Producing yourself-- WDYRSLA spinoff by yep
Started 2-23-09

So I've been thinking about where to go next in the "Why do your recordings sound like ass" thread in this very forum, and there is still an awful lot of ground to cover with the technical stuff, but more and more I have been thinking about the role of the PRODUCER in the record-making process, and how that diverges from the role of then engineer and from a lot of the technical stuff.

So this is a kind of spin-off, where I will respectfully ask participants to steer clear of the technical nitty-gritty (although there will certainly be some overlap) and focus more on the procedural and "big picture" stuff. I suspect this could be a more free-wheeling and open discussion, because everyone has something to contribute.
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First off, there is a lot of confusion about what a producer actually DOES, which is understandable, because it is in fact a pretty vague role, although a hugely important one in most modern commercial records.

The producer is usually the most highly-compensated individual in the record-making process. The producer usually gets a 2% royalty, which is slightly less than a typical band member, except the producer gets paid BEFORE all the deductions taken by the band's manager, accountant, and breakage fees and all that. Moreover the producer probably works on a lot more records than the band does, so yours is just one of three or six or eight records the producer might make that year.

Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the producer, if there is one, is likely to be the person most trusted by the record label. The A&R rep might ASK you how it's going, but then he meets with the producer to find out how it's REALLY going. So the producer is swinging a pretty big dick, as my old friend Musashi would put it.

So what exactly does a producer DO, to earn this kingly status, and kingly chunk of your record sales?

Well, first off, a PRODUCER is different from an engineer, even though they both often sit side-by-side behind the mixing console (for one thing, the engineer is paid by the hour, and is usually lucky to be making minimum wage, so that's one difference). Some producers do their own engineering, but this is by no means a requirement.

This is where it starts to get really confusing for a lot of music biz novices-- after all, we WRITE and PERFORM the music, and the engineer RECORDS and MIXES the music, so what else is there for anyone to do?

HOHOHOHO! Coming up.
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The producer is a sort of "project manager" for your album. The producer plans the whole project, budgets time and money, keeps everyone focused and productive,

and makes sure that the thing actually gets done more or less the way it was meant to be done.

I can hear the outcry now: "What a racket! These people actually get paid more than the artists for doing THAT?!? Who needs 'em? Why won't the record company just let US keep the money and buy a calendar and write up a f'n schedule ourselves?!?"

Answer?… http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Democracy

It sounds like a joke to say it, but one of the producer's primary functions is simply to keep the band from breaking up or drastically changing their sound during the record-making process. And scoff all you like, but the likelihood of a band breaking up before completing an album is HUGE. MASSIVE. Probably a majority, without some coaching and guidance. For real.

And even worse (from the record company's POV) is that there is some gene in musicians whereby, as soon as they have the opportunity to finally bring their musical vision to the world, the vision that they have slaved over and nurtured through years of all-ages tuesday shows in front of twelve people and months of sterno ramen dinners in the back of a van, they decide to CHANGE IT. They decide they no longer want to do hard-edged blues rock about partying, instead they want to do socially-conscious rap-metal. Or afro-cuban-infused instrumentals. Or acid jazz over techno beats. It sounds funny, but this kind of stuff is RAMPANT. And from the record company's point-of-view, it's a DISASTER. It's like investing all your savings in Microsoft and then having Microsoft decide to take all the capital and become a vegan communal farm in Vermont.

Musicians are a bit like revolutionaries-- they are often more built for fighting than for winning the fight. You or someone you know may have experienced a little something like this when you first started computer recording-- what starts out as a desire to record some ideas for straightforward songs you've written turns into an open-ended odyssey of reinvention. Imagine if your copy of REAPER came with a rented house in Beverly Hills and a $200,000 advance. Maybe you'd have your own little "Chinese Democracy" start to emerge.

So what does a producer actually do? And how can thinking like a producer help you? That's what this thread is here for…

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 Producers are generally people who have some practical experience in the record-making process. Some are engineers who kind of expanded into it. A lot are former artists, themselves, or studio musicians. Some started as club owners or band managers or studio managers or tour managers or some other practical aspect of the creative world.

The first producers were basically straight-up mooks, A&R men who churned through artists like a line cook turns out patty melts. They were middle-managers for industrial-era record companies, and their job was managerial, to book the sessions and to get the musicians in on time and so on, like a shift manager. In time, it became clear that some producers were producing consistently better-

sounding and more salable records than others. Sometimes this was the way they matched up talent, sometimes it was their own creative contributions in arrangement or engineering, sometimes it was the vibe or dynamic they created in the studio, and sometimes it was just their ability to pick winning material or performances.

Whatever it was, it amounted to a sort of "golden touch" where some producers were basically churning out hit after hit with pretty much any artist the record company threw at them, while others plodded through one bland recording after another, no matter how talented the incoming artist.

The golden age of the producer was probably pre-Beatles american pop, where different cities and different record labels each had their own prized "sound" made up of a local cadre of stable musicians, studio engineers, songwriting and arrangement teams, and record producers were the ringleaders of the whole thing.

Sort of like present-day Hollywood directors, who may or may not have any specific talents in cinematography or screenwriting, but who make the whole razzle-dazzle spectacle happen. Some of them actually operate cameras and edit film, but a lot of them just sit in a chair and "direct" a rather massive process that still reveals a unified artistic vision.

Phil Spector was probably the most iconic "golden age" producer, being part-arranger, part-engineer, part studio manager, part talent scout. But a lot of producers had none of these technical skills, or entirely different ones. When the Beatles came along and ushered in the era of name bands, supergroups, and "stage full of stars," the visible role of the producer began to recede into the background, to the point where the public widely perceived the movies to be made entirely by cameramen and actors, so to speak. But this was mostly just a perception thing.

Modern-day hip-hop and R&B probably most forthrightly showcases the producer's artistic fingerprints, but make no mistake, the producer almost certainly plays a massive role on the sound and gestalt of your favorite records of any genre. An engineer will point the mics at your instruments and record an accurate and flattering representation of what they sound like, but it is the job of the producer to get you from what you DO sound like to what you COULD sound like, if only you had a million-dollar producer.
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 So here's how all this starts to come into play for home recordists in a practical sense.

99% of all human endeavor is accomplished through prioritization more than inspiration. The entire science of management can basically be boiled down to prioritization. First things first, and second things not at all. If you can get through the first priority, then the second priority will become the first, and so on, until the only things left are fairly small.

So the first aspect of prioritization is deciding what is really important and focusing on THAT. This can be a little tricky and counter-creative when you're doing stuff like writing and practicing, but actually producing a modern studio record is a big

project with a lot of details and technical aspects, and if you just allow inspiration to drive the process, there is a strong likelihood of having inspiration run out or meander before the project is done.

Ironically, this is often particularly true of the most accomplish-able stuff. The more that you have the big idea stuff in order, the bigger the niggling details become, proportionately. This is where the SECOND part of prioritization comes into play, which is deciding when to fish or cut bait. A short-hand way to put it might be to say that it is a matter of deciding when good enough is good enough.

But a more nuanced and accurate way is deciding when whatever you're working on is close enough to finished so that it is no longer the first priority. Sometimes that means that the specific material you're working on is pretty good, but that other aspects are still rough and need to be sorted. Sometimes it is a matter of acknowledging that you're driving down a dead-end street, and that it's time to cut bait.

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 One of the great challenges of working alone is that boredom tends to creep in the closer you get to perfection. The consequence of this is a tendency to keep changing direction every time you get close to something finished. The idea that seemed brilliant two weeks and eighty takes ago starts to sound lame and tired by the time you finally start getting it right.

A producer's primary job is to prioritize. To keep the project on track. To keep everyone focused and to steer the decisions regarding fishing vs cutting bait.

This does NOT mean that the producer is a Nazi who is going to take over your music and force you to sound like something you're not. The best producers are very good people, dedicated music fans who know how the process works and who are on your side 100%. They are supportive, enthusiastic fans who are also honest and willing to be critical when it's due. They become like a fifth member of the band, a coach and mentor who can guard against both the self-doubt as well as the delusions of grandeur that can affect all musicians.

They guard against distractions, protect you from the record label, take care of logistical and technical details, and create an environment where you can concentrate on creativity and music, in a focused, productive way. They know enough about the process to rule out dead-ends, and to direct you towards methods and approaches that will bring out the best aspects of your creative vision.

They know when to go for an authentic, raw, lo-fi sound, and when to pull out all the stops and go for a full-blown, lavish, major-label 128-track production with strings and gospel chorus and 20 tracks of guitar and percussion. They know when you're getting burnt, and to call time out and move on, and they know when you need the extra push to get through a creative roadblock. They can negotiate disputes between band members in neutral, diplomatic, but authoritative ways.

They warn you before you get bogged down wasting time, and before you get carried away with aimless wankery. And they do it in ways that are supportive and inspiring, not dictatorial. Their reason for being is not a cynical contempt for the

creative process, but a reverential devotion to it. And they take care of all the details. Their intervention is not tampering with your music, it's allowing you to focus on it, and to present it in the best possible light, in a thousand critical ways that have little or nothing to do with actually playing or recording the instruments. It is pretty safe to say that nobody else in the record industry is going to be as purely dedicated to the quality of your record as the producer (after all, she's getting paid on the royalties!)

So, the challenge to the self-producer is how to focus and prioritize without that guidance and shelter. That's what this thread is about, and all ideas from all comers are welcome. As far as I know, there has never been any coherent guide to doing this aspect of the record-making process yourself. I have some ideas, but here, the experiences of real-world home recordists trump the methods and techniques of studio pros. So questions, ideas, thoughts, and ramblings are welcome.

