

## insider report

# Producer empowers artists to be in control

Cookie Marenco's work as a recording engineer and producer came directly from her own love of music. Her career has been a model of the variety of work that is the music industry. Along with producing five Grammy-nominated albums and numerous hits on the Gavin charts, she has composed film scores, worked in A&R and been a pioneer in multimedia entertainment. A self-described "advocate of the indie artist," she has some often outspoken ideas about the future of music and the increasing importance of Internet technology to both emerging and established artists.

"I didn't even know what a producer was," Marenco admits when discussing the early stages of her career. She grew up surrounded by music, learning to read music before words. She began to study violin at age 10 and oboe at 13. She received the Art LaRatta Piano Scholarship and auditioned with the San Francisco Symphony, and went on to major in composition in college and studied jazz with Allaudin Bill Mathieu and Art Lande. This training has allowed her to score commercials for Nissan and AT&T, along with documentary and feature films.

While in college, she began teaching piano lessons. Though she loved all of the music she studied, she realized that, like many of her colleagues, she might only find work as a waitress or high school bandleader upon graduation. She continued to teach piano for ten years but began to look into engineering and producing. Her approach to teaching, she feels, led naturally to her current vocation. "When you produce," she says, "you're still in the role of teacher, especially with younger artists."

Another important part of working with younger artists is developing their patience and focus. Marenco feels part of a producer's job is to "keep them focused on the goal . . . and teach them what it takes." Often a band will send a demo tape with the belief that she will be able to make them sound great even if they aren't the most skilled musicians, get them a record deal, book gigs for them, and any number of other wonderful things. "If they're unrealistic, I can't work with them," she says.



Cookie Marenco

### COOKIE MARENCO

Producer

Worked with: Max Roach, Praxis,

Mary Chapin Carpenter

Studio: OTR Studios, Belmont, CA

Before sitting down to record with a band, Marengo will ask artists for a list of influences and perhaps more importantly, who they want to be three albums from now. For the band that wants the "Big Hit" and a barrel full of fast money, that second question can be a deal-breaker with Marengo. She works with artists she likes and whose approach to music she respects. The critical thing when recording, she feels, is to set a goal. Often that goal is for the band to get the most out of themselves. "It's not some kind of get-rich-quick scheme."

Because Marengo has experience as an artist, she has many valuable lessons to impart to those she works with. She credits Lande with one of her basic theories as a producer and teacher: "When you're heading down a path, and it's not working, you have to be willing to try something out of the realm of possibility. You have to take a chance."

This attitude is crucial to the role of producer, says Marengo. Sometimes she acts solely as engineer, downplaying her own experience as a musician. More often, artists look to her for expert advice and sound opinions. When she does disagree with an artist's choice, she takes a diplomatic approach. Marengo respects their choices; she knows all too well how it is to be in that position. This also provides the chance for her to exercise one of her other talents, getting to know an artist. "The hardest thing is to keep the simplicity and space in the work, to discover the important aspect of this musician," she says. With all her training and education, Marengo must discover again and again the answer to the question: "How can I make artists perform at 300 percent of their ability?" This is perhaps one reason why many artists, even years after they have worked with Marengo, still consider their work with her to be their best. "The goal is to assemble the right group of people and create a great mood," Marengo says, describing the challenge of producing.

Marengo doesn't leave her responsibility to an artist at the console. She often helps those interested in the next step after the material has been recorded: the live show. As an example of how the role of producer can expand, she cites her work with Tony Furtado, an artist signed to Rounder Records. Furtado was a champion banjo player who also loved the slide guitar. Marengo, sensing where his true desire lay, told him he would be crazy not to play the slide guitar on his next record. All of this was, for Marengo, part of helping Furtado define who he was as an artist and how to best build a career. A year after working together, Furtado had booked 200 dates, was paying his band and refining his live show. Two years later, Furtado had sold out the Fox Theatre in Boulder, Colorado.

Along with playing, teaching and producing, Marengo has also worked in A&R with Windham Hill Records. This gives her an insight into the industry most artists (especially younger ones) don't have. As she has worked with more and more independent and developing artists, her experience has been valuable in helping them avoid some of the pitfalls of the industry.

Her experience has also fueled a growing disenchantment with some aspects of the music industry. With other independent musicians, producers and concerned

talent, Marengo was part of what she referred to as "The Boston Tea Party." This celebration of independence was a turning point. "We weren't intimidated by not having a record deal," she says. "Nothing is settled with a record deal." As record labels become, in Marengo's opinion, glorified ad agencies, artists will turn to the ever-expanding electronic means available to them. Ani DiFranco and Leftover Salmon are just two examples of artists who use record companies as distribution outlets, and the Internet or other resources to retain power over their own careers.

"You are in control of your life," Marengo says of indie artists. "You won't be in control with a [major-label record] deal." For a newly signed band, or otherwise unproven talent, recording and publicity costs will often come out of their own pocket. They will have to book their own tour. A band will still have to develop their own marketing plan, advertising strategy, and incur many of those costs. What a label can do, Marengo feels, is provide the illusion that someone is there to help you.

"Ten years ago, a band had a year to make [something] of a record before the label would close the books," Marengo says. However, in an alarming trend over the last three years, that time has gone from three months to just less than one month from the date shipped. "In my estimation," she says, "it's like a movie which makes it in the first week or doesn't. If a record takes off, they [the label] push more." But if a record does not hit instantly, the support often isn't there. Marengo has found herself championing artists to form their own labels.

