

In the studio with Jazz singer Kendra Shank—making vocal magic

# RECORDING

The magazine for the recording musician

## Recording VOCALS

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### The Voice

What a fickle instrument it is! As one who used to make his living from working for singers, from creating and rehearsing new routines to writing the charts, rehearsing the bands, conducting their live performances and sometimes playing on their studio recordings, I have

countless memories of vocal triumphs and failures. At the airport on the way to the gig, listening to the singers' greetings and conversation in the departure lounge, I'd get an inkling of what that night's vocal performance would be like. Too many causes for worry—last night's lack of sleep, the marital argument on the way out the door, the brutal air conditioning on the plane, anxieties about new routines ("Can we go over this again?") or a new venue ("Do they like my kind of act?")—they all bode ill for the stamina, the delicate songs and the high notes.

You think double-reed players are nervous wrecks (watch them fiddle with their reeds and cups of water below the music stand...)? Then watch some singers with their warm-up idiosyncracies, from a strategic cup of tea ("Must be with honey!") to a humming exercise with tuning fork ("I forgot to bring mine—I can't go on without it, can anybody find a tuning fork in a hurry?"), from a pretzel-like yoga pose in the Green Room ("May I have some privacy?") to a shot of brandy ("You didn't see this, but it really helps..."). You soon realize just how fickle the voice is—and the psyche behind the voice.

So—as we get ready to record them, let's be kind to the singers! As producer/engineer to the stars Rob Chiarelli told you in our interview in the May issue, make the singers comfortable, indulge their whims, and don't ever let them see you sweat when you're recording them. Insecurities can sink a session in a hurry, so give the singer no hint of your troubles, even if some of your equipment goes haywire during a session. Keep your cool, call a break, soldier (not solder!) on with a work-around, and only when the singer is happily out the door, feeling good about today's achievements, can you collapse and panic before you troubleshoot and fix the problem.

The studio is not a natural environment for a singer. No audience to inspire the performance, controlled and downright contrived room acoustics that are nothing like any rooms where singers are used to singing, separation from the players by anything from a set of goboes to an iso booth, and—usually worst of all—headphones! Let's remember that it is just simply *not normal* to hear oneself more through one's bodily resonances rather than through the air, but that's what happens when headphones are clamped on the ears. Hearing the headphone feed of one's voice in the mix with the instruments is so different from hearing it any other way that it throws many singers who are neither shy nor inexperienced.

Jazz singer Kendra Shank feels that way about headphones, as she tells us in this issue's interview. But that didn't stop her from achieving a splendid new CD, much to the credit also of studio owner and engineer Manfred Knoop and Kendra's stellar band.

Rick Barrio Dill produced vocal tracks with a newly hired lead vocalist who has his own home studio—at the other end of the country. They used the internet to make it work, and Rick tells us how.

Joe Albano had the task of blending the less-experienced voices of two band members with that of the lead singer, and he reports on the tools and techniques he employed. Tricky assignment, commendable results.

It's not all about the voice this month—we bring you guitar- and bass-related articles you'll like, and quite a diverse sprinkling of product reviews for your consideration. Singing, playing, or both, we wish you a very happy summer, and—

Happy Recording!

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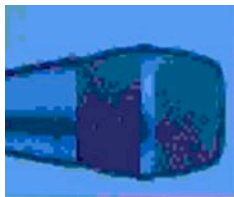
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## RECORDINGS VOCAL COLUMN

In this month's Vocal column, Rick Barrio Dill harnesses the power of the Internet to bring a vocalist and a band together.

# RECORDING VOCALS IN AN INTERNET WORLD

By Rick Barrio Dill

I love technology—it never sits still. It is no longer difficult to work on recording projects with people not in the same zip code—and do it *fast!*

Having artists and producers in the same room at the same time, or all the musicians present for tracking, may be preferable but is often unrealistic. Sure, for years now there have been solutions like FTP up- and downloads, or the old "DVD or CD-R in the mail" trick, but that didn't work well when time was of the essence. Now, progress in both internet bandwidth and accessibility allows sharing large audio files across the internet and can lead to much greater productivity. I'll give you my most recent example.

### Long-distance audition

I am based in Los Angeles. Recently I was hired on to play bass in Sugarwall, a "rock/pop-with-a-hint-of-country" type project that was touring a little, but was also in the midst of replacing their lead singer. They asked me if I knew of anyone who might be a good fit, and I thought of a good friend of mine, Ronnie Dee, who is an amazing artist and world-class singer. Ronnie lives in Florida (where I am originally from), not an issue in this case since the members of Sugarwall are spread all over the country—geography doesn't matter with them because each member either has his own recording rig or has access to one.

