

**MUSIC PRODUCTION**

**DO IT RIGHT**

**THE FIRST TIME**

**ABQ Music Explosion**



# The Legal Stuff

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# **PRODUCTION DO IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME!**

**By**

**ABQ Music Explosion and VMG World Wide**



1. Either you want your music to make money or you don't!
2. Either your music logs AIR PLAY or it doesn't!
3. No radio air-play equals NO RECORD SALES!
4. Either your music is RADIO FRIENDLY or you're dead in the water!
5. Keep your arrangements UNDER 3:30 TOTAL RUNNING TIME until you're established like legendary Sheena Easton, Bett Midler, Michael Jackson, Tina Turner, Mary J, Alicia Keyes, Garth Brooks, Madonna, Linda Ronstadt, et ceteras. When you can afford to spend ONE MILLION-PLU\$ COLD HARD BUCK\$ in PROMOTION you can crowd the RUNNING TIME ENVELOPE! Until then you're just one more set of TRACKS out there in Radio Land looking for a handout of airtime.
6. If the selection you're going to record requires more than 3:30 TOTAL RUNNING TIME due to 'the integrity of the song', record some other song before you blow your budget of this worst of all emotional tangents!

## **PREPARATION & PRIME!**

A recording project is exactly like a court case: it's won or lost in preparation! Ask any attorney from the best to the most jackassed and they'll all confirm that court cases are neither won nor lost in the court room: they're won or lost in preparation! Recording sessions are neither won nor lost in the studio: they're won or lost in preparation!

1. Recognize the fact that making a record is a highly emotional endeavor for most artists. Never let that emotionalism interfere with common sense.

The only way you can produce an Artist without making them sound like everybody else is to HAVE A GOOD HARD STUDY ON THAT ARTIST! What is the actual quality and tone of their voice how do they phrase can they make each and every KEY word believable in the process of making the whole STANZA believable, even in recitation what is the nature of their diction do they pronounce in slang or accent et ceteras. Once you HAVE THAT STUDY you can make the musicians sound like they're in the same song at the same time with the singer. Without it, it's damned near impossible. As you read the rest of this treatise you'll see just how important that STUDY really is to everybody concerned with the project.

2. Here's the BIG SECRET to getting into record-prime for any given project used by all successful artists and producers and ignored by all the fools! It's so simple that anyone can do it, but idiot element know-it-alls constantly ignore it to their own (and everybody else's) detriment.

When preparing for a given session, regardless of what your specific job is: engineer, singer, drums, et ceteras; for as many hours (or days) prior to the session as possible, and especially on the days of production, LIMIT your exposure to any other music except demos or partials of the material you're going to record!

Idiot elements will claim "it makes no difference", but see how long it takes for them to not only lay down their part: but lay it down so that it sounds and feels like its there with the rest of the production and you'll know better! That TIME is expensive and for all intents and purposes WASTED! It burns everybody else's prime un-necessarily in addition to un-necessarily adding to production costs!

And the reason is simple: MUSIC IS INFECTIOUS! It had better be if you intend to sell it. But nobody can record "THE SOFTEST SWEETEST" while they're programmed to the eyebrows with "YEA! DANGY DANGY"!

3. Just as everyone must get themselves "primed" in the morning to go to work for whatever the day requires, artists and producers 'prime' themselves to perform! That mental prime is all-important to the success or failure of a project and only a fool burns that 'prime' off the artists or producers under any conditions. Therefore AVOID:

A: Un-necessary delays in production;

B: Un-necessary re-takes to find levels and settings: especially VOCALS; and

C: All alcohol or other 'stimuli'! (NOTE: Here's the first of many contradictions in this crazy business: ONE OF THE BEST Throat Savers is a cap-full of SOUTHERN COMFORT in a FULL CUP of hot Black Coffee! It's not enough to blaze somebody's mind and it's the absolute best to prevent a COUGHING FIT that can instantly blow a voice! Even so, make sure the person is not an alcoholic: that is just too dangerous and destructive to be worth any record!)

4. A singer may be able to perform for hours on end: but not at record quality! The best throat on the planet has about THIRTY MINUTES of record-quality! With a bit of common sense as explained above, that thirty minutes can be extended to about forty five minutes of actual recording time over the process of a day's recording. First: NEVER do any of the following:

A: Suck lemons to keep a throat clear;

B: Blow out a throat with high or loud passages; or

C: Perpetually repeat high or loud passages to obtain settings!

