

interview **stephen
harris**

the waiting game

PRODUCER & ENGINEER STEPHEN HARRIS

Stephen Harris is the man behind some huge recent hits by U2, Santana and the Dave Matthews Band. Sam Inglis finds out how he made it big.

"I was determined not to have a hit record too early in my career," insists Stephen Harris. "Sometimes, you can be in a room with a band, and however you record it, it was going to be a hit record, because the band are hot and the song's amazing, and my mum could've recorded it. Then A&R people see your credit and you get thrown all this work, and you can't cope with it. It probably took me 10 years longer than it could have done, but I wanted to make sure that when my time came I could cope with it and know that I was worthy of it."



It's one example of the patience and thoughtfulness that have enabled Harris to realise his ambitions in a notoriously competitive business. Many people attempt to follow the same classic progression from teaboy to assistant to engineer to producer, and many fall by the wayside. It's a hugely difficult path to take, but Stephen Harris wouldn't have it any other way: "I have this real concern about how kids can get into the industry these days. It seems to me that there's a lot of courses springing up around the country that are taking kids in, and providing them with an education in the music business, or becoming a recording engineer. But it's a tough industry to get into, and I think it should be made tough. There's only a dozen openings in major studios, studios that are worth going into, that will give you an education. It still has a sort of fantasy kudos about it, it's a bit of a dream job. And it is great, but what concerns me is that these kids are taking these courses when they could be making other decisions in life. I've been told all my career if you're not at a certain place by the time you're 21, or 25, you should give up, because it's a shit job when you're not doing well. There have been times when I thought I was going to give up. I was looking at selling water filters for a living -- but it should be tough. And also, to be successful, you do have to have talent -- not everyone can do it."

Jazz Odyssey

Stephen Harris's own path into the producer's chair began at school, when an 'O' Level Music trip to the Old Smithy studio in Worcester hooked him. He joined a local jazz orchestra solely because they were about to go into the studio, and found himself on the path to full-time employment: "We were in a studio called Zella Studios in Birmingham -- it's not there any more. I sussed out the owner, spoke to him, and got a Saturday job, then I got a full-time job just before my 16th birthday. It was a great place, a local place. This is

why I think I've had a brilliant education in the studios, compared to assistants in big studios in London. The sessions would start at 10 and finish at six, and I'd stay till nine or 10 o'clock, and my boss would stay there with me, and he'd put me up a tape and I'd learn to mix. Within a week I'd done two mixes, and learned how to edit tape, and stuff like that. And in the studio, all the house engineers were used -- freelancers didn't come in. There were two engineers there, and one got the sack just before my 17th birthday, and the other one died of a heart attack, and so I was just thrown in at the deep end. One day I'd be doing a bhangra band, the next day I'd be doing a punk band, then I'd be doing the speech for a porno film. I must have done more drumkits in the first three years of my engineering career than people have done in a lifetime. I don't know how I got through that first year -- I couldn't keep a snare drum on tape for more than 20 minutes! I made loads of mistakes, but I was responsible for my own sounds really early on, and I was learning. You can be told that you have to put vocals through a Neve EQ or an 1176, but knowing *why*... Assistants in London these days are there for five years, and they do one session a year if they're lucky. They don't get enough hands-on experience, and I feel very lucky that I started in an out-of-town demo studio. It was a demo studio, but at least I was in there making mistakes, learning what microphones work best where and how, and it was a great education."



Many engineers would have been happy enough to secure a full-time job and responsibility for their own sounds, but Stephen was ambitious and recognised the need to move on. "I saw a job interview in *Studio Sound*, 'Engineer wanted for residential in Yorkshire.' I wrote off, and they said 'Oh, you haven't got enough experience,' but then I got a letter from the owner saying 'If you bring your own band up, we'll only charge you £100 a day, and you can come in and engineer it in our studio.' So he wanted to try me out, but he also wanted me to bring the band in and fill the studio for £100 a day! A great scam. And out of about 160 people, I was the only person who took it up, who got off my arse and got a band to get up there and go in the studio and pay the money. I did a day and I got the job."



