

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of Recording

Contributed by Larry Lawless
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Grueling work day scheduled...8:00am to 4:30pm holed up in the recording booth, making edits, setting levels, reverb and panning. For those of you with no experience of these things (as I was before I started this fool idea), let me give you an idea of what's involved.

First, if you have some romantic conception of making a record where a group walks into a studio, plugs in their equipment, plays straight through their song in one take, the producer says, "OK, that's a good one!" and there you have it ... welcome to the real world. Today, it's rare to even have everyone playing their parts at the same time. Most sessions are the result of layering and overdubs, where the drummer and bass player in two separate rooms, communicating only by headset, lay down their parts to a "click track", a recorded metronome playing in their sets. Then, whatever other instruments are playing come in one by one and play their parts while listening to the drum and bass part. Then the vocalists sing all by themselves, again listening to what was recorded earlier. Then, you might have all kinds of other things overdubbed, strings, extra percussion, you name it. Then it all goes in to the editing room where cuts are spliced and mixed, volumes controlled, with computer recording and the programs available, you can go in note by note and fix wrong pitches, timing ... just about anything.

In our situation, it's more like the old days, since we are recording in a concert hall, not a studio. In general, our approach was to play straight through the pieces with everyone on stage together, the instruments close-miced, with acoustical baffles in between all the different instruments to try and eliminate as much "bleed" (mics on one instrument picking up the sounds from another) as possible. After a few complete run throughs, we would listen, make decisions about mallet choices, approach to ensemble problems, drum tuning, etc., then do one or two more run throughs with the new sounds. Once we had a fairly good "bed take" to base things on, we would isolate problem sections and do several takes of just those, until Dan felt we had enough usable material. On some of the songs, the improvised solos happened in the context of the run throughs, on some, we just laid down the background rhythm track, and then let Doug or Dave "blow" their solos several times later, and pick the best one. Sometimes that was a very hard choice, and one thing I hope to be able to do after the CD is released, is to be able to post some of the "alternate" solos that didn't make the album.

Once we finished the recording sessions Thursday night, Kevin burned CDs of all the tunes with all the raw recording ... good, bad, and downright ugly ... for me to pick from, using Dan's notes. Unfortunately, Dan has had to go back home for a week, so he was not able to be in on the editing process, but his notes were very detailed, and for the most part, after listening critically to all the material, I just used the cuts he recommended. His work that he did "live" in the booth has made the job for Kevin and I so much easier that we are well beyond where we thought we would be.

The next step is the editing. In the booth, listening very critically, sometimes isolating each part measure by measure, listening both on the studio speakers and headphones, we would decide which cuts to use. For example, we might take the first 22 measures of take 5, then splice in the next 54 measures of take 11, then the solos from take 3, etc. I'm probably revealing too much dirty laundry here, but I would like to help you, dear reader, understand the difficult task of what we accomplished here. Just for idle curiosity, the most takes we did on a tune, including overdubs was 44 (Homonyme Fils), the fewest was 7 (Tone Down), with an average of about 25. After the editing, we would discuss the "sound image", or panning, which determines where your ear perceives the sound to be coming from when you listen to it in a room. For example, if we used 2 vibraphones on a tune, we would pan one to the left, the other to the right so your ear can distinguish between the 2 different parts. On some of the songs with more unusual sounds, we got very creative with the panning, making it seem like the sound goes from one side of the room to the other. Next, we would add reverb if necessary, to give some body to the sound, but also some perception of distance, so you feel like you're sitting in the hall, not directly under the marimba. Last, we would go through listening for any balance problems, like toning down the bass or drums, or boosting a solo. With the almost "live concert" nature of this recording, there were some places we did almost nothing, the mix being taken care of by performance technique, not electronics.

By a little after 4:00, we had done almost all of the tunes, one last session tomorrow, then it's back home to Texas for me.