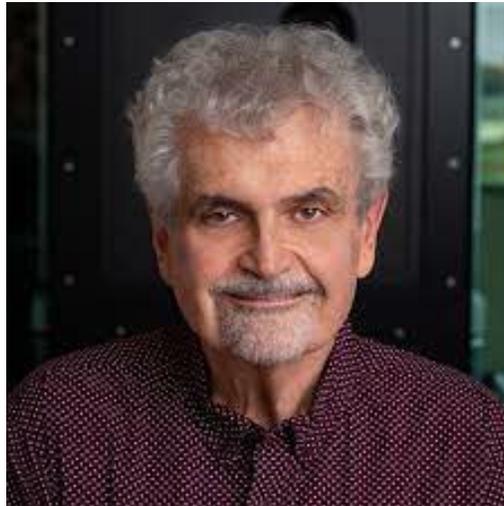


**This interview with
BILL SCHNEE
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on April 22, 2025**



Library of Congress: How did you and Lincoln Mayorga first cross paths?

BS: Lincoln and Doug Sax were partners. Doug Sax was the famous mastering engineer that passed away about ten years ago. They built The Mastering Lab that was one of the first independent mastering rooms. So in order to promote it, they did a direct-to-disc record [in the studio behind The Lab] of Lincoln's music (that one is already in the Registry). I really think they gave away more copies of that album than they sold. The main purpose of it was to promote their mastering business. At that time, everything was recorded on analog tape. [But] when you recorded direct-to-disc, you saved going through two generations of analog tape, and only one pass through the console. So the clarity of the recording is incredible.

So it was a bit of an unfair test when he gave these to people [his album] because they would hear this incredible clarity that they would never be able to get on their record mastered on analog tape. But that's what got the ball rolling, and Lincoln just enjoyed doing it because he enjoyed arranging and whatnot. So they did a second album, and then a third one, and the third one is when Doug asked me to engineer it.

That was the most fun I'd ever had in the studio.

With direct-to-disc recording, in three days you've got an album recorded, mixed, and mastered. You can't beat that. And so when I went back to "normal" recording, I felt like I was in slow motion.

Lincoln was a great arranger, but his music was not exactly the most contemporary. So I got the idea of producing [an album] with a vocalist, and I told Doug about my idea. It took about a week to talk him into it, but then it took him two months to talk Lincoln into it. Lincoln had no desire to do it. He said, "Wait a minute, this isn't really a record label - it's just for us." But Doug said that I had a great idea and finally sold him on it.

So, it obviously happened. Interesting point is at that point in my career, I'd only worked with two artists that I knew could walk up to the mic on the last song and give a real performance. The first one was Barbra Streisand. I had just done three albums with her, and I knew she could do it. So I called her manager, but he was literally, "Go away, kid, you're bothering me." So that was that. Well, I had also just done some vocals and mixed three songs for a new artist on Motown, and that was Thelma Houston. I was blown away with her vocal abilities, and quite honestly, the sound of her voice as well. It was a much more high-fi voice than Barbra's. So I went to Suzanne De Passe [at Motown] and worked out a loan out agreement and that's how that came about.

LC: You kind of touched on this, but it's very different producing in the Sheffield way than it was in a regular studio. Tell me some of those differences?

BS: The biggest difference is, for a normal album, you would spend 10% of your time in pre-production and 90% of your time in the recording studio. With a direct-to-disc, you have to have everything worked out to the nth degree up front. So we actually spent 90% of the time in pre-production and only 10% of the time in the recording studio. That's the biggest difference. Everything has to be arranged to the nth degree so that we could just get in there and get out.

LC: How did you amass the musicians to back up Thelma? Did you know them already or did you audition or how did that go?

BS: People of my age group will tell you that I just picked, literally, the best band I could get, the absolute best. You could never get a better one at that time. We had two of the best drummers, two of the best percussionists, the two best guitar players, six great horns, six background singers, [and] four phenomenal keyboard players. I knew that the pudding had to have the highest ingredients, so that's what I did. I put together the best band I possibly could.

LC: How long did that take?

BS: It didn't take that long for me to decide who to get. What did take a good amount of time, oddly enough, was to get a date that all of them could make it. And that was a bit difficult. Even more difficult was the fact that we had a problem like a month before the original session date, and I had to call everybody and cancel them. I should say postpone it and then had to go through again finding a new date—three full days--that everyone would be available for.

LC: How did you go about amassing the songs that Thelma would sing on the album?

