



# Sylvia Massy

**RUSSELL COTTIER** talks unusual recording techniques with the globe-trotting engineer, producer, author and artist

Sylvia Massy needs almost no introduction to those of us who grew up listening to rock in the '80s and '90s. Massy started off in the punk band Revolver but soon moved on to producing, including co-producing with Kirk Hammett, and soon ended up at Larrabee Studios working with big name acts like Prince, Paula Abdul, Julio Iglesias, Seal and Aerosmith. After a hit with Green Jellö, Massy went on to rack up credits with the likes of Tool, Skunk Anansie and many more.

In the '90s, Massy produced material for Red Hot Chili Peppers, Sevendust and Powerman 5000. In 1997 Massy mixed the Beastie Boys' *Tibetan Freedom Concert* in New York. Massy engineered and mixed several projects for producer Rick Rubin for his label American Recordings, including Johnny Cash's album *Unchained*, which won a Grammy award for Best Country Album in 1997. With Rubin, she also recorded Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, Slayer, Donovan, Geto Boys, the Black Crowes, and System of a Down's debut album.



/ Massy mixes the masters in France

In 2001, Massy acquired the Weed Palace Theater in Weed, California, and operated it as a recording studio for 11 years, with clients including Sublime, Dishwalla, Swirl 360, Econoline Crush, Cog, Spiderbait, Norma Jean, Built To Spill and From First To Last.



/ Cottier & Massy “...a Jedi’s strength flows from the Force”

In 2015, Massy began writing a book called *Recording Unhinged*, published in March 2016. Interviews for the book include Hans Zimmer, Geoff Emerick, Bob Ezrin, Bruce Swedien, Bob Clearmountain, Al Schmitt, Elliot Scheiner and other luminaries of the recording world. Massy herself illustrated the book. *Resolution* caught up with Sylvia at Edge Studios in Cheshire, England, during production of the new God Damn record. We followed her progress and caught up as Massy embarked on an ambitious tour of Europe and Australia.

#### What brings you to Edge Studios in Cheshire?

Well every record is an adventure and what better place to make a record than here in the beautiful countryside in Cheshire? There’s some great equipment here, I have Neve, SSL and all the tools that I need.

#### So what was it that got you into this crazy recording game?

Well I use to play in an all-girl punk band, then an all-girl metal band, so I had been writing music for a long time — but I found the self-recorded productions were really fun to do in the studio. I got a engineering job in a studio, basically so I could get my own band into the studio at night and make recordings in the studio down-time. It went so well that other people started asking me to work on their musical projects. So I abandoned my own musical career and went into production... because I really love it!

#### Was that at Larrabee Sound?

No that was back in San Francisco, at a studio called Bear West.



/ Recording the band God Damn in Aldwich underground

#### But then you moved to LA?

Yes, there was a point at which it became obvious that if I really wanted to make this as a career, I would have to move to where the industry was, and that was in Los Angeles.

#### Of course you did loads of amazing records in LA. Particularly those snare sounds in the late ‘90s, System of a Down and so on. Were you using samples? Your productions always sound very natural?

Well, the main idea behind recording drums for me is to give it as much of a live feel as possible, bringing all the musicians together as they

would be in a live show.

With the drums I would want everything to be as well recorded as possible with some experimental things that perhaps would be good in the mix. With the snare sound you can start out by making it sound great in the room, I learned how to tune drums by making everything even on the top head, and taking it to the pitch I want. I actually pitch the drums into the key of the song — that helps solidify the whole kit within the picture of the musical piece. Then I would also dampen the top heads in different ways. I would cut old heads into rings to put on the top head, which helps a lot. Or just ▶

“I think that if you are having a good time, it is imprinted into the music. Whether or not you can actually ‘hear it’ in the music, you can sense it



/ Tracking Lucy Luvs Fur at Capitol Studio in Los Angeles

put different things on there. Sometimes different items inside the drum that will rattle and create an unusual feel.

