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# 5 Vocal Recording Mistakes You May Be Making

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Everybody wants a great vocal sound on their recording, right? Most engineers can give you tips for techniques you should use, but there are some things that you will definitely want to avoid – details that are frequently overlooked. Doing these may be keeping you from achieving great vocal tracks.

## 1. Ignoring Bad Acoustics

We get it — if you're recording at home or in any less than ideal environment, then you're unlikely to have studio-quality acoustics. You're going to have to compromise, but there's a limit to what you can ignore without totally trashing your sound. Room tones and resonant buildup are absolute tone killers, because they artificially boost or cut narrow frequency bands, resulting in tonal imbalances you simply can't fix.

While other reflection patterns (room modes) cause serious issues, flutter echo, which is what you get from parallel walls, is one of the biggest culprits of bad, resonant sound. In most cases, a small amount of acoustic foam (or even just moving the couch) to break up parallel walls can work wonders. You can



also avoid or reduce the effects of parallel walls by pointing the nulls on your mic's polar pattern at the offending parallel surfaces.

## 2. Being Unaware of Rumble



Most engineers recognize the importance of preventing mic bleed and broadband noise, but they often overlook the need to block out low-frequency noise. Low-frequency noise, such as vibrations from passing cars or HVAC systems, can completely destroy low-end definition, turning your recordings into mud. This problem can be undetectable until it's too late, and you find yourself trying to fix the unfixable in the mix.

An exposed hardwood floor can act like a giant speaker, transmitting the rumble of traffic into the kind of deep vibration even a top-quality shockmount can't block out. Thick carpeting can often do the trick, but you might need to record at off-prime hours to avoid truck traffic. The best way to prevent HVAC noise is to simply switch off the HVAC (along with all your fluorescent lights, your fridge, and other noisy electronics). You can also use baffles or diverters on the A/C supply vents to change the direction of air flow if it's disturbing your mics.

## 3. Using Excessive Color/Processing

Recording with some in-line processing, such as compression and EQ, can be a serious time-saver. What's more, even if you prefer to track clean, you have to appreciate the natural warmth and colored sound you get from the right kind of preamp. The biggest problem with tracking while using processors and warm preamps is that you have to commit to that one sound.



This isn't to say that you need to go 100% clean — you just need to be sensible. Until someone invents a de-compressor, you're going to want to be conservative with dynamics on the way in. Likewise, overloading your preamps is a great way to find yourself in a bad spot when you try to get a smooth mix from vocals that sound vaguely like they were recorded through a megaphone.

## 4. Not Perfecting the Headphone Mix



Similar to applying or not applying color to your vocals as you record, prioritizing the monitor mix can be hard to sort out. For instance, as the engineer, you know that the most important thing is for the final mix to sound as good as possible, and in order to do that, you need to get a great mix going in the control room. While you may get requests for obnoxiously bright or totally uncompressed headphone mixes that offend your sensibilities, it's still your responsibility to set up a headphone mix that will deliver the sound your vocalist needs.

At the same time, you can only humor your talent so far. When he or she starts requesting mixes dripping with so much reverb or delay that it becomes impossible to sing on key or in time, then you need to put your foot down and come to some form of compromise. The bottom line is that you need to do what's best for the song/mix, and that means getting the best possible performance out of your vocalist.

## 5. Moving Too Fast While Recording

Rushing the recording process is nothing short of repeatedly telling yourself that you can “fix it in the mix,” a mentality rarely adopted by studio professionals, and for good reason. While it may be tempting to get a halfway decent take or two (or 15!) and move on to the next song, this expedience will cause you frustration and lost time, as you spend hours trying to edit together and tune and polish vocals that will never sound quite as good as you hoped they would.



Fixing up poor vocal tone with a complex signal path is an entire issue on its own, but trying to correct for poor vocal performance in the mix is a waste of time and energy. For one thing, although advances in pitch and timing software have been truly staggering in the past few years, they can only effectively fix mild errors without imparting some artificial character to your vocals. It's always best to start with the best performance possible.

Starting with the best vocal take will save you from the biggest limitation of mix-rescuing vocal processors, which is that there's no software out there that can correct for poor expression, inflection, or character. So if your vocals don't sound great already, chances are, you're better off taking your time and getting it as right as you can in the first place.

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