5. With respect to number 4., above, again preparation is the secret. Which KEY to record in is always up for grabs to those who haven't the slightest idea of what they're doing. Analyses of some FIFTY THOUSAND successful records that both played and sold reveal yet another simple production secret:

A: Always record in one of the FIVE (5) open chords on a guitar: A, C, D, E or G! That's right! Unless you're doing instrumentals always record in one of those FIVE keys! Nobody knows 'why', it just works. Just like the sun coming up, you can't do anything about it, so don't waste the energy to try. Determining WHICH of the five keys to use: it's yet one more simple process.

B: Find the KEY, sharp, flat or indifferent, that the LEAD VOCALIST can hit the LOWEST passage in under full control! Not 'hollowed' out or at 'whisper' volumes: but under full control! Then record in the next HIGHEST open chord on a guitar! For instance:

If the singer can do the passage in F, the correct KEY should be G! Not only does that save the singer's throat, it makes the backup and harmony easier on everybody else! Regardless of where they're going to do it on stage: this is not a stage performance: it's a non-visual audio performance!

That is the secret that kept the late PATSY CLINE from screeching and gave her all that range to octave, yodel, moan, talk, growl, or whatever else she damned well wanted to do! And, that is the secret that permitted the late JIM REEVES to sing so rich and so smooth! It also gives the singer all that upper range to lean on as necessary!

## **ACTUAL PRODUCTION**

1. Again, we're back to preparation! Once you have the music selected to record, determined the actual KEY to record in, the next step is to work up an arrangement! The following asinities are the absolute KISS OF DEATH even for most 'established' artists: Therefore AVOID:

A: Introductions that exceed FOUR BARS of music! Get into the damned song and say something when you do! Many computer review systems are auto-timed to :30 and few Broad-casters will spend more than that reviewing a new release so jackass elements have featured everybody in the band with their own introduction the reviewer has heard everything but the damned lyrics and the VOCALIST! and the jackass is astounded the record didn't sell.

B: Changing RHYTHMS anywhere in a song! The best way to blow somebody's concentration - and their continued tolerance of your music is to switch beats once it's running and the listener is IN to it! When combined with a VISUAL, such as television or motion pictures, you can get away with changing the beat: but a record is an AUDIO sensory and cannot be seen, ONLY HEARD!

C: Limit INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDES as necessary to curtail TOTAL RUNNING TIME and don't 'humor' anybody's ego when you do determine the intros, interludes and tag!

2. Once you have the arrangement determined: lay down a scrap VOCAL and RHYTHM section with whatever instrumentation is necessary for the intro, interlude, and tag. SAVE THE LEAD SINGER'S VOICE! (\*\*STOP HERE AND APPLY PARA 4., NEXT SECTION!)

A: When you get to laying down keeper tracks ALWAYS listen to the track being recorded at HIGHER VOLUME than the music that will accompany it in final mix! You can do that and still give the performer at the time whatever mix they need to lean on. But the record isn't made in the sound booth IT'S MADE IN THE CONTROL ROOM! So having the track being recorded loud and the rest of the production soft in the control room is the only way to get the tracks you need to produce a commercially acceptable product. There's no other way to hear the clams while you still have time to correct them.

B: If some jackass wants to hear "finished record sound" while your recording - THROW THE IDIOTIC BASTARD OUT while you can still save the production. Even if they're the Executive Producer who's paying the bills I TELL THEM ONCE! You don't need some Beer Joint Baritone diversion from the hard requirements while you're trying to accomplish those hard requirements. You can tolerate such stupidities only if you intend to be a party to a do-nothing record.

3. Whether you're producing with DIGITAL or ANALOG, study the production as you go! You need to be HEARING what does, and does not, fit with the sound of the LEAD VOCALIST's voice and their delivery. Therefore, as you're laying tracks:

A: CUT DRY, LISTEN WET! Never record special effects, reverb, echo, et ceteras, in the production track: always add it later! Once it's in the only way to take it out should it be even the slightest bit wrong is to record it again! That's not only un-necessarily expensive: it's stupid! You can make adjustments of special effects until hell freezes over with a dry track: but you have to live forever with a wet one recorded in! You can add the damned thing for study purposes AND YOU SHOULD but make sure it doesn't cover clams in the dry track in the process.