Harris had now secured a permanent position at a respected residential studio -- the Slaughterhouse in Driffield -- but had no intention of resting on his laurels: "I got really paranoid, because that was the late '80s and I was really paranoid about having no SSL experience. At the time, Clearmountain was at the top of the tree, I was reading about SSLs in all the magazines, and I felt like I was being left behind. And through contacts that I met in Yorkshire, I was offered a job at Swanyard Studios as an assistant, taking less money. I would have been working as an assistant, and they said 'There's no way you'd engineer for at least a year and a half.' I'd been an engineer since I was 16, but I was so paranoid I thought 'I'll take this for the SSL experience.' Anyway, I came to my senses and didn't take it."

Fortunately, Stephen was by now ready to enjoy his first hit: "A week after that a band called the Little Angels came into the studio, and we did a song called 'Radical Your Lover' which went to number 28, and hey presto. I got on well with the band and the management, and I hung on to their shirt tails, and they took me to London."

The Top Of The Tree

Harris's perseverance has seen him through some difficult times, to the point where his

production, engineering and mixing skills are in demand all over the world. He has a production Grammy for his work on 'Love Of My Life' from Santana's record-breaking hit album *Supernatural*. With Steve Lillywhite, he mixed U2's number one singles 'The Sweetest Thing' and 'Beautiful Day', and engineered and mixed the Dave Matthews Band's multi-platinum album *Before These Crowded Streets*. British successes have included Kula Shaker's hit album *K*, which he co-produced, engineered and mixed, and hits by Britpop contenders Hurricane #1, the Longpigs, Rialto and the Bluetones. His most recent projects have included producing a forthcoming album by Counting Crows and mixing Natalie Imbruglia's comeback single, while he beat off strong competition for the job of producing the debut album by hotly tipped US songwriter Ben Kweller.

Of all these projects, it's one of the more minor commercial successes that Stephen considers the most important to his own career. "If there's one record that I had to take with me to show what I'd done, that one record would be the Longpigs album [*The Sun Is Often Out*]. I found myself in a situation back in the early '90s where I was forced into the freelance world, because the studio I was working in went up in a fire. I ended up doing lots of death metal. You have to eat, and it was a good education and I learned all about metal guitar sounds and stuff like that, but I never listened to it and I never liked it. It got to the point where people would be saying 'Can we drop in on the words "flesh, mutilation, carcass?"', and I was getting really despondent. I got a call from Kevin Bacon and John Quarmby, and they said 'Do you want to engineer this band called the Longpigs?' And I listened to the demos, and it was a massive breath of fresh air. It was the turning point in my career, when I got into the indie thing when it was all happening in '95-'96. It's a great album, and I think it's a crying shame that the Longpigs never went on to make it big. We did that on an Amek Angela, and we mixed it manually. It was great fun."

Smoothly Does It

The attitude Stephen has formed through his experience is that engineering is not so much about technical wizardry and showing off as about getting a clean signal path and making sessions run without hitches. "For an engineer, I'm pretty anti-gear. A new piece of gear comes along and it takes a long time for me to give it the time of day. It's not that I get off on the gear, it's more that I get off on the simplicity of the right signal path. I don't really sit there and work out new effects, that doesn't interest me. I like gear to be invisible. If I can hear the gear working, if I can hear a sound trying too hard, there's something wrong with it. Everything should be comfortable. I know what I like, and I think you'll find that most engineers fall on the same pieces of gear. We all know why a Massenburg EQ is great over a mix -- why does everyone put a Massenburg over a mix? It's the only one anyone puts over, most of the time. All the assistants in London, if you go 'We'll put an EQ on the mix', they'll go straight for the Massenburg -- Bascombe does it, Stent does it, everyone does it. And why? It's because we've all tried all the different EQs over the mixes, and the one we all like best, the most musical, discreet EQ is the GML. That's why everyone falls into the same opinions over microphones, compressors, like Fairchilds. A good engineer gets those decisions quickly and makes everything speed along, and gets sounds really quickly.



"I've done some stupid things. I spent nine days on a guitar sound, for a band called Fear Factory. This guy Dino the guitarist had an amazing guitar sound, and capturing it was absolutely imperative. The first album we did, it took half an hour. But the second album it was like 'Well, we've got to get it better.' He had this

amazing Marshall stack which had been heavily modified, and I was testing every 451, and every 57, and every possible combination of speakers, single speakers, noting it all down. Anyway, we got a sound that we really liked, and then we had to move studios a day after, and start all over again!

