

Inmates Running The Asylum

"Live" and "recording" in the same sentence?

By Jack Alexander

Live recording. Now there's an oxymoron, as certain educated folks say. Early recordings were indeed live – artists were arranged around a big horn attached to a stylus, which wiggled with the waves focused by the horn, and the whole mess was written to foil over a wax cylinder or whatever. Singers were put near the horn mouth, reeds in the middle, and noisier things like brass further away.

With the advent of tape recorder and the multitrack methodologies, true live recording of a performance

gave way to fabrication of the elements of that performance from pieces not recorded in real time, i.e., not live. This resulted in the presentation of a musical event that never existed in any real sense as sonic art created by humans in the same place at the same time.

There was a reaction to this kind of thing in the audiophile world, which led to direct to disc (direct to the cutting lathe – no tape, no edits), but "commercial recording" as we know it danced merrily along from analog multitrack to digital multitrack. And ultimately, on to the current computer environment, which has led to the disappearance of many recording studios.

Now the inmates have taken over the asylum, and I will let you be the judge of the relative quality of the product, since the recording process has migrated from the downtown studio to the kitchen table.

Though I remain a serious consumer of recorded product, I knew from the beginning that I did not belong in a recording studio, and was only too happy to limit my activities to live.

Like all live engineers, when asked to yank a feed off the main sends, or perhaps a matrix or two auxes to feed a recording device, I had an attitude and tried to weasel out of it.

- I was *concerned* that the tape recorder would load down the out-



puts on the main sends and I would lose a couple clicks of headroom because of the dilution of the purity of the master bus.

- I was *concerned* about grounding problems because of the addition of a recording toy of unknown provenance (How good is it? How has it been maintained? How many times has it been dropped?).

- I was *concerned* about time being wasted dealing with recording issues when needing to concentrate on the show.

- I was *concerned* about time wasted dealing with the offender requesting the recording because if he was clueless he would need a lot of hand holding.

- I was *concerned* about time wasted dealing with the offender because he was a recording pro and was going

when recordings were requested. Maybe too easy. Many of my live brethren started to knock off shows for their personal collections. (Those matrix L/R's tended to get routed to the weirdest places.)

Some folks spent more time stealing the show than doing it, and some venue owners not only encouraged but demanded it. This really offended me, and I usually managed to fake my way out of having to do this kind of illegal recording: "Weird how there was a horrible buzz in the feed to that Revox in the manager's office – I must get the preamps checked, right?"

One particularly aggressive club owner, himself a member of a famous act (that's how he got the bread to buy the club) drove me nuts with this kind of thing. I usually managed to overdrive the guy's recording feeds so

house engineer is spending an inordinate amount of time futzing with the recording equipment.

Due to the nuclear warfare occurring in monitor world (the principal "artiste" was offended at the sound of the motors driving the moving lights), the house guy had some time for this, and he was all over the dedicated matrix recording feed and checking the outcome on the cans jacked into the recording device.

And he was very nervous. And his production manager was standing there with him, and he was also nervous.

TRANSGRESSIONS REVEALED

Later that day one of our guys (who had been babysitting the FOH guy) gave me the word: Every day this poor engineer got reamed for transgressions – real and imagined – that

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to drive me nuts with bs that had nothing to do with a live show.

- And I was *concerned* with getting reamed because the recording stunk, when I really didn't care and was only too well aware that the recording could never truly represent the live show when yanked off the main sends.

Because: LIVE GUYS ONLY PUT STUFF IN THE SYSTEM THAT IS NEEDED TO EXPAND WHATEVER IS HAPPENING ON THE STAGE. JUST AS MUCH WILL NOT BE IN THE LIVE MIX THAT IS ALREADY AUDIBLE IN THE ROOM, SO MASTER SEND RECORDINGS FROM LIVE SHOWS ARE NOTHING LESS THAN A PITYFUL JOKE.

TOO EASY?

As we started to see consoles with more aux sends, and with the advent of the matrix, it became easier to throw something or other together

that the tapes were awful. After too long he gave up and didn't bother me about this anymore.

Unlike some engineers, I was fortunate enough to avoid the worst live recording aggravation, the dreaded board tape review. The worst example of this was a particularly tense soundcheck for a major act playing one of my regular venues.

