

## Engineering success, *from Beyonce to Little Richard*

By Janine Latus

**T**here's no sign out front at Patchwerk Recording Studios in Atlanta, gray and unassuming next to a McDonald's. Otherwise, fans would flock, and stars don't like that.

Beyonce found it just fine, showing up with one bodyguard and zero attitude. She called Missy Elliott on speaker phone, and the two chatted like normal people with Mike Wilson '89, chief engineer and co-owner of the place, before Beyonce recorded her part on Elliott's 2002 hit, "Nothing Out There for Me."

Another hot star (whom Wilson chose not to name) would purse his lips – the cue for an assistant to rush up to apply lip balm. But most who have made it are humble, knowing it's a collaboration. They recognize that without that sound engineer and everyone else on the team, they may as well be singing in the shower.

Wilson is sitting at a console, gliding faders up a quarter inch here, a smidge there. He's been doing this for 25 years, bringing up the snare, moderating the kick and the hat, with a client list that began with hip-hop artists like Outkast and Ludacris and expanded to include Toni Braxton, Snoop Dogg and the Atlanta Symphony.

He's been nominated for 13 Grammys and has won two – for Beyonce's 2003 album "Crazy in Love" and BeBe & CeCe Winans' 2009 single "Still." He's been to the ceremony a couple of times, once photographed on the red carpet in a snazzy black tux with a blue satin vest that matches his eyes. Only the nominees get to tread the red, so his wife had to walk behind the backdrop and rejoin him on the other side.



**Patchwerk is the biggest studio** in Atlanta's hot music scene. It was founded in 1993 by Bob Whitfield, an offensive tackle for the Atlanta Falcons, and a childhood friend, Curtis Daniel. They grew up in California, in a neighborhood next to the cabbage patch that gave the studio its name.

Whitfield was busy and left Daniel in charge of pretty much everything at Patchwerk. Wilson, meanwhile, was working as a freelance sound engineer, shifting more of his work to Patchwerk and bringing with him established relationships with artists and producers throughout Atlanta. Daniel brought Wilson in-house, eventually making him chief engineer.

When it came time to build a new studio, Daniel took him to fly out to meet with architects. "He was the one who decided

**SOME OF WILSON'S OTHER CLIENTS** LITTLE RICHARD GLORIA ESTEFAN KENNY ROGERS  
THE POINTER SISTERS TRISHA YEARWOOD TITO PUENTE KISS CEELO GREEN

where the walls would go,” Daniel says.

In 2009, Whitfield needed out of the business, so Daniel invited Wilson to partner with him in buying it. Wilson takes care of things as small as mowing the lawn and as big as engineering TLC’s 1995 hit “Waterfalls,” which sold more than 13 million copies.

The platinum record in the hallway is hard to find amid the constellation of gold and platinum albums, most with cover photos of girls and grills and guns, even though the artists were nice as a next-door neighbor while they were working with Wilson.

“Mike has more plaques on the wall than anyone can imagine, but you’d never know that meeting him; he’s just humble, generous and kind,” says Marshall Manning, a performer turned producer who has known Wilson for nearly a decade.

**Early on, Wilson worked with reel-to-reel,** timing his splices to correspond with the snap of a snare, to hide the inevitable tick of the tape. Now the engineers who work for him do their mixing on computers, trained by him since they were interns.

It’s an art, engineering music, and each artist has a distinctive voice. Once, Wilson put an echoing delay on a percussive sound called the snap and created a subgenre of rap called snap music. That brought a parade of artists into the studio, wanting to work with the guy who’d come up with the idea.

Wilson, who grew up in Hampton Roads, came to ODU to study business. He spent two semesters in a sound engineering course, working in a doublewide with a tape recorder, rudimentary sound effects machines and some briefly cutting-edge equipment.

“It was the coolest thing on the planet ever,” Wilson says. “We’d go in there and make sounds and create stuff.”

He decided he didn’t want to do business anymore; he wanted to make music. He played piano and guitar with friends and briefly shaved off his trademark curls so they wouldn’t block his sight while he was surfing.

After he graduated from ODU, he moved to Atlanta and earned an associate degree in recording arts/management at the Art Institute of Atlanta. He answered an ad for a guitarist in the back of the Creative Loafing artsy paper, played electric guitar, jumped around on stage, met his wife, and stayed.

**In both his marriage** and business partnership, he finds success in the synergy. At Patchwerk, Daniel is the idea and people guy and Wilson is the details guy.

“I’m very OCD-ish, so I make sure things are done right,” Wilson says. “It’s great that neither of us wants to be in the ave-



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nue the other wants to be in.”

The business – like great music – requires a team.

“I see a real disconnect with today’s youth about what it takes to get somewhere. It’s not about you, and you’re not going to get there by yourself,” he says. “That’s the hardest part to get some people to understand. It’s a team effort. You need to get on the bus.”



*Mike Wilson has been nominated for 13 Grammys and has won two.*

*Janine Latus is a writer living in Chapel Hill, N.C., who geeked out over the engineering for Wilson’s sound studios. She is still obsessed with the physics of sound.*

## **WILSON RECEIVED A DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI AWARD FROM ODU LAST FALL.**