More to come.
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Prioritization happens every step of the way, with every element of the project. It starts with deciding what the scope, time, and budget are going to be. Then you decide how those resources will be allocated.

e.g. three full days and eight half days to record and mix a 5-song demo. This might be a project over two weeks, where you "book" three consecutive Saturdays in your home studio with four after-work days per week.

So we might say the first Saturday is four hours to get all the instruments and mics set up, and then 4-6 hours to cut live rehearsal tracks of the ten or so songs under consideration, two or three takes each.

Day 2,(The first after-work session) is spent with the whole band selecting which five songs sound best (tightest, fewest mistakes,most "complete") in the rehearsal tapes. Those are the ones that will be quickest to record, so those are the ones that make the cut.

day 3 track drums and bass. record the bass DI along with drums, using the scratch tapes as a click. aim for 4-5 takes of each song. No editing or pre-mixing, just tracking. everyone else can stay home and practice with the scratch.

Day 4 rhythm guitars, double-tracked, 4-5 takes x2 for each song. Everyone else stays home.

Day 5 rough edits and pre-mix of the rhythm tracks. Just the engineer, comping the takes and knocking them into shape.

Day 6 (second full saturday) is tracking vocals. everyone else stays home.

Day 7 comping vocals and rough pre-mix. engineer only.

Day 8 full-band review and meeting. Decide whether intros or choruses need sweetening, whether punch-ins or overdubs are needed, etc.

Day 9-10 record sweeteners, solos, overdubs, punch-ins, synth pads, whatever, comping and pre-mixing as you go (this is just cleanup and ear-candy, whatever you have time for).

Day 11 (full saturday, final day) Final mix. Engineer should have at least four hours alone before the band shows up for last-minute input. This is just a demo, after all, and the main thing is to get it done.
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 The above schedule allows for some time off, and also leaves a few in-between days that could be used to keep the project on-schedule. It's a fairly manageable and realistic pace for a respectable demo of songs that are already fully written and performable by a real band. And it goes by fast enough that there is not really any time for second-guessing to creep in.

Inch by inch, everything's a cinch. Yard by yard, everything is hard. If you break it into easily-manageable chunks, it flies by.

If the songs are NOT fully-written and rehearsed, or if the only parts written are acoustic chords and the only band member is one do-it-all guy or gal, then the planning has to be much better. That is where pre-production becomes a much bigger deal, and sometimes the best approach is doing demos BEFORE you do the actual demos.

More later.
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From Marah Mag

Quote:
Originally Posted by yep
If the songs are NOT fully-written and rehearsed, or if the only parts written are acoustic chords and the only band member is one do-it-all guy or gal, then the planning has to be much better. That is where pre-production becomes a much bigger deal, and sometimes the best approach is doing demos BEFORE you do the actual demos.""
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Hi yep. That seems a point worth emphasizing.

It occurs to me there might be something even more important that has to precede the kind of prioritization, budgeting, and scheduling you've outlined: Having a clear idea of what the recordings are for, and what they're sposed to accomplish.

This would seem especially true if you're the do-it-all gal or guy. If that's the case then you may well be… are likely to be… functioning not only as songwriter and performer, and producer, but also engineer and assistant engineer and assistant's

assistant. You're also likely to be more competent with, and more interested in, some of those functions than with others.

Under those circumstances, prioritization might include the difficult task of deciding just where you're going to compromise, even on such important things as sound quality, mix balance, and so on. Do you just push ahead and complete as many songs as you can, as well as you can, knowing that the songs are great but the recordings really lack, or do you wait until you're competent enough to, in fact, do-it-all? How long should that take? And what will it cost, not only in dollars but, more importantly, time and creativity?

That's a level of prioritization that I think many home recordists never make. That's what leads to the search for the perfect plugin and the scouring of forums for tips and tricks and how-tos, and reinforces the idea that you're somehow supposed to do it all.

Does the songwriter/singer/rhythm guitarist/big-picture-concept person really want to become a recording engineer conversant with compression ratios, Fletcher-Munson curves, and how best to mic the Marshall next to the bed, or is that just the undertow that pulls her down?
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Back to yep

 Marah,
Those are exactly the kinds of questions that I think often go unasked in home recording books and threads.

There is nothing wrong with planning to write and figure stuff out in the studio and the production process. In fact it's commonplace. But it's made exponentially harder if there is not a plan or a set of clear milestones or objectives.

How vague or open-ended those goals can be and still be meaningful depends a lot on the circumstances and the competencies of everyone involved. So it's perfectly legit to go into the process with just a riff and some lyrical ideas, and to say, for example, that day 1 will be spent figuring out the rough arrangement, i.e. the number and length of verses and choruses. And that might be just a process of singing nonsense lyrics over a drum loop, just to kind of stake out the boundaries of the song and see how long it should be. And then day 2 might be spent constructing some bass loops to drag around and start to build a song as though you were a band trying out ideas in a rehearsal room.

Or maybe it will be trying to extract a chord progression from the riff idea that suits the test vocal. Or maybe it will be a hybrid back-and-forth process, or a structure-building day of sorting out where bridges, solos, turnarounds and breakdowns will ultimately happen. Maybe you'll simply copy the structure of a favorite song and all it takes is five minutes to block out the rough framing. Maybe it takes several days of experimenting with ideas before a fluid and natural structure takes shape.

But the main thing is to have a reasonable and realistic sense of how important

each step is, and how much time you're going to spend on it before you move onto the next step. Otherwise you risk getting caught in the trap of spending two months creating one perfect measure of of a single riff, that is basically just an over-produced recording of the same idea you had in the first place, and you're right back where you started.

This is the kind of process that a good producer can guide and direct. Without a producer, it is something you need to figure out for yourself. This requires having a pretty realistic sense of your own strengths and weaknesses. You HAVE to have some faith in yourself and in your own creativity and ability to solve problems that are currently unknown. It can be a little scary to pencil in "write chorus" on the calendar for day 3, but that's exactly the kind of thing that a producer does, because they DO have faith in your ability to work out a chorus in a day, or a week, or however much time is alloted.

And the thing about all the compressor ratios and fletcher-munson curves is that they're actually not that hard or complicated if you only have to deal with one thing at a time. If all you have to do today is to set up mics on a drum kit, and all you have to care about is getting clean, good-sounding tracks, then it's a pretty easy job if you have the mics and stands. And then you can set the drum sounds completely aside until two weeks from now when it's time to pre-mix. And then you'll have a whole afternoon where the only thing you have to do is to is to get the kick and snare to complement each other, check the phase relationships, and set up a reverb bus. Anybody can do that if that't the only thing they have to do. And so it is with every step of the process.

Where people get bogged down and overwhelmed is when they try to write the song, record the drums, change the guitar sound, experiment with drum samples, mix the drums, and change the bassline ALL AT ONCE.

The role of the producer is to make sure that you are working on the important stuff, and that you are spending a proportionate amount of time on it. Juggling is easy if you only have one ball. If you can sit down with a calendar and put on your producer hat and plan a project made of manageable chunks, then your creative self will be free to focus on each piece without getting distracted by the big picture. And at the end of it, the big picture will have taken care of itself.

The hard part of the "demo before the demo" approach is not letting that FIRST demo turn into a sprawling, open ended process. The reason to do the pre-demo (or "scratch" as I tend to call it) is just to get your thoughts in order without having to worry about sound quality or awkward transitions or embarrassing flubs that you don't want anyone to hear. It's the equivalent of the rehearsal tapes. Once you have that rough mumbled vocal, a riff, and a couple of bass loops, it's time to stop pre-production and move onto the actual production.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by Marah Mag
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Let's come back to this, because it gets to the heart of why I broke this thread out.

The technical stuff is actually NOT that important, and it's NOT that hard, and you DON'T have to know it. Anymore than you need to think about triads and modes and harmonization rules to write a good song. All you need to get good sound is ears, and focused critical listening. Understanding all the technical theory is just a bonus. And if you miss something, and get the reverb predelay wrong or set the compressor ratio to 2.7 when it really should have been 4.2, nobody is every gonna notice or care. And it certainly will not diminish the artistic merit or commercial potential of your music. Of course we want everything to be as perfect as possible, but at the end of the day it's the painting, not the frame that counts.

Super-advanced engineering and production CAN sometimes turn mediocre material into a potential hit, but its absence does not prevent a basically adequately-recorded song from being a hit.

A band goes into a studio and spends eight months and half a million dollars with teams of assistants and drum techs and editing specialists and comes out of it sounding like a soulful burst of inspiration that was captured on a moonlit veranda one summer night. That is a factory-produced illusion, same as when an action star jumps off an exploding building onto a helicopter while negotiating a billion-dollar business deal with perfect hair. Don't get me wrong-- the talent and creative vision are real (whether they come from the artist or from the producer is another question), but the fulfillment of that vision came about through a systemic and controlled process.

To stretch an analogy to breaking point, a lot of young musicians sit down on the veranda on a summer night, pour a drink to fuel the inspiration, and then are disappointed when the results come up short. And they start to get it into their heads that they must need whiter teeth or better hair gel, to mix metaphors.

Especially if you are not a real band that actually rehearses real songs in real time in real rooms, you really need to put the effort into production to keep the results from sounding homemade. It doesn't have to be hard. It should be fun. But it can be intense and sometimes frustrating.

