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- 2007
- 2006
- 2005
- 2004
- 2003
- 2002
- 2001

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Producing a Winner

Michael J. Powell talks about the state of the industry, taking chances, and keeping it real.

By **Lesley Mahoney**
February 21, 2008

Grammy-winning producer and musician Michael J. Powell knows a thing or two about the music industry. For starters, he's worked with stars such as Anita Baker, Aretha Franklin, Patti LaBelle, Tyrese, and Aaliyah, to name a few. Still, though he has an impressive resume, Powell is nothing but down-to-earth when it comes to offering his take on anything from the state of the recording industry to carving out one's niche as a producer.

On a recent visit to the college, Powell and his recording and mixing engineer Quentin Dennard offered far-reaching advice during a clinic co-sponsored by Africana Studies and the Music Production and Engineering Department. They played and talked about producing and recording tracks by artists such as Baker—with whom Powell produced *Rapture*, the album that skyrocketed her career and earned her two Grammys—and up-and-coming pop/r&b singer Stephanie K. Here's a sampling of what they had to say.

Powell on the state of the industry:

Record labels aren't signing acts anymore. The day of a major label cutting a demo and getting a deal is just about over. A lot of people are doing music over the Internet. The challenge is going to be marketing and promotion. You've still got to do marketing and promotion. You've got to still work the street team, get your music out on the street, get it into the club, and then maybe radio will play your music. So that's the challenge: just getting music to the people. How will you distribute your music?

On getting your creds:

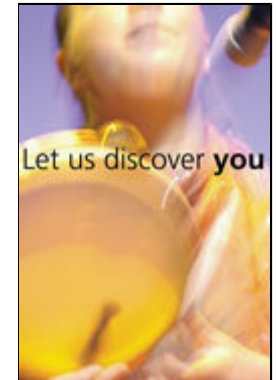
You need to be a businessperson, handle your business. Credits are everything. If you're working on a project as an engineer and they leave your name off and the project wins a Grammy, guess what? You missed out. So you've got to make sure you get your creds. You've got to make sure when you're writing with someone that you establish right up front, how is this going to go down?

On distinguishing yourself as a producer:

Michael J. Powell

Photo by Nick Balkin

"You can't be afraid to take chances. . . because what you do could be the next new thing. We can't be safe around our music



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Quincy [Jones, '51] was the man. That's all I listened to [when I was starting out]. I internalized that. I listened to Quincy and tried to elevate what I was doing at that level. At the time, when I first started producing, I didn't really have that quality of musicianship around me or artistry or anything. But I just worked on it and kept trying to reach out to different people, raising my skills and listening a little harder.

and our ideas."

—Michael J. Powell

I asked, 'What could I do that's going to be different than all the other stuff that I'm hearing?' You can't be afraid to take chances. That's the biggest thing. Because what you do could be the next new thing. We can't be safe around music and our ideas. We've gotta be ahead of the curve if we're going to make a difference.

On respecting artists:

You really have to give the artist what they want. I don't care how good a producer you are. They don't work for *you*. You work for *them*. As an engineer, you work for the producer. You always have to keep in mind what the goal is. What's the ultimate goal? What's the artist trying to get out of this? And you've got to do your best to give them what they want, sometimes against what you're hearing and what you're feeling because it's really important that the artist is satisfied.

Dennard on working with Powell:

I'm coming in the game learning. At the same time, Mike has let me find my own identity as an engineer. I can do certain things and find my own way. I appreciate that because I know he works with some of the best engineers in the world, and it's allowed me to become one of the best engineers in the world. It's not just about turning knobs. It's not just about the theory of it. You really got to do it because you love to do it. Go that extra mile. When you're cutting records, make everyone feel at home. Make them feel like they're cutting a record. It's going to help you out tremendously, and it will keep you working.

Powell and Dennard on what really matters:

Powell: I'm not motivated by money. We all love money. But I love the music. That's going to be my legacy—the music.

Dennard: One hundred years later, music will still exist. What you do is still going to be there. You really have to put all your love into it. The things that we do, we don't do because we see a check coming. We really don't. We'll put the same work into a project for someone that's paying us hardly anything versus something that we know is going to be a hit.

Lesley Mahoney is a writer/editor in Berklee's Office of Communications.



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