

Inspirations for better performance

Studios interrupt the loop — Musicians perform and an audience responds, and the performers react to the audience. It is a natural state of affairs. Place a studio in the process and the performer/audience feedback disappears. For the inexperienced it is difficult to reproduce the feeling that drives live performance. For the veteran, a change in studio tactics can produce unexpected results.

KEITH SPENCER-ALLEN suggests ten things to try.

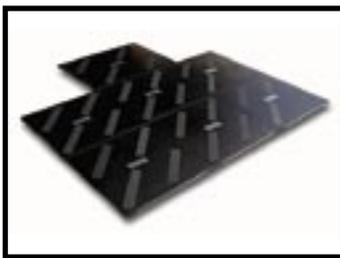


LIGHTS — One of several elements of the live stage experience that can be brought into the studio. While it's too much to expect a studio to install a lighting rig, the ability to control lighting beyond 'full-on' or

localised dimming is a useful creative tool. If a band has a small lighting system, have them bring it in. Just dimming the lights isn't really that effective as it slowly induces tiredness. Consider spotlights for the overdubs, particularly for the vocals.



SET-UP — So many times a performance is made more difficult by introducing artificial barriers into the recording process — iso booths, distant placing, etc. Frequently it is better to have musicians place themselves (with a little guidance) where they feel most comfortable in a studio. This may vary from setting up as they might on stage, physically close together, or in the darkest corners of the room. This may present challenges to the engineer but that's why you are there. Compromise comes later, after your recording know-how has been exhausted.



MORE OF THE STAGE

— Sometimes bringing in extra elements of a live situation works. Creating a simple stage or raised area

does much to break away from the stereotypical recording situation. Even adding just a drum riser adds a different dimension (literally) while for larger sessions placing a brass section or choir on an elevated, even tiered, area can make recording easier and more akin to the performers' regular experience.



NOT ALONE — If you go the stage route, it seems natural to add an audience. Bringing back that instant feedback to the performance can help on basic tracks. It doesn't take a large number of people, probably no more than you might find hanging around anyway. This provides a more controlled alternative to capturing the basic tracks at a live gig and bringing the recordings into the studio for improving and overdubbing, which can work. And oddly, even on overdubs, an audience, even a small one, that can hear the foldback may inspire the performer.



REDUNDANT PLAYERS

— When overdubbing basic parts it can be difficult to inject the right performance, and if it takes a long time, attention can wander. Having another musician play at the same time, even if not being recorded, can bring focus to the overdubber and highlight how certain sections need to be played due to what will be added later. It can also stop an inexperienced player feeling persecuted by the 'tyranny of the talkback' from the control room!



BREATHING AND SMELLING

— It's unfortunate that when a lot of audio electronics is gathered together and switched on, there's a very distinctive smell — hot electrical components and warm plastic. While, by association, it acts as a stimulant to the studio junky, it is a total depressant to higher levels of creativity. Because there's normally a shortage of fresh air, we have to look to other means — not spray cans. Natural oils and scents can work but are very personal in taste. However, try adding some ionisers as a compliment to air-conditioning. Provided they have a rating sufficient for the space they can 'clean' the air, add a freshness, and remove many of the impurities present.



THE SITTING ROOM — After successfully recording some demo tracks in a musician's home sitting room, it isn't always possible to match the sound with the same instruments in

the studio. Consider setting up a typical sitting room in the studio with twin sofas, carpets, drapes and coffee table because it works on two levels. Acoustically it provides the right amount of reflection and absorbency in the right places and most musicians began their playing careers practising and rehearsing where they felt most comfortable.



ADDED FANTASY

— Although more of a producer's input, creating a theme for an album's sessions can differentiate this production from the last, and generate a specific vibe. The Beachboy's Brian Wilson had his piano placed in a large sand pit so he could feel inspired by the sand between his toes! At a simple level it could be rugs and drapes, to large potted plants, mannequins, fountains, art installations — all have been experienced. Whether it works is dependent on the personalities involved.



OUTSIDE

— Recording outside is a completely new experience for many. Acoustically it is like taking off the studio roof and the sound is more open yet deader although other reflective surfaces become more obvious. The creative stimulus can vary depending on the situation and for practical reasons really only works for overdubs. Singers seem to benefit most and enjoy the contradiction between the drier sound of outdoors while hearing a more reverberant signal in their cans. And of course there is the famous trick of bouncing the sound of large guitar amps off the sides of a remote valley, as Cornwall's Sawmills studio knows with its instant stadium effect. The biggest but least anticipated problem will be birdsong, which cuts through anything!



EXTREME ACOUSTICS

— Moving drums and guitars into stairwells, recording vocals in the bathroom are all well known techniques but consider going the opposite direction — no reverberation. A sonically dry environment is oppressive on a large scale but when very localised can be a useful recording device. Recording an acoustic guitar or voice in near anechoic conditions is very effective. Completely surround the playing position (almost) with absorbent blankets, cushions and drapes — with a guitar these can be very close. The musician will have to wear headphones, probably with some ambience added to be able to perform but the resulting signal is supremely flexibly. Large amounts of compression can be added without the perceived distance of the instrument changing. Vocals can sound like they are whispering in your ear. The challenge is rewarding.