The band asked me if I could send Ronnie an instrumental and have him demo his take on one of their songs. I obtained the band's Pro Tools files from their previous recordings, opened the sessions, muted all the old vocals and made sure I was on the grid with the correct tempo map, and I bounced an instrumental MP3 with a 2-bar topside of silence for Ronnie to sing over.

I emailed this to him along with the tempo of the song and a note that it has 2 bars on the top, and he was able to use his Nuendo rig in Tampa to cut his vocals/demo. All he had to do was obviously set up a new session with the correct tempo, drag the MP3 in, and sing over the top. Simple.

The same day he sent me back an MP3 of a quick mix he made of the instrumental along with his lead vocals and 12 tracks of background vocals. I was able to forward

this email/demo track to the drummer in Colorado and the guitarist who lives across town here in L.A. Presto... a virtual audition!

Within 20 minutes, my phone was ringing off the hook. They were floored at what had been done in less than a day and at how great everything sounded (not even being really mixed and just on MP3). The decision was made right then and there to hire my friend sight unseen (but definitely heard) and they enlisted me to produce the re-recording and re-mixing of their record with the new lead singer.

### Close collaboration—from a long way away

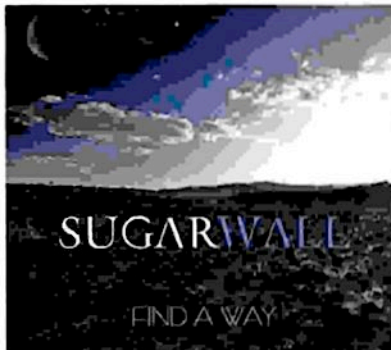
It was fun to exchange ideas and tracks between me (the producer) and Ronnie (the singer) on a daily basis. For example, for this first song, he used YouSendIt (yousendit.com) to send me back 13 consolidated files (1 lead vocal and 12 backgrounds, 24-bit/48 kHz), zipped up in one folder, all with the same absolute 2-bar start point as the original instrumental I had sent him.

I love YouSendIt for this kind of usage—for \$10 a month, I can send and receive files up to 2 GB in size, basically as much as I need. This ZIP file from Ronnie was approximately 400 MB and it only took about 20 minutes to download with my DSL connection. Once I had it on my hard drive, I just dragged the individual vocal files into my session and boom... they lined up perfectly with my 2-bar original topside space. I could then start to do a detailed mix on my end.

### Back and forth

Not so fast, though. As producers tend to do when we get into it and roll up our sleeves, I started to notice the need for some lyrical changes, and I also wanted to challenge some of the lead vocal melodies that I felt could possibly be better (or better executed).

When the time-zone difference permitted, I called Ronnie on the phone and "phoned in" my suggestions for changes. If it was too late for the East Coast, I put my list of changes into an email and sent it off. Inevitably, by the time I would wake up the next day on the West Coast, I



would have in my email inbox numerous takes and options, in one ZIP file that Ronnie had sent me.

For brevity's sake (and keeping file sizes small with respect to changes), all "takes" would have the same start point, *all on the grid and all starting on the downbeat of the previous bar where they would be inserted.* This way I could simply create a new take with the grid ON (or in this case, duplicate my lead take), and drag the new bit or replacement vocal piece to its appropriate place in the song. I would then repeat this step for each new "take piece" that I had received from him (naming each take appropriately) and then audition accordingly. This worked perfectly, whether I needed a better performance or an alternate melody. As long as I could continue to communicate what I was looking for as the producer, he could execute on his end, and we were able to achieve an incredibly fruitful artistic partnership, on our own schedules, with 3000 miles separating us.

#### It's a record

Over the next several weeks we chipped away, doing exactly this process for 10 songs. We would discuss melodic and lyrical rewriting ideas, either over the phone or via email, and as the process moved along, each of us got incredibly good at feeling out what the other was going for, even though we were across the country from each other. As you would expect with any writing and recording endeavor, some days were easier than others, and when certain ideas just weren't working, we moved on to other songs. Before we knew it, we had rewritten and re-recorded all lead vocals and background vocals for an entire record, all over the internet.

I am proud to say I just finished mixing and mastering (with Gil Tamazyan) the entire record into what is now the Sugarwall LP *Find A Way*, and the band is set to release this record on May 19, with the tour starting in August. You can read more about the album and hear samples at [sugarwallband.com](http://sugarwallband.com). Using the power of the internet, YouSendIt and some good home studios, we were able to negate the problem of geographics and get down to what really should matter—getting the job done right and having fun. ☺

*Rick Barrio Dill of Shark Eating Dog Productions performs and produces while based in his Upstream Studios in Los Angeles when he's not touring with bands like 2nd Day Crush and Sugarwall. Check him out at [www.myspace.com/allmyspacegimmick](http://www.myspace.com/allmyspacegimmick) or write to him via [talkback@recordingnag.com](mailto:talkback@recordingnag.com).*

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