



TOM DOWD

ROB BOWMAN

'THE GREAT SOUNDMAN OF OUR TIME'

Aside from a handful of fervent record collectors, Tom Dowd remains virtually unknown to the general public. But to those in the industry—players, engineers, producers, and record executives alike—Dowd was a sonic sorcerer, capable of wizard-level alchemy when it came to capturing sound on tape. Just as important, both as an engineer and a producer, he had the patience of Job and the personality of a saint. A producer's job is often as much psychological as it is musical and technical. For Eric Clapton, it was Dowd who helped him overcome his self-doubt as a songwriter. For Butch Trucks of the Allman Brothers Band, "Tom had a way of making things work. He had a way of pulling us together, being this father figure and this psychologist that would dig into the depths of us and find what we were capable of giving." Fellow engineer Phil Ramone put it in very simple terms: "He was *the* perfect coach."

Some engineers specialize in jazz, others in R&B, while the majority work pop and/or rock sessions. Dowd knew no such limitations. He cut influential recordings with jazz luminaries Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Charles Mingus; protean vocal groups such as the Clovers, the Coasters, and the Drifters; R&B stalwarts Big Joe Turner, Ruth Brown, Clyde McPhatter, and LaVern Baker; soul masters Ray Charles, Rufus Thomas, Otis Redding, Wilson Pickett, and Aretha Franklin; blues icons Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, and Stick McGhee; pop wunderkinds Bobby Darin, the Young Rascals, Sonny and Cher, and Dusty Springfield; and rock superstars Cream, Derek and the Dominos, the Allman Brothers Band, and Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Try and name another engineer with such a diverse portfolio. Then try and name another engineer/producer with more seminal recordings on his curriculum vitae. Dowd

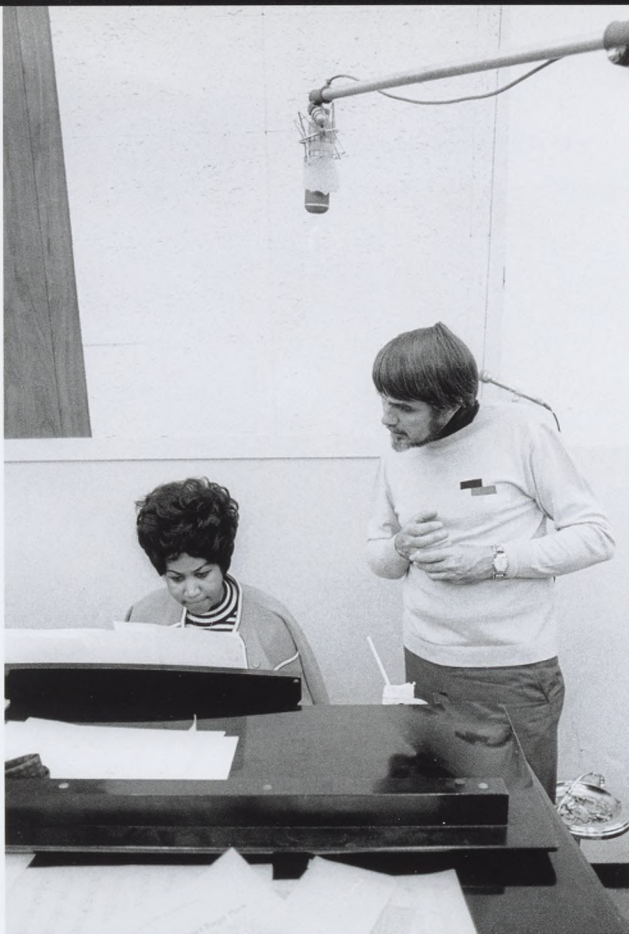
was involved in every Ray Charles Atlantic recording from 1952 to 1960, including "Drown in My Own Tears," "I Got a Woman," and "What'd I Say." It was Dowd working the board and getting the great bass sound on Jimmy Garrison for John Coltrane's groundbreaking albums *Giant Steps* and *My Favorite Things*. Otis Redding's finest album, *Otis Blue*, just happens to be the one Redding LP that Dowd engineered. All the early Aretha Franklin albums for Atlantic, including such bone-crunching hits as "I Never Loved a Man," "Respect," and "Dr. Feelgood," feature his engineering prowess. Beginning with *Soul '69*, he also got a coproducer credit on many Franklin sessions. Finally, Dowd engineered and/or produced a number of the most important albums in the classic rock era, including Cream's *Disraeli Gears* (it was Dowd who suggested the groove for "Sunshine of Your Love"), Derek and the Dominos' *Layla (And Other Assorted Love Songs)*, and *The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East*. Along the way, he served as a mentor in the art of recording to Arif Mardin, Steve Cropper, Ray Charles, Eric Clapton, and dozens more. The most influential recording engineer of the late 1940s to the late 1980s, Tom Dowd—working behind the scenes—played an inestimable role in determining the sound of popular music on record during those decades.

