



Time To Be Vocal

by [Phil Gates](#)

We've been talking a lot about guitar tone, which, don't get me wrong is VERY important, but many of us are singers as well, or at least have singers in the band, or are hiring singers for their projects. So let's talk about tracking vocals.

First off is what mic are you using? Not necessarily the actual brand name, but what type of mic?

For potentially high volume sources, like guitar amps, snare drums, trumpets, etc, a suggestion would be a dynamic mic.

For more subtle things like vocals, pianos, ambient mics, overhead cymbals, stringed instruments, a suggestion would be a condenser mic.

You absolutely CAN use a dynamic mic for vocals, (think of almost any live record you've ever loved, that was probably an SM-58 being used) but a condenser mic will pick up more subtleties of the voice being recorded. So let's go with that.

Next is gain structure:

Let's re-cap the procedure for this

1. On the input you're connected to, turn the input sensitivity or gain all the way down counter-clockwise
2. Watch the peak LED (usually by the input sensitivity or gain knob) while turning the input sensitivity knob clockwise as you audition the source.
3. When the peak LED begins to illuminate;

then bring the input sensitivity knob back counterclockwise until the peak light occasionally flashes (if the peak light is set lower than 0dB)

At this point you have obtained a good working level for the input stage, as well as for the rest of the unit.

Cool. So far the gear end of it is set up. Let's get to some more acoustic aspects of tracking vocals.

Is the room isolated?

By this I mean are there going to be problems from outside sources? Planes, trains, automobiles? Plan good time to record around these things.

Do you have a vocal booth?

This could be very handy, indeed a good vocal booth is very important. Keeping in mind that a vocal booth could easily be a closet in the house with acoustic tiles in it.

Are you recording vocals in the same room as the computer is in?

If this is the case, make sure to use a cardioid mic pattern with the rejection side of it pointing towards the computer. This will minimize the sound of computer fans and hard drive noise getting into the mix. You might also want to put a noise gate on the mic to help in-between phrase noise.

The next step is about how to have the vocalist approach the mic.

I'll use a pop screen in between the vocalist and the mic. Place the pop screen about 2" off the mic and I'll tell the vocalist to stay 2" off of the pop screen.

If the vocalist has done a lot of recording, they'll have good mic technique.

If it's a new vocalist, or new to the studio, I tell them to act like the mic is someone they care about's ear. Get in close to whisper or be sultry. Back up a little for louder passages. The overall concept is that you want to have a consistent level to the mic.

Now let's talk about making the vocalist happy. (OK, OK, no vocalist jokes here please) Is the room comfortable? Is it the right temperature for them? Do they need coffee? Tea? How's their headphone mix? Remember the headphone mix you like might be terrible for them. The basics for a headphone mix are some beat, (kick, snare) for timing and a rhythm instrument (guitar, or keys) for pitch. Everything else is vocalist vibe. If they want guitars to the left and bass to the right and the high end rolled off over all, give it to them. What do you care? If it makes the project go better, go for it. It may be better than arguing the ways to provide a headphone mix, or the history of the headphone mix to a person, and frustrating them right before you need them to sing for you. On the flip side, keep an eye (and ear) on it. If the vocals are starting to suffer timing-wise, try to give more beat to the headphone mix. If the pitch is starting to vary, add more of the rhythm instrument.

Now we can get into a little producing.

If the vocalist is one that isn't very used to punching in, you may have to have them sing the whole song down, by verses and chorus' doing like 4 or five complete takes of each on separate tracks. Then later, after the vocal session, you can go back and pick which parts you like of the four versions. Usually it needs to be done in four to six versions as by then the voice has started to change, and it will be harder to match up the same tone of each vocal as you edit later.

This method can be just fine. I've done sessions where we cut line-by-line vocals. Not because the vocalist couldn't punch in, but because we wanted every line to be perfect. And I've also cut sessions where the vocalist could only do the song from top to bottom-no breaks- like four times then that was it. The rest is editing and producing.

A common thing to make the lead vocal sound bigger is to double the vocal. This can be easily done by using a short delay on the lead vocal. I, however, am a bigger fan of actually singing the vocal a second time on another track, then panning the two tracks on playback at about 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock.

This can sound really good, as there are little differences between each take that liven it up greatly.

I have also done triple tracking of the lead vocal. Putting the best one at twelve o'clock in the mix and the other two lead vocals at about 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock. I'll put the two sub

lead vocals a few dB down from the 12 o'clock vocals track to make the track sound centered.

Effects wise, I may put the sub lead vocals through a short reverb, and the main lead through a longer reverb. The same goes for delay. When it comes to compression, and EQ, I will tend to dress up the main lead vocal only with the cool plug-ins, and use regular EQ's and compressors from the software for the sub lead vocals. They are, after all playing a part at this point, and if I use all of the DSP of my computer on the three lead vocals, this is probably going to start to load down the DSP processor of my computer. Considering that I may be using DSP on other instrument tracks.

Recording vocals is an art like playing guitar. Try everything that's reasonable, and see what works best for you. Try these, and other things on a day that doesn't matter. Get to know your gear, Mics included. They are the link between your singing, and sounding on playback as faithful as you sound live.

Try some of these things out, and see what you like. Next month we're going to have fun w/ back-up vocals.

Take care,
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