B: Polish all EQUALIZATIONS as you study the tracks GOING IN (Remember that STUDY OF THE SINGER mentioned above?), and avoid RE-EQing during mix! The wave bend will more than likely be excessive at that point and that track will have to be done again! You'll need to do some RE-EQing to be sure, but the least, the better.

C: EQ everything TO THE LEAD VOCALIST'S VOICE! NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND! The instrumentation and back-up are there to SELL THE SINGER the singer is not there to sell everybody else! The singer's job is to SELL THE SONG, not the god-damned band! And to do that they need everybody else's efforts and sound towards that goal.

In fact, there has never been a "good" singer who could carry a "bad" band, but any competent band can carry the world's worst singer!

4. YOU CAN'T 'FIX IT WHEN YOU MIX IT! Minor clams can be edited or covered over: but major boo-boos have to be RE-DONE and even minor clams should be corrected on the spot (Remember that part about the track being recorded being a whole lot LOUDER in the control room?), and they can be if you catch them! One of the biggest production boo-boos is to permit lead and fill instruments blast on incoherently! That requires a lot of knob-grabbing during mix and that's just plain stupid!

Require the musician to play their own dynamics, dropping volume down as needed behind the FRONT FEATURE and raising it again as needed isn't the end of the world!

A properly produced production should MIX start-to-finish without touching a knob! There's only one way you can come back to the exact electrical setting of a fader: and that's by blocking it in TOP AND BOTTOM with magnetic strips literally welded to the board! So any time you have to move a knob: you have an un-necessary problem! One knob blocked in is a livable; Two knobs and you're asking for two different mixes due to speed-of-fade, point of punch-in, et ceteras; Three knobs? Make somebody re-do a track your production is already jackassed!

## SECRETS OF COMMERCIAL ACCEPTABILITY

1. ANALOG RECORDING Always EQ each and every track at just the edge of TOO BRIGHT! You'll gain BASS in transfer regardless of WHAT you're told, and one db over the bass edge (which smears clarity) and your record is dead! Therefore even if you're going to dump ANALOG to DIGITAL at some point in the production: EQ IT BRIGHT in the ANALOG stages! You'll need the EQ room for final mix.

DIGITAL RECORDING Don't sweat the transfer-loss the system is changing ONES and ZEROES - not rising and falling sine waves. Even so EQ BRIGHT the system it's going to be heard on is add bass 99.9999% of the time and LOW VOLUME is the absolute killer of frequency response - therefore a BRIGHT recording will still sound GREAT regardless of the system and the volume!

2. RECORD all tracks with compensation to allow for the FINAL MIX to be as BRIGHT and CLEAN as possible! Signal processors are notorious for smearing the hell out of the BASS REGISTER, especially broadcast compressors and juke boxes that have a very LIMITED FREQUENCY RESPONSE to begin with. The best RADIO signal is only 55db down when it reaches the antenna and combined therein is all the local noise from miles around. Making sure your production SURVIVES that should be your primary production concern.

3. NEVER send more than ONE signal into any special effects unit. They're just not capable of RECORD QUALITY with more than one source signal at a time! They'll either 'fuzz' or distort both signals: and neither are acceptable, especially with respect to VOCALS!

4. Getting a consistent live/mike track is simple: and it doesn't matter whether you're recording an instrument or a voice:

A: If you've done your STUDY OF THE SINGER or as much as you can glean from the Lead Vocal SCRAP track as you produced everything else to wrap it in: you should have the EQs set to give that Lead Vocalist the best sound going in that the equipment is capable of.

B: Set the microphone stand where you want it and mark the floor at its base with ordinary VISIBLE tape. Should you have to move the stand for any reason, it can be re-positioned which can be critical for acoustics! You will NEVER be too exact in re-setting a mike, so the tighter you make the position marks, the better.

C: MARK THE FOOT AND TOE POINTS of the singer by making a "T" on the floor with two strips of tape. STRIP ONE determines the DISTANCE from the mike and WHERE the singer's TOES should be during each vocal attempt! STRIP TWO determines WHERE the singer's feet should be right or left! Between those two positions the singer can always come back to the exact same point of PRESENCE!