"You spend all this time getting a tone, and then at the mix you just get 10kHz and turn it way up! It's ridiculous. It's not the sonics of the sound that's important, it's the character of the player that's being picked up. When you do recording, you don't record a great guitar sound, you record the guitarist who's playing that guitar. You can record a really nice, bright piano sound, but if the player's playing in a nice, moody, dull, way, you want a dull piano sound. You've got to think of things like that. Picking up the character of a player is the way you record.

"I go through phases over the years. I remember going through a year when I was just into mono, nothing stereo -- the poor people who had to work with me and deal with my fixations! I remember for a long period of time I didn't use any reverb, I would just record everything with the ambience. And now, I won't use anything but EMT plates. If a studio hasn't got an EMT plate, I won't use it!"

People Skills

The move into production, for Stephen, is a matter of being able to make the sessions run as smoothly on a personal level as on a technical level. "Every session I've worked on, people say to me 'You make us feel so comfortable.' I've never had a really bad session. Somehow, I just eradicate it, and that's the producer in me, just being able to make people feel at home. It's people skills.

"The only producer I'll engineer for now is Steve Lillywhite. Steve's one of the greats, and I just love the way he works. He's a real need-to-know guy. He doesn't care what mic I put on -- if it doesn't sound right, he'll ask me to change it -- so you get a free rein in what you do. And also, he's a great balancer. He skipped engineering -- he went from tape-op to producer, I don't know how that happened -- and so he tape-ops himself, so you don't even have to touch the recorder! You get the sounds on the first day, and then you just sit at the back reading a magazine! It's a really easy gig, and I like the way he works. He gets the best out of people and he doesn't get bogged down. There's no Pro Tools around on sessions. I only just got him into RADAR, which is my favourite."

Death By Pro Tools?

"When Pro Tools first came out I tried it, and I hated the fact that you started looking at the music," declares Stephen Harris. "People started saying things like 'That looks out of time to me.' What the f**k does that mean? It *looks* out of time? It *sounds* all right! I love out-of-time things, I love out-of-tune things. On all my favourite records there's bad tuning, there's bad timing, there's noises all over them, there's clicks and pops -- it's the stuff that gives records depth. I can even listen to stuff I've done, where I've recorded every note, I was there for every second of the recording and every second of the mix, and I still listen to them and go 'Hello! What's that?' Something new to your ear speaks up, and that's what gives stuff like the Beatles, or *Pet Sounds*, or any classic record depth. It's better that it's not tidied up. When a record's been absolutely Pro Toolsed to death, it's laid out on a plate for you, and it might be an amazing record, but there'll come a day when you cannot listen to anything more, because there's nothing else for the record to give. The whole modern music scene is in danger of going that way too much, and the recordings have no life to them. They're good records, but they stop short, and you can't take anything else from them. It's just soul, that's what it is, and I don't want to make records that way.

"I'm scared of Pro Tools and the fact that I can, and I have done, sit behind a computer and compute the shit out of something that was sounding great. Ten minutes later you realise that you've fucked it

up, it's shit, and you might as well go back to the first bit. I think there's a lot of inexperience in thinking that you're doing the right things in recordings. You go through your career and you listen to your mixes and you think they sound thin, or dull, or that there's no 3D-ness to it or life to it, and you think 'I'm trying my best!' But then you work with artists who take you up a level and their records sound good, and you realise that it's not the gear, it's mainly issues that you concentrate on while you're in the studio. A bright hi-hat, or a great bass drum sound won't make a hit record, and won't make a record fresh. It's all performance, and leaving things in there -- not listening too hard, just feeling it.

"If I could trust myself to use a Pro Tools system and just use it as a recorder, that'd be fine, but I know that if I did I'd be chopping sounds up instead of getting the artist to perform them again. It has got its strengths -- I was mixing a Bryan Adams live album last week, and I had a really brilliant Pro Tools operator, and she made it invisible. But I actually don't like the sound of it. I've done a lot of back-to-back testing, and systems which have got Prism or Apogee converters sound much better. And also, getting the clock source right really changes the sound. For me, Pro Tools running on an 888 interface sounds a little bit 'scared'. It's very difficult to describe sounds, but that's how I hear it."

