



Prince and the Gemini II

FINDING THE RIGHT CHEAP, UNTUNED GUITAR FOR THE JOB

■ Prince walked into Studio B, looked around at the cold, clinical '80s décor and asked, "Don't you have a big stuffed 'Grandma's' chair or something?" Knowing full well there was nothing like that in the entire facility, I said, "Why yes...of course, I'll just...um...go next door and get it..." I then ran out of the room to the front desk. "Lemme borrow someone's truck, QUICK!!!" I tore out of the parking lot straight down to Melrose Avenue and purchased the first upholstered chair I could find. Minutes later I calmly walked back into the session with the big chair, and set it in front of Prince. This was his first day booked into Larrabee Sound in West Hollywood and I wanted to make a good impression. He sat down in the chair and nodded. What was originally a four-day booking turned into a three-year odyssey with Prince.

Working with Prince was extremely challenging. He was impatient, uncommunicative, intolerant, and yet extremely generous with credits and opportunity. And he actually wanted to know my opinion! He would have three or four rooms running at the same time, with songs in various stages of development. I usually worked in Larrabee's Studio B on a Solid State Logic 4056 E/G console with a pair of Studer A800 analog 24-track tape recorders. To prepare for a Prince session, I would have the room set up for anything that might be happening that day with rented drum machines, keyboards, bass, electric guitars and pedalboards available. He would play everything and anything. It was 100 percent Prince, so when he would spin around on his heels and go for an instrument I made sure I was *on it* like my life depended on it! He would even have a vocal mic hung over the console, usually a Neumann U87, so he could do the vocal recording himself. Prince would rarely warn you of his arrival. He would just show up and everyone would jump to action, no matter what time of day or night.

In anticipation of engineering a particular Prince date, I once brought extra guitars to the studio—one of them being my cheap little Fender Gemini II acoustic. I was a bit embarrassed for it against the row of pol-



Caption

ished, tuned and beautifully tweaked rental guitars on the session, so I stuck my Gemini II in the corner out of sight. It was un-tuned, had old strings and no stand. I knew that whatever instrument Prince reached for had to be tuned, plugged in and ready to record, or he was outta there.

It would figure that Prince pulled out that damn Gemini II. I was horrified. I imagined him throwing it down on the floor and storming out of the studio because it was not properly prepared for him. Instead, I was shocked to witness Prince playing flawless rhythm and even solo parts, bending the individual strings to the right pitch as he fretted chords effortlessly. He compensated with his fingers to bring the instrument in tune and the guitar sang like it had a fresh set of strings.

That acoustic sounded great on the track "Walk Don't Walk." It did just what it's best for, keeping an even percussive rhythm throughout the



Caption

GEAR STORIES

song. Prince used the Gemini II on several other songs and at the end of the sessions, he casually directed his crew to pack the guitar up into one of his road cases. I don't think he realized it was mine and assumed the rental company would just charge him for it. I noticed what Prince was doing and said, "Excuse me...you can buy one of your own for \$200; they aren't that expensive." He smiled at me and said, "But I want this one."

The dreadnought-shaped Fender Gemini II six-string acoustic is really nothing special, or so I thought. Prince had a thing for that guitar. You'll hear it on the *Diamonds and Pearls* album. Originally manufactured in Korea in the late '80s, the guitar features a mahogany back and spruce top. It's a budget guitar—dry sounding, very woody. Not sparkling, not shimmering, more like a chugging. Just a very plain acoustic. I generally use it to fill out rhythm tracks in rock songs, more as a percussion instrument, like a shaker. Acoustic guitars can play multiple roles in album recording, either as a melodic voice or as a percussive instrument. It is not always necessary to have the deepest most resonant tone in an acoustic guitar; in fact, for percussive needs you may want the guitar to sound

almost like a washboard!

An Underrated Studio Essential

Budget acoustic guitars are often underrated in the studio. Never be afraid to have an inexpensive Yamaha, Washburn, Aria or Alvarez on hand to add texture to your tracks without tonally complicating the sonic picture. Fender stopped making the Gemini line but has a similar offering in the Fender CD-140S acoustic today. Even outside of recording, just having a cheap acoustic lying around can help inspire creativity. We always have a few no-name acoustics sitting on the couch in the lounge of the studio, ready to help work out a part or ignite a spontaneous sing-along. And if it gets sat on it's not the end of the world.

At the end of 1992 I had a Billboard Top 25 single with Green Jello's "Three Little Pigs." I had also been asked to produce a new band called Tool. At the same time Prince offered me a job at his Paisley Park Studios in Minnesota. It was a great opportu-



Caption

nity, but I decided to remain in Los Angeles. After declining his job offer, I never heard from Prince again. No, I never sold him that guitar and most of my clients today who use the Fender Gemini II could never imagine its stressful, difficult and incredibly magical heritage! ■■■

Sylvia Massy is the unconventional producer and engineer of artists including Tool, System Of A Down, Johnny Cash, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Tom Petty and Prince. She is a member of the NARAS P&E Wing Steering Committee and Advisory Boards, and is a resident producer at RadioStar Studios in Weed, California.