

Jon Altschiller owns and operates Chiller Sound in New York City. He's worked with artists like Rachael Yamagata and mixed projects for Joss Stone, Ben Folds, Mandy Moore and Joseph Arthur. He also contributes music to films and advertising. But he's best known as one of the busiest live concert recording and mixing folks in the business. Among other regular gigs, he works for Phish, tracking and mixing each show of their tour for immediate release to fans through livephish.com. It's a strenuous task, as many Phish shows go well beyond the three-hour mark, leaving Altschiller to finish off a three-hour-album every night. Jon has not only stamped his reputation with one of live music's staple bands; he's also mixed live albums and DVDs for Dave Matthews, Simon & Garfunkel, Jason Mraz, The Decemberists, Lenny Kravitz, Warren Haynes and the Bonnaroo Music Festival. On a break from a recent Phish tour, we discussed his history and his desire for perfection, despite a reputation for being "a live-guy." We were also joined by Jon's assistant, Danielle Warman.

**You got your start in recording by following the Grateful Dead on tour and taping shows. What was your rig like?**

I was in bands when I was young and I had a [Tascam] Portastudio, so I had four inputs and four microphones. I recently listened to a recording I did in Ventura, California, in 1987, which was circulated a good deal. I had two condenser [mics] and two shotgun [mics] on the side. I really split the whole taper section! It was epic!

**So you must've had a reputation amongst the other tapers...**

Oh yeah! Because I was working in studios I would show up with crazy mics. I'd come with Neumann U 87 and the like. I also had a DAT [recorder] when they first came out - a Sony TCD-D10 in 1987. Because of all the session work I was doing in New York I knew which musicians were going to Japan. That connection enabled me to get my hands on the digital technology early. During that period of time so many people were asking me for patches [at the shows]. The tech at the studio I was working at built me a mult-box. It was 1988 and I had the patches filled every show! It was the geekiest of gigs.

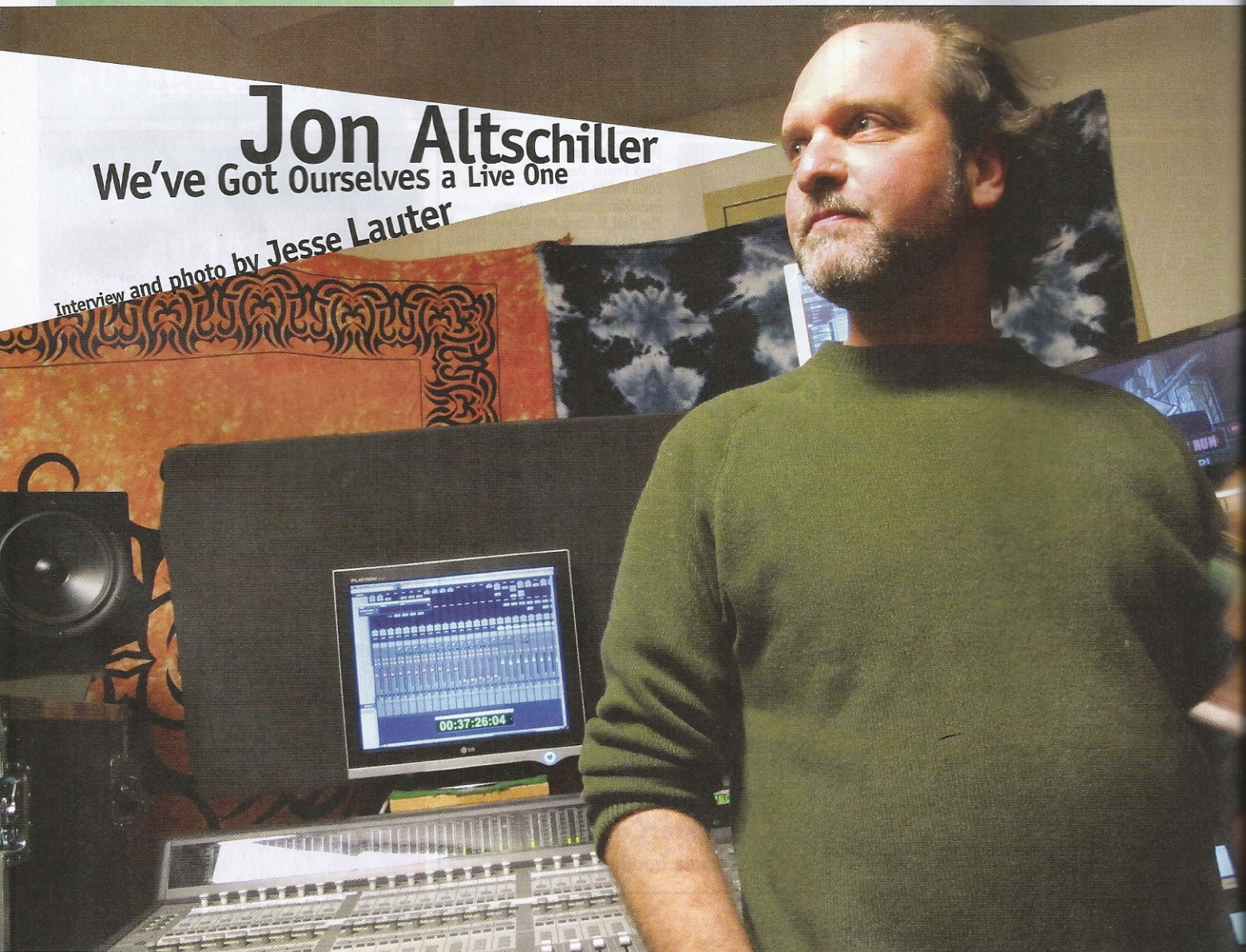
**You eventually came full circle and mixed The Dead for the Bonnaroo '04 album, as well as the DVD. How did that feel?**