It's really important to not lose sight of what got you started, and what you love about music in the first place. Be sure to spend time away from the computer, just playing, for pure enjoyment. And then make your time at the computer count for something. Trying to record every idea as a perfect "take" is a recipe for soul-sucking discouragement.
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The other day I listened to an audio book in my car. From a producer/song writer who scored 600+ golden and 100+ platinum records. And he expressed just the same. He said, the bigger bunch of theory (including composing and arranging!) he learned way AFTER having had a dozend top-10 hit records! He just had used his ears and changed stuff until it sounded right. If I remind correctly he expressed that all the theory he learned afterwards just made him faster, not necessarily better. And he mentioned that he is a 100% self-educated person and that this is the better way to go.

That is just the OPPOSITE of what clever studio gear salesmen are telling us. Am I right?""
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Yes and no, I think.

Better gear makes it a LOT easier and faster to get the best results. And so does understanding the theory and mechanics of audio. But if you have the time to tweak and tweak and revise and refine, then I bet a targeted $2,000 home studio with a bunch of free plugins could eventually get sonic results that are absolutely competitive with a commercial studio. But bear in mind that a commercial studio could probably get sonic results in a week that might take a bedroom studio months to get.

But the other side, and specific reason why I started this thread, is that sonic results are not necessarily all that critical to a great record. And way too many home recordists get severely bogged down in sonic minutiae that they don't really even understand, and lose sight of their own creative talent and vision.

They pick up a shiny new mic and a fast computer and an awesome software package and enter the process all excited and inspired to track the songs they've been working on, and three months later, they're glassy-eyed, huddled over the computer, downloading eight thousand free plugins and reading preamp reviews and "8 tips for fat bass tracks" and asking whether they need a UAD card and whatever. And they get stuck churning out uninspired, (badly) over-produced recordings that suffer from multitrackitis and preset overload.

It's not that the gear and the production value don't matter, it's that the quality of the recording is usually not nearly as important as having a vision worth recording in the first place.

If I had to pick a single favorite musical recording to listen to, it would probably be the song "Karate" by the Emperors. And it's a terrible recording. It's actually not even a good song. The lyrics are hokey and corny, the changes are hackneyed, the melody is almost nonexistent, all the instruments and lyrics are muffled and distorted and hard to make out, the bass is unbalanced and the song and mix are both extremely static and repetitive, but the energy and the enthusiasm of the performance get me every single time. I can listen to it over and over again and it

just puts me in a great mood, every time.

On the flipside of that is another song that I can listen to over and over again and never seem to get bored of, which is the Dropkick Murphys' "Shipping up to Boston." This, in contrast, is a brilliant piece of production. It's not really even a proper song, basically just a guy yelling the same verse (that doesn't even really work) over a single chord. And it would flat-out fail the solo-singer-and-piano test of good songwriting-- you'd just sound like an asshole if you tried it at a party. What makes the song is the outstanding production value. The massive, dynamic, and brutally focused instrumentation and production arrangement create a grand hollywood spectacle of a guy yelling in a monotone about his wooden leg.

I referenced the two examples above not because they are empirically important stuff that everyone should love and study, but because both show completely different sides of how a great recording can be made. One is a record that gets by on the sheer energy and inspiration of the performance. The other is a carefully crafted and staged studio production. Your own record collection probably has countless similar examples. You might not even like either of these songs, but you can probably find examples of your own.

Whether a record will ultimately be worth listening to is not a test that has binary "matters/doesn't matter" ingredients. "Karate" would probably not be improved by adding strings and tin whistle and all the production sizzle, and "Shipping up to Boston" would almost certainly not work as a "three guys in a room" demo-quality recording.

Anybody who says "what really matters is X" probably doesn't know what they're talking about. Either that, or they're just talking to have something to say. Nobody really knows. It's fashionable to think that formulaic hits can simply be manufactured, and maybe sometimes they can be, but somewhere in the chain is somebody who can find the elusive "it" that speaks to people.

The best producers might or might not actually know anything about music or about audio in a technical sense. Some of them can't play an instrument and don't know how to work a tape recorder. But they have an ear for "it" and the ability to bring it forward, the way that some actors can be captivating to watch even if they are not actually that good-looking or intelligent.

There used to be fairly settled guidelines for good songwriting. In the days of Tin Pan Alley, the standard was clever lyrics, sophisticated but singable melodies, and rich, multi-layered changes. The composer HAD to fit all the artistry in the sheet music, because that was all they had.

Then the electric guitar came along, and allowed anybody with an idea to have direct, immediate control over not just the notes but the SOUND. A complete novice with three chords could make the instrument wail, howl, moan, scream, roar, whisper, or sound like a helicopter or a machine gun. And they could fill an entire auditorium with sound and these real-world performances could be captured and broadcast.

Now we have music where the artistic merit and creative vision might have nothing to do with what's printed on the score. How could you write a meaningful lead sheet

for a Skinny Puppy or Run-DMC track? And increasingly the "live" sound is actually an elaborate reconstruction of studio trickery. It's not like you can really sit around the campfire with an acoustic guitar and bongos and play an Enya or Wu-Tang Clan song.

Trying to distill this stuff into rules or systems is like trying to hold onto water. The tighter you grab it and the more you try to pin it down, the more it slips through your fingers.

My point is not to say "this matters" and "this doesn't." You're the only one who can decide what matters for your music. But if you FAIL to decide, if you can't set out a vision and then come up with a method for seeing it through, then there is a very high likelihood of just getting lost in a horizonless ocean of possibilities.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by hux
OK yep - come clean, man. who are you, really? does the label know you're spending so much time on here when yer sposed to be working?

great stuff, these threads are going to be linked for years. I hope somebody's archiving this stuff.""
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HOHOHOHO!

Thanks for the compliment! I gave up audio engineering as a profession years ago, because the money sucks and the music business is basically dying unless you're doing car commercials. I am nowadays mostly a real estate investor and a designer of industrial controls and building automation systems (understanding signal circuits comes in handy in other fields than audio!).

I occasionally take on audio projects but they don't keep the mortgage paid. The way the music industry is going these days, you could almost certainly hire a much bigger name than me.

Seriously, if you want to work with a top-flight producer, give them a call. You might surprised at how accessible and flexible they can be. Steve Albini is famous for taking on worthwhile projects based on what they can afford, instead of what he could charge. And in the piracy era, a lot of pretty famous names are living at their mom's house, looking for anything that will pay the studio rent (this is not a joke).

Frankly I am a *very* below-market name who would have to charge above-market rates to make it worth my while to take on a full-blown production project. But like most audio types, I am always amenable to working with acts that fit my approach, schedule, and tastes, whatever they can afford, given that the level of service and the time commitment is somewhat commensurate with the budget (i.e. I can't quit working for three months to do a pro-bono hobbyist project).

But honestly my first tip would be to just call up the producers listed on the back of your favorite albums. Chances are, most of them do not have six-figure day jobs, and you might be surprised at how approachable they can be.
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…My original goal was to create non-embarrassing versions of my own songs for exposure rather than aiming at grand productions. Only after I proved to myself that I could do that did I up the ante a bit and involve some side musicians who made the whole thing sound better…

…I now have a massive list of audio things to investigate, but they didn't become dead-end detours (which, given my normal attitude to techie stuff, is a minor miracle).""
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I think that these are some of the key concepts at work. Not necessarily that you have to start with "low expectations," but that manageable and realistic expectations are far more likely to result in a finished product of some sort. Especially if they are not a wildly-moving target.

Going back to prioritization, part of prioritizing is deciding what is important, and part of it is deciding what is immediately doable. Personal finance advisers will often encourage people to pay off small loans first, even if they are lower-interest, just to get them crossed off the list.

Similarly, there are some tasks that you can do in one sitting, and that are closed-ended with a known outcome (e.g. tracking a part that you already know and can already play all the way through). There are others that might be somewhat hazy or complex, or that may have a variable outcome based on what you find along the way (e.g. tracking a part that is yet unwritten, or only half-written or that you're not entirely happy with or able to play, yet).

The latter kind of thing is where the project-management aspects of production become key. Everything that has ever been done could probably have been done a little bit better. The question is whether this project aims to get 99% of the way there, or 70% of the way there, or even just 20~30% of the way there. This last might actually be a perfectly reasonable goal for a simple singer/piano demo or live recording.

The danger with setting unrealistic goals is that they often end up with a couple of 99% elements, a couple of elements that are unfinished or that contain embarrassing mistakes or omissions, and some that are just never even started. Moreover, following the old 80/20 rule, the first 80% of the results come from the first 20% of the effort. A typical band recording with a drum loop, a rhythm guitar track, bass and vocals probably sounds about 80% finished to most listeners. But that could all be done in a day if that's your only goal. It might be another week of work to write solos, edit breakdowns, get a complete, varied, multitrack drums with

fills and frills, overdub and layer vocals, add sweeteners and production value, and mix in earnest. And it could take forever if you're trying to mix and re-write each element as you go.

Spending that extra week to polish and perfect the results is fine, but it should be structured. For example: how much time do you want to spend on drum fills? If you HAVE a brilliant drummer who can tear through the whole song in one pass and never play the same measure twice and never loose the groove even while continuously varying the intensity, great. But if you're trying to construct the drum performance that stops the world in your spare time, then it might take a lot of years before you move on to bass. Or it might result in a lot of time spent on overblown, ridiculous-sounding drum mania that has to be scrapped when you realize that all that effort spent working one-measure-at-a-time produces drums that sound stupid in toto.

The best goals to set are probably ones that slightly exceed your current ability. Because the reality is that you WILL get better and figure things out as you go, and you will often be surprised at how much better things start to sound as you actually get closer to completion. Those solo tracks that sounded lame and naked start to sound a lot better in a good mix.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by simpsongb
OK...I've been lurking in the shadows for moths on these two posts. superb stuff really.....and while the technical post is fascinating, this post is where its at-for me! From getting started to getting done seems to take forever...

