



The Art Of Record Production : What's The Job Description?

Richard James Burgess

Richard James Burgess' book [The Art Of Music Production](#) is a must-read for anyone aspiring to be a record producer. We at StarPolish also feel that it is a must-read for artists, because 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 what's in store-- including an explanation of the job of the producer and an analysis of producing a recording session. We suggest you read this section from start to finish the first time, but for ease of later reference, here is an outline with links:

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Introduction And Overview

*"When two men in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary."
William Wrigley Jr.*

A great producer sometimes does very little. The producer who knows when to butt in and when to butt out is, in my opinion, the very best kind.

Flood (Nine Inch Nails, U2), discussing how you keep the creativity going, says "Some days [that] can mean just sitting there and saying, 'sounds great, just carry on'. Then other days, constructing a situation that you hope will spur people on."

Some producers do almost everything. In the case of the All-Singing-All-Dancing type, the producer will be the songwriter, orchestrator, engineer, producer and vocal arranger.

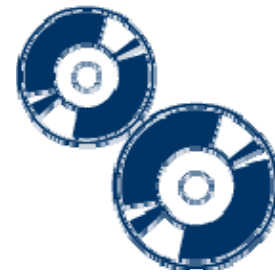
Sometimes the producer acts as a stimulant or a catalyst. Bands and artists have a habit of trotting out their clichés (or even worse, someone else's clichés). A good producer can be the little bit of grit that irritates and stimulates the artist to create the pearl.

Production can sometimes be about arranging or optimizing arrangements. This is about coming up with, and organizing, all the bits that will comprise the finished record.

Finding and choosing material can also be a part of the production process.

Jerry Harrison of Talking Heads assumes nothing. The first thing he will do at the pre-production stage is say, "Let's hear everything you have, not just what has been decided on. Sometimes you'll see that the raw way that they play something sounds better than the way they did it on a demo."

Sometimes production is about mediating, moderating and protecting the democratic process, other times you need to allow yourself or someone else to be a dictator. "Usually what people are practicing is not democracy,



but cowardice and good manners," says Brian Eno (David Bowie, U2, James).



Probably the worst thing that can happen in the studio is for things to descend to the lowest common denominator, to compromise in order to keep everyone happy. Excitement and passion are more likely to produce a great record than conciliation and compromise.

Sometimes producing is about defining the parameters, sketching out the boundaries, or "establishing the cultural territory" as Eno puts it. Artists are not always focused. The producer in this case needs to direct the artist's attention, and a good way to do that is by limiting their options.

So how do you make a record sound great, balance it all up so you can hear everything, get everything in the right place and make it exciting as well? The first thing is to make the artist feel comfortable. They should be confident in the people they are working with and feel as though their collaborators have confidence in them.

Knowing when to push them, when to back off a little and when to stop altogether can be the key to getting that extra special performance from an artist. As Nashville veteran Barry Becket says, "I wish I had taken Psychology 101 in college instead of making music."

A little preparation can really lubricate the proceedings. An experienced engineer can pre-set the mic levels, EQ, reverbs and foldback (the mix of whatever music the singer will be singing to, either on headphones or speakers) before the singer arrives.

Clever orchestration helps to maintain clarity when you come to do the mix. It ensures that each element of the record occupies its own space in the audio spectrum and does not compete with the other instruments.

An exciting mix entails the use of equalization, compression, limiting, expansion and gating to optimize the sounds, increase their impact and ensure they occupy their own space in the audio spectrum. Mixing also entails careful balancing and panning of the instruments and vocals to focus the listener's attention on the most important things, and appropriate use of effects in order to give some front-back perspective.

Mixing also involves riding (changing levels relative to time and the other instruments) and panning of instruments and vocals in order to improve the dynamic flow of the track to draw attention to different facets of the orchestration at different points in the song, and increase the overall excitement.

Managing The Session From Day To Day

A) Pre-Production

Some albums are done completely without pre-production, which allows almost all the creative decisions to be made in the studio and makes the budget extremely hard to pin down. On other records virtually all the vital decisions, and in some cases a large part of the work, is done at the pre-production stage. Extensive pre-production makes costing more accurate and often helps to keep the final price of the project down.

If it's going to be a live band recording together in the studio, pre-production is the time when the arrangements are finalized. Then the band rehearses all the songs to the point where they know them inside out. Arranging and rehearsing can be left until you get into the studio, but then instead of going for great takes, you'll be wasting expensive studio time deciding whether the song is better with or without an extra two bars after the chorus. However, it's always a good idea to allow for flexibility in the studio. Once you get there and play that first take back on the big monitors your thinking and approach can completely change.

In the case of a computer-programmed album, not only can the arrangements be worked out in pre-production, but the parts can be played into the computer. Sounds and samples can also be decided on. Project studios with modular digital multi-tracks and the new consumer digital consoles or hard disk-based work-stations are fast making it possible to do these projects entirely at home.

