



Recording Vocals

A great vocal recording can take a song to the next level and make you stand out from the crowd. So how does one go about capturing a great performance? There are many different types of singers and there are a number of factors to consider in order to achieve that great recording. Whether you're looking to record vocals for the first time or you're an experienced engineer, here are a few things to consider for your next session.

Microphone Selection

It begins with choosing the right microphone. You want a mic that is going to complement both the singer's voice and the song itself.

There are a few different types of microphones. Generally speaking, dynamics have a focused midrange and can handle a very high SPL (sound pressure level), ribbons have a warm vintage tone, and condensers offer a full range sound, from rich lows to present mids and crisp highs. It's likely that most of the time you will use a large-diaphragm condenser; however, don't just jump to that or any other conclusion without trying some options first. If you're working with someone who has a lot of studio experience, they may be able to help point you in the right direction. You'll want to compare your options and go from there.

Keep in mind that it all starts at the source. The closer you can get to a final sound at the recording stage, the better off you'll be moving forward.

Positioning

Most of the time, you want the singer to be on centre with the diaphragm of the microphone. Reading lyrics while recording can cause them to move off axis during a take, so it is always best if they can memorize their lyrics. This will not only make it easier to stay on axis, but will be one less thing for them

to think about as they are trying to deliver a great performance.

Distance is another factor to keep in mind. As the singer gets closer to a microphone, the low frequency information will increase; this is known as the proximity effect. As they move further away, the room's acoustics become more influential. Knowing this, you can fine-tune the positioning for the sound you'd like to achieve.

Polar Patterns

The most commonly-used polar pattern is cardioid. This picks up sound mainly from the front of the mic and will reject much of its surroundings. An omni polar pattern, which picks up equally in all directions, can offer a more natural sound as the singer's tone is not greatly affected by distance nor if they are moving on and off axis. Different polar patterns offer different frequency responses, as well as different rejection points. This is another tool that will give you control over the tone and the amount of room reflections you capture. There are several polar patterns. Learn about them and experiment to get the most out of a microphone.

The Room

There is somewhat of a misconception that vocals should be recorded in a "dead" room, meaning a small room where the walls are covered in fabric or foam to remove all reverberation. This can sometimes result in a dull, lifeless-sounding vocal, especially if the room is not treated properly. Although the "dead" approach is definitely valid at times, it is just one approach. It's good to try out a few rooms, and different areas within a room. Start by listening to what the singer sounds like in each space. Once you find the best available option, you can fine-tune as needed. You will really begin to notice poor room acoustics when you apply compression, and even more so when it comes to mix time.

Headphone Mix

Often overlooked, a good headphone mix can be the difference between an okay vocal performance and a great one. You want the mix to sound awesome, but just because a mix sounds great doesn't mean it will be good to sing with. There could be elements that are overpowering, distracting, or otherwise hinder the singer's ability to find the pocket and connect with the song. This could mean turning up the drums, lowering lead parts or other busy/distracting elements, etc. Make sure that you communicate with the singer to identify and address any issues with their headphone mix. When it comes to effects, most people like some reverb, especially if the room is dead. Start with a little and only turn it up when requested. Reverb can give someone confidence and vibe, but too much can impede their ability to find pitch.

The Performance

Above all else, it's vital to ensure that nothing get in the way of the performance. The singer should feel comfortable and confident. You want to help guide them through the process, give constructive feedback, and keep them on the right path. It's also good to have a plan of attack before you start recording. Do a couple passes of the song so they can get comfortable and you can check your levels. Then have a quick discussion about how to proceed. Sometimes it will make sense to do full takes, front to back; however, you may find it helpful to leave the more strenuous parts for last. For example, you could record the verses first, then the bridge, and finish with the chorus. This way, you won't exhaust the singer early on. This approach will allow you to focus on one section at a time and fine-tune your equipment to get the optimal vocal sound for each section of the song.