

## Andy's Tips on Production

*"Every artist's production should be the expression of an adventure of his soul."*  
W.Somerset Maugham

Production is an art form and the producer, a multifaceted technician-artist. The whole music industry has gone through a massive change in both technology and consumer relation and so has the role of the producer.

A modern producer needs to be able to wear several hats at once, depending on the artist and budget. Sometimes he will need to help the songwriter finish writing a song, come up with a hook or a specific instrument part or re-arrange the form of the song and/or instruments. He might need to help the band pinpoint their sound and vibe and/ or help with the development of a musical style. A producer might also take on the role of the engineer and/or mixer and the process of mastering.

I've worked with many producers, mixers and engineers over the years. Having been on both sides of the glass, I've learned that vision and planning are the key to a successful final product.

Producing an amazing album requires knowledge and preparation on the part of both the producer and the artist. If you're a newbie, I hope this article will be helpful to you. I guarantee you'll end up with a much better record.

### The Main Stages Of A Production:

(Applies to one song or full album):

#### 1. Pre-Production:

*"God is in the details."*  
-Unknown

The pre-production stage is the most important and yet most overlooked aspect of producing a song or album. This is the "**get-the-most-bang-for-your-buck**" part. A lot of money can be saved by being well prepared because the most expensive part of a production is usually renting a studio with good gear.

Over and over again I've seen money going out the window because the musicians in the band felt they could skip the pre-production part and then ended up not knowing their parts well enough or what they wanted to sound like. This ends up wasting a lot of time and sapping enthusiasm and morale.

I've seen producers not having a **clear vision** on how the song was supposed to be structured, what parts were or were not needed and whether the project was ready for the studio.

Granted, there will be variables in the studio that you couldn't foresee. Inspiration might strike and suddenly you're coming up with a new hook that's better than what you had but throws off the vocals, etc. A good producer will adapt to such positive surprises and make fast decisions accordingly. Bad surprises are what must be minimized.

**Trust between the producer and the artist** is of utmost importance and yet another reason why pre-production is so essential. The pre-production stage allows for trust to develop between the producer and the artist(s) and for everyone to agree upon the vision for the final product.

The artist or band might have played a song the same way for a year but now the producer is telling the guitarist that his/her part is clouding the vocals, the vocalist is singing in the wrong key, the bassist is not grooving enough and the drummer has bad time....**this should not happen at \$100 an hour in a fancy recording studio.**

**Exchanging ideas** about the vision can be done over dinner, in a cafe, via email or on the phone but to complete the pre-production process, you would work in a rehearsal facility ideally with all the instruments and band gear that would be used in the recording studio.

#### Recap of Pre-production Tips:

- \*Song-writing. Choosing your best songs/material.
- \*Define the vision of the song and/or album (style, vibe, etc.)
- \*Arrangement (which instruments to choose, what parts to play)
- \*REHEARSING THE PARTS! Create good demo recordings of the songs
- \*PLAN YOUR BUDGET! If possible, leave a little bit of wiggle room for one extra day for tracking and mixing. Stuff will always come up.
- \*SET A SCHEDULE! A little pressure never hurt anyone and it will make sure you are organized and held accountable for your vision.

#### 2. Production/Recording:

*"I need more cowbell!"*  
-SNL

Now that you have a full vision and know what you want to record, it's **all about capturing a great performance**.

I encourage you to read up on your favorite albums and learn all the creative ways artists use to get into the right mind-set and vibe for that special performance. Every artist is different and what might have worked for one might not work for another. It's all about being in the moment to get the right performance to track. For example: imagine Zack De La Rocha's (Vocalist of Rage Against The Machine) mind-set when he recorded "Killing In The Name" in the studio. I imagine him channeling frustration and anger at a system he wants to change, then using all that anger and frustration to give an **authentic performance** that makes the listener feel what he felt in that moment. Just listen to his voice and you can imagine him standing right in front of you "spilling his guts out". A truly great performance requires **preparation and authenticity**.

#### Choosing the Right Recording Studio:

Expensive gear is not necessary to get a great sound but you do want to record with the best gear that:

- a) fits the vibe of the song
- b) is within your budget, but
- c) most importantly the engineer or producer knows how to use.

A \$5000 condenser microphone is not going to be useful if the singer sounds better through a \$160 dynamic mic. (U2's Bono, Michael Jackson and many other vocalists used, and still use, relatively cheap dynamic mics for their platinum selling records). The producer either has his own studio where he can do some of the production process or knows studios where he has worked at frequently.

Depending on what kind of music you want to record, one of the bigger issues in the studio is **tuning**. Although we have the possibility to manipulate the tuning of a recorded track with software, we want to avoid it, because it can degenerate the natural sound of the amplified instrument. Also, you don't want to approach the recording with the mind-set of correcting everything later. Start your recording aiming for the best sound right away. One solution is to have great instruments at your disposal in the studio. Another option is to always record the instrument with an added **DI (Direct Input) track**.

I've done it many times; the bass performance will be great, but because the instrument is subpar, the tuning is bad on specific notes. I would run the DI track through a tuning software, knowing that tuning the DI track will sound more natural than tuning the amp'd recording (this has to do with the added harmonic complexity of an amplified signal).

This usually works better with basses than guitars.