The brass drums have a lot of colour, and you’ll hear a lot of them on recordings I did in the ‘90s. The Black Beauty or the legendary Terminator snare from The Drum Doctor was what I was using in LA. The Black Beauty is a very consistent drum, no matter where you hit it on the top of head it gives a very consistent sound, making an uneven drummer sound better. The SOAD and Tool recordings had no samples added. I do — on occasion — support the drum recording with some samples, but they are not obvious, just to even out any kind of fluctuations in pressure.

**When did you start the crazy recording techniques? When you were at Sound City?**

Well I’d always done some crazy things. I guess the first documented thing was Tool recording *Undertow*. We did that at a place called Grandmaster Recorders in Los Angeles. We set up some old wrecked upright pianos. They were totalled so there wasn’t any reason to save them for anything. So we dragged them into studio. We set them up with mics, I put pickup mics on them. Then we shot them with shotguns and smashed them up with sledgehammers and recorded all of that. I guess

the intention was — what’s the most obnoxious sound we can record?

You think that dropping a piano off the top of a building would be pretty obnoxious, but when I tried to hire a crane nobody would do it! So I thought, well, sledgehammers is as close as we are going to get this time. I’m still on the quest for the most obnoxious sound and we are actually trying to get that with the God Damn record, here in Cheshire.

**You have thrown guitars off cliffs too I believe?**

Yes that was another dare. There’s something really special about building some adventure into a record. I did that on the project *Machines of Loving Grace*. I said lets get an old wrecked guitar and make it our sacrificial guitar for this session. Everyone would do something to it, carve into it, draw, drill through it during the session. By about three weeks later it was a very decorative beautiful thing because everyone put their artwork on it and then we tied a rope on it and dragged it out to a cliff. We set up a Marshall stack, got some feedback and then tossed it off the cliff. Whether or not the actual sound it made was useful didn’t matter because we had been planning for this the entire session, and there was a feeling of fun in getting through the somewhat tedious overdubs to get to that day.



/ Building microphones out of junk store finds in Buenos Aires

**Do you think that's why people want to make a record with Sylvia Massy?**

Well I hope it's not the only reason because it's a bit gimmicky for me to try some of these crazy things... but it sure makes it a lot more fun! I think that if you are having a good time, it is imprinted into the music. Whether or not you can actually 'hear it' in the music, you can sense it.

**You were talking earlier about trying to avoid overdubs on this record, do you prefer to work like that in general?**

Certain musicians have such a great stage presence that you want to capture it. This particular band, God Damn, is fantastic live and I want to document that, as well as leave it open for interpretation in a mix. I'll show you Thomas' guitar rig — there are several amps. I added some more onto his typical live rig, so in the mix I can push this and pull this back and manipulate the sounds in a way that we won't have to do overdubs to get that kind of dynamic.

It's not always appropriate: sometimes you want to have the freedom of adding as many overdubs as you want so you can add all sorts of textures and colours into a piece of music. We will have some interesting diversions: one song there will be a string section that will come in from nowhere — and some unusual atmospheric sounds.

Then the idea is that we will also be

recording in some unusual places, for example, at the Aldwych tube station in London on one song. It is not open to the public it's an unused tube stop that is available for filming. I don't think they've done any recordings down there, I think this will be the first.

**You've been sat on the producers couch painting.**

Yeah absolutely! And I think that you can translate some of the musical ideas into art, I am often inspired to paint, and I have no plan usually when I start. In this particular session we started talking about doing portraits of the band the band members as dogs.

**Of course you did all the artwork for your new book.**

Yes, it was a fun. It took a year to assemble stories from other producers and then I did diagrams and some cartoons and some other kind of illustrations in the book. But a lot of people contributed to that book — there's a lot of other producers and engineers who gave stories of their own — the book is called *Recording Unhinged*, and it's done very well with Hal Leonard as the publisher.