So what do I take away from that day and the year since during which I have hardly finished a d*&^*m thing? First, I need to stop thinking so hard and start playing. I play acoustic and sing. I occasionally add string backgrounds when I can "hear" them, but mostly after the fact. No percussion...just acoustic and vox. Its amazing how hard I can make that.

My only concern with this whole discussion of the producer role is that it could increase the delay to start. I can see myself thinking I need to have it all planned so that I don't waste time...""
=====

In part I think you have answered some of your own questions.

The whole idea and role of a producer is something that becomes relevant as you make the transition from creative exploration to the business of actually producing a record.

So, no, you should not stop to plan out creativity, and when you get a killer idea or burst of inspiration you should just record it. Similarly, when you have a big chunk of half-finished ideas and incomplete songs, you may find that you can turn a lot of them into finished records just by setting aside some time to systematically connect

the dots and close the loops in a more workmanlike if possibly slightly less sublime way.

I don't think you necessarily can or should try to structure inspiration, but sometimes, after the inspiration has blown its load on creating the killer guitar lick or the brilliant chorus or whatever, you still need a bassline and a few more verse lyrics and so on to actually fulfill the original creative vision. That process of managing the completion is the producer's role.

In business, there is a concept commonly called the "deliverable." A management team might get together for an open-ended brainstorming session, or might commission an exploratory study of market analysis, or might set aside a budget for R&D exploration of some new technology or whatever. But good managers will always attach a "deliverable" to the project. It may be a question that is supposed to be answered, or a decision that is supposed to be made, or a cost estimate that needs to be finalized, or whatever. The point of the deliverable is to avoid the conundrum of a million-dollar study of an issue by a panel of experts who ultimately conclude that the issue requires further study.

By way of example, the CEO might tell her top marketing, engineering, product-management, and procurement people to prepare for a three-hour meeting next week to decide on a strategy for entering the touch-screen market. And in that three-hour meeting, all the experts can argue their sides and voice their opinions and doubts and whatever, but at the end of it, the CEO expects to have enough high-level overview to decide on the "next step." And maybe that decision is that in order to get into the touch-screen market, the company has to develop a $150 touch screen with X feature set. So the CEO then assigns twelve engineers to spend four weeks with a $200,000 budget to determine whether it is possible to develop a $150 touch-screen. And in four weeks, everyone meets back again to hear their findings and to decide whether to commit to a product line, or whatever. And maybe there are setbacks, maybe the engineering team says that they can do a $170 touch screen, or that they can do one with less features, or that it's not possible right now but it might be possible in September when the next generation of widgets comes out or whatever. But the point is that there is always an outcome, and always a next step, even if that step is just a decision that has to be made.

You can do this in a home studio as well. By a assigning a fixed-outcome deliverable, you make yourself accountable to actual milestones and results. Maybe they don't always come out as good as you hoped. Maybe sometimes you get nothing done and have to re-write the schedule or re-evaluate whether your goals are realistic. But if the alternative is spending 18 months tweaking guitar riffs with no end in sight, then even a bad schedule is better than none at all.

Finished is always better than perfect. A company that has a million imperfect $150 touch-screens sitting on the shelves at Best Buy is infinitely better off than a company that is endlessly tweaking a perfect product that nobody can buy or use. A record that is only 50% as good as it might have been is still infinitely more product than a perfect record that doesn't exist.

The role of a producer is not to schedule imagination nor to hold up creativity, the role of a producer is to tie up the loose ends and actually make a record out of your musical imaginings. HOW the producer achieves that goal is irrelevant, as long as

the goal is achieved. If you don't like the scheduled example above, then you don't have to use it. That process is not right for everyone.

A good manager or leader is not necessarily someone who just creates a process on paper and then demands that everyone in every circumstance adheres to it, a good manager is someone who manages the real-world variables and who sets priorities in achievable, meaningful ways. It's not about being the "boss" and telling people what to do and then blaming the employees if they don't deliver-- that's the sure sign of a bad manager. A good manager is someone who prioritizes not based on abstractions, but based on good assessments of the real-world variables and required resources.

The production process for a gritty hip-hop MC is going to be vastly different than the production process for a cinematic Celine Dion record that requires coordinating orchestras and professional arrangers and session musicians, which is going to be vastly different from the production process when working with a self-contained band that is coming into the studio with finished, self-contained songs, which is going to be vastly different from the process of working with a dance/pop act that is coming in with neither songs nor instrumentation.

If there were a simple recipe or template, there would be no need for a producer. The producer is just there to keep the project making forward progress, and to make sure that the overall process is built around deliverables as opposed to endless studies that all require further study.
_____

 A couple of generic tips for getting things done in the studio, that you can take or leave as you see fit:

When actually "Recording" (as opposed to jotting down or working out ideas), play and sing slower and softer than you normally would, and focus on the basics of just getting down a performance that is in tune and in time.

Don't try to kick everyone's ass with your performance awesomeness. You will kick ass, or not, according to your talent and ability. Trying to push yourself for the extra 10% since this is "for the record" is likely to result in mistakes, sloppiness, and frustration. Push yourself to give 110% during rehearsals, so that you can give 100% during recording easily and fluidly. Mistakes and straining stick out in a recording far more than killer licks do.

Moreover, blowing your load right at the beginning makes the rest of the song boring. Start out just by competently and clearly presenting the material, and you will find your groove and start naturally kicking ass by the end of the session. If you start out turned up to eleven, then where do you when you need that "one more"?

Practice, rehearse, and re-write the core material BEFORE you sit down to record. Then trust it, and trust yourself. When you sit down to actually make the record, pretend that it is someone else's song and that you're just a hired musician who is there to play the part. Do not start second-guessing the material or the sound or the instrumentation-- you have already worked that stuff out and made a decision, and your decisions were good ones.

The headphones and the mics and the VU meters and the constant re-tuning and multiple takes have a way of making your beautiful, emotional, inspired songs feel like work, once it comes time to actually record them. This will lead you to believe that the material is bad, or that the sound is bad, or the instrumentation is bad, or that you just suck. Forget all that stuff. You're here to do a job, to record this part, so just record it, and do a good job of this specific task that is in front of you right now: to record this part clearly and cleanly, as it is written.

The tracking process is just brick-laying. Every step might seem trivial and meaningless, but if the architectural design was good, then the result will come out good. The bricklayer's job is not to second-guess every brick and location and placement, nor to try and guess whether each individual brick placement is really the best contribution to the overall beauty, the bricklayer's job is to lay bricks.

When you have finished all the tracking, and taken a couple days off, and you come back and listen to the rough mixes, everything will sound completely different than it does when you're on take 27 of the chorus after re-tuning and adjusting the headphone mix and input levels two dozen times. So just lay your bricks, and focus on getting them clean, straight and level.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by ringing phone
Yeah and sometimes even posting your stuff on internet forums is a recipe for disaster too because we all know how internet forums like that work don't we!?

It's all the big, hey here's my song, will you smoke its pole…then I'll smoke your song's pole when you post yours.

So it's like…let's give oral first on the proviso that we'll reveive oral right back.

Ok I did you…now you do me

Am I being too course?"
=====

Getting feedback is a tricky business. Especially when you're seeking it from friends, family, or fellow musicians, all of whom are likely to have an agenda, bias, and/or shaded presentations related to courtesy, ego, etc.

Praise responses will often be overly generic, while critical responses will often tend to be along the lines of "you should try to sound more like my favorite band" which is just as unhelpful. I am certain that (insert name of greatest musical artist ever here) was criticized by musician friends for not sounding more like X

The most objective kind of feedback you can get often comes specifically from asking for better-than/worse-than comparisons. E.g. instead of asking, "what do you think of these songs?" ask "Which of these songs is your favorite, and which is

your least favorite?" or "Which instruments do you think sound the best-recorded?"

Similarly, asking pointed, "neutral" questions will often get "between the lines" answers. E.g. something like, "I'm not sure about the production/recording quality of the vocals, do you think they're too quiet?" or "I'm thinking of re-recording some of the vocals, any advice on which songs to start with?"

You may get responses like "well, they sound a little too yelling" or "it sounds sort of flat and hard to understand." By asking them to comment on the recording quality, you have absolved them from the discourtesy of criticizing your talent, and some of their responses might unintentionally reveal or confirm things about the underlying quality of the music and performance.

If you can set aside defensiveness and insecurities, and guide people through a specific and analytical assessment of your music, you can often get a clearer perspective on what other people are hearing. Which is not to say that you should necessarily be making music for anyone other than yourself, but sometimes outside input can help to clarify your own perceptions, and might help you to make better decisions.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by Lawrence
…That's why I think the most objective feedback is totally in the blind. People usually speak the honest to goodness truth when there is no immediate fear of offending or discouraging anyone. …"
=====

Not only that, but perhaps the most frustrating and common "blind" reaction to competent indie acts is indifference. Not "I would buy it if it had a better guitar solo," not "you need a new singer," not "too repetitive," not anything actually useful like that, just a shrug, and change stations to see what else is on.

I don't think anybody out there really knows what makes good music, what makes them respond to music. How is cousin Eddy supposed to listen to your record and tell you how to become a star?

"Would you pay money for this music?" "No, but I might download it on Limewire if my iPod wasn't already full."

The frustrating thing about slipping in your CD at a party is that very probably the dominant reaction will be that people continue having their conversations, assuming the music is at all an appropriate fit.