It's scary how tuning has been abused in the last couple of years. Making everything be perfectly in tune takes away the authenticity and humanity of a performance. What's even scarier is that people now have a hard time hearing an authentic voice on mainstream radio because everybody is using the same tuning software which makes every singer sound exactly the same!

Having a DI signal will help you even when you don't have tuning problems. Let's say you love the performance but the guitar was too distorted. You won't be able to change that unless you used a software plug-in to track your distorted guitars or you recorded a DI signal that you can re-amp (running the signal through a new amplifier).

**If the situation permits, always ask for an additional DI signal recording of amplified instruments.**

There so many more tips that I could get into, but those I mentioned above will already make your songs sound 200% better.

Reminder: while you're recording, you should strive to get as close as possible to the way you want everything to sound. Try not to fall into the "We'll fix it in the mix" way of thinking.

#### Recap of Production/Recording Tips:

- \*Choose the right studio for your budget and needs, if you haven't done this already in the pre-production planning
- \*Make sure you'll have the right and the best instruments ready for the session
- \*Prepare yourself mentally, emotionally and physically for each performance
- \*Although there will probably be pressure in some form or another, try not to let it ruin your vibe and inspiration. Use relaxation techniques, deep breathing, meditation and visualization to help you focus under pressure.

### **3. Post-Production:**

*"We'll fix it in the mix."*  
-half of the population

So you got great performances and all the instruments DI recorded. **Post-Production is the mixing and editing of the recorded music**. The less editing you have to do, the better.

A lot of novice bands forget to calculate the mixing part into the budget. Yet when they listen back to what they recorded, a lot of, "WHAT?! That's what I sound like?" will come up.

This could have been avoided during the pre-production process. Now everything needs to be fixed within the mix; the vocals are out of tune, the guitars are pushing too much and are distorted, the bass is inconsistent time-wise but consistently out of tune, in the drum tracks the snare is fast and the kick is behind and the fills are messy which throws off the groove.

AAAAARRRRGGGGHHHHH! That's not going to work and not what anyone wants as their final product.

Twice as much time and money will now be spent fixing the mistakes in post-production than by just making sure you're ready for the studio in the first place.

But not you— you didn't make these mistakes and are very happy with your recordings. Great! This is a very exciting time for

you, because a good mixer will make it sound even better.

I'm not going into all the tools and possibilities because they are endless. **Due to digital recording we have the possibility to do pretty much anything with a recorded signal.**

To put it in a nutshell, a mixer is going to make sure that all the recorded tracks sound the best they can and that **the hooks and parts that need to be driving the songs forward are upfront and easy to hear.** He'll also help define the vibe of the recording; right in-your-face sound, more removed, pumping, etc.

#### Recap of Post-Production Tips:

- \*Editing parts and mistakes
- \*Using Eq's, compression, gates, etc. to improve the recorded signals
- \*Create space and dimension with panning and reverbs
- \*Highlighting the parts and hooks that drive the song
- \*Creating a complete band sound that reflects the vibe of the song (compression and harmonic excitement)

#### **4. Mastering:**

*"We won the loudness war!"*

-Metallica on the production of *Death Magnetic*  
(fictitious quote)

So you're done mixing the song but why is the volume so low? And it sounds a little raw. Well we're not done with the song yet. We need to get the song ready for the masses.

I consider mastering a separate process from post-production. Although a lot of pros would put it under the umbrella of post-production; especially if the producer will do the mastering himself. A music mastering studio is set-up very differently than a typical recording studio. The master engineer needs to hear the mix in full detail, so the room will have a sparse lay out to ensure minimum room interference and premium acoustics.

Mastering your final mix will make sure that your song will sound equally as good on all possible speaker systems and that the volume of your song is where it's supposed to be. Furthermore, during the mastering stage the song order of an album will be set along with the time in between each song.

A lot of producers will do everything up until the mastering stage and then give it to a mastering house. The reason for this is because a mastering house will have better sound systems and digital audio workstations to ensure the best possible final product.

There are some similarities between mixing and mastering. Minor flaws will be edited and noise (clicks, dropouts, hum and hiss) will be removed. The stereo image will be adjusted if need be, fade in and fade outs will be set. There are many more things that can be done and some of them can even be done during the mixing stage. The difference is that a good mastering house will be able to do a better job. The gear that is being used in a mastering house is especially made for the process of mastering and is very expensive. That's why many mastering houses will just focus on that part of a production.

Nevertheless the producer and artist should work very closely with the mastering house to ensure that the final product sounds the way it's supposed to.

#### Recap of Mastering Process:

- \*Fixing minor flaws (noise, clicks, pops, etc)
- \*Adjusting stereo image/width
- \*Equalization
- \*Adjust volume and dynamic range
- \*Peak limiting

#### **Conclusion:**

Your song is now back from the mastering house and ready for commercial release! Yay!

As you can probably see by now, every stage of the production process is crucial and interrelated. As a whole, production is subdivided into smaller stages that influence each other. Doing poorly in any one stage or neglecting one altogether will significantly compromise your project. Dotting every 'i' and crossing every 't' on your way will make sure that you're making your vision come true or that you'll end up with even more. How exciting!

Oh wait...we forgot about marketing and how to get your music to the people...

...The work has just begun. ;)

*"What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."*  
-T.S. Eliot