The Sweetest Sound

Harris is not a fan of Pro Tools (see box elsewhere in this article), preferring both the sound and the tape-style interface of Otari's RADAR digital recorder. His RADAR evangelism came to the fore when Lillywhite asked him to help out on a session with U2, who were planning to revisit an old B-side left over from their *Joshua Tree* days. "I got a phone call from Steve, he said 'I'm doing this song called 'The Sweetest Thing', it's going to take two days -- record the vocal on one day, mix on the other -- I really wouldn't mind your help.' I said 'Fantastic!' Working with U2, how much bigger does it get?"

"I went over, and they've got a great place in Dublin with an old Neve desk, it's a real character studio. They built the studio with a control room and a studio, when they did *Pop*, and they didn't like it, so they just turned it round and put the control room in the studio area, which is much bigger -- and then if they wanted to record some drums, they'd go into what had been the control room. The reason the drums were all a bit dead on the album [*All That You Can't Leave Behind*] was that they were all done in a control room, with the acoustics of a control room!



"So the vocal re-record became editing, then we took off the bass and redid most of the guitars, redid the vocals and the backing vocals. In the end, all we kept was the drums, a bit of the bass, a clap track and a keyboard part. We were working on analogue, and I had it copied, because I didn't want to work on the original -- it took me ages to find some Telefunken noise reduction, which is what it was originally done with. Abbey Road sorted us out in the end. Eventually we needed to do some edits, and I wasn't going to chop the tape, because it was just too difficult, so I was going 'I really like these Otari RADARs, can I get one of these over and we'll do the edits on that?' Edge said 'We've had a bad time with digital, the last album was done on digital and we weren't really happy with it.' I said 'Look, trust me on this, let me transfer it over and you can A/B it.' There wasn't a RADAR 2 in Ireland, so we got one flown over from London, transferred it over -- Lillywhite had never seen one before either -- and Edge was sitting there for about two hours A/Bing it. They went out and bought two the week after, and they started the album after we finished 'The Sweetest Thing'.

"They're a brilliant band. I wish that I could get every young band I work with, and get them to be flies on the wall in a U2 session. I'd tell them, 'This is how you do it, this is the depth of thought and passion you should put into all your recording.' It's a great privilege to be in the studio with them. It can be exasperating because they work long hours, and they push

you, but that's the best thing about it. They inspire you to do it. It's not so much thinking too hard about it, it's that they're so passionate about it all, and the way they work on instinct. It's good to act on instinct. It took us seven days to mix that track, including all the re-recording and getting the string section in, and Bono listened to it and said, 'That is the best mix I've ever heard of this song, that's it, done. Give me a vocal mic and I'll do the vocal again.' Because what happens is that the track's sounding great, and that inspires him to do a better vocal. The first time I recorded Bono, he goes, 'Well, this is how we do it': big monitors, full blast, SM58. I'm going 'Damn!' But when you put it up, it's part of the vibe.

"When we finished 'The Sweetest Thing', they started the album the week after, and when they bought the RADARs they flew me over because no-one knew how to work them. I thought 'Two days in Dublin at the expense of U2, it'll be great!' And I was lucky to witness them rehearsing and writing. When I walked in they were just trying an idea out, and they said 'Oh, we're just going to be playing for a couple of hours, just hang out.' And what they were playing was an absolutely appalling mess. They were trying to get this idea, and it was all out of time, and it was going on for ever. It wasn't just bad, it was really, really bad. I didn't know where to look, or what to do. I was going 'Is it always this bad?' And it was the most magic thing I've ever been privvy to -- it just clicked, and turned into U2, and turned round into this rhythm section that was the sexiest motherf***ing groove you've ever heard. And they'd got the idea. They were searching for this idea, and they knew it was in there somewhere, and they spent ages doing it and it suddenly clicked. It's that gel of people that makes music amazing.

"Then Steve was doing some mixing on the album, and then he rang up and asked if I wanted to come out for the last two weeks and finish off some tracks, so we did 'Beautiful Day' and 'Walk On'. 'Beautiful Day' took about six days. When I first pushed it up and started getting the mix together, it didn't hit me, I was thinking 'All right, it's not a bad song...' and then I made it too 'rock'. The thing is, when you start a mix, you always try to pzazz the whole thing up, use every trick in the trade to get it sounding punchy and bright and crushed, and say 'Aren't I a brilliant engineer!' Daniel L anois came in, and the look on his face was saying 'That's very impressive, but it's not right.' And I realised that I'd mixed all the music out of it. The beauty of that song is in the backing vocals, and if you listen to the final mix that we did, it's almost all vocals!"

