockfield is located in the middle of nowhere and is one of Britain’s few surviving residential studio facilities. With the help of Rockfield engineer Nick Brine, recording took place over the first half of 2005 in the Quadrangle and the Coach House. And how. For several months Baker had the band over a barrel, recording the backing tracks — mostly drums, bass, and rhythm guitars — on endless configurations and locations, all to get the densely, richly-textured sound he was after.

“In the smaller studios, The Coach House,” explains the producer, “they have a [4-channel] Neve 8218 and Roser mic pres, which came from the Rosser desk on which I recorded Bohemian Rhapsody. In the Quadrangle there’s

**Photo:** Jim Steinfeldt
A MULTITUDE OF DIFFERENCES

It’s here that recording enthusiasts really pick up their ears, eager for more details. Yet frustratingly, time and time again during the interview Baker was evasive in providing them, frustratingly, time and time again during the interview. Baker seems puzzled by the occasional sound of incredulity in his interviewer’s voice. “Oh, of course there were at least 120 guitar parts in many of the songs!” exclaimed the Briton breezily, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. “A lot of people play one guitar from the beginning to the end of track, but we didn’t do that. Dan has a lot of different guitars, and so we went, OK, the first half of this verse sounds good on this guitar, but why don’t we change to a different guitar in the second half, and then go back to the first guitar for the chorus, but in a different timing, or with different strings, or a different amplifier, or a different microphone, and so on. By the time we multi-tracked all those we ended up with up to 160 guitar parts on a good deal of the songs. In some places there may be a bunch of 100 guitars that comes in for just two seconds.”

“The way I like to work,” continues Baker, “is to have all the guitars in the control room, so they’re all at the same temperature. That way you never spend half an hour waiting for a guitar to stabilise and remain in tune. I also want the guitarist with me in the control room, so we can have complete communication all the time. With the sound coming back from the monitors you instantly know whether you have the right sound or not.

“Dan has between 40 and 50 guitars in the room to studio. We had the speaker cabinets in different corners, plus close microphones and overhead mics. Typically we would use 36 microphones to record the drums, but we would have nearly double that amount set up. For a couple of tracks we put a drum kit outside in the Quadrangle parking lot, which resulted in an unusual ambience with a slap echo coming back off the brick stables.”

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FROM COW FIELD TO WHITFIELD

“We also had the cabinets in different rooms; identical cabinets placed in different surroundings, one in a live room and one in a dead room. The microphones could be everywhere: hung from the ceiling, lying on the floor, and so on, but we often had dynamic mics close up and antique tube mics for ambience. The microphones themselves were of every conceivable make and vintage and we had everything ready to record via a preamp of our choice. For a more American sound we used the MCI console or API EQs, and for a more British choice. For a more American sound we used the MCI console or API EQs, and for a more British sound, the Neves. So every time we did a guitar part, we chose the most appropriate guitar, head, speakers, microphones, preamps, and so on.

“We did all this stuff,” Baker continues, “because we were making a massive-sounding type of record. We were going for a huge, huge production sound.” Justin Hawkins, when asked in an interview what he had learned from Baker, succinctly put the approach like this: “more is more.” Unsurprisingly, bases were recorded according to the same approach, with the bassist in the control room and playing different bases and amplifiers, recorded through different microphones for different parts of each song. The bass often ended up double-tracked in the final mix, panned left and right.
“On a couple of songs we had a microphone in a champagne bucket – a bit of a waste of a champagne bucket, but he loved singing into it!”

Roy Thomas Baker divides his time between England and Los Angeles and Lake Havasu City, Arizona, where he has his estate and a top-flight studio. Roy Thomas Baker will, of course, forever be associated with one of the most famous songs of the ’70s. Queen’s ode to rock ‘n’ roll excess, Bohemian Rhapsody – at the time (1975) the most expensive single ever made. The song was originally intended as a ballad, but it was dropped at the last moment, a time when Freddie would say, ‘any idea that you have, let’s try anything...’ The bagpipes, played by Stuart Hamm, were also recorded at Whitfield.