If you want usable feedback and input, my suggestion is not to put people on the spot by broadly asking them for their opinion, but instead to "bring them into the studio," in a virtual sense. Ask them detailed and specific questions in a context and tone that makes it clear that you're not looking for approval, but for input. In other words, instead of setting the table and lighting candles and giving them a plate and

then hovering nervously over them to watch their reaction, ask them into the kitchen and offer them a spoonful from the pot and ask whether they think it needs salt.
_____

That's a pretty good way to describe it.

There are vast hordes of artists who are "good enough" in some sense or another. That is, they are "good enough" that they *could* have a shot at a music career, usually with a few buts or ifs attached. Maybe they don't play live, maybe they are a great songwriter but a weak performer, maybe life obligations or whatever get in the way, maybe they have talent but require training/practice/coaching to refine it, maybe there is a charisma or looks deficit, whatever.

Production and recording techniques won't change any of the above. Neither will feedback, at least not in a direct sense.

What a good producer (or good assistance in the form of advice and feedback) CAN do is to help ensure that your records are the best representation of your art, and that shortcomings in the record itself do not hamper your ability to connect with an audience, whether for money or anything else.

Seemingly simple decisions such as what kind of material you're ready for, whether and when something is too simple or too complex or too repetitive, whether you're really hitting those high notes as well as you think you are, whether it's really a good idea to include that instrumental jazz number on a rap-metal album, and so on.

A good producer or pointed feedback can help you make the best decisions regarding arrangement, intros, bridges, breakdowns, solos, instrumentation, key changes, and so on to keep your music exciting and interesting without becoming distracting or inappropriately wanky or complex. They can help you to select the right material, and to make honest evaluations of your current skill level in relation to your ambitions. They can serve as a gut-check and a sanity meter, helping you to move on when you're getting mired down in details but also helping to draw your attention to things that you might need to spend more time on.

That's the feedback that is useful, whether it happens mid-project in the studio, or in general out in the real world.

When a singer doesn't realize that he's not very good, it's usually a combination of people not telling him, and him not being receptive or open to the notion. There are a lot of musicians where you can tell them exactly what they're doing wrong, and exactly how to fix it, and they just brush it off with a "oh, that's the sound I'm

going for" or whatever (really? you're going for the sound of a loose bridge saddle?).

Those are the kind of people most likely to get self-reinforcing feedback. They go around telling people how their stuff has an early Beatles sound and saying "hear how I went for that McCartney-esque bassline?" and people nod their heads and tell them how they hear the McCartney-esque bassline and how they hear the early Beatles vibe. And if someone ever mentions that the vocals sound a little... I don't know...off?... The reply is that they're hearing a "parallel thirds" harmony or whatever (what they're really hearing is a sound like dying geese, but our new early Beatles are not seeking advice-- that's the sound they're going for, after all).
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by west_west
This is my first post, and the only reason for it is that I've read through Yeps: WDYRSLA to the point where this spin-off was created and this thread to end and actually has something to say/share

There has been a lot of discussion about feedback, which has been very interesting to read, but slightly over-emphasized in my opinion. I want to go back to the practical talk about how to actually try to be the producer for yourself. I want to to this by sharing a bit of my own experience.

I am a young and novice self-producing singer-songwriter. I own one of the cheapest home-studios in the world (simply because I still studying). One of the most important things In my opinion has been the talk about something is better than nothing (independently how perfect the vision and intention for the nothing-result-project was). Another thing was the talk about goals. Setting up goals for each session

Since I only got myself to play with the recording phase often contains a lot of creativity, because it's at this stage I can start thinking about if I need a synthpad and how the electric guitar solo are supposed to be like and so on. In my case I've found that a good way to keep myself from being sidetracked by this process of arranging during tracking and mixing is to set up goals for each session. I often find myself on the way to school thinking about the goals for next session. And when the session takes place I make sure to reach the goal. A goal might be to figure out a solo by jamming with the record as well as it can be to record a voice.

Another thing that I've discovered is that it is often more fun to build the song by first recording a drumloop (I prefer drumloops over metronome to keep everything at about right tempo) and then record the intro, all instrument (except voice - which I often do at the end) and rough mix, then go to the verse doing same thing and so on. I am aware of that this method somewhat violates some rules about the recording/mixing process, but for me it is a way to make the bricks that are going to be laid down in place.

One thing that another member here brought up (I can't remember the name tough) was the point that this planning thing tends to stretch the starting distance

before the actual recording can takeoff. My goal is to have to use as short bit of the runway as possible before my plane rotates of the ground (sorry, I'm into flying and airplanes and such too). For a self-producing home recordist that only uses himself I don't think the schedule is necessary as long as you remember to set sessionbased goals for at least the next session, and have a deadline when you say that you have to be done. This way I've created some for my level of experience fairly good records. Almost or completely on time.

I don't know if this is useful reading to anyone, but as this thread was about sharing I thought that I might just as well share what I have experienced.""
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Great post.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by Tedwood
…Mind you I'm now thinking I should allow for the possibility that he might be able to sell the results - in which case I really should get more than 2% - or a proper rate.""
=====

Get a music lawyer if you intend to write a percentage deal. And never, ever do a percentage deal without getting it in writing and all lawyered up (really, I mean, do not even accept it if the guy offers, just do it for free and hope he gets famous and hires you on). It will poison his career and probably ensure that the record never makes any money, since no "real" business wants to touch something where a third party has some nebulous percentage and ill-defined claim. Besides, asking him to give you 2% of record he sells at a bar or whatever is more trouble than it's worth, and that technically puts him in breach of contract.

If you want to get paid, just write down who owes what to whom and put a price and terms on it, making sure to put in terms that you own the recordings until final payment is made. Might be $500 or $500,000, depending on everything else.

If the guy really wants to give you a piece of something, get a piece of the songwriting. All you need to do is write down the name of the song, the lyrics, and that you own X% and the other person owns Y%. Then both of you sign copies, preferably with a credible witness, and you all keep a copy.

As an aside, if all you are doing is recording and mixing, then you're just acting as an engineer and there is no reason to mess with producer credits.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by Tedwood

...Here in the UK...""
=====

Seriously, what you think you're talking about has nothing to do with it. My younger sister lives in London and sits on the board of directors of a UK record label. And although she knows zero about music or recording, she knows an awful lot more about the business than most people on this forum.

If you want to produce someone in the UK or the US or Ghana or wherever, and you want to do it for free in the hopes of possibly getting something in the future, then just do it. Produce it for free, and shake hands with a gentleman's agreement that if the artist ever makes any money they'll send you a fruit basket or a million pounds or whatever seems appropriate to them at the time. And then you are free to rely on their on their good English manners to take care of you appropriately when and if the time comes, according to their own discretion.

You freely give them a gift of producing their record now, and they can freely give you a gift when and if they ever get rich from it. No harm, no foul, no commitments.

But in English Common law, a contract is a binding agreement, whether verbal or written (except in real estate, where it must be written). A first-time artist who owes a 2% of gross producer royalty to a third party is practically untouchable. For one thing, the artist himself may never see 2% of gross on the first releases, or may have it entirely spent on advances, promotion, touring, and video costs. For another, the label or distributor who signs him does not want to be on the hook to you for all the nebulous gray-area sales that artist made on his way to getting signed in the first place, but they may be, whether or not you care about pursuing it. It's not some anonymous bedroom producer they're scared of, it's his brother-in-law lawyer or whoever that overhears "you know, I produced that record..." when the song comes on the radio.

And you can post on forums and genuinely mean it when you say that you're a good and decent fellow and a true Englishman would never sue for more than he's entitled to, but a legitimate business has an obligation to the law and their shareholders to assume that legal obligations are real obligations.

Seriously, if you want to get paid for something, charge up-front. If you want to it for free in hopes of some future consideration when and if it makes any money, then do it for free, and then hope for some future consideration when and if it makes any money. The worst business situations in the world (and the world includes the UK) are situations where people signed or committed to agreements that they didn't really "mean," or where there are a hundred unspoken ifs, ands, or buts that are not explicitly agreed to.

Honest business is not like credit-card agreements, where the legalese is just there to screw the poorer party. In honest business agreements, the purpose of the written contract is to spell out what was agreed to in principle by the two parties over a handshake, and to make sure there are no misunderstandings. The role of a lawyer is not to set up traps and legal "gotchas," it is to prevent them. The lawyer knows what kinds of details can sometimes turn into a million dollar difference for

their client. The lawyer knows what kinds of ambiguities and loopholes the other party's lawyer will exploit when and if there is ever real money on the line.

And remember, it's not your client, but his label's lawyers who will decide what you are entitled to, and whether the agreement is acceptable. *If* you produce a great record and it gets traction and a major label or distributor decides to release it, *and* your client legally owes you nothing, then at least you get a producer credit on a commercial release (and whatever your honorable English client decides to send you in thanks). But if, on the other hand, you and the client have some vague royalty agreement, then best case is the label's lawyers will tell them to pay to re-record it so that you can be cut out.

More likely, they will determine that record can't safely (legally) be simply "re-recorded," since production is not just engineering, and you may well still have a legal claim on a remake of the record that you produced. Moreover, an artist with a ready-made record, ready for release, is a totally different prospect from an artist who needs to have a whole new record produced. It's a whole different ballgame. This is what I mean about "poisoning" a career. Englishmen may be men of honor, but I can tell you from experience that English lawyers do not rate honor very highly when advising their clients on whether to risk real money.

It's not just about you and your client. It's about everyone else that might affect your client's future, but who has zero relationship with you.