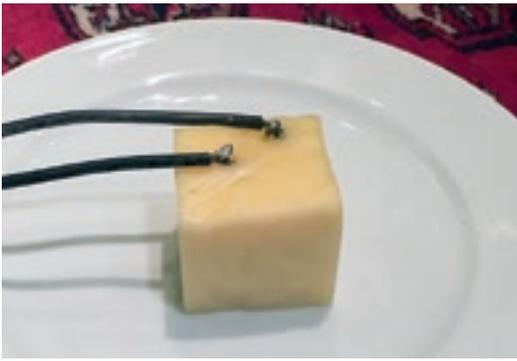
**Is there anything that didn't make it into the book, that you can tell us about?**

Well there's plenty that I couldn't tell you about, but yes we've saved a lot for a second book.



/ Sylvia and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

The thing that I started doing recently was putting audio from the output of an amplifier — instead of going straight to a speaker out of an amplifier I'll divert the sound signal to go through an appliance like a fan or a light bulb or a drill. Incredibly, each of those things has a property to add... you know, either harmonics — or in the case of motors if you run the audio through the motor and hit certain frequencies the motor will start up — like a drill! Then you've got the sound of the electronics plus the sound of the motor which adds a layer of harmonics onto whatever you're running through it, so I use it for guitar solos a lot. ▶



/ Recording through a cheese filter

Or I'll have it pass through cheese or pickles. I'm not sure, but I'm thinking that sodium chloride is the magic ingredient that is very conductive. So you don't want sweet pickle, it's not gonna sound the same really... no, it has to be a salty dill, right... and the saltier the cheese the better!

**What about this microphone that gets carried around the guitar room during takes?**

Oh, this adds a really interesting phase texture, it's kind of like a 'human Rotary', you can hear the change in the tone as you walk by. The Doppler...

**So looking at the drum kit, here in the studio, you have a length of hose around the kit in the floor. What's that for?**

I started using hoses in recording, and it works so well that I do it almost every session now. Wherever I go I'll just ask for an old garden hose; then I'll take about a 12 foot section of the garden hose, and I'll put a mic into one end. I'm using an SM57 on one end and I'll tape up the other. I drape the hose around the kit. It

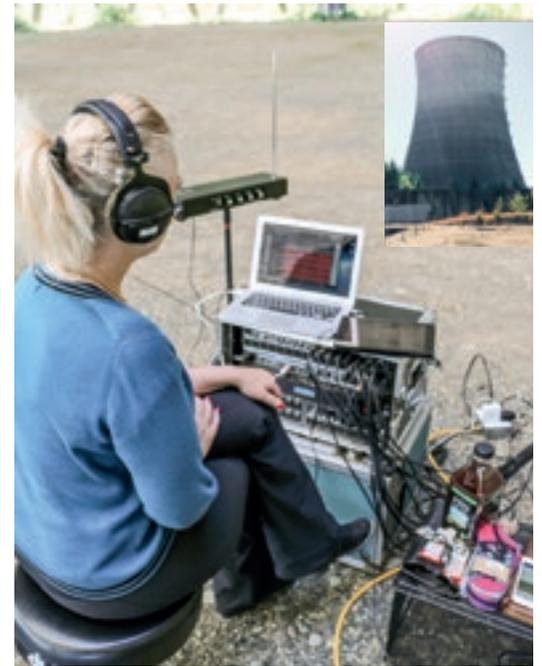
captures the entire drum kit sound without the sound of the cymbals. If he's really hitting those cymbals hard, I want to have a nice breathing room with compression. Cymbals would spoil it, but I can compress that signal after recording, and it's a beautiful, pumping, big room.

