

The importance of pre-production



How to avoid costly mistakes in the studio

Alright. I know what you're thinking. Preachy blog post time.

"He's probably going to very astutely point out that I should learn my own parts and tune my instrument BEFORE I get to the studio, and then all my problems will be fixed!" Or even better, "That we should have all the music and lyrics written BEFORE we get to the studio!" Or simply "That I should warm up my vocal chords, change my guitar strings, practice my parts to a click, stretch before takes, tell the bass player to change his strings, put on new drum heads, quit putting off beginning that Keto diet your friend who apparently lives at the gym now keeps going on and on about, and of course, HAVE FUN at the studio. THEN the song is going to sound amazing, big time success...Real original take there bud!"

All of that is of course true! (especially the Keto thing, you only have one body and pizza is great, but it's a hollow life.) If you carry out all of those tips and tricks, your studio experience absolutely will be better and more productive. Unfortunately that list is missing the most important process you can put your music through that would enhance it far beyond your initial expectations, and that my friends, is arrangement.

If riffs and beats are the words with which you express the song in your head, arrangement is the sentence structure that will determine if it's an Oscar winning script or the most down-voted comment on a Justin Bieber Youtube video. However my intention with this post is not to tell you how to arrange your song, it's to urge you to consider the easiest and most reliable way to sharpen your arrangement into the best possible song it can be, and that is pre-production.

For those who don't know, pre-production is a fancy word for literally demoing your song as if it was the final recording, then assessing what works, what doesn't and making the appropriate changes before you enter the studio to record the tracks for real.

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Although the song might sound fine when you jam it in your rehearsal space, most of us have learned the hard way that once we put our parts to tape, all sorts of weird shit can happen. The chorus suddenly sounds too slow, the guitars

disappear when a certain drum beat is played. The vocals sound off during the verses but you applied a delay that really makes the lines pop. Or the most common one, if your band has orchestration or synths or anything else of the sort, those elements are completely gone in the mix. If you take your time pre-producing the entire song with ALL the elements, you'll have the most accurate representation of what can potentially go wrong when you record it for real. However assessing the problems only gets you halfway there. The real benefit comes when you actually change the elements that aren't working before you record them in the studio.

I know that sounds like an obvious statement, but if you do your own pre-pro, and you do access issues, how many times have you said to yourself: "Hmm Even though I cant hear all those low vocal harmonies during that high pitched riff, I'm sure the stud we hired to mix this will apply his magic and magically make two sustained instruments occupying the same frequency range fit together! Lets record!" The truth is, its so much easier to simply change the arrangement then it is to fix it in the mix. Move orchestral arrangements up an octave so they are not inhabiting the space of guitars. If you have a low voice, consider tuning down in order to help the voice cut through. Pay close attention to syncopation, maybe the bass following the guitar sounds boring and it would be better if it matched the kicks or did something else entirely! Making these simple changes during the pre-production phase will mean that:

- 1) Your arrangement is going to be pro as hell, people are going to be impressed.
- 2) Your mixer will be in a creative state of mind instead of a corrective state of mind and your songs will turn out much better for it.
- 3) Arrangement is a skill, and the more you apply it, the better you get at it. You'll be crafting No. 1 hits in no time!
- 4) \$\$\$\$\$\$\$ saved in the studio or mixing cause you got it right the first time.

If you aren't sure how to record yourself, there are countless resources on Youtube, however I'm going to recommend actually going to a studio and asking them to do pre-production with you. Obviously I'm biased, but consider the benefits of having someone there who knows what they're doing so you can save time and focus on quickly and efficiently performing all your parts. As well as the benefit of someone with an outsider's perspective giving you feedback and options when something doesn't work the way you wish it did. While you might encounter the problem for the first time, they may have dealt with it dozens of times and can get you out of that rut in minutes. Generally studios giver cheaper deals (I know I do ;) and don't put as much emphasis on individual performance when pre-proing because your goal is to just get the song roughly recorded so you can start the arrangement process.

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However I totally get wanting to do the pre-production on your own! There is nothing wrong with that and you shouldn't feel like your making the wrong choice. All that it takes is a little bit of self education and some time and you can do it well enough to get your stuff recorded.

I recommend downloading Reaper, a free music producing software and watching Youtube videos on how to do ONLY what you want to do. Its easy to go down the rabbit hole of self-education and watch a 45 minute videos on mixing guitars, but remember your goal here isn't to learn how to mic up a guitar cab with 12 different mics, its to quickly record songs music so you can accurately assess if anything is inhabiting the frequency space of something else, if your tempo is too fast or too slow, if you need more or less vocals, if you need more intense drum beats or groovier beats to give the other instruments their room to breathe, etc. and make arrangement adjustments accordingly.

I hope that whatever this long winded and rambling thing I just subjected you to has inspired you to go out and demo your music, alone or with a producer, and really analyze it for what it is and what it could be, and then make the necessary changes to fix the issues before you spend more hard earned cash than you need to! If you have any questions I would love to answer em, shoot me an email at diego@oraclestudios.net

Till next preach,
Diego Fernandez

Some videos on recording:

Reaper download:

<http://reaper.fm/>

Setting up Reaper:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtTshPV4bpk>

Recording guitar and vocals in Reaper

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhRMM3RjbHM>

free drum machine and drum programming in Reaper:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZe-CKu2G-o>