Combined with a Mellotron and some backwards gongs samples, pan flutes that were recorded at a radio station studio in Pete by legendary player, Fredy Gomez, made sure that The Darkness created one of the more erotic album beginnings in hard rock history. Add the album’s bagpipes, marching drums and bumbling guitars in Headlong, the sitar in the title track, and the lush orchestral sections in various tracks (arranged by Paul Buckmaster), and some eyebrows will be raised, as opposed to heads bunged. According to Baker, these things came out of an experimental try-anything mentality. They clearly were part of a desire by the band to stretch musically, and not just be a carbon copy of what went before.

Notwithstanding its innovations, Baker is adamant, however, that it was not the intention, “to make a retro record. We wanted to get the best of both worlds, old and new. I think we ended up succeeding, because it sounds like it was done last week, and yet there are aspects where you go, wow, I recognize that from the ’70s or ’80s. There may be a John Bingham sound recorded in a huge room, but at the same time I wanted to make a modern record. I love the hybrid thing.”

THE HYBRID THING

Baker’s preferred method of mixing analogue and digital was the perfect foil for his ambitions. “Since the aim was to go for the big, hybrid sound, we used analogue 24-tracks to record on,” he explains, “and then transferred everything to ProTools and Nuendo.” It’s totally and utterly academic. At my home studio I have a 40-track Stevens tape machine – the best-sounding analogue machine ever made – and both ProTools and Nuendo systems.

Hybrid recording required Baker to map three different sound worlds: the retro world of analogue, the digital world, and the ‘in-between’ world of Pro Tools. Baker’s studio was a paradise for all three. “We kept a few Pro Tools systems around,” says Baker. “Some of them had analogue 24-tracks, some Pro Tools, and some analogue.”

Baker’s dearth of studio equipment is surprising, but the concept of having to spend a lot of money on equipment in the studio is something of a misnomer. “I think it was 1976, and Freddie was obsessed with Pro Tools,” Baker says. “He wanted Pro Tools in every studio in the world.”

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The Axl Rose project sounds like rock ‘n’ roll excess gone mad. (1994), and it is said to have cost US$13m by the time Geffen Records had seen enough. The latter, he says, “was a staggeringly major piece of work. It was the blueprint for my kitchen with production time, a time when Freddie would say, ‘hey, do you have, jot throw it on. We three things on that we thought we might later get rid of, but we ended up keeping everything’.

‘Then came Silver Screen Attraction and immediately afterwards Night At The Opera. It had Bohemian Rhapsody which was the pinnacle of my period of overproduction. I went straight from there into The Cars’ album (1978), which was totally the opposite. I made a conscious effort to pare down the overproduction, even though it still had some aspects of overproduction. It was like a blueprint for sparsity, but it still had power at times when you needed it. When the backing was too much, I used to make them massivly overdubbed and sound really full.

The Cars’ debut album became a classic, and helped lay the foundations for the New Wave movement. Baker went on to do Jazz (1979) with Queen, three more Cars albums, and even help produce the electropop hit “Do That to Me One More Time” for David’s On My Life (1980). Baker’s career took an unexpected turn with the production of several albums for MOR-rock bands Foreigner and Journey. Derided by some critics it nevertheless sold by the bucketful, as did albums Baker produced during the 1980s and early ’90s for the likes of Slade, T’Pau, Ozzy Osbourne, The Stranglers, Motley Crue, Def Leppard, and Alice Cooper.

Around the turn of the century, Baker, like several other producers, spent a couple of years of his life producing a forthcoming album by Axl Rose/Guns N’ Roses (working title Chinese Democracy). Recordings for the album began in 1994, and it is said to have cost US$13m by the time Geffen Records had seen enough. The latter, he says, “was a staggeringly major piece of work. It was the blueprint for my kitchen with production time, a time when Freddie would say, ‘hey, do you have, jot throw it on. We three things on that we thought we might later get rid of, but we ended up keeping everything’.