BS: Well, it was a combination. I found some. I found the title song, "I've Got the Music in Me." It was from a Kiki Dee album. Then, funny enough, I would go on a year or two later to produce Kiki for Elton John's label. So I had that. The song "Don't Misunderstand," Suzanne sent that one

over. So it was just a little bit of all kinds of stuff. There was one from our arranger, Michael Omartian. He wrote an instrumental called "The Dishrag," which is actually a rag. And the funny part about that is about 10 days before the session, Michael called me and said, "We have to do another song." I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I can't play my own song. Since we can't punch in and fix mistakes, I don't think I can play it perfectly". Realize that once you start the lathe, you're going to do one whole side of the album. He said, "I've practiced and practiced and I can't do it." And I'm going, "Oh my gosh, what will we do now? We've got to come up with something." And I went to Doug and told him and he talked to Lincoln and got back to me and said, "Have him transcribe the thing onto paper." I had rented a tack piano for that song because it was a pump bass, old-fashioned rag that Michael had written. He was just afraid he couldn't play it without making mistakes. When we walked into the session for that song, I'll never forget the look on his face when we set the paper up on the upright piano. And Lincoln sits down and says, "So how does it go?", and proceeded to play it near perfectly from reading it the first time. Omartian just went bug-eyed. He could not believe it. So Lincoln had pulled it off beautifully.

Another instrumental on there--and this is a cute story—is an instrumental I wrote. Michael was supposed to finish it, but he couldn't do it. So someone else finished it, and it's different than I had originally imagined it, but it came out great. About a dozen years ago now, a young rapper named Lupe Fiasco rapped to a song on Jay-Z's album. And I guess after that Warner Brothers signed Lupe. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, I got a call asking to make a sampling agreement for my instrumental. And, lo and behold, on the first album that Lupe puts out, it's on there. He sped it up a little, put a thang on it, and he and Jay-Z rapped over it. I don't know if Lupe found my song, or Jay-Z found it, or it was one of their friends. Whoever it was, they found my song on that direct-to-disc album 30 years later, sampled it, and they both rapped over it. When I've told this story since then, I always say, "And, for some reason, I've never been called to write another rap song!"--Until a year and a half ago when Sony called me. There's another rapper, Kaytrinada out of Canada, and he did a similar thing. It's a different version but the same idea using different parts of it. So, now, my song has lived on in the annals of rap. What can I say?

LC: That must make you feel good, that, right? That's fun.

BS: Yeah. Obviously completely unexpected. Who would have ever thunk it?

LC: For this technique, direct to disc, was everything that Thelma sung in the studio put on the disc? Do you have any outtakes in this method or no?

BS: Here's the thing: normally when you go in to make an album, you start recording different songs. You may not be starting with the complete final record like we were forced to, but you start at least recording the basic track. You want to cut several takes and you think, you can always want to go back, or at least I do, after you get the one you think is the best. So just to make sure, when everyone's gone you go back and listen, to make sure that it got better over time. But you're basically picking the best track of just one song. Well on a direct-to-disc, first of all, you're picking the performance of the whole album. That's very difficult. And the other thing that most people don't quite realize is that on a normal record, when mixing, every time I pull up the piano, it's the exact same piano part with the exact same dynamics. If I mix it for four hours,

every time I pull up the piano, it's always the same. It's like that with the vocal, with the drums, and so on. Everything has been captured. It's recorded. But with direct-to-disc, you do a pass, and the sides are about 15, 16 minutes long. And then you take a little break and do another pass. And it's not exactly the same. The band will be playing it close, but the dynamics aren't going to be the same. The sound is very similar, but dynamics especially will change. Thelma's vocal performance is likely to be very different. When you have a real singer that gets a performance going, it's how they feel it when they're singing it. The most important thing in picking the master take are the performances of all the songs. After that, the mix comes into the selection as well, so sometimes it is very difficult to pick one whole side as the master. And one of my favorite stories of that album was on the second side. We were going along and everything was just smoking. I was even happy with my mix. Thelma was killing it, the band was playing great - there was nothing the least bit weird going on. We got to the last song, which was the Beatles' song "Got to Get You Into My Life". We went through the first two verses and the chorus line, did the horn interlude and, then, there's no vocal. I pushed up Thelma's fader and all I hear is a very apologetic, "I'm sorry." Thelma had locked up and forgotten the lyrics at the top of the third verse. And of course as the producer, what do you do? I hit the talk back and said, "That's okay sweetie, you're sounding great. We'll get it this time." I refer to that as the "one that got away." But the one we got right after that was really good as well.

LC: I think these sessions must have been absolutely nerve-wracking for you and her and the musicians. Because you really couldn't just start over again. I guess you could, but it wasn't what the point was.

BS: Like I said, you'll start the whole side again in 15 minutes. It's kind of funny because, it wasn't that nerve-wracking for me. Fortunately, as I said, I had been through this before but just as the engineer. But being the producer and the engineer did add a whole extra level of pressure on me. But having done it before, did make it easier. I'm telling you, musicians of that caliber-- I don't think anything would faze them. They played every take masterfully. They were just the best of the best. And I never noticed anything about Thelma being the least bit nervous, except for locking up and not remembering the first lyric of the last song. But she seemed cool as a cucumber.

LC: I got to interview her last week. She said she loved recording that way because it was just like giving a live performance.