Dowd was born in New York City on October 20, 1925, to a mother who sang light opera and studied at the Sorbonne, and a father who worked as a stage manager at the Hippodrome, Roxy, and Capitol Theaters. Under his mother's tutelage, he began studying piano

ALL OF A SUDDEN PEOPLE WERE SAYING, 'HOW DID HE DO THAT?'



and violin at the age of 5, and later played sousaphone and string bass. Precocious to a fault, he was also a mathematics and physics whiz, attending the prestigious Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. He graduated at 16, then studied at City College before being drafted at 18. After boot camp he was assigned to the Special Engineer Detachment, Manhattan District, and began working in the physics labs at Columbia University. He was part of a top secret research team that would ultimately become known as the Manhattan Project (and result in the development of the atomic bomb).



Dowd's specific role, as a member of the neutron beam spectrography division, was operating a cyclotron, performing density tests on various elements and recording statistics. What could be better training for a life in a recording studio?

After the war, Dowd's recording career officially started in June 1947, when he was hired by the Carl Fischer Music Publishing House. His duties included recording air checks for music publishers documenting big band performances of their compositions; artists and students studying at Carnegie Hall; dialogue spot announcements for small radio stations; and occasional small-label sessions. The latter usually involved recording Russian immigrants for the Kismet label, Greek music for Spiro Records, Latin music for Verne Records, or Polish polkas for Harmonia Records. Along the way, he also made a series of fifteen-minute radio shows with the famed jubilee singers the Golden Gate Quartet.

When Carl Fischer Music sold its recording studio, the new owners changed its name to Apex Recording Studios and kept Dowd on as their primary engineer. At Apex,

Dowd cut a number of jazz sessions, including Dizzy Gillespie's bebop classics "A Night in Tunisia" and "Salt Peanuts." In Dowd's own words, "What started out as a summer job turned into a career."

Beginning with a Ravens session for National Records, Dowd engineered recordings by R&B stars such as Wynonie Harris and Big Joe Turner. For the newly minted Atlantic Records, he worked sessions for Frank Culley, Joe Morris, Ruth Brown, and Stick McGhee, the latter session generating Atlantic's very first hit recording, "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee," in April 1949. For National, Dowd engineered Eileen Barton's "If I Knew You Were Comin' I'd've Baked a Cake," a Number One pop hit for ten straight weeks in 1950.

Early on in various studios, Dowd started experimenting with miking each instrument. His main concern was getting a strong, resonant bass sound. It wasn't long before word got out that the records this whiz kid worked on had greater frequency response, and could be mastered much louder than recordings cut by most of his contemporaries. In the documentary



OPPOSITE PAGE With Ahmet Ertegun, Eric Clapton, Felix Pappalardi, and Ginger Baker (from left), recording "Strange Brew."
THIS PAGE, FROM TOP With Aretha Franklin, 1969; a Wilson Pickett session at the Fame Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

Tom Dowd and the Language of Music, Dowd recalled, "All of a sudden people were saying, 'There's a bass on the record. How did he do that?'" Dowd, in fact, was not only placing microphones and working the board

on sessions, he also was developing into *the* number one mastering engineer in New York City.

Working at Fulton Recording Studios, he expanded his repertoire, cutting sessions for the Latin label Tico Records with artists such as Tito Puente, Joe Loco, and



Machito. One of those sessions produced Puente's original version of "Oye Como Va." Dowd was also responsible for a number of Bethlehem jazz dates for artists such as Chris Connor, produced by a young Creed Taylor.

Burning the candle at both ends, Dowd began engineering most of the Atlantic Records sessions on a part-time basis at its makeshift studio on West 56th Street. In March 1954, Atlantic hired Dowd full time. Using just four mics, Dowd cut classic Atlantic recordings such as Big Joe Turner's "Shake, Rattle and Roll," the Clovers' "One Mint Julip," the Drifters' "Money Honey," and LaVern Baker's "Tweedlee Dee." Ironically, over at Fulton, Dowd cut white pop singer Georgia Gibbs' cover of Baker's "Tweedlee Dee" for Mercury.

