

*David Feeny is a veteran of the Detroit music scene, and a grammy award winning musician. He also owns and operates Tempermill Studios, and Gangplank Records. Mr. Feeny has worked with a litany of independent recording artists including Jack White, Kid Rock and Loretta Lynn. We talked with Dave at his Tempermill Studios in Ferndale, Michigan. For more information on Tempermill Studios please visit <http://tempermill.com>.*

**RTH: So how did you get into recording?**

**Dave Feeny:** In high school, I had a good friend who was in a band called 'The Attitudes' and they had done some recording at a local studio called Multi-Track. The process just blew my head off, I drove the engineer nuts with questions. After that, my friend and I bought a 4 track and made some home recordings. He was enamored with this place called The Recording Workshop in Chillicothe, Ohio, bands from all over the midwest would go there for free and let the students record them. He was thinking of taking a class and asked if I was interested. It was a little six-week trade school, just long enough to get a taste. So we went, I think it was '82, I loved the environment and was one of the project leaders, ironically my buddy hated it so he left after a few weeks.

I left my job at a steel processing plant (that's where the name Tempermill comes from) to attend the class. I was convinced that it was what I wanted to do, and my success at the school just confirmed that I had a knack for it. I banged on dozens of studio doors in Florida and back here in Michigan, but couldn't get anyone to let me even sweep the floor. When I got back home I turned my bedroom in my folk's basement into my control room for my makeshift studio and after a couple years, I got so busy that I actually ended up moving out of my parent's house to a flat in Hamtramck but left the studio there! So I would commute to my parents house to work, that was weird but I was going non-stop.

**RTH: So your parents were okay with you doing this?**

**Dave Feeny:** Yeah my parents were very supportive of me doing it. They were not so supportive of my not wanting to go to college and that was understandable. So what happened was that I started getting so much traffic at my parent's house that it got to the point that I just really couldn't do it anymore.

**RTH: So you went from recording in your parent's basement to your studio here?**

**Dave Feeny:** Yep, I went from their house to here in 1989. That was a big step. This building was a doctors office and what I thought would be a case of beer and a weekend of knocking down walls turned out to be way more involved than I had anticipated. It took months to get it roughed in and I was still in a couple relatively popular bands; Hysteria Narcotics and the Orange Roughies and they both toured quite a bit.

**RTH: So how was it touring?**

**Dave Feeny:** I can see why it kills bands. We were total indie guerillas. This was before cell phones, so we would have to stop every day, pull out my calling card and coordinate gigs. I know it seems kind of funny now, but our biggest expense was our phone bill! One tour we were out for 6 or 7 weeks and I think that we actually stayed in a hotel a total of 3 nights! We would perform, stay at the club until closing and then drive for 4 hours then pull over and crash in the van. Then we would get up the next morning to go to the next city.

Sometimes there would be somebody that we knew in town, and we would crash at their house. Every once in a while we would just announce from the stage that we were looking for a place to stay for the night. Standard touring equipment consisted of; guitars, amps and sleeping bags. This was late '80s early '90s. We wouldn't make hardly a penny playing, but we would do ok selling t-shirts and albums. I have got a lot great stories, and I wouldn't trade the experience for the world.

**RTH: So when you were not touring you were working in the recording studio correct?**

**Dave Feeny:** Yeah I came here built the studio, bought my Harrison console, 24-track and main monitors, I maxed out every credit card that I could get my hands on, just like all those independent movie maker stories. Geoff Michael did the basic design and it took a few months to gut the building and build the control room, I then started doing sessions and for the next 20 years it's been a series of updates and improvements!

**RTH: So when did you get involved in Blanche and American Mars?**

**Dave Feeny:** I got involved with Blanche after Goober and the Peas dissolved. Dan Miller (founder of the band Goober and the Peas) was in a band with Jack White called Two Star Tabernacle. But Jack went on to form the White Stripes and Dan Miller was starting a new band with his wife Tracee and some other friends. He asked if I'd like to join, so we had a couple rehearsals, I was playing guitar and some organ, about the third time we got together Dan asked if I wanted to try and play pedal steel, I had had a few guys play steel at the studio over the years and always loved the sound, but didn't own one. He told me that he bought in a pawn shop in Kentucky a few years back and never really figured it out, I had no idea! So I took it home with a 'how to' book for a weekend and wrapped my brain around it and I've been learning ever since. So now, I've been playing pedal steel guitar for about two weeks when Thomas Trimble from American Mars calls and says he heard I was playing from a mutual friend, Brian Boyle (Blanche's still green banjo player) and asked if I wanted to play a North-by-Northeast showcase in Toronto. I had done a record with American Mars at the Tempermill in 1997 and it's still one of my favorites. I said I'd give it a whirl and we played the gig as a trio, fun. Now I was in two bands after not really playing since the Orange Roughies broke-up in '92.

**RTH: So you've had some successful tours comparatively, how is touring now compared to the old days?**

**Dave Feeny:** Well we certainly haven't attempted any of the cross-country adventures of my youth, but it's still a bit of a grind, a lot of down time. The most surprising thing is that since we've done quite a few shows in Europe that the audiences are much more receptive, there's just a greater appreciation of the arts in general over there. I think the average age for one of the tours we did with the Handsome Family was about 42, whereas a run of shows we did with The Kills on the U.S. east coast of the was 22! So it was a pleasant revelation that there's still an audience for music that isn't part of the ultra-hip scenester crowd. We also have done a number of shows with the White Stripes and what's so surreal is that you have no idea who is going to be back stage. I'm quite sure none of them would remember me but I met; Adrian Brody, Winona Ryder, Jude Law, Nicole Kidman, Renee Zellweger, Jeff Beck and countless other musicians and bands! After a show in London, it was just me and Colin Firth signing autographs as fast as we possibly could, very odd.