Word Of Mouth

Harris's first encounter with Steve Lillywhite also yielded a massively successful hit album, this time for American roots-rockers the Dave Matthews Band: "Steve Lillywhite was doing the album *Before These Crowded Streets* in the Plant in Sausalito, San Fransisco, and I think he just wanted an

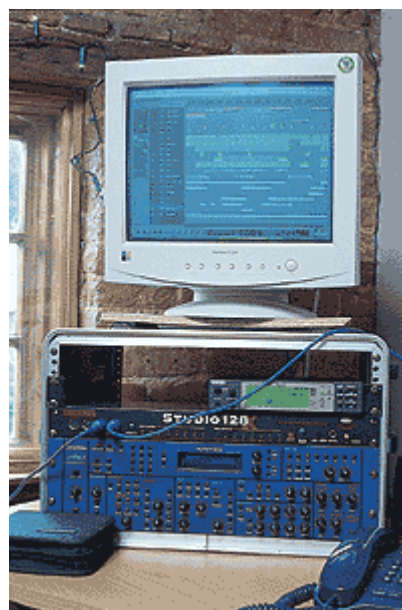
Back To The Future

"Normally, I never use gates on drums -- I think it's a rookie mistake," says Stephen Harris. "If you gate the snare or the bass drum, you're losing the plot, unless you're going for a specific sound. There's no need to gate the snare and get a 'pure' drum kit. The vibe of the drum kit probably comes off the top end that you put on the snare drum! A good drummer balances his own drum kit. I'm all for putting a bass drum on one track and then a stereo pair -- three tracks. I always commit way early -- maybe too early."

However, the value of a thorough training as an engineer shows most of all when you're faced with the unexpected, whether it's a problem in the studio or simply an unusual request from an artist... "I was doing an album with a band called Rialto, and doing some drum recording at Metropolis, and the drummer said 'I want to get an '80s drum sound!' I got a Drawmer gate out for what must have been the first time in 10 years! I was using multiple mics just to add triggers to certain sounds, it was great fun. But if I hadn't had that experience in the '80s, I would never have been able to do it."

English guy to do it, being surrounded by Americans!

"Carter, the drummer, is the most stunning drummer I've ever recorded, and I've recorded a few. He has this drum kit that's so complicated I just looked at it for about half an hour before I even decided how to record it. In the end I decided there was just no way to record this kit and dissect it, you might as well capture it as a whole. For the first time in my life I put four overheads up, very close to each other, because where he sits, there's drums behind him and cymbals over his shoulder, and there's nine toms or whatever. So there was a bass drum, snare drum, overheads, and then just the occasional focus mic. And it was the first time in a long time I hadn't had to rock a drum kit up and get it sucking and blowing, because he plays like a jazz drummer, and Lillywhite said 'Remember, this band don't use electric guitars, you haven't got any electric guitars to cut through.' It's just two acoustic guitars, saxophone and violin. And everyone was going 'Great drum sound', but the only compression on that album, drum-wise, was when it hit the stereo compressor at the back end of the desk. And Steve Lillywhite's lack of compression was a revelation to me. He said 'Let it breathe', and with that sort of music, things just poke out. You control it later on with a fader ride or something, but he'd rather do it with a fader ride than a compressor."



Personal recommendations and word of mouth are crucial to developing a career as an engineer or producer, and the strong relationship Stephen formed with Dave Matthews and his band bore fruit when Matthews was asked to collaborate with guitar veteran Carlos Santana for the latter's album *Supernatural*. "I got a phone call from Dave Matthews begging me to do it, and I was really busy doing a couple of albums in London, two bands on the go at the same time, and I had a week's holiday booked with my family. And at the time, if you asked anyone under 25 who Carlos Santana was, they'd never have heard of him. But when a mate asks you like that, you can't turn it down, so we went into Electric Lady with an engineer friend of mine, John Seymour. And we walked in, and there was just Carlos in there. So I said 'So, what song do you want to do?' and he goes 'I don't know. I haven't got one, really. I was hoping that you or Dave might have brought one along!'"

