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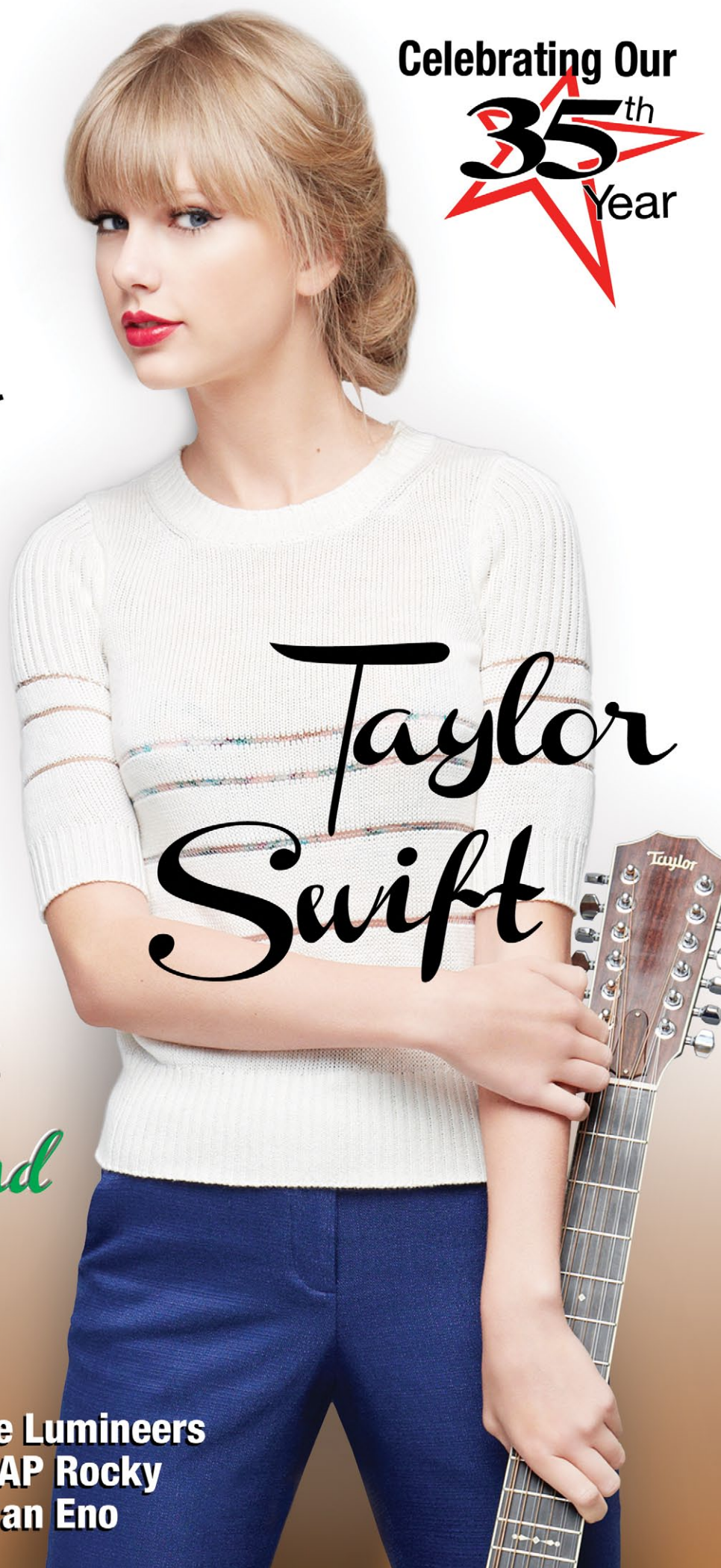
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PRODUCER CROSTALK

Zack and Kenneth



(l - r): Cody Carson, Kenneth Mount and Zack Odom

Producing in the Shadows of Atlanta

By Rob Putnam

Zack Odom and Kenneth Mount—known collectively as ZK Productions—write, mix and produce from Vintage Song Studios in suburban Atlanta, GA. From the start, they worked together on 8-track recorders in basements. In their late teens they interned at Atlanta's Tree Sound Studios and soon began to look for bands to produce on their own. They've since worked with artists including Jimmy Eat World, All Time Low and Ludacris. The album that proved pivotal for them was Cartel's *Chroma*.

What the duo enjoy most is collaborating with artists on songwriting. "The co-writing is so much fun," Odom says. "Often bands come in with a song that's already done but they don't have exact ideas for where drums or guitar parts will go. The basics are finished but they rely on us to put all the production behind it. Over the last year, our work has been about 60 percent production, 40 percent songwriting."

"We started producing around 2004 or 2005 and we've never worked in the city," he continues. "We're more comfortable safety-wise being in the suburbs. A lot of studios in Atlanta have been robbed. We try to keep our place discreet. Only we and our artists know where it is."

For any producer, impediments to solid sound are always lurking in the shadows. But a band once presented the pair with an altogether different challenge; one that was highly counterintuitive. "They wanted to go for a raw and sometimes lo-fi overall vibe," Odom explains. "We love to hear things sound great so that was going against the grain a little. We were very excited about making that record but at the same time it was challenging to go 'Ok, I specifically do not want that to sound good.' We liked it in the end but it took a lot to get there."

The team mixes most of what they produce. Fortunately for their mastering engineers, they remain mindful of mastering concerns; of not turning over a heavily-compressed mix. "We try to get it exactly where we want it," Odom says. "But we try to give the mastering guy a lot of room, level-wise and as far as dynamics. We use Ted Jensen [Sterling Sound], Tom Baker [Precision Mastering, Hollywood] for our heavier rock stuff and Michael Fossenkemper [TurtleTone Studio] for a lot of indie-budget stuff."

Although advances in recording technology have made things eminently easier in the studio, the pair finds that sometimes those advances have hidden costs. "Software and hardware updates and things that no longer work with each other: that's always a major frustration," Odom asserts. "In the last five years, that kind of nonsense is the biggest thing we've had to deal with."

"Sometimes when we update things, they become incompatible," Mount adds. "You had something that worked perfectly before it was updated."

Potential complications aside, they don't avoid new gear. "We just updated our studio with a new SSL mixing console," Odom says. "We have the AWS 900, which is like a combination of the analog realm and being able to control Pro Tools. There are so many things they've incorporated into this console that everyday we're learning new things. And we use our vintage UREI Silver Face 1176 compressor all the time. It's got that nice, aggressive rock sound."

Recent projects include new works by We Are the In Crowd (Hopeless Records) and Set It Off (Equal Vision Records). Upcoming projects include Waking Heroes and Cartel. "They had a couple of people do mixes and then did a blind-listen test," Mount recalls. "They picked our mix over the others."

The three most important things they've learned about the business are:

- We have to remind ourselves that when an artist brings in a song, it's their baby. It's so easy to jump in and make changes. We have to remember to respect their ideas.
- Being efficient with our time. In the songwriting process, we don't want to get hung up on finding the perfect drum beat before we write the melody. That all comes later.
- Remaining aware that we don't want everything to sound the same. We have to think how we can make each artist sound unique.

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