**RTH: So how did you meet Jack White?**

**Dave Feeny:** I had done a few records with Goober and the Peas and they had this long Spinal Tap-ish type history of drummers that they went through (although I don't believe any died from spontaneous combustion), it's true that they had 15 guys that played drums. So I knew Jack from them, he was their last drummer. He was just this young, weird kid who at the time had a white pet rat he would walk around with. He has always been an interesting character.

**RTH: So how did you start recording with Loretta Lynn?**

**Dave Feeny:** Jack White was (and is) a big fan of hers. He approached her about producing a record for her. She was pretty hesitant and they went round and round about it, I'm not sure she trusted his intentions at first, but she finally realized he was very serious about it and agreed to do it.

So Jack literally called me on a Wednesday and said "I am going to go to Nashville on Friday to do some demos with Loretta Lynn do you want to do it?" and I said "Yeah, of course, are you sure you want me? You can't swing a cat without hitting a pedal steel player in Nashville that's probably better than I am." I found out later that it was also Loretta's daughter, Patsy, who suggested I play. I met her when Blanche opened a show in New York with the White Stripes and Loretta.

So, we went down and did some recording. I remember the first night, Loretta wasn't there yet and we were just running through songs and in a middle of take, we're recording and Loretta Lynn walks in she is staring at me (because the way the studio was set-up, I was the only one she could see) and literally my brain dissolved and

completely lost track of what we were doing! So then we met her (again) and she could not have been nicer, she is so down to earth, completely unassuming. We recorded about 5 songs the first night and I think we ended up keeping four of them! The whole album is almost all the first take.

This little band that she put together was totally collaborative, we all made suggestions on arrangements, we all sang on it, we all did percussion stuff and I even ended up engineering on the record a bit. I ended up playing all of the slide guitar and dobro too. I couldn't be happier about the way it turned out.

So we won the Grammy for best country album and I got an award as a performer. The band was called Loretta Lynn and the Do Whaters because that's what Loretta called us, because said we would 'Do whatever' needed to be done to make the record. I think she had been used to a lot of other outside musician's being called in by previous producers. Jack certainly deserves all the credit for making it all work and we was wonderful with Loretta.

**RTH: Can you give me an example of why it was so great to work with Loretta Lynn?**

**Dave Feeny:** I remember we were preparing for the Letterman Show in this rehearsal studio in New York and I was just noodling around and setting up she was watching me play and she said "I ain't never heard anybody play the steel like that before- it's the most beautiful thing" I just wanted to cry, I was really touched, I mean she has performed with and played with some of the best musicians ever and paid me such a great compliment.

**RTH: What do you think of the Detroit music scene today?**

**Dave Feeny:** Detroit has always been great. It's certainly not as it was in the eighties and nineties, there were a ton of great bands in the indie/punk/alternative world. There was also a more cohesive scene, in the eighties it was Hamtramck and in the nineties it was the Cass corridor. There really isn't a scene or club where you can confidently walk in now and really know what you're going to see. I guess that's kind of good and bad

There has got to be 50 clubs with live music on any given night in metro-Detroit, there are more opportunities here to hone your skills and find an audience than anywhere else in the country.

**RTH: In this economy you are still pretty busy correct? How do you see the state of the professional recording studio?**

**Dave Feeny:** We're still busy. What's really changed are the album projects that used to be a bunch of really long days on a row, it was the most efficient way to do it because doing it all analog with the 24-track required a lot of set-up. It would take a while to get everything dialed in and I'd end up doing multiple versions of mixes to make sure we didn't have to go back and set it all up again. So to me the biggest advantage of working digitally in Protools is that I can work really hard on something, save it and know that I'm just picking up where we left off. It also makes it easy to make revisions down the road. People have been sending me a lot of stuff to mix, today I'm mixing for a band from Brooklyn. They tracked everything there and then just sent over files. Doing that is probably a third of what I do.

We've also got some other great engineers here that have done all different styles of music, so we can accommodate most every project and do the whole project from start to finish or just one or two of the steps from basic tracking, overdubs, mixing or mastering.

Until they start installing USB ports in heads, people are still analog! So rooms like the Tempermill still have an integral place. You need a great room with the ability to track groups with great microphones, pre-amps and either tape or analog to digital converters. I think I probably have more invested in microphones than some other places have in their whole studio! You can get something done here in a day or two that could take months to fudge your way through it at home. We're not the cheapest studio in town and we are not the most expensive, but what we offer is experience, expertise and our ability to facilitate the process for you.

**RTH: So where do you think that the music business is heading?**

I think that things are going to get back to a regional live music sort of thing. As an independent artist, you can't effectively tour the whole country, it's just too much real estate. So what I think is happening is that bands are concentrating on a smaller circle, say everything within a 4-5 hour drive. That includes Chicago, Columbus, Cleveland, Toronto, Grand Rapids, Mount Pleasant, Lansing, Ann Arbor and all those cities in between, that's millions of people in all of those cities and I think that is totally doable. You can actually make some money selling your music directly to your audience. I can only speak for myself, but I'm totally overloaded with music choices and the vast majority is really bad! The record industry, as bad as it is and was, at least provided some sort of filtering system. It weeded out a lot of really, really bad stuff.

**RTH: Closing thoughts?**

I don't know about you, but I couldn't survive without music, it dominates our house and both our kids are constantly singing, humming, dancing or banging on something. I love it, that's a testament to its power! Still no better feeling than driving around with the radio cranked and hearing a familiar song come on that I dig only to realize a minute into it that it was something I recorded. Makes me smile.