"We were in pre-production for seven months," said Rick Rubin (The Red Hot Chili Peppers), 'working on the material. Then we recorded the whole album in three or four weeks. So the process of getting the music on to tape is very simple, but getting the music to the point where it's even ready to be recorded is very tough."

B) Recording The Live Band

Any time there is a musician in the studio performing, the intensity level of the session goes up. You have to assume at all times that the current performance may be the best one they are capable of. In which case, if you fail to record it well or at all, that performance may be lost forever.

"I like live recording, I think you get a better sound than with overdubbing," says legendary Beatles producer George Martin. "It doesn't take longer, it just takes a little more application – but you have to be in a studio that can handle it."

John Leckie (Pink Floyd, Radiohead) says, "I've always believed in recording a live backing track that holds some magical interaction between musicians. This is almost impossible to obtain when doing singular overdubs. So even today I'll start on some songs by getting the bass, drums, a rhythm instrument and the vocal all happening together. I'll choose the take that has this magical interaction or uplift or some spirited feeling that makes the song happen – you just have to feel it."



C) Recording An Orchestra Or Big Band

One of the great engineer/producers, Phil Ramone, recalls the first time he engineered an orchestral session on his own. "Afterward there were stains on my pants. You put your hands on the console, and suddenly you realize, 'Oh, my God. It all depends on me, and if it falls apart it's my ass'."

D) Overdubbing Live Musicians



This usually involves only one musician performing at a time over a pre-recorded backing track. The problem is to get the overdubbed performance to blend with the pre-recorded track. If a band plays together in the studio, even if they can't see each other, they somehow empathically feel the natural dynamic and tempo fluctuations that happen organically.

Overdubbing has worked fine ever since Les Paul invented the concept. Since the mid-Sixties overdubbing has become the standard way to make records outside of the jazz and classical fields. You can change an arrangement or orchestration if instruments are overdubbed and the engineer's control over the sonic quality of each instrument is much greater. The downside is that the end result can sometimes be a little stiff or sterile.

The band that honed this way of working to perfection was Steely Dan. Walter Becker, who was half of the production team, recently said that it has always amazed him that you could create a tight, live feeling groove entirely by overdubs. "You record all these little bits and pieces, layer upon layer, and then you play it back and it sounds like it happened at the same time. All I can say is to make that really work well, like so many other things, it depends on the choices you make as to what is a good overdub, or what the tracking needs."

E) The Computer-Based Session

If one single factor would distinguish the computer session from any kind of live performance recordings it would be the lack of adrenalin. Things can always be modified, edited and corrected. The excitement of the performance disappears. Computers generally allow a great deal of procrastination and endless changing of minds. But sometimes this can be a lifesaving thing. Before computers, if the drum sound was not right, the key

was wrong or the structure needed modifying, the only thing to do was to start from scratch again. It was very costly to make a mistake. Since computers, the arrangement, the parts and the sounds can stay in a state of flux until everything is printed to multi-track or the computer-generated sounds and parts are mixed directly to two-track. Unfortunately, the individuals who have difficulty making decisions seem to be the ones who are attracted to making records by computer. These people have great difficulty finishing a record. With everything in a permanent state of flux and no necessity to make a decision, the project can go on forever.

F) The Vocals

Vocals and drums are often said to be the most difficult instruments to record. In fact, technically, vocals are relatively easy to record. The aspect of vocal recording that seems to cause the most difficulty is capturing the magical performance. A great vocal may well be in-time and in-tune, but there are plenty of in-time and in-tune vocals that are less than great shifting oxide every day of the week.

A good production needs to be sensitive to the intention of the song, leaving space for the vocal and supporting it with the right musical attitude.

John Leckie's priority is to make the singer feel comfortable rather than worry about a technically perfect recording". Some inexperienced singers cannot perform with headphones. So I see nothing wrong in tracking the vocal with an SM58 in the control room with the monitors cranked up. It's easy to freak out about the spill, but you can gate it out later."

"Nine times out of ten, the scratch vocals are better than the real thing because the artist doesn't have the pressure – that 'this is it' rolling round in his or her mind," says Jimmy Jam. "You can catch gold (or platinum as the case may be) while an artist is in the process of learning a song and playing around with addictive new melodies."

Many singers are uncomfortable singing in front of a control room full of people. Even if the singer is screened off and can't see into the control room, they might be that much more self-conscious and less likely to take risks.

There is probably no process as personal and individual as vocal recording. Great vocals are done by great singers. There's no studio trickery that will turn an average or bad singer into a great singer. Sure, you can correct a multitude of sins such as tuning and timing, but you cannot find a greatness button anywhere in the studio.

G) Which Method Makes A Better Record – Live, Overdubbed Or Computer?

"When musicians physically play together, they get something off each other which you don't get when you're overdubbing. Overdubbing is a clinical way of doing things," says George Martin.

For better or for worse, certain kinds of music would not have come into existence without computers. Computers have enabled us to separate technical proficiency from creativity. Nonetheless, a bad computer track has very little to commend it. It may be in tune, in time and technically proficient, but music is really about the communication of emotions or feelings.