D: Should there be a loud passage, add an additional "T" BAR where the singer can put ONE FOOT to rock back on during that passage! You'll be amazed how EASY it is to get a good clear signal without wrapping the needle around the peg!

E: Record the KEEPER Lead Vocal Track LAST so they have all the backup they need to lean on! PUNCH IN line at a time if necessary, a record must be many times more perfect than any live performance!

## **THE FINAL MIX**

1. When you're doing final polish on any track: SHUT EVERYTHING ELSE OFF UNTIL YOU GET THE PRELIMINARIES DONE!

2. After you have the Vocal Track properly recorded, getting that great vocal sound in the FINAL MIX is simple, but it takes a little time. Considering that you've gotten all the other tracks to sound like they're in the same song at the same time with the lead singer: follow this simple process:

A: SHUT OFF EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE LEAD VOCAL!

B: Pan the track until it reads with equal volume in both the left and right channels keep it dry at this point! Raise the level until the VOCAL track peaks on the zero! Block in the fader with magnetic strips!

C: EQ the LEAD VOCAL until you have the best quality of the voice as possible! Re-set the volume as necessary to attain zero. The track should be within a few db start to finish, including the loud passages. If you've done your STUDY of the voice as advised, the EQ and LEVEL setting at this point should be negligible.

D: Now take either an echo or reverb: you're going to need both with nothing else in them but this vocal track during the mix! Put them in a separate channel by themselves and patch/assign the lead vocal to them. If you've done some experimenting in this arena while you were laying down instrument tracks and the final VOCAL, you should have the better part of this process already established. You should only need to polish.

E: Pan the first effect forty five degrees which effect doesn't matter and which side doesn't matter but for this explanation we'll begin with echo.

F: Now set the echo on its minimum setting or the factory set and listen! Lower the fader to the bottom and bring it up until the voice "sweetens"! Repeat the process with different settings until you have the correct delay, EQ, et ceteras, each time fading down all the way and bringing it back up until the voice sweetens! Once you have the settings, including the fader block it in tight with magnetic strips and turn off the echo!

G: Now pan the reverb forty five degrees to the opposite channel from the echo! Repeat the exact same process lowest or factory settings listening, and bringing the fader up from zero with each test until you have the voice sweetened! And block it in with magnetic strips! Some jerk will want to play jackass if you don't!

### **Now comes the hard part!**

H: Turn on the echo which like the reverb should still be set at forty five degrees one right and one left and adjust the pan until the delay, or signal drop, in one is filled by the other! It's not a matter of volume it's a matter of pan degree! The norm is usually a lesser than forty five degrees when finished, and sometimes there is a need to fine tune the volume, but do that as a last resort. And remember to reset the magnetic strips to keep the production where you set it!

6. Now that you have the LEAD VOCAL as good as it's going to get, the next instrument to consider is the BASS! A: SHUT OFF EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE BASS! B: PAN the BASS until it reads with equal volume in both the left and right channels. C: TURN ON THE LEAD VOCAL, EFFECTS AND ALL!

D: EQ the BASS to compliment the LEAD VOCAL and set the LEVEL to where the two sound as much like a finished product as possible. BLOCK IT IN!

7. Now that you have the LEAD VOCAL and the BASS combines as close as possible at this point, the next instrument to consider are the DRUMS!

A: SHUT OFF EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE DRUMS!

B: PAN the BASS DRUM until it reads with equal volume in both the left and right channels.

C: PAN the SNARE DRUM until it reads with equal volume in both the left and right channels.

D: PAN the RIDE HI-HAT until it reads with equal volume in both the left and right channels.

E: NOW RE-PAN the SNARE and HI\_HAT until they are in solid stereo balance with each other! Which is right or left is a matter of choice, just make sure that NEITHER is all-right or all-left.

F: NOW bring up each of the other percussions and set their LEVELS and PAN until it sounds like a live drum set during rolls, et ceteras.

G: TURN ON THE LEAD VOCAL, EFFECTS AND ALL, and the BASS.

H: EQ the BASS DRUM to compliment the LEAD VOCAL and set the LEVEL to where the three VOCAL, BASS, and BASS DRUM, sound as much like a finished product as possible.

I: Add the SNARE and repeat the EQ process to make it compliment the VOCAL.

J: Add the HI\_HAT and repeat the EQ process to make it compliment the VOCAL.