I was a Deadhead. I went to summer school in California so I could be where the Dead were. I went to so many shows that my father had a t-shirt made that said, "Did Jerry Garcia ever drive across the country to see me?" It was a family joke. [laughs] So it was Bonnaroo '04 and The Dead were playing. Granted it wasn't with Jerry, but they were playing 100 yards from me, blowing my mind. I thought, "I have driven thousands of miles to see and record this band, and now I am mixing this?" But the true experience was being able to solo Bobby [Weir], the drums, and Phil [Lesh]. It was a trip. When you're a Deadhead, and the same goes for Phishheads too, it's an immersive culture. The Dead got me through the '80s! I remember doing the Bonnaroo show saying, "Wow, I can't believe I'm doing this." But having worked with Phish and Dave Matthews, I felt prepared to do it. I didn't feel out of place or afraid to touch it. That confidence makes me feel like I'm able to mix bands that I love, like the track I did for the Simon & Garfunkel album [2005's *Old Friends: Live On Stage*].

# Jon Altschiller

## We've Got Ourselves a Live One

Interview and photo by Jesse Lauter





**And now you're sort of a glorified version of a taper with Phish. Do you think you're putting the "hard-working hobbyist" tapers out of work?**

I enjoy having tapers there [at the Phish shows]. I'm never going to ask a taper, "Why do you do this when I put out my mix every night?" I understand the experience of taping! But I've also done plenty of studio records, so I also understand that you need to hear the vocals. [laughs]

**You've also done live records for the Foo Fighters, The Decemberists and Warren Haynes. Did you ever see that in the cards?**

I love doing records, but I also love the art form of live. That comes from the Dead. I love live music and really feel fortunate to do what I do.

**What are some of your favorite live albums that you didn't work on?**

When I was in high school, the Talking Heads' [concert film] *Stop Making Sense* came out. It was playing at the 57th Street Playhouse and my dad had an apartment right there. I was over on Christmas break and paid to see it at least five times. I didn't know what I wanted to do yet with my life, but that experience viscerally excited me. I love [Little Feat's] *Waiting For Columbus*, which Phish actually covered for their Halloween 2010 show. And then the obvious ones for me would be [the Grateful Dead's] *Europe '72* and *Live/Dead...*

**And Live/Dead was the first live recording cut to 16-track...**

That's right! Those guys were so ahead of the game...

**All those records you mentioned are some of the most well-regarded in the canon of live albums, but some studio trickery went into the making of those records.**

When you're in the studio people expect magicians. When I do a live record I treat it like it's the studio. I have the musicians' back. When you have the musicians' back you get the respect of the musicians, and then you get the next gig. It's not just about balancing stuff. It's about knowing what they're after. It is our job to present the artist in the best light that we can. With that said, I think it is best to do what the artist wishes to do. The truth is that there are some bands that you fix a lot of stuff for and some that you don't touch. I've had bands re-sing, replay and add parts. If you're lucky to put out ten album or DVD projects in your life, don't you want them to be as good as they can be for the ages? *Stop Making Sense* and *Waiting For Columbus* are overdubbed. That's known! But you put those on now and they hold up! I know when I put *Stop Making Sense* on I want it to be right, and it is. To me you have to do the fixes with integrity – and do as few as possible. I want to make a point that I've *never* done an overdub for a Phish release. I understand where the band wants to be. When I do Live Phish, it's live. Everything is there.