Starting in 1952, Dowd recorded all of Atlantic's sessions in what was then referred to as *binaural*—later known as "stereo." At the time it was only possible to release these recordings in mono. But by the early 1960s, when stereo LPs began to reach the consumer market, Atlantic's back catalog was, for the most part, ready to be reissued in pristine two-track stereo. As usual, Dowd was ahead of the curve.

In 1955, he built a new recording console for Atlantic. Frustrated with the chunky, three-inch-round Bakelite volume knobs then in standard use in recording studios, Dowd discovered three-quarter-inch slide wires being made by Langevin, and began using them instead. This meant that eight faders could be housed over the course of twelve inches on the sound board, and that he could use his

two hands to literally "ride the faders" as a track was being recorded—similar to playing piano. Dowd's innovation eventually became standard within the industry.

A few years later, the visionary Dowd insisted that Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler let him commission Ampex to manufacture the third 8-track tape recorder in existence. In early 1958, Atlantic became the first commercial studio in America to record with an 8-track machine. To put that in perspective, Stax Records didn't have a 4-track machine until 1965, the Fame Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals didn't have a 3-track machine until 1967, and the Beatles recorded *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* at Abbey Road on 4-track. Atlantic's first session with the new 8-track machine was *LaVern Baker Sings Bessie Smith*. From that point forward, Dowd became one of the first—if not the first—engineer to start using EQ to obtain a more pronounced bass sound. Soon thereafter, EQ would be applied to every instrument.

Working for Atlantic kept Dowd cutting sessions at a nearly inhuman pace. In 1967, the company was sold to Warner Bros.-Seven Arts. While Dowd continued to engineer and/or produce a number of Atlantic artists including Aretha Franklin and Cream, by 1970 he had decided to relocate to Miami. There, Dowd helped Criteria Studio owner Mack Emerman retrofit his studio so that it was a near clone of Atlantic's New York facility. It was at Criteria that Dowd most famously served as engineer and executive producer on *Layla*, as well as producer on the Allman Brothers' second album, *Idlewild South*. A few

months later he would produce what many consider the greatest live rock album ever, *The Allman Brothers Band at Fillmore East*. (Dowd would continue to work on a semi-regular basis with the Allman Brothers up to his untimely passing in 2002.)

No longer working directly for Atlantic, in the 1970s Dowd would go on to produce Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Gimme Back My Bullets*, *One More From the Road*, and *Street Survivors*; Rod Stewart's *Atlantic Crossing*, *Night*

DOWD'S INNOVATIONS BECAME STANDARD WITHIN THE INDUSTRY



OPPOSITE PAGE At the board (far right), with Duane Allman, Aretha Franklin, Jerry Wexler, Arif Mardin, and others.
THIS PAGE In Muscle Shoals, 1969; with Eric Clapton, circa 1981.

On the Town, and *Footloose and Fancy Free*; and a steady stream of Eric Clapton solo LPs, including Clapton's comeback album, *461 Ocean Boulevard*. From Clapton's vantage point, Dowd's background as a musician was crucial to his work in the studio: "Where I could feel that I could really trust Tom was that I'd seen how musically proficient he was. He really does know music and much more than I have any grasp of. So, whenever I thought I had an idea or I wanted to record something, I would always think of Tom first above doing it on my own and above anybody else that I had ever met."

In addition to Clapton and the Allmans, Dowd continued to produce a host of artists up through 2001, including Diana Ross, Chicago, New Model Army, Billy Vera and the Beaters, the Bee Gees, Gladys Knight, Quincy Jones, and Primal Scream. In 1994, he remixed tracks for A Tribe Called Quest.

In trying to summarize Dowd's contributions to rock & roll, perhaps Jerry Wexler should have the last word: "Even though Tom was just a kid, this eager and exceptionally bright engineer was one of my teachers. Our gig was to get the music played right and righteous in the studio. Tom's job was to capture it on tape. It was up to him



to find a true mix of timbres, bass, treble, and midrange, to load as much volume as possible without distortion. Tom pushed those [volume] pots like a painter sorting colors. He turned microphone placement into an art . . . In the studio, he became my mainstay and then later one of my best coproducers. When it came to sound, he displayed an exquisite sensibility. . . . Tommy Dowd is the great soundman of our time."

In February 2002, Dowd received a Grammy Trustee's Award for his lifetime achievements. Sadly, he would pass away eight months later from emphysema. Tonight we welcome him into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.