



## **The Art Of Record Production: Difficulties And Pitfalls**

*Richard James Burgess*

*Richard James Burgess' book [The Art Of Record Production](#) is a must-read for anyone aspiring to be a record producer. It is also a must-read for artists, because it provides sound advice and an excellent analysis of the art (and business) of producing a recording. In this excerpt, Richard advises the aspiring producer on some of the most common problems that he or she will face during the recording process.*

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### **Studio Nightmares**

Bad personality traits can become magnified by the enforced closeness of the studio. Add any amount of drugs and alcohol, sprinkle a little success on top and you have an explosive mixture. Always remember, things are never so bad that they can't get worse.

### **Serious Differences Of Opinion**

Tony Visconti related a difficult time he experienced with The Boomtown Rats: "It was a nightmare. It was like a Stephen King novel – it starts out in an innocent little village somewhere. Then there's that little touch of evil that starts to grow..." Speaking about Bob Geldof he says, "He's difficult, and he knows it. He's a good performer, a great songwriter, but you have to keep him out of the mixing room. Apparently, he wants everything to sound very sizzly and trebley, so I used to mix a really fizzy top just for him. I used to put this glistening sound on the cymbals, and he loves to hear his sibilance, which was very hard to get on a vinyl record. Then I said, 'Bob, there's a limit. We can't put too much of this on tape.' His drummer told me, 'You think that's bad, he goes home and he takes all the bass off his hi-fi set, and he adds more treble!' It was then I realized I must be dealing with a deaf person!"

### **The Endless Album**

They may not qualify as nightmares but interminable album projects can be mentally, emotionally and physically exhausting. Unless you are seriously into job security, and are working on a daily rate, the endless project is a killer. The problem used to be confined to the ultra-rich artists with their own studios. At least you could console yourself with the knowledge that you were working on a record that was definitely chart bound. Now that almost anyone can own a studio of sorts, the problem is becoming epidemic. When the artist owns the studio you're removed from the time pressure. You don't have to finish.

### **Lack Of Vision**

Andy Jackson (Roger Waters, Pink Floyd) says, "I think a lot of records are made and nobody's sat down beforehand and said 'OK what are we trying to achieve here, what record are we really trying to make.'

Obsessive artists are very often the problem. You spend hours and hours and hours dropping in little bits that don't make any difference and probably won't make the mix anyway. It's hopeless. You can't convince them. Their vision has become so microscopic. There is no overall vision. They don't really know what record they are trying to make."

### **Panic Stations**

A) **The Singer Can't Sing In Tune/Time**

Nine times out of ten, if a singer who didn't seem to have problems with tuning in a live situation has problems in the studio it's going to be something to do with their foldback. Suggestion number one is to rework the headphone balance to try to give more harmonic support. Make sure they can hear enough of themselves but not so much that their own voice is drowning out the track. Headphone mixes are a very personal phenomenon. Some singers like them insanely loud, with very little of themselves in the mix, others like to hear a little bit of the track with their voice obliterating everything else. I worked with one singer who wouldn't allow even a smidgen of reverb on their vocal in the final mix. In the studio he couldn't sing without "Phil Spector"- style vocal reverb in the headphones. Some singers can survive with almost any mix as long as they have one side of the headphones on and the other side off. Failing all else you can bring them into the control room, turn the monitors up like a live show, and they'll probably bag it in one take.

Certain styles of music are more forgiving. Alan Moulders takes the view that, "With vocals, if the attitude is there, you can stand a certain amount of timing and tuning problems. I'm not averse to a bit of sampling and adjusting with the pitch wheel. Generally, I just try to get the best performance I can."

## **B) The Band Can't Play In Tune/Time**

What Jerry Harrison of The Talking Heads says is, "We can work around someone, if someone is not the most proficient guitar player, but if he has a style, we'll work around that. That's what the studio now offers, I can use the studio to help draw out the performances from the people that they maybe can't just do one take after another."



So, it's the first day in the studio and you find out that the tempos are all over the place.

The first thing to do is apply a bit of analytical thinking. Why aren't they playing in time? Is it studio nerves? Is it because the guitarist is rushing, and pulling the drummer along with him? Does the drummer change tempo every few bars, does he gradually speed up or slow down or does his time shift dramatically before or after a fill? It's a process of elimination. When I was a studio drummer, I often found that an over-zealous musician on the session would push the tempo. My solution was to discreetly ask the engineer to take that musician out of the headphones. Then I could hold the tempo steady, and it was up to the other musician to play to me. This became especially important in the mid seventies when playing to click tracks became the norm.

OK, so removing things from the headphones didn't work. You've checked the live demo tapes and found them to be fine. The chances are that you are dealing with a case of red-light-fever. Nothing to do with the studio being in a bad neighborhood, just the pressure of knowing that this is it. What happens today will be preserved for posterity. Everything the band has dreamed about is coming to fruition, and it's scary. In this case, it's really a matter of making them feel comfortable, letting them know that they can take risks, and if they screw up there is enough time for them to come back to the track and have another crack at it. It is always valuable to record all the run-throughs since they will invariably play better if they don't think they are being recorded. So forget turning the red light on. Press the talk-back button and say "Let's run through it to get some levels." Hit record and pray!

Being out of tune is less of a problem than it used to be. With modern tuners even someone who's completely tone deaf can get a guitar in tune. I usually record an A440 tone right at the beginning of the project. All the tuners can be referenced to that no matter how many studios, countries or altered states we are in. There are a few tricks with stringing up guitars that prevent them from going out of tune and sometimes the instruments need to be professionally set up so that both ends of the neck play in the same key.

If something does get recorded which you later realize is out of tune with the rest of the track, there are now digital pitch shifters that will change the pitch of an instrument without changing the speed or vice versa.

If it proves to be totally impossible to get the band to play in time, thanks again to digital technology it is now possible to quantise (correct the timing of) live audio. There are currently limitations within which this will work. Often it is better to edit parts that are actually in time from another take or from another part of the same take. This can be done either on analogue tape by cutting and splicing the tape, by copying from machine to machine, or by using the cut-and-paste function on a random access digital recorder, just as you would cut and paste text on any word processor.

Of course, nothing to do with technology is as simple as it sounds, and nothing ever works exactly the way it is supposed to. Sometimes when you have to go through all this stuff you can't help but think that it would have been easier if the musicians just got it right in the first place.

### **C) One Of The Musicians Is Screwing Up The Take Every Time**

Tony Brown, President of MCA Records, Nashville, and one of the most successful Country music producers of recent times, says, "I've seen one person completely start shutting down a tracking session. The artist needs to be creative and shouldn't have to worry about that problem. It's the producer's responsibility, and how he does it is as important as deciding to do it. You can pull the person out of the room, or have him sit in the control room, but you have to give him a reason. If things start getting weird, then I take him outside to talk. Nine times out of ten, depending on his ego control, he will usually say, 'Have I got time to run an errand?' That means, 'I'm embarrassed. I'm out of here.' I find that great musicians even know when they are not cutting it."

### **D) You're Just Cruising Nicely Up To The End Of The Album Right On Budget And The Main Man Decides Half Of It's Crap**

This reaction is usually attributable to "Buyer's Remorse" or "Post Purchase Dissonance." Logic dictates that if someone liked something over a substantial period of time they'll probably come around to liking it again. A break from listening to it over and over again can be invaluable. However, some artists are not that logical. Producer panic at this point in the project will burn whatever budget is left. You may go into a dive that you can't pull out of. This may be a good time to bring the A&R person into the debate.