Lastly, it's way past time to take this discussion into another thread, since it has nothing to do with the topic.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by Tedwood
…
Yes I agree it's past time this moved on to something useful, but "seriously" Yep, maybe you should have started a new thread yourself about law and contracts and I would never read any of it""
=====

Maybe I did, before you ever posted OT (and maybe it has already been vouched for by lawyers from the UK):

http://forum.cockos.com/showthread.p…light=business

Or maybe you should never have asked for legal/business advice since you are so certain you don't actually need it, and since it has nothing to do with the topic at hand.

You keep talking about culture but contracts are about law. You know nothing about me or how I do business or keep promises, you simply set me up as a target to accuse for things you think shouldn't be so about the world of business.

What I am telling you is not how things should be, not what I think will happen or would like to happen, nor what I would do or how I would approach anything. What I am telling you is how actual global businesses with real money at stake approach things. Maybe you will only work with clients who will only ever aspire to sell records to honest Englishmen in the UK, and who would not deign to do business with Universal or Virgin or any other global company that hired lawyers. That's fine. Do whatever you want.

You asked for advice, I offered some, free of charge, at my own expense, based on long experience. You clearly decided, without having any knowledge of where I've lived, where I was raised, what I know, or anything else about me, that I am culturally incapable of understanding the nuance of how business legal dealings work in the UK. Whatever. You are entitled to your own presumptions and prejudices.

It is clear that you have already decided the answer you want to hear. You were asking not for advice but for affirmation. In any case, the quality of the thread has been significantly degraded by the whole aside (my responses included).

I'm done with this aside. Have at it about how decent and honest Englishmen are compared to the rest of the world, and about how contracts and business law don't really matter in the UK.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by Toft
I'm with westy. I do have a question, though.

One of the roles I imagine a producer has to take on pretty regularly, is that of coach/encourager/inspirer. You know, the guy saying "that take was great, now take it up a notch, really let me have it, I want to feel the pain" etc

Does anyone have any suggestions as to how to make this work as a producer of yourself? I know it's popular for sports stars to hype themselves up - does anyone do this while tracking?""
=====

What makes a great coach, boss, or producer is somewhat nebulous. Some absolutely abysmal human beings that nobody likes still manage to inspire superhuman results from the people they work with. Others are like a best friend and secret muse rolled into one. Others still are simply workmanlike and detached. Some create pressure and negative energy, some create bliss and positive energy, some just help everyone to keep an even keel and a focus on results.

Likewise, some musicians may respond better or worse to some managerial styles. A good producer or coach is not necessarily the one who keeps everyone happy, she is the one who gets the best results, preferably in a time- and cost-effective way.

So this is something you will have to feel out for yourself, to some degree. As both

athlete and coach, so to speak, you are relying on yourself to sort out your own "style" from possibly two different perspectives. I.e., you need to not only perform at your best, you also need to find the best way to evaluate and direct your own performance.

Some pieces of advice I would suggest are:

- Work on a schedule, and make deadlines. You may not always meet every deadline, but you will at least start to have a sense of what is working as expected and what is not. If you set yourself a goal of blocking out basic arrangements for song one on tuesday, song two on thursday, and song three on sunday, and Sunday comes around and you're still trying to figure out the intro for song one, then, if nothing else, you know it's time to take off the performer hat and put on the producer hat and ask yourself what's really the problem here.

- At the beginning and the end of every session, take a deep breath and think about the results you want to achieve in a clinical way. If today's job is tracking vocals, is the objective to record the greatest vocal performance of all time (that is a perfectly legitimate goal), or to get enough decent takes to comp together something passable and roughly in time/tune, or to nail the high notes/difficult passages and then fill it out with double-tracks or punch-ins later, or to get a decent bed that you can embellish or re-record later, or what? Making those decisions intelligently might depend partly on the schedule and session goals, and partly on your mental and physical state and other realities. One of the greatest benefits of having a good producer is simply having someone who knows when to say enough is enough, and how to make on-the-fly adjustments without totally abandoning the plan, and so on.

- Avoid, or at least minimize the temptations of superstition and circumstantial thinking. Maybe your last great vocal track was recorded at 3am when you came home drunk and exhausted, or maybe it was recorded one day when you woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. Whatever. That does not mean that you need to be in that condition to get the "magic."

- Play to your strengths, rather than trying to overcome weaknesses. Real accomplishment is different from school, where nobody pays attention to the "A" you got in one subject if you failed another. Do you worry that your songs all seem to be in similar keys, or all seem to have similar structures, or all use the same instrumentation, etc? Well so do many of the most successful albums of all time. A record should be a *record* of what you do well, rather than a showcase of what you are capable of. It's not a resume, it's the actual job. There is nothing wrong with being a one-trick pony, if it's a good trick. Watching a great card magician perform a bunch of great card tricks is a lot more enjoyable than watching him perform a few great card tricks interspersed with a lot of other mediocre tricks. This does not mean that you should not aspire to grow and develop as a musician, just that actual produced records are not the place to do it.

-Last but most, separate "production" from "working out ideas" (a.k.a "pre-production"). Seriously. Do not get caught in the trap of coming up with a cool idea and then spending forever trying to make it sound like a finished song. When experimenting, I like to just record all the ideas, however hodge-podge or disjointed, in one project file, and keep scrolling past the old stuff and recording

new versions starting after the last, so a single project file might have five or ten different versions all in sequence from oldest to newest and the last is always the newest (not necessarily the best). At some point, it starts to feel "right" or very close to, and then I'll save as a new project, deleting all the other versions, typically using the rough version as a bed/scratch track to start recording the "real" version.

THEN I will start to record with all the guitars fresh-strung and scrupulously set up and tuned, and all the mics and levels carefully placed, the drums tuned correctly, etc. Working this way has two advantages: I don't need to worry about the sonic details while experimenting, AND, by the time the project is really "production ready," everyone has developed a pretty good ability to play the whole thing through, more or less.

The above methodology might or might not be ideal for anyone else, but the point is to avoid the trap of recording one killer measure or verse or whatever and then somehow trying to stretch that recording into a finished record. Sometimes the first recording is the best, but often it's not. Howard Hughes in his later years got to collecting all his urine and such, thinking every drop was a precious gem. Don't be like that.
_____

 I recently read an article on the development of the video game Half-Life 2 (released in 2004). For those who don't know, Half-Life 2 is widely regarded as the best video game ever made, with an unbeaten, near-perfect score on review-aggregate sites such as metacritic, and a general reputation for having elevated the art of video games to a level yet-unmatched. Total revenues are unknown, but every indication is that HL2 has made as much or more money than all but the biggest Hollywood blockbusters, probably somewhere in the order of $700m worldwide.

It also had a very long and notoriously troubled development history that included multiple delays, many, many millions of dollars in cost overruns, having the source code stolen and released publicly by a hacker in a case that led to international intrigue and press, one of the original partners quitting the company, and all kinds of flame wars and feuds in the video-game world.

In the article, one of the developers says something like: "in any creative effort, there is a point where you're halfway through and you start thinking: why are we even doing this? But you just keep going, and that doubt makes it better. And somehow in the end you create something better than original vision."

I think that often, the most talented and original people are most susceptible to this "halfway frustration" and self-doubt. Bad musicians often have no qualms whatsoever about playing the loudest and most insistently. Those who give up when they are closest to achieving something meaningful are often those who are most ambitious and most capable, since they are also the most demanding critics. Where the incompetent hack sees nothing wrong with sounding halfway as good as the worst song on the radio, the skilled visionary starts to think himself a failure for not being categorically better than the best stuff ever recorded.

The value of having a producer, or even of simply being able to put on a

workmanlike "producer hat" is that it keeps you moving forward. There is the old adage: "obstacles are the things you see when you take your eyes off the goal". The people who make things happen are those who, instead of asking: "can I do this?" ask: "HOW can I do this?"
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by DerMetzgermeister
One of my personal heroes is Werner Herzog. The scope of his ambition and artistic integrity always amaze me.
Did you see "Fitzcarraldo", or the documentary made about the production of that movie, "Burden of Dreams"?
Every time I'm delayed by some factor outside my control (most times another band member that doesn't take things seriously) I say to myself, "Well, at least I'm not dragging a hundred ton ship over a hill in the Amazon.."
I don't know what else I will have to do to complete this record I'm working on but if that includes making someone work at gun point (as allegedly Herzog did with Kinski in the set of "Aguirre, Der Zorn Gottes"), well… Phil Spector did exactly that a number of times. You got to do what you got to do.""
=====

I think "Aguirre: the Wrath of God" was not less demanding than "Fitzcarraldo", but yeah. Herzog is a case study in achieving extraordinary artistic results by ignoring what it possible and instead simply deciding what will be achieved.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by Kenneth R.
:O

This is me.""
=====

The trick is to realize that doing something worthwhile takes work. And also to remember that your original vision was and remains worthwhile. When you have spent the last three days trying to figure out a transition between chorus and verse, anything starts to feel like a chore, and starts to get old, and starts to seem boring and uninspired.

Musicians who can competently play hackneyed progressions well are a dime a dozen. The world is full of people who are "just as good" as the Beatles, or Stevie Ray Vaughan, or whoever, because all they need to do is learn the stuff that's already been done. A lot of them can play better than many radio hits, and complain about it, but nobody cares about the "just as good as the Beatles", because they can buy a genuine Beatles CD for the same price (or more commonly, they can pirate real Beatles songs just as easily).

Doing something different takes effort, courage, and faith. The details are hard, because nobody's ever done them before. It's easy to sound like yesterday's hits-- just copy their sound. But it's very hard to sound like tomorrow's hits, because nobody knows what they sound like yet.

