



Hi Everyone,

In my last column I touched on recording acoustic guitars and getting the right sounds with my Pro Tools LE 002.

This month I'll share some techniques for recording vocals. Now, mind you, I am still somewhat of an amateur when it comes to engineering. I have become an engineer primarily out of necessity as other artists and players have done. The big studios—and I do remember the days—are primarily booked by record companies that have fairly good-sized production budgets, or writers and artists with the cash flow to handle those expenses. Most of us, in reality, are grateful for the technology that allows us to record our own music in our own home studio environment. It is amazing that good sound quality can be achieved with good microphones and mic pre-amps, and a bit of knowledge and patience.

I was told that Michael Hedges' landmark recording *Aerial Boundaries* was recorded for the most part on a two-track machine in his living room. It sounds lush and spacious. Back then, of course, that involved analog technology and tape. The secret today is to achieve as warm a sound as possible when one is using digital computer-based recording gear.

I would like to discuss vocal recording.

Okay—it has been said “Don't let Keaggy record his own vocals.” Right! So, I'm a piece of work in progress. Still, that won't stop me from trying—and it shouldn't stop you either.

Practice puts perfection a little bit more within reach, so you and I should continue to learn and encourage each other. Honestly, I've listened to some of my recordings from the distant past, and they weren't all that great and warm sounding. On the other hand, I believe the vocals I recorded on such CDs as *Dream Again* and *Acoustic Café* have some real sonic merit—possibly because I am relaxed when I record my own vocals.

Now, there is a lot to be said in being “produced”. A great producer can draw a performance out of the artist that may be otherwise unattainable. Lynn Nichols, for instance, really challenged me to sing my buttocks off on the Sunday’s Child album, and that was a blast!

Left to myself, I do tend to be mellower, but sometimes that’s good. When I recorded Way Back Home in 1986, there were two songs I just couldn’t sing comfortably – the title song, “Way Back Home” and “Olivia.” I asked the producer and engineer to leave me alone in the studio at the controls with a handheld mic. They stepped out and I nailed the vocals exactly how I wished them to be.

On the True Believer CD, I was not happy with the producer’s direction for my song “Son Of Man,” so I said, “Let me just sing the way I hear it,” and the result was just what the song needed. The producer, Alan Shacklock, by the way, is a great producer and brought out some very strong vocals from me. The engineers I worked in the past were really great, too. Some names: jb, Bill Deaton, Russ Long, Richie Biggs and Tom Laune, to mention but a few.

Well, here I am now, for the most part, in my own working area, creating music, as I am able. The microphones I have used on vocals range from Audix to Audio Technica, and I also have a CAD mic. They are all reasonably affordable and have good sound. I am also using a newly acquired La Chapelle tube mic pre-amp.

I am only into my fourth or fifth year of computer based recording. It was reel to reel from the early days till around 1999 when I got ADATs, then went to the Mackie HDR 24 digital recording machine. Still have it. It has good sound! In 2003, I dove into Pro Tools and have been learning more every time I record.

Back to singing. I sit with headphones on and man the controls. Occasionally, I will stand, as it makes one sing differently; it’s more like a performance. But most times, I will sit and work my parts out and end up feeling pretty good about them. There have been times when I would go back over them again and again, tweaking the vocals or re-singing them.

When mixing—and I still have a lot to learn about mixing—I will monitor the sound on headphones, then listen to the Mackie self- powered speakers at various playback levels. I find that at lower levels you can discern proper balance more acutely. Also, when a mix is completed, it helps to listen in a car as well as on another stereo system.

With harmonies, if I’m doing my own, I’ll often put the previous vocal pass somewhat to left or right of center—10 or 2 o’clock. If the vocal BGVs are many, I’ll concentrate on singing along with a few but not all the vocal tracks so I can hear more distinctly the part I am singing, as well as the part or parts I am harmonizing with.

When I record other vocalists in my studio, I will have them often go into the vocal booth if they are cool with that. This is helpful as well if a producer is present in the control room. Incidentally, my room is just an open room with a smaller vocal or amp booth.

The recording process can be very rewarding. As you keep at it, small goals are achieved, then before too long, you start to see and hear the big picture come into sonic focus. Well, I hope you've enjoyed some of this, and do pardon my lack of technical savvy and engineering expertise. I'm mainly a guitar player by trade—really! Next time, I'll give you a bit of detail about software Plug-ins and effects.

Blessings of Christmas Cheer to you all.

Phil Keaggy