

As the recording schedule starts to heat up each year, I'm often asked, "What can we do to make a CD that's on the level of (insert "top tier" group here)?". The answers seem complicated but are often much simpler than you might think. I've been helping vocal groups record for over a decade, and in that time I've had a chance to observe a number of factors - both good and bad - that can influence the success of a recording session and ultimately, the entire project.

In the past I've spoken at length about the merits of effective planning, and aside from that talent is obviously the single biggest variable involved in making a high quality CD. That being said, not everyone is an "all-parts all-star". Budgeting also inevitably plays a significant part in the process, but again, not every group has access to a lot of money.

The good news is that there are a number of things that every group can do to improve their recording experience and results, and they don't cost a thing. In fact, following these simple tips can often save you thousands of dollars and will almost certainly result in a much better end result:

Come Healthy

Sure, it's a simple statement, but these words of advice are so often ignored that it makes me wonder what some of my clients are thinking! Here's the breakdown: unless you sing bass (and do it well), going out to party the night before recording is likely going to hurt your performance in the studio the next day. If you're in college, partying kind of comes with the territory, of course. But I am amazed at how often clients will not be able to sing more than a few notes and then blame it on a night of debauchery. If you're going to party, consider talking with your Music Director (MD) about assigning your part to someone else (see (Wo)Man Up!).

Along the same lines, it seems that each year more and more of my clients show up to record while sick. While I respect the dedication, coming to the studio sick doesn't do yourself or your group any favors. No one wants to get coughed on (least of all me!), and sick singers are generally unable to sustain (or often even meet) their usual level of excellence. Throw in the added variables that come with studio recording, and, more often than not you end up with awaste of time and money, and a whole lot of frustration to go around. So, Come Healthy; if you're sick or hungover, please stay home, get well, and practice your parts. We'll catch you in the next session!

Know Your Music

This sounds simple, and it is. So simple in fact that music directors often wrongly assume that everyone knows their specific part well if a song sounds good in rehearsal or at a gig. Hence, they don't spend the time needed before recording to properly prepare for the session. Parts tend to "evolve" within a section, following something akin to a game of Telephone; over time, what you put on paper can end up being sung quite differently by different singers. Taking the time to run the parts in sectionals prior to



recording can often quickly expose small discrepancies in parts and save you (and your engineer) a lot of headache and frustration, not to mention save you money.

Occasionally I will have MDs who end up literally teaching parts to their singers while on the clock. While this can sometimes give a cleaner and more accurate result, it usually ends up decreasing an album's quality because it cuts into the time we would otherwise use for the fun and creative parts of recording. Furthermore, not knowing your part tends to frustrate your engineer and shows a lack of respect for their time. All other things being equal, making your engineer frustrated won't help the process or the end result! The bottom line: Know Your Music. Drill those parts, and drill them in the manner in which you'll be recording (i.e. by part), before you ever step foot into a studio!

Overdo It

Vowels, enunciation, and energy. Three areas that, from my standpoint as an engineer, consistently need more focus. And by focus, I mean *intense* focus, both in preparations and during recording. What might seem "weird" or "over the top" in a vacuum tends to be "just right" in the studio. Intensity is one area of recording where skimping should never be an option. If you mess up by being "too crazy", it only takes a second to try it again. On the flip side, trying to create intensity during the mixing phase is an expensive (and often futile) process. The best recordings I have produced, heavily "produced" or not, come from interesting and intense raw tracks. Whenever possible, take the extra time needed to capture well-executed, high-energy tracks during the recording phase. It'll pay off in spades later on.

I often tell clients that the weirder they *look* while recording, the better their tracks will *sound*. For pure vowels, *really* overdo the facial movements that differentiate an "ooh" from an "ah". For more consonant or complicated rhythmic syllables, make sure your execution is crisp, even to the point of your face hurting a bit for a few seconds after you sing. Remember that as parts aggregate, even a little lack of energy will start to become more noticeable. On the flip side, and especially if the material you're singing is more about the attitude than the execution, don't be afraid to sing with abandon; we can clean up anything that really needs it afterwards, and we'd much prefer a high-energy "messy" performance to a more careful, "cleaner" one. If you're running the session as a producer or MD, don't be afraid to demonstrate for your singers - sing the parts for them at about 150% of the intensity where you want them to be, sometimes more than once, and you're likely to get about 85% of what you wanted from them, at worst.

Breath support: if you can't make it through at least 1-2 measures comfortably, you probably need go back to the woodshed. I'm surprised at how often clients have a hard time singing more than a few beats without needing to take a breath. Vocal exercises can help with this, as can aerobic exercise - swimming is particularly helpful. Since you'll probably be recording a few measures at a time (see Focus Your Resources), you won't need to sing an entire verse or chorus in one take, but it's nice to have some air in reserve to help regulate your tone and delivery and when necessary, to Overdo It.



Focus Your Resources

If this all sounds a little demanding, it is. Making a great record takes a lot of work! When you're done recording (either as the singer, producer, or MD), you *should* be tired, out of breath, and perhaps even a bit frustrated. That said, plan to pace yourself. It's perfectly OK – and in fact quite necessary - to set progressive, attainable goals when making your record. A great way to make sure you set up your singers for success is to Focus Their Resources by breaking up the recording into 1-4 measure increments (this also applies to more macro, CD-related goals, by the way, something I'll touch on in a later entry). Your producer can help you with this, especially with overlapping sections, but it should be fairly easy to determine how best to divide a singer's part into manageable chunks. Doing it this way can yield some amazing results and will instill confidence in your singers on playback, making each successive recording session that much more fruitful.

Embrace Your Role

Every group has their superstar, "could-sing-every-part-in-a-pinch" members, and these folks are certainly a vital resource to utilize when making a record. However, just as important are the "role-players" -- the rock-solid bass who can't read music well, the power alto who has some intonation issues but can make a spot-on vocal guitar, the amazing vocal drummer who might not have a terrific solo voice -- are all essential cogs in machine. A good MD and producer will be able to analyze each member's strengths and weaknesses and assign recording parts accordingly, with an eye towards efficiency as well as art. Sometimes this might mean taking people off their "normal" parts and assigning them to a different one; don't fall into the trap of "I sing this part normally so I have to record it that way". That's perfectly fine. Similarly, don't restrict singers to just one role or part. They might have a hidden talent that could be a major addition to a given song or to the entire project. Be sure to talk with your group before recording about everyone's role in the project so that your sessions can run efficiently, with a minimum of surprises, and so that people aren't put on the spot in front of their peers unnecessarily. Ultimately, you will find that with the proper preparation and delivery, members of your group will come to Embrace Their Role in the recording process, no matter how big or small that role may be.

(Wo)Man up!

As much as you try to plan and prepare for your recording sessions, it's important to stay flexible and be prepared to make decisions on the fly – some of which may not be the "easiest" choices to make. You hope you'll know your music, come healthy, overdo it, focus your resources, and embrace your roles, but sometimes a member of the group may have an off day or may not be able to execute their part as well as needed in the vacuum and spotlight of recording. That's OK - it happens to everyone at some point. What's important is how you react to it, whether as a singer, MD, or producer. Keeping in mind



that it's your group making this CD and not you alone, when the situation calls for it, (Wo)Man Up! Be mature enough to admit that someone else would be better suited to record a given part - or even an entire song. The momentary sting your ego may feel will be forgotten when you hear the end result and reap the rewards of a true group effort.

These are just a few non-technical (and free!) details that you may find helpful when making your next record. Share them with your group and let me know if you have any feedback or tips of your own. Best of luck!

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