Ideas are seeds-- some of them grow, a lot of them don't. But most of them require water, fertilizer, and so on. If you have a good idea, then mark it down as such and never doubt it. If it sounded like a good idea the first hundred times you played it, then it's a good idea. If it loses its lustre after 300 attempts, that's you, not the idea.

Work in small chunks. Switch to something else when you start to get bored or exhausted, but don't give up on the idea, just put it on the shelf for a while. Know and accept that a lot of it will be a chore. Massive amounts of work go into producing movies, plays, novels, and records that seem effortless. Even cooking a good meal.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by thalweg
Yep, your view points on the producers role generally reflects the qualities of the successful and ambitious, regardless of profession…""
=====

Yes, exactly. The critical idea for a hit record, a cure for cancer, a longer-lasting lightbulb, or a convenient way to organize the hall closet might come in an instantaneous flash of brilliance (or in a drawn-out process of revision, whatever), but actually making those things happen usually requires work, expense, and often a lot of doubt and frustration before the thing comes into being.

The point is not that recording *should be* nor *must be* a difficult, chore-like, doubt-filled process (it's best when it is not). The point is that it sometimes *is* those things, often when it is closest to achieving its best potential.

Quote:
That said, my biggest problem was always trying to change the world and invent a new genre. Thats a huge and unrealistic burden that will always leave you disatisfied with the end result.""
=====

Without getting too far off track, I would caution anyone, in any endeavor, against *trying* to be innovative. I would always suggest trying to be GOOD, and let the innovation take care of itself, if it does. It is very possible to do extraordinarily good and worthwhile work without necessarily doing anything terribly innovative. Also, a lot of "invented" genres of music are transient fads, and not very good ones.

Most if not all of the best innovation happens accidentally, or in small increments,

or by blurring lines between stuff that's already been done, until one day it turns out to have evolved into something entirely new.

When you go back and try to categorically pin down the first "techno" track, or the first "rock n' roll" song, or the first "jazz" recording, or the first "heavy metal" band, or the first "rap", it's pretty hard to do, in the sense that there is no specific point where you can find a song that sounds categorically different than anything that have ever come before. Yet any of those things are very distinctive-- it seems pretty easy to distinguish heavy metal from jazz or rap.

Metallica is definitely heavy metal. Black Sabbath is almost certainly heavy metal. Led Zeppelin *might* be heavy metal. Steppenwolf *could* be heavy metal, but probably isn't. A whole host of 1960s garage rock bands that played minor-key, riff-based guitar rock almost certainly were not.

In Darwinian natural selection, it is effectively impossible for there to be any single "first" member of a new species, since a key part of the definition of a species is that it can only produce viable offspring with other members of its own species. A single specimen that has nobody to reproduce with is just a mutant. (please nobody spin this off into a pro/anti evolution thing-- the example is relevant whether you agree with the theory or not)

If your own musical ideas do not fit neatly into any clearly-defined genre, terrific. Pursue them, and do not ever think that you have to alter your inspiration to fit a radio-station format. But if you're sitting there, trying to think of a way to create a "new genre," my advice would be to drop that from the agenda, and let your new genre create itself, if it will, by making the best music you can make.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by Captain Damage
"The composer must not be a slave to his ideas, but rather their master."
- Schoenberg""
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This is the flipside to having faith in your ideas, and working through them.

It might be a bit over-stated to force it into an either/or, slave/master, one-or-the-other proposition (in the most basic sense, any composer is always at least somewhat at the mercy of the quality of his "ideas"), but it's a good point, nonetheless.

Sometimes that killer bassline or guitar riff that you spent weeks coming up with and figuring out is just too busy or too distracting from the important essence of the song. Sometimes the cleverest bit of lyric is too clever by half and just doesn't fit. Sometimes the sad, melancholy acoustic ballad that you wrote in a bout of depressed introspection works better as an up-tempo rock or dance track, or vice-versa. Sometimes a brilliant 100-line poem really needs to be cut down to eight lines repeated twice to work as a song.

A lot of times, songs as initially written are "too minor". A lot of beginning songwriters have a tendency to try to make their most intensely-felt material *too* intense, and instead of coming across as emotionally powerful, it comes off sounding a bit ham-handed or plodding, tedious, or overwrought. Some of the most emotionally powerful material combines deeply affecting lyrics with funky, melodic, pentatonic, up-tempo, or even major-key backing material. Think "Papa was a Rolling Stone" by the Temptations, or "Hurricane" by Dylan, or "Imagine" by John Lennon, or "Whole Wide World" by Wreckless Eric, or countless others. Contrast breeds poignancy and emotional sharpness.

The "idea" that matters is the core psycho-emotional response of the song, not necessarily the specific notes or words.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by thalweg
…I'm almost convinced that getting your fat bass sound, meshing perfectly with the drums is of significantly less importance than interesting lyrics with a great melody…""
=====

Vocals are always the most important part. For a long time, lyrics and melody were considered the sole copyrightable definition of a "song". A lot of home musicians get this backwards, and slave over the instrumentation and then record weak, timid, half-assed vocal tracks and expect that people are going to hear "how it's supposed to sound" vocally or something.

the fact that the musician is a brilliant guitarist or a wizard with synths and loop construction means very little if the vocal is weak. A mediocre singer with a good band sounds like a mediocre song (albeit maybe with good backing tracks). A great singer with a mediocre but competent band sounds like a great song, period.
_____

Quote:
Originally Posted by capthook
…A great singer is a relatively rare thing compared to all the other aspects as you are either born with the gift or not, rather than an external instrument…""
=====

I think this is often a mistaken notion.

I think it is very possible for weak or bad singers to become good singers, as much as it is possible for clumsy beginning guitar players to become skilled and capable guitarists.

A lot of musicians put years and hundreds of hours of practice into their instrument, and then try to sing. If their singing then sounds bad, they chalk it up to not being born with the right voice or something.

The reality is that the human voice is the most complex, capable, and expressive instrument in existence. Expecting to deliver a good performance simply by virtue of being generally musically inclined is like expecting to be a virtuoso trombonist or French horn player just because you can play the right notes on piano.

I reject the notion of "either born with it or not", based on my own experience. Singers need practice and training at least as much as players of mechanical instruments do.
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Quote:
Originally Posted by GregHolmes
"Single mike" recordings are more likely to sound good in situations where everyone is playing LESS and listening MORE (perhaps that's more often in jazz or folk). In some contexts (maybe rock) everybody is trying to be the lead soloist - to be the "star"...""
=====

That's a great observation.

Recording in general is a lot easier when the musicians have a sensitive and intelligent sense of accompaniment and arrangement. Recording gets a lot harder when each musician regards his instrument as his job, and everyone else's instruments someone else's job.

It's like the difference between a great conversation and a bunch of overlapping lectures. A really good musical "conversation" can often equal something much greater than any of its constituent parts.

In the video above, I think we are not so much hearing either a great production, or a great "conversation" so much as simply a great vocal performance with some light and competent accompaniment (which is often all you need). I think it would have been nearly as good with just bongos or acoustic guitar, or even acapella. The backing band is tasteful and plays with sensitivity, and a lot of backing musicians certainly could have done a lot worse, but I'm not sure that it would be my first pick of a brilliant arrangement.

Shifting gear in the same lane, I'm no great fan of Billy Idol, but when I hear his better-known tracks (e.g. White Wedding, Rebel Yell), I am very often struck by how much greater than the sum of the parts the production is. They are very disciplined, very controlled recordings in a genre that is often very UNdisciplined, and the result is stuff that is made of "hit", often in spite of being somewhat underwhelming material and musical skill.
_____

…Treating original material in the same way elevates it almost to the level of the standards.""
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Brilliantly stated.

All those tidbits about "less is more" and "the notes you don't play are as important as the ones you do" really come out of this.

I'm not sure that it's possible for every musician or ensemble to achieve, and I wouldn't necessarily recommend it as a purposeful goal if it's not something that is already "happening", but the very best music engages and excites the listener's imagination in really magical ways, to the point where the listener's inner ear almost furnishes the lead accompaniment.

I think any musician has had the experience of sitting down to learn some glorious piece of music and has been dumbfounded at how simple it is. It's like: "that's IT? That's all they're playing?!?". Similarly, I think most have had the experience of sitting down to learn some other piece of music and finding it to be far more complex and difficult than it "sounds". I have always been attracted to the former more than the latter.
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A Q on a different direction: how would you produce a project (album) that has highly varying tracks + recordings? Typical band recordings feature same drumkit/drums/guitars/mics throughout the record so it's easier to get a consistent mix and coherent master.

I am planning to embark on a project where each track will be an experiment. No wait, more like the other way around… I am planning to embark on an experiment with different instruments, sounds, recording on different setups/studios etc… and then hopefully put something together out of the best of the results.

Before I start going there, what would be good to know? And how could that work out with an acceptable (if not good) sonic result? (as well as marketing it and labeling it for a target audience).

Thanks"
=====

Great question.

This is bit outside of my wheelhouse, and a bit outside the intent of the thread, which is how to produce and manage a recording when YOU are the talent and engineer, not necessarily a general discussion on producing records.

That said, I will offer that it is useful to distinguish between producing an ALBUM and producing SONGS. In any case it always helpful to have an idea of what you are trying to achieve before and throughout the process of achieving it.

The very notion of an album as anything other than filler between the singles might seem a bit quaint these days, but setting aside the question of whether anyone still listens to "albums" (I certainly do) as beginning-to-end musical presentations...