BS: As a singer, she's really got it, and as you probably know, most don't. We've been using studio wizardry for years to make people sound better than they are. And now with auto-tune and such, it's just kind of a joke in a way. But it is what it is. We don't complain. But when you know who you are like she does.... and I don't know if she told you in the interview, but when I called to tell her about the Registry induction, she said her two favorite albums that she ever did were the very first one with Jimmy Webb and this one this I did with her. That made me feel great.

LC: What does it take to be a good engineer?

BS: I talk to kids in schools and stuff, and of course, the business has changed so much in this regard. But I personally think that being a musician would be a big part of it. I think anyone can

learn how to capture the instruments, meaning learn how all the technical stuff works, what different microphones sound like and whatnot ... learn how to place them and use them in that context. But when it comes to mixing, all of my favorite mixers are or were musicians. In addition, they have a God given gift. And that's what I found out many years ago. I really think I have a gift for balancing music ... like a conductor for records. I started as a keyboard playing musician, and popped as an engineer so quickly that I was soon working with the best keyboard players in Los Angeles. And much to my dismay these days, I gave up playing; the console became my instrument.

LC: Tell me a bit about Lincoln Mayorga. I was very fortunate that I got to interview him a few years ago. In fact, it was one of the very first interviews I ever did on behalf of the Library of Congress, and he was lovely, he was great. Can you tell me a bit about your memories of him?

BS: He was just very reserved -- no ego whatsoever. A very, very gentle man. Hard to rattle. I'm kind of boisterous. I move quick. I like to get things done and all that kind of stuff. He's a lot more chill. As my wife always pointed out, he had very soft hands. I guess he must have had great hand lotion. But, seriously, [he was] the consummate musician. Just the real deal. Remember the song "Love Letters (Straight from the Heart)" [by] Ketty Lester? That was Lincoln. He played the piano and I believe he arranged it. So he had some history in pop music, but he was really a classically trained pianist. And that was his heart. But his partner Doug [Sax] was really the brains behind Sheffield. I miss him all the time.

LC: I assume you have fond memories of this album? Was it received well when it came out? Did people get it, so to speak, when it came out?

BS: Absolutely. Within a year or 18 months of its release, it was in every hi-fi store in the country and soon thereafter in many parts of the world. With a hi-fi system, the weakest link is almost always the source. So if you have a better source, the cartridge they're using, the amplifier, speakers ... everything is going to sound better. That makes it easier for them to sell equipment. I've had a lot of people write me over the years and say, "I sold a lot of hi-fi gear with that album." A couple of people commenting on the NRR announcement on social media have just said it as well. Maybe the strangest thing to me about this audiophile album is that three people have contacted me over the years saying they are front-of-house mixers for live concerts, and they use the album for setting up their house sound systems. One is a big time front-of-house mixer, and an old-school guy, for sure. He uses all analog equipment, no digital consoles. He uses the album when he's on tour to set up the hall for a concert. I just spoke to him two days ago to tell him about what's happening with the LOC because I knew he'd find it interesting. By the way, when I say he's big time, for the last 18 years he's been doing the Rolling Stones' [concerts]. So before a Rolling Stones' show, you might hear Thelma singing in the house for him to make sure the sound is good. He told me on that call that, right now, he's rehearsing in Los Angeles for the new Guns N' Roses Tour. It just cracks me up but he really appreciates the sound quality of this album.

LC: Did you have a chance or did you want to work with Thelma again?

BS: I didn't, and I certainly would have liked to. I started two times on pre-production for a second Thelma album, but Doug told me to hold off. He wanted to design better electronics first. To say I didn't agree with everything Sheffield did would be a major understatement. And Motown was Motown ... they did things their way back then. Prior to this album, I had mixed two or three records for Motown, but they would never give me a proper credit. The credit would say, "Engineered by: So-and-So [a Motown engineer]", and then "Special thanks: Bill Schnee." Suzanne De Passe called me right after Thelma's record came out to record the "Marvin Gaye Live" album. I went in to meet with her and said I had two requests ... one, that the credit on the record would read, 'Recorded by Bill Schnee.' Second, I wanted a shot at mixing it. If Marvin didn't want to use my mixes, that would be fine. But I at least wanted a shot." Well, one out of two isn't bad.

LC: What did you get?

BS: I got my engineering credit on the record. Interesting, however, is about 30 years later, Motown had been sold and there was a woman in charge of special projects. She called me up and said, "There's an old album I want you to remix." I said, "Okay, what is it?" It was "Marvin Live in Oakland." I said, "Well, I recorded that." She said, "I know." I have no idea why they did that. I've never heard of something like that happening before ... a successful album being remixed almost 30 years later. But funny enough, I finally did get to mix it. Unfortunately Marvin had passed away by then, so he never got to hear it. And in continued "what are they thinking" Motown logic, the album with my mixes sat unreleased for 20 years. It is finally just come out now for the album's 50th anniversary. So my mix is now out on all the streaming platforms.