**Can overdubs on a live record enhance the structure of what the band already put in place?**

I guess I've sometimes taken the creative approach. I've added parts, but a lot of them were parts that were on the record and were missing from the show. I think it's also interesting to build off a live multitrack in the studio. There's an artist I'm working with now who said to me, "I go to the studio and everything sounds flat, but my show is rockin'. What can we do?" And I said, "We'll record a few shows, take it to the studio, choose the best takes, redo the vocals, and do all the overdubs." That can be a fun approach for a record, because it really pushes things along.

**How did you fall into the world of Phish?**

I was working with John Popper [Blues Traveler] in the early '90s, and I believe he introduced me to Trey [Anastasio, Phish's lead singer and guitarist].

**Had you taped Phish shows before your introduction?**

I had taped two or three shows before we met, but I was by no means a regular Phish taper.

**The first album you did with them was *A Picture Of Nectar*. Then you worked with Muscle Shoals' keyboardist/producer Barry Beckett on their album, *Rift*. How was that?**

I thought Barry was great. I mean, Muscle Shoals! He was a great musician and he focused Phish more. He would make the guys go through and underline the most important lyrics in each sentence, which was interesting because it was a concept album and the lyrics were so out! [laughs] But when everybody in the band is dissecting their lyrics you have democratic discussions as to what meanings of songs are, which usually leads to something better. I still put that to practice to this day. I was young, 23 or 24, during that recording. When they took the record to Nashville and finished it there it was one



of the first experiences I had with letting go. It was a tough thing for me because I'd been in their camp for three years. But you have to understand that bands move on. Nothing is forever because everybody needs to grow. They moved on to Steve [Lillywhite] and I moved on as well. I met [John] Alagia and that got me into the Dave Matthews camp. From there it was [John] Mayer, [Jason] Mraz and a ton of other great experiences.

### **And now you're back out with Phish, but in a different capacity.**

A bunch of bands do downloads and most of the time it's just soundboard mixes. No one delivers the quality and quickness that Phish provides. If you pre-submit your ticket number into livephish.com you can listen to the show again on your way home, which was the joy of taping! They understand that you need to get it out quick. I think it's a great idea and the technology is out there. What I like about Phish is that they care about the quality they put out. It's not cheap to take me out on the road, and sometimes I'm amazed they do. But the line they give me is that they're making an album every night. Ultimately, I recognize the historical significance of what I'm doing. To actually archive a moment of history is a joy to be a part of.

### **Are you happy with the quality of modern mobile recording?**

I think modern recording, in general, is a little quick and there's less attention to mic'ing. I understand that if you're in a club, you have what you have. Sometimes I think people just do things from what they've read, instead of looking at the physics of what they're doing. If you have extra tightness of patterns, it helps a lot. Garry Brown [Phish's front of house engineer] gets it. We do use a few "non-traditional" live mics. We use some ribbons. There's a Royer 121 on Trey's guitar, which I think is great. There's a [Royer] 224 for the stereo drum overhead. I love that microphone, its image is great, but in a live setting I'm getting so much ceiling that I can't tighten it down.

### **But isn't that the beauty of the recordings?**

I guess it is. I could use my own overheads, but I think that I have a job because I stay out of the way. Getting stuff done quickly and being transparent definitely has helped my reputation, as well as having a good relationship with both the monitor engineers and front of house. There are a lot of times that they'll switch microphones, and I'll be very quiet. I am in charge of the room mics, because they don't use them live. But, in terms of live recording, we take everything that's on stage. Sometimes we'll share effects and things. It all works together really well.

### **Do you use a video feed? If you do, do you use it to influence your mixing?**

Yes! I used to bring my own camera and stick it on an audience mic stand so I could have my eye to the stage. Then they hired a live video crew. I give an audio feed to the video people and they send video to me. It is very helpful to me, and it's helpful to them,

because there are times where I can call them on the radio if I notice something wrong on stage and vice versa. But during the show, I sometimes call out, "Hey! Can you iso Chris Kuroda's [Phish's celebrated lighting designer] cam?" I'm next door to the best party every night, but I'm underground and they can sometimes forget about me! You need to be connected to the players. Often I can tell that the [video crew] are following my cues and honestly I am pushing theirs. During the webcasts, I am very conscious of what the audience is seeing and making sure they hear what they see.