**Where have you been to on your European tour — and what was the purpose of it?**

This year has been my busiest — I have traveled to twelve countries, with recording sessions in the UK, Dresden, Prague, Mexico City and Los Angeles, as well as in my home-base in Ashland, Oregon. I have conducted workshops in Buenos Aires, Gdansk, Sardinia and New Zealand. Plus a visit to Genelec in Finland, Shure in Chicago, Microtech in Gefell and Neumann in Berlin for microphone research (I am currently writing the ultimate 'Vintage Microphone' book, to be released with Hal Leonard Publishing in 2019). I also did a fantastic seminar in France for Mix With The Masters, I spent a week as a visiting professor with Berklee College of Music in Boston, I spent time with the students at CRAS in Phoenix and the Abbey Road Institute in London, and did a keynote speech at a convention in Gothenburg, Sweden. And in between all that I have been mixing a couple dozen projects, even when I am out on the road!

**Your globe-trotting must have required extensive planning as well as comprehensive wardrobe changes...**

Oh yeah, there was the session on an island prison in the harbour in Helsinki at the beginning of 2018. It was so cold that the ferry boat needed an ice-breaker to open up a route to the studio every morning!



/ Recording in Cooling Tower 5 at SATSOP Nuclear Power Plant, Washington

The workshops are creatively rewarding. I've fine-tuned them to include a trip to a local junk store or flea market before we begin. I give the attendees a list of items to look for, including transistor radios, telephones, digital watches, drills, light bulbs, cassette recorders, boom-boxes, old transformers, garden hoses, children's toys and oddball instruments. If they can get it for under \$5 then we will bring it back to the studio and incorporate these things into our recording. The guinea pig band never knows what they are in for!

**What have you been up to in the Southern Hemisphere, and why were you hanging our with the New Zealand prime minister?!**

I recently conducted a workshop with the New Zealand Producer Series at Roundhead Studios in Auckland. While I was there I visited the fantastic studios at Massey University in Wellington, where I happened to be onstage the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, for the New Zealand Artisan Awards. I was honoured to meet the prime minister and got a chance to thank her for all the work she has done to support the arts and music in New Zealand.

**What's next in your hectic schedule?**

Currently I have mixes up to my eyeballs, but soon enough I'll be heading to Miami for an IndieGuru event, and then back to Capitol Studios in Los Angeles for Lucy Luvs Fur. In 2019 I will be back in Sardinia, and London, and plan on traveling to Russia to gather the final information needed to wrap up the microphone book. And I'm sure there will be some sessions on an Icelandic glacier, a giant satellite dish, an art museum, on an airliner or a tramp steamer. Or some such thing. Haha! I try to keep things spontaneous. 📍

**RECORDING UNHINGED**

The world is not short of a book or seven about music production: recording techniques, programming tips, microphone placement, Pro Tools this, Ableton that. But Sylvia Massy's book is something else completely. Written with her life partner (and "ordained minister" who "started his own religion") Chris Johnson, Massy's *Recording Unhinged* is a madcap bedazzlement of tips and tricks for experimenting with audio, both in and out of the studio. Sometimes in the street, or in a cave, perhaps. And occasionally, by throwing a guitar off a cliff. Yes, as we already know, Massy doesn't like playing it safe if she can do something hazardous or unexpected — or both — instead.



While there are 'conventional' chapters on process and technique (Vocals, Bass, Guitar and so on), what makes this book a sheer delight are Massy's witty, oft-bizarre cartoons and illustrations peppered throughout the narrative: 'How to Shoot a Piano' is a particular favourite. As well as being a world class producer, you see, Sylvia Massy is a hugely accomplished illustrator too. Not only that, she and Johnson have amassed a fine collection of photos, and they've included plenty of those too.

And if that wasn't enough, the book is rammed with nuggets of wisdom and insight from the likes of Geoff Emerick, Bob Ezrin, Susan Rogers and many more from Massy's peers. Every page is an adventure, with break-out boxes titled 'Russ Hogarth on Sucking', 'Matt Wallace on Blindfold EQ', 'Al Schmitt on Producers, Bookies and Hookers'... you get the picture. In fact, someone savvy at publisher Hal Leonard commissioned a version of the book featuring Massy's illustrations only in monochrome, so you can literally get the picture and colour it in yourself!

Dave Robinson