They were (of course) carrying full production, which meant that I had the day off, free to glom the deli tray and offend the female wait staff. Actually, it would have been impossible to offend them more than this act had done, as they had all been thrown out of the room for the soundcheck. (I'm aware that I have just identified the act for those in the know, but I did not mention the name, right?)

I positioned myself 20 feet or so behind FOH and tried to make sense of the situation, and note that the

were "revealed" on those board tapes.

The presence met with his engineer and reviewed the tapes from the previous show, in what was a fairly ugly ritual. This kept the beleaguered FOH engineer in constant fear of being fired. Nice working environment, eh?

I heard the real (live) mix, and the FOH was just fine, considering (ugh) the nature of the act. They even had some fancy recording microphones blended into the tapes for room sound, and apparently none of this was ever good enough for the person (aren't we politically correct here?) of the hour.

All of which led to my inviolate rule with respect to artist review and recording of my FOH mixes: If you want this, get someone else.

It should be noted that I've never had a problem with client review of a live soundcheck or show mix, if they're standing out in the room with

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me. This is because they're reviewing the actual product that we as a musical/technical ensemble are creating.

Now the recording types love to point out the ephemeral quality of live sound work – remember, their stuff is retrievable for the ages, blah, blah, blah, and ours is gone with the last note of the night. They tend to forget that a live show is (usually) a real-time event, one that is repeated often, not pieced together over time. Their more obvious mistakes never hit the final stored product, whereas our mistakes can only lead to quick real-time solutions before they're repeated and the "stuff" really hits the fan.

BROTHERS IN ARMS

Being part of a live recording scenario can be fun, though, when it's the real deal and there is a big old recording truck with heavy kit and heavy techs.

These recording guys are in the same space-time continuum as the performance, and have similar attitudes to live engineers, as they don't really get a second chance either, and it makes them better. Same as us.

Sure, they can edit and sweeten and overdub after the event, but most of what they do is subject to the same pressures and constraints as the sound reinforcement aspect of the performance. Back in the day, they always had the cool mics and splits, and many were ex-live guys who had retreated to the truck, yet knew our gig too and often had really good advice.

They would check you out if you

were doing monitors, and ask you to cut the sides, for no live recording guy wants heavy sidefill. It can make the recording sound hollow. And I sympathize, I really do, but that never stopped me from issuing a flat "no" when this was requested. Artists behave differently when tape (or whatever) is running, and big sides saved me more than once when some prima donna got the shakes when that little red light went on.

These days live recording is finally a big deal – live 5.1 DVD-V, SACD two channel, and SACD multichannel. With the right playback system, these recordings can really put you at the event.

I use the best of them for teaching and analysis purposes, and am blown away at the quality of what is being done with live recording of events in high-bit formats. However, I'm less happy when I notice only one brand of mic on some of these recordings – there is a particular product line that turns up more than it should, and on my home reference system, I don't even have to check the disc notes to know that the event was an endorsement situation for them.

No one company has the answer for all situations, even the ones I'm partial to, and we're also seeing a little too much marketing in the new world of live recording. Two recent recordings come to mind, one DVD-V of a highly competent acoustic/jazz aggregation, and a multichannel SACD of a crossover "countryish" act that is severely compromised in audio quality because a certain so-so micro-

phone was mandated for the event.

I know I am going to get some heat about that latter one, but my home surround rig is four B&W 801s, two stacks of B&W CM2/CM1 for surround, with electronics from Musical Fidelity, VTL, Quad, and an Outlaw Audio 950 controller and a Phillips 963/SA SACD player, along with a bunch of Shunyata Research and MIT cable. It's really hard to hide anything from this stuff.

FINANCIAL CONTROL

I totally support the recent practice of offering quickie mixes of the show for sale during the out. It's one way to avoid the corporate control that has destroyed radio, though one notes that those same corporate guys have sued to get financial control of the sale of same-day event mixes.

As to how these mixes are being done, I recently read that some people are using a certain measurement tool to tweak their live mixes for the recording that will be sold at the end of the night. I hope this is an aberration, for though live recording is now a big deal instead of a nuisance, giving the live show away to (theoretically, and I don't buy it) enhance the recording is equivalent to leaving the dry rub off Texas brisket because someone might get indigestion.

And, no, sir, I will not turn those sidefills down. You'll just have to turn up your recording. ■

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