K: Add the other parts of the DRUM SET one at a time and in any order and repeat the EQ process on each in turn to make it compliment the VOCAL,

### **FIRST RULE OF THE THUMB:**

EQ each instrument to the LEAD VOCAL (and NOT the other way around!) to make them BLEND as much as possible. It's not a matter of 'how good' a given instrument sounds by itself, it's a matter of 'how good' does it sound with the LEAD VOCAL which is the all-important factor! ONCE YOU HAVE THEM SET BLOCK THEM IN!

8. Now that you have the LEAD VOCAL, BASS and DRUMS combined to this point, the next instrument to consider is your choice! Just get all the instruments done by following the same process for each before you attempt the harmonies and back-up vocals.

A: If you're using any instrument track with an effects of any kind be sure to solo/duet it with the VOCAL to avoid clash! Echo/Reverb on lead guitars and harmony vocals are notorious for clashing with LEAD VOCAL effects, so set the instrument or harmony effects to fit the VOCAL DO NOT CHANGE THE VOCAL EFFECTS SETTINGS!

B: After each instrument addition you'll need to fine tune the drums again! AND: WHATEVER YOU'VE JUST FINISHED WITH: BLOCK IT IN!

9. PIANO: The good producer's secret: PAN the LEFT hand FORTY FIVE DEGREES to one channel and the RIGHT HAND not more than FIFTEEN DEGREES to the other! Then when the PIANO takes the LEAD it's both in stereo and UP FRONT on that all-important RIGHT hand! BLOCK IT IN!

10. AVOID CHANNEL OVER-LOAD BY SHIFTING THE DEGREE OF PAN ON THE OFFENDING INSTRUMENT OR VOICE!

## **SECOND RULE OF THE THUMB:**

Everything can't be in the center, and neither the right or left channel can be 'heavy': so a good producer will take the LEFT hand of a piano and balance it by PANNING the BASS (in a few-piece production) or the BASS DRUM (in a more complex production) in the opposite channel just enough to BALANCE the production!

In the REAL WORLD OF RECORDING, there is actually only one rule: whatever works! Keeping a production CLEAN and UNCLUTTERED is easy enough, but always keep in mind that NO TWO PRODUCTIONS ARE EXACTLY ALIKE! But any set of properly produced music beds can virtually always be RE-EQed to fit any additional artist who sings that song in the same KEY! And when the final mix is finished, it'll sound like an entirely different production.

THIRD RULE OF THE THUMB: Making final production/mix decisions is easy: EITHER IT COMPLIMENTS (sounds good!) WITH THE LEAD VOCAL OR IT DOESN'T! If it doesn't: then change it or eliminate it and record something that does!

And always remember the initial admonition about emotionalism there comes a point where "doing it better" is really only "doing it different" and that's the time to shut down and let your ears readjust.

11. And now the most critical element of all THE KARAOKE TRACKS called MMVs inside the Industry and TRAX by the kids. Once you have the Final Mix on any given selection STOP! Stop right there before any jackass gets their hands on the board:

A.: Rewind the Studio Master --

B: Kill the LEAD VOCAL ONLY and all the effects on the LEAD VOCAL only --

C: ON A SEPARATE Master, make one more EXACT copy without that LEAD VOCAL ONLY!

D: Jackass elements will kill ALL THE VOCALS, and that sucks! LEAD VOCAL ONLY

E: REPEAT - LEAD VOCAL ONLY!

The more-exact those lead-vocalless music-beds are, the better! And, contrary to all the damned liars: you cannot 'go back and get it later'! And, if you don't think so, try it! Just be prepared to re-mix the main-take all over again. Even a delay of an hour when the humidity and/or the barometric pressure has changed that song will sound different and there's not a damned thing you can do to restore it!

So, make those damned MMVs while you're at it and THEN you can go to the next song with your potential money secured. Should a song really take off, those MMVs will just about DOUBLE the initial record sales and then top off the project with about a whopping 400% over that in sales! Kids love those TRAX and so do the KARAOKE licensors!

For someone who only read the short course in Studio Production you've become a pretty damned good producer!

Now that you know how to produce a commercially acceptable record contact any of the VPs and Producers below and get your product on the air, promoted, distributed and licensed World Wide. And do it before you blow your budget! If you're close enough to any of them, you might want to use their Production Facilities and certainly get the benefit of their expertise.