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"Basically, people use digital because it's cheap. Tape is certainly much more fun, but it's so expensive. And it's also hard to get hold of tape sometimes. When we first started the album, we were told that there wasn't any! Terry (RTB's wife, manager, and the album's production coordinator as well as The Darkness's US manager) managed to get a hold of 60 reels somewhere, and without that we would have had to do the whole thing in digital.

" Anyway, we recorded everything to analogue tape, because it gives you a nice, full texture that you cannot get any other way. I make sure the levels are at full tilt and the red lights are flashing. I press it exceptionally hard. For this reason I don't need to use Dolby. We align the tapes so that everything is just on the verge of distorting, and the tape acts like a giant compressor. It's why I don't like to use outboard compressors during the recording stage, because you stop the sound of tape compression from happening.

"So after we recorded things on tape we transferred them to ProTools for editing. We were basically running 'Tools as a workstation and a backup. We worked at 96k resolution, and the good thing about it is that, unlike with 44.1, you lose a bit of punch and resolution, you get an exact clone of the analogue, including all the textures."

Baker's insistence that everything was recorded on analogue, combined with the 100% of overdubs for each song, meant that he ended up filling about 400 reels of two-inch tape. "We must have used the whole of the studio, the whole of the orchestra, with a lot of close miking resulting in 90-old tracks. Basically in the last stage before the mix we transferred everything to ProTools for ease of operation," Baker continues. "We then set ProTools up with the Neve 88R and started mixing. I don't like mixing inside ProTools, because it's a bit Mickey Mouse to me when you need a mouse to push up and down faders and so on. I don't get a feel for it the same way as when I push a fader with a huge motor in it. When I drive a car I like to have the steering wheel and the gear stick under my hands. I don't think I could do it from the back seat using a computer."

"I always record with effects, because it adds to the performance, and I tend to blend in the ambient tracks. This means that mixing is mainly balancing, and giving sounds final tweaks. Because I don't add much compression during recording I may add compression. I'll be using old and new stuff during mixing, like Fauxhilt, Sumitra, or TubaTech. Instead of sticking a Lexicon on the vocals I used natural echo: echo chambers, plates, or slap tape echo.

And we mixed the album to half-inch analogue on an Ampex two-track and also back into ProTools, as a comparison. We listened to both, and found that the analogue had a much more saturated bass sound, while the digital had a really nice crispy top end. We ended up using the analogue mix for mastering, adding some treble to make it sound as sparkling at the top-end as the digital did."

And so, after a year of intense work, Baker had managed to pare 57 songs, 400 reels of tape, containing almost 10,000 tracks, down to just 10 songs and one 35-minute stereo tape. Excess had made way for economy, and one wonders how Baker had managed to keep track of the whole process, choosing the best performances and sounds out of the 100s of options at his fingertips.

"Oh yeah, you have to mentally organise," says Baker, "and make very good notes of everything you do. There were recording engineers who made sure that it all got to tape and who did the transfers to ProTools, which was a task as well. But for me there's no risk of not seeing the wood for the trees. It's totally the opposite. You get focused on what you think is appropriate for a song, and then you tune into different microphones and preamps and EQs and so on. As long as you stay focused on what's appropriate, you're never confused whether it's the main or that mic.

"But you have to know what your goal is. It's not like, 'let's try this, let's try that.' That's an inadequate way of doing it and you end up all over the place. In this instance the band and I had discussed beforehand what we planned to do, and we mapped it out before we went into the studio. Of course it changes – it always changes. In the studio you're running 100 percent on instinct, and you sometimes end up with something that's a lot better than you'd planned. But the structure of every song on the album is exactly the way it was planned out. Our vision of how the record was going to pan out was exceptionally clear, and we stuck to that vision, unless happy accidents occurred. And I think we pulled it off."