The record industry is in what Marengo refers to as a rebuilding phase. "Artists need to open themselves to all of the possibilities that are available to them." Marengo cites her work with Liquid Audio, a company providing 16-bit CD-quality sound on the Internet, as one of those possibilities. The songs are copyright protected, available for direct distribution, and allow consumers to audition songs before purchase.

In November of 1998, Marengo participated in an unprecedented recording session for Liquid Audio with Kristin Hersh, former lead singer of Throwing Muses. Hersh performed for an audience of 500, while Marengo recorded the concert. The recording was uploaded to the Internet and made available for sale and downloaded within an hour of the performance. With such technology readily available to bands and musicians, Marengo says, "It's OK to not have a record deal."

Marengo likens the changes in the music industry to the development of the NFL. In the '60s the NFL was an oft-snubbed sport; today, it is a national institution. The public spends six times as much on sports as they do on music. While the luxury of a constant reminder (à la weekly televised events) is not available to musicians, artists' websites make them a more consistent presence to fans and strangers alike. Just as people have a favorite team they follow from week to week, they can now keep track of their favorite band in a similar way. Continuing the sports analogy, Marengo mentions a study in which a crowd's noise and encouragement was shown to actually turn the tide of a football game to the home team's advantage. In a similar way, how an audience interacts with a band changes each performance. "The audience becomes a part of why the music happened that way, that night," Marengo says.

The shift in perception from the all-important record deal to an artist's ability to retain individual control of a career through new technology will also weed out less serious musicians. With such power comes responsibility, such as cultivating a loyal fan base and keeping up with changes in multimedia. Marenco supports these changes as more and more artists make live broadcasts, one-of-a-kind CDs, and special merchandise available to fans from their own websites. In this way, artists, not record companies or managers, will be in control of their work and careers.

—Tricia Sait

lyric sheet. "Demo should be clear and well thought out. Vocal plus guitar or piano is fine. Let us know your present goals and reason for contacting us and include a short bio." Does not return material. Reports in 3-4 weeks.

**Music:** Mostly country, singer/songwriters and "roots" (folk, acoustic, bluegrass and rock); also instrumental. Produced *There's Talk About a Fence*, and *Natick* (by various artists), both recorded by Rick Lee on Waterbug; and *Old Friends*, recorded by Jeff Nourse on Caliente. Other artists include Marinda Flom, Robert Bromley, Lisa Green, Ron Young, Sterling Silver and Crossties.

**Tips:** "I'm interested in artists/writers who are accomplished, self-motivated and able to accept direction. I'm looking for music that is intelligent, creative and in some way contributes something positive."

**MAYFLY RECORD PRODUCTIONS, LTD.**, 19523 Barwick Dr., Spring TX 77373. (281)288-5911. Fax: (281)288-5911. CEO: Monty Bodenhamer. A&R Rep: Jerald Gray. Record producer, record company (Blue DAT and Mon-Tee Records) and music publisher (Moan & Groan Publishing, Ltd.). Estab. 1991. Produces 30 singles, 5 LPs and 5 CDs/year. Fee derived from sales royalty when song or artist is recorded.

• Mayfly's A&R rep has performed with Ike & Tina Turner, Bobby Bland, B.B. King, Johnny Taylor, Buddy Ace and Johnny Copeland.

**How to Contact:** Submit demo tape by mail. Unsolicited submissions are OK. Prefers cassette. "Send original material only. Proof of ownership is required. Primitive recording is OK. Send all of your work on one tape. (This allows us to profile potential of artist). Do not send rap, Christian or country. Be sure to include a permanent address." Does not return material. Reports in 3 months.

**Music:** Mostly blues, R&B and pop. Produced "Zydeco Woman," written and recorded by Jerald Gray (blues); "Misery For Company" (by Monty Bodenhamer), recorded by Joe Mayfield (pop); and *We Goan Boogie* (by Bodenhamer-Gray), recorded by Mayfield/Gray (blues), all on Mon-Tee. Other artists include Robyn Mathis and Janis Boyer.

**Tips:** "You must be a team player willing to take constructive criticism from those who have 'been there' before you. We listen to what 'can be,' not 'what is.' A lot of talent, a little humility and a positive attitude will get you where you want to be."

**MEGA TRUTH RECORDS**, P.O. Box 4988, Culver City CA 90231. E-mail: jonbare@aol.com. Website: <http://users.aol.com/jonbare>. CEO: Jon Bare. Record producer and record company. Estab. 1994. Produces 2 CDs/year. Fee negotiable.

**How to Contact:** Submit demo tape by mail. Unsolicited submissions are OK. Prefers cassette with 4 songs. "We specialize in recording world-class virtuoso musicians and bands with top players." Does not return material. Reports in 2 weeks only if interested.

**Music:** Mostly rock, blues and country rock; also swing, dance and instrumental. Produced *Party Platter* recorded by Hula Monsters (swing); and *Killer Whales* and *Shredzilla* (by Jon Bare) (rock), all on Mega Truth Records. Other artists include The Rich Harper Blues Band, Aeon Dream & the Dream Machine and Techno Dudes.

**Tips:** "Create a unique sound that blends great vocals and virtuoso musicianship with a beat that makes us want to get up and dance."

**MODERN TRIBE RECORDS**, 14550 W. Eight Mile Rd., Oak Park MI 48237. (248)968-2862. Fax: (248)968-2864. Producer: Juan Shannon. Record producer, record company and music publisher. Estab. 1990. Produces 4-12 singles and 2-4 LPs/year. "Fee varies depending on negotiation."

**How to Contact:** Submit demo tape by mail. Unsolicited submissions are OK. Prefers CD, cassette or