Many great and entirely coherent albums vary quite a bit in terms style and instrumentation. Examples include some of the most highly-regarded records ever made, such as Sgt Pepper's, Pet Sounds, and a lot of stuff by late 60's and 70's era rock gods. Even a lot of 80s pop albums got pretty far-reaching at time. Commercial acts these days are not often given the same creative latitude, but there are plenty of smaller examples (Stephin Merritt's stuff with the Magnetic Fields comes to mind, or maybe Tegan and Sarah's first album), and a lot of hip-hop and R&B artists still experiment pretty widely with instrumentation and style (A lot of Michael Jackson's records, and most stuff produced by the RZA vary quite a bit from one song to the next).

Maybe some of the best examples of really effective albums that vary a lot would be great movie soundtracks. Almost any film by Quentin Tarantino or Martin Scorsese is apt to have a great soundtrack album, with a bunch of artists, but still revealing a unified progression and aesthetic.

In some respects it is almost easier to talk about what makes a bad album than a good one, and it's not always bad songs. One of the worst things that can happen in an album is to have an inappropriate or jarring mix of catchy, uptempo, hard-hitting pop/rock alongside delicate, spacey, challenging, textural music. The problem is not that one or the other is bad, the problem is that one tends to make the other sound boring, while the other tends to make the first sound stupid or fake.

It's like wearing a full tuxedo but replacing the pants with cargo shorts, or wearing Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt with dress shoes. Or like serving crackers with peanut butter and foie gras, accompanied by Champagne and Dr. Pepper. It's not necessarily about bad vs good as much as about creating an immersive experience, a journey instead of a slideshow.

This is actually a fairly common problem with unsigned bands. They try too hard to show off their different sides, mixing jazz and acoustic folk with electronica and punk or whatever. A lot of "how to get signed" or "how to make the perfect demo" advice will tell you to pick a genre and stick to it. But I think "genre" might not be the right word, it's more like "gestalt" or "vibe". Artists such as Beck have never had a problem selling records without "picking a genre", but his albums still have a sense of unity and continuity. The genre is Beck, in a sense.

Ironically, even while the industry "insiders" will tell you "pick a genre and stick to it", modern albums frequently feature a single that is completely different in texture and tone from the rest of the album. This is an infuriating experience for the buyer,

who might hear a kick-ass pop-punk song on the radio, and then pick up the album only to find the rest of it filled with introspective shoe-gazer stuff. This both turns off the potential "crossover audience" who feels like they wasted their money and also alienates the committed shoe-gazer audience who will dismiss these pop-punkers out of hand. It's not necessarily a "genre" thing, nor a matter of different instrumentation or production techniques or whatever, it's a matter of a band with a certain vision who maybe had a cover or a one-off in a more poppy or accessible style, and the label latches onto that as the "single" instead of allowing it to be a neat little extra.

Pretty much every 80's hair band album included at least one "power ballad", something slower, often primarily acoustic, with more sensitive and romantic lyrics, but the song still "made sense" in the context of the album. One need only hear such a "power ballad" to immediately envision a skinny white man with permed long hair and leather pants singing it.

Be very careful of deliberate genre-hopping. Especially with highly technical styles such as fusion jazz, speed metal, latin percussion, celtic folk, free jazz, Appalachian fingerstyle, modern classical, etc. These are genres that tend to consist of a handful of extremely dedicated and accomplished musicians, and a whole lot of bad other stuff. Every so often a pop/rock band will come along who manages to successfully incorporate one of these kinds of styles, and it sounds awesome, and it then spurs a lot of other stuff that sounds really fake and dumb. This also applies to intense styles of techno/electronic music. There is a fine line between cheesy and awesome.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: don't try to be innovative. Try to be good. If you are an innovator, then you will innovate whether you intend to or not. If you're not, you can still be a great musician who contributes a lot of value to a lot of people's lives without making an ass of yourself by trying to reinvent the cheeseburger.

This doesn't mean not to experiment. It means pursue you vision, and follow where your inner voice leads you, as opposed to trying to figure out what to do next based on charts and graphs and textbook theories. I once saw a concert poster that advertised "the next step in the evolution of reggae". The fact that I cannot remember the band's name and that I never heard of them again is telling, but I do remember thinking: why the hell should I care about the "evolution" of ANY musical genre? What does that even mean? Is this going to make all my Jimmy Cliff and Peter Tosh and Linval Thompson records obsolete? (NO)

I once heard one of the Marsalis brothers say something like: "There is no 'evolution' in music. We're never going to 'get beyond' Bach or Coltrane or whatever. We all just contribute to an expansion of the stuff that enriches our experience of life."

Bringing it back to "bad albums", the trick to making a great album (as opposed to making a mix CD of a bunch of good songs) is making something that takes the listener on a journey, as opposed to something that flips through a bunch of travel brochures. There is no limit to how varied that journey can be, but there might be a limit to the degree that you expect the listener to exhibit patience for musical ADHD.

An album should be set up like a live set, like a recorded concert. If it is a very ambitious and varied album, it might be something like a variety show, or a "Night at the Apollo" or a Christmas extravaganza, or superbowl halftime show, or a movie soundtrack or whatever. It doesn't necessarily need to sound the same from beginning to end, or even like the same band. But it should ideally sound like something that could be listened to by the same audience from beginning to end without making them feel like they're listening to a resume being read aloud.

On that note, one thing I like to recommend is to try to imagine, realistically, how you would play this album on tour. That doesn't necessarily mean that every single song has to consist of exactly five musicians playing the exact same instruments or whatever, but suppose that you got a small contract and a tour budget that allowed you to hire a second guitarist and a cello player or whatever. You could probably find a second guitarist who could fill in on backing vocals and plunk out some basic synth lines, and maybe you'll hold out for a cellist who can also play a little horns or who's willing to fill in on bongos or tambourine. Maybe you can find a trio of backup girls to sing at major concerts, and so on.

But seriously, suppose this album is successful, and suppose that the audience wants to hear these songs, and suppose that you do NOT become the kind of mega-star who travels with a gospel choir and a Tuvan throat-singer and a horn section and an orchestra who all fill in for one song each…? Suppose that you have to actually load in your own gear and that you have to limit the band to the number of people who can sleep on a bus and who are willing to split $500 per night?

Maybe you're willing to karaoke the whole concert… that's fine, if it's something your audience is going to accept (would you accept it, as a fan of this music?-- that's not a rhetorical question).

Maybe you could pare down the "important" parts to the core musicians… if that's the case, I suggest making sure that the "core" arrangement is still a satisfying representation of the song. Nobody wants to pay money to hear "Ring of Fire" without the horns.

The reason to think in "live" terms is not purely practical. Focus and discipline have a way of honing artistry, and limitations have a way of making everything count. We have all heard big, sprawling, spare-no-expense productions that suck and that could not be saved by guest composers and the London Symphony Orchestra and the Harlem Gospel Choir.

None of these are rules, just suggestions. The Beatles and Glenn Gould both famously quit playing live because they decided the studio was a better way to communicate their vision. And the more truly "experimental" you get, the less advice there is to give. But even stuff like John Zorn or Bill Dixon or Kronos Quartet albums tend to have a certain consistent vibe or vision.

Don't know if that helps, but that's what I got.
_____

Quote:

It helps immensely thank you. You've covered just about every one of my 100 questions that stemmed from my original question (including that). And stuff that have been troubling me for many years. So yeah, thank you!

btw, I was indeed asking about my own music/production, not about producing bands and albums in general.""
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Glad to hear it was helpful.

Something I can't believe I forgot to mention:

Broadly speaking, I know of two ways to approach recording an album:

1. Artist comes in with an "album" number of finished songs, and you record them all as best you can.

2. Artist comes in with a massive quantity of ideas, and you hammer them into songs as you go, gradually weeding out the ideas that aren't working (regardless of quality-- it's just a matter of keeping the stuff that is making progress and setting aside the stuff that's just spinning wheels).

I have heard tell of a third type of album project, one where the artist comes in with a small handful of unfinished "ideas" and a general vision to work out in the studio. I have never actually seen such a thing all the way through to completion, but my impression is that they tend to either be extremely high-budget, or extremely unsatisfying projects, or both.

In all cases, it's always good to come into the studio with an excess of material. If the goal is a 10-12 song album, it's good to have 15-20 songs. Chances are that one or two of them will have a hard time coming together-- maybe they are a bit too ambitious, or too simple, maybe the guitar player or the drummer can't quite figure out a good part, or maybe everything they're trying to play is a bit beyond their current abilities.

Often some of the songs will either sound too similar to something that's already on the album, or just won't have a good "place" on it-- those make great B-sides or "extras". Examples might include one ballad too many, a song in a similar key with a similar melody and riff as the main "single", an "offbeat" song that just doesn't seem to fit anywhere, a neat little acoustic/vocal number that nobody has developed any accompaniment for, and so on.

It might be great material, but that doesn't mean that Hamlet would be improved by having a lightsaber fight and a death star in the background, nor that Star Wars would be better if Luke Skywalker sat down and gave a soliloquy on "Alas, poor Wedge, I knew him well...".

The natural progression of a real touring live band often makes album construction fairly obvious-- the band's gradual evolution from playing together every night leads to its own obvious vibe and gestalt. A solo musician trying to fabricate an

album out of whole cloth may have a bit more work to do on the particulars.
_____

 PS-- I feel the need to re-emphasize the fact that I am not a producer, and that I never meant to set this thread up as general advice for producers. There are probably better resources for aspiring producers out there.

My intent was to address the specifics of keeping oneself motivated and making forward progress in a DIY recording, as a spinoff of a home recording thread.
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Stopped 12-24-09 at post #136