### **Does it get stressful?**

I've had this conversation with friends before where they ask, "How can you do it?" You just do it! My listening environments are sometimes awful and that's frustrating. It can be stressful to understand that certain frequencies are overheard or under represented... to basically not know what you are hearing. I have headphones, but they're not too helpful when it's 100 dB in the room. They generally give me a dressing room every night. If they don't give me a dressing room, they give me one of those little trailers that resonate a lot because they're hollow on the bottom. Sometimes I think, "If I could just play that back!" Pro Tools' delay compensation is off, so I know I have some phase issues, which I wouldn't have if it were on. When you're running 80-some-odd tracks a night, and you have all your TDM and RTAS maxed, I guess it's kind of stressful. Another problem is that I'm using [audience] mics at front of house, which is 125 feet away. I'm getting such a delay that it ruins my clarity. When I do a DVD I can go back and time-shift. I like having the ability to do that.

### **Any horror stories from the road?**

I'm doing alright because I test my system for a month before we depart, and I have two complete systems on the road with me. But we've blown out converters and, when things like that happen, there's no time! My Genelec [speakers] even blew out. We got struck by lightning!

### **Where was that?**

PNC [Bank Arts Center, Holmdel, New Jersey]. We get hit by lightning and I'm like, "Where's the clavinet? I hear it but..."

Danielle Warman: "It's on the wrong side!"

And I looked up and there's no light on the Genelec. It totally blew out. I turned to Danielle, who doesn't get to go to many shows, and I sent her back to the city to get my spare Genelecs. She got back for the second set!

DW: 100-mile drive, round-trip, on the New Jersey Turnpike.

That's the thing about the road. Something is gonna happen! And you only have until the next show to fix everything.

### **How has this experience made you a better studio producer and engineer?**

I feel more like MacGyver. I have a better appreciation for electricity, which I didn't really think about much before. You work in studios and you take for granted that you're in a room with clean power. And then

you're out there and you have to know how much voltage and wattage your gear is using. But the experience has helped me let go, whereas in the studio you try to make things perfect. I think being in the studio makes me better on the road and it makes me a better engineer overall.

### **And mixing on the fly?**

It's a mental task. When I'm done at the end of the night, I am spent. At nearly a hundred shows in, I have not ever gone to the bathroom once when they're on stage! It's that intense. They keep you on your toes for a long time. I listen to every show after I do it. I'm not allowed to talk about it on the bus anymore. The crew is like, "It's done! Tomorrow!" That's where I kinda get lost in the studio mentality. But that's the type of passion you need.

### **Do you accept imperfections in the studio more because of your time on the road?**

No. I think when you reach a certain level, the expectation is that it's gotta be right. I will, however, *surrender* to imperfections. I've talked to Trey about this many times. He once said to me, "One of Miles Davis' most significant moments, ever, is a big clam..." He was explaining how important this one note was to him, in terms of sticking out – a clear wrong note – and how it was not fixed. So in live mixing I'll argue the imperfections, but you won't find any on Rachael [Yamagata's] record! [laughs] That doesn't mean I think you should make everything sterile and run everything through Auto-Tune; I'm still an analog guy who likes to get takes and comp takes, and have a singer express the whole way. I love Rachael and Phish because we're getting a group of people who are communicating an idea together, who understand what they are communicating, and have the ability to communicate it! I read an article about how there is still so much music to be had, and how there is so much more business to get, because the people who got into the music business to make money have all left. The people who couldn't imagine doing anything else are overwhelmed. Now you have to deliver 16,000 different kinds of mixes. If I were a lawyer, I'd be billing for all of this! But my mantra is, "Do your work. Love your work. Make everyone look good! Understand your place." A lot of people go in too heavy-handed. I often say, "If all I had was a wire recorder, I'd still work to make it sound good." ☺

[www.chillersound.com](http://www.chillersound.com)

Jesse Lauter is a producer/engineer/mixer who has worked with Low Anthem, Langhorne Slim, Craig Finn, Elvis Perkins and Marco Benevento. [jesselauter.com](http://jesselauter.com)

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