"So Dave then turned up, and we sat at the piano, and they came up with this song. We flew Carter from Dave's band up from Charlottesville, and then we flew in half of Carlos's band, and we got a session keyboard player in, who's also the producer and keyboard player for the Brecker brothers. On the first day we wrote two songs, so the next day we did a complete setup,

That's Dedication

"The best thing I ever did to get a gig was on the Little Angels' second album," says Stephen Harris. "This was Atari ST days, and at the studio in Yorkshire where I was based they had this thing called Hybrid Arts *SMPTE-Track*, which was an American system which didn't take off like *Notator* or *Cubase*. They had a programmer, but he was in a band, and he was going to have to leave to do his own album, and so the Little Angels said 'We know this guy who could do the programming,' but I was no programmer -- I'd learned how to do a click track and a few string parts, and I'd only learned the Hybrid Arts system. I had an S900, but the S1000 had just come out and I'd never used one."

"It was at the Manor in Oxford, and I went down to meet them and the producer said 'Do you know how to work all this stuff, then?', meaning the S1000 and the computer. And I looked at the software, and it was Hybrid Arts! He was probably the only other person in the country who used Hybrid Arts! I told them I had an S900, and I could learn the S1000 in the two weeks before we were due to start. So I went home, and that night I had a phone call saying 'Can you start tomorrow?' But I got really sick, and I was puking everywhere, and I rang up and said 'Look, I'm so ill I'll have to come the next day.' I was so ill, but I had to learn the S1000, so I got my sister to go to a local music


got all the sounds, everybody live in the studio, no separation -- and we nailed it. It's one of the most exciting things in the world when you see a band like that just cook, and the tape's rolling. The song was very cool, and when they'd finished they went into a big salsa thing which went on for 15 minutes, because they were just enjoying themselves so much. And most of it, except for the guitar and Dave's vocal and some piano, everything else was just that one take. Everything went down live to analogue 24-track with Dolby SR.

shop and rent one! I was lying on the couch learning how to use it with the manual, and she had a microphone and she was singing into it. The next day I went down and I started the session, and that's what you have to do. It's so competitive. That was my first time on an SSL desk, as well; I sat down and I had to make it work instantly."

"I sat in the studio and we were talking arrangements, and there was Dave Matthews, Carlos Santana, the two guys from Carlos's band, who had played with the last Miles Davis band, Carter Beauford, and this guy who plays with the Brecker brothers -- all looking at me for guidance. And for 30 seconds, I lost it. I thought 'This is where you either sink or swim.' I've had a few of these moments in my career, where you just do it and get on with it and be professional and don't show any weakness. And even those musicians still need guidance. You realise that you have strengths that they haven't got, although you can't play the instruments like they play the instruments. And then I pulled myself together, after thinking 'What's a f***ing boy from Birmingham doing in this studio with these players all looking at him?' So I coped, and we got the arrangement together, and it was a magic session. My experience saw me through it."

Stephen is clearly one of those engineers and producers who appreciates the organic qualities of a great band, and he loves to record live whenever possible. Like the Santana track, the Harris-produced Kula Shaker hit 'Hush' was also done in this fashion: "We were in Sound City studios in LA, which was where Nirvana did *Nevermind*. I was freaked out -- I remember sitting on the bog going 'Kurt's been here! I'm on his toilet!' It's a great studio, a great old Neve desk, and they blasted that song down in about an hour and a half -- second take, bit of tambourine, bit of backing vocals... it took me about three attempts to mix it, but they just blasted it down. Live recording, that's where it's at. I think it's my boredom threshold!"

American Sounds

Stephen Harris's fondness for clean signal paths, traditional techniques and well-rehearsed live bands has, unsurprisingly, made him a popular choice for American bands and record labels, and he's spent a good part of the last few years recording in the USA. "I used to be so paranoid about American engineers," he admits. "I used to think 'How the f**k do they get these sounds?' But what it comes down to is just different musicians' styles. American bands tour so much. If you do a tour of England, you can do it in a week, but to tour America, they play for years and years. And they know their instruments, they know how to play well, and so when you record them, their sounds are great, their playing's brilliant. I love English sounds and musicians as well, but in America it's just great instruments in great studios, in great rooms. American records have this sheen and this great bottom end -- but then I listen to loads of American records, and I look at the credits, and there's loads of English engineers there! And then I listen to American records I've done, and they sound American...." 

Glossary

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