

For my creative investigation project, I am recording Jango, a psychedelic jazz band that describes themselves as “Neo noir spacegroove / spaghetti western intergalactica / 2060 cosmic funk” (Jango, 2022).

When I first made contact with the band about the recording, they said they wanted to do a live studio session recording, as a way of capturing the vibe of their live set. The band has been around in various forms for around 5 years, but they had never recorded any of their music in a studio before. We agreed to do full live band takes in the same room, not recorded to a click, and to focus on the connection between the band members rather than on perfect live takes.

The things I wanted to improve on in this assessment are:

- My ability to do full live band tracking. I have done live tracking of individual instruments in studios (particularly drums), however I have never done full live takes of entire bands, and this comes with additional and different challenges including mic bleed and band tightness
- My ability to use Avid Pro Tools. Although I am confident in the use of other Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs), I have very minimal experience with Pro Tools, and I wanted to improve on that. It is an industry standard tool and I will need to know how to use it. I won't be

running it in the live session, as I am too inexperienced to use it efficiently, but all the mixing will be done in Pro Tools

- My ability to mix more “naturalistically.” Much of my mixing experience has involved making things larger than life, using lots of additional effects and synthesisers and not sounding like a live band in a room. That is the opposite to what is required for this project, so this will stretch my current experience
- My ability to mix in a room rather than do it at home. Much of my mixing and production work has been done at home, and although the setup is good, being able to focus on the task at hand when you’re in a separate studio is a skill I want to develop
- To try and get the sounds at the source rather than “fix it in the mix.” Many studio experiences I’ve had have been rushed due to the small amount of time available, and I want to rectify this bad habit.

Pre production

Based on my own experience being recorded as a band, I tried to use that experience to help inform how to run a session as a producer better.

While organising the session, I made sure to get a list of production and mix references to help anticipate recording decisions on the day, to help speed up the recording process, and have a focus on mixing even from the start.

Before the recording session I sat in on a rehearsal. This helped me familiarise myself with the songs they were planning on playing, as although I had heard them live before, I would be able to listen to them more actively to plan how to record them. I used this opportunity to make notes on how the recording session could be set up, otherwise it would need to be worked out on the day which would end up wasting a lot of time. It also helped give an understanding of the band dynamic.

I also used the rehearsal to write the song structures down, so when recording and mixing in the DAW, it would be easier to navigate around the audio recordings, so I could jump to each specific section I needed rather than guessing semi randomly round the recording. This also saved a lot of time in the mixing process.

Recording session

Overall the recording session went well. The band were punctual, played the songs to a high standard, in time, and the recordings came out well. There was enough time to get the sound right at the source, by doing things such as adjusting the drum overheads and mic positions for the best sounds, as well as trying different preamp sounds to properly compliment the sound sources. Some preamps affect the transients of the sounds in different ways, so I made sure the sound sources that needed transient details were given to sounds such as the guitar or snare drum, whereas the ones with slower attack were given to the trumpet, as it can then compliment the sound source and make it better. However, there didn't end up being much time to try different guitar sounds or change amps between songs, which could have added different textures to the live recordings.

There were no obvious ways the setup could have been made quicker, and there were no technical issues that limited what could be done in the session, although afterwards I found one of the mics wasn't recording for most of the songs, which may have been discovered earlier if there was more time in the sessions to methodically check the recordings. Additional time could also have led to a slightly more relaxed atmosphere, and more methodical checking that there were no issues with the recording. There was also not enough time for more than two takes per song, and although the first takes came out well for each song, having more time could have led to a more granular approach in

reviewing the recordings and making sure they were the best they could possibly be, even as a live studio recording.

Although a lack of a click track to keep everyone at a consistent tempo helped the vibe of the recording, it meant that it was hard to cut between takes, especially as the band was recording in the same room leading to bleed in all the mics.

As I had sat in on a rehearsal at the pre production stage, this gave me a chance to reflect on what I had heard and make some creative suggestions prior to the recording. For instance, I was also able to bring an amp and some pedals to help get some different sounds that the guitarist didn't think they'd be able to get with their current setup, mainly focusing on fuzz and distortion, and in fact the amp I bought (an 80s Fender Champ with a very clear clean channel) was used for the whole recording session and fitted in perfectly with the sound of the band.

The issues that came up in the session were mainly around communication with the band. While I had discussed a session plan with the band that would have kept the timings tight, it seems this wasn't stated assertively which led to discussions between the band about what order to play the songs, and that time could have been spent recording the songs.

During the time at the end of the session, the band wanted to record another unplanned song, and although it turned out well, keeping a more focused view on what to record could have kept the attention on quality over quantity. With a more efficient timekeeping schedule, there would have been more time for experimentation in sounds (both in the guitar, as well as different miking setups for the other instruments), as well as having more time for doing additional takes, and being able to select the ones with the better performances, as well as experimenting with different ideas for parts. Having two days rather than one to record would also have led to having more time for this, as well as having a more relaxed session, especially as the session ended up recording six songs (five planned, and one unplanned). I also found issues with giving constructive criticism. As I know the band personally outside of music, it made it harder to give specific advice.

Mixing

One of the goals I set for myself during this assessment was to learn how to mix audio in Pro Tools. I started by using online tutorials to help develop my limited current knowledge at the time. Although I knew the theory of what I wanted the DAW to do, it was hard finding the Pro Tools workflow to do it on my own. I ended up arranging tutorials on it to be able to work out the workflows to do what I wanted. It did help me work out my learning style as well. I find it easier to learn in one-on-one sessions with people rather than online tutorials. I also found it easier searching and reading manuals for the right information rather than having to go and search through multiple articles on the internet looking for the right information.

Part of the reason for one of the goals being about focusing during studio sessions is that I don't have access to Pro Tools at home, so I would need to work on it only at uni. I wasn't able to always sit down and focus, but I was able to get the mix completed on time.

Despite planning on doing all the mixing at Tileyard, due to the extreme temperatures, I ended up getting a one month Pro Tools subscription for the final stages of the mix to avoid having to travel. Despite this, I still stuck to only the plugins and resources that would have been available to me at Tileyard, as I still wanted to use this restriction to learn.

To start the mix I balanced each element of the mix against pink noise (H, 2019) to get a quick balance. I hadn't done this before, and was surprised with how quick it was to get a rough balance of the track. Using Pro Tools also helped with this technique, as it was easy to generate a pink noise track in Audio Suite rather than have to turn a signal generator on and off.

During the mix, as I was only able to use Pro Tools at Tileyard, I had to stick to only using the plugins available. This consisted of the built in Pro Tools plugins, with some additional freeware ones, rather than using the paid for 3rd party plugins I was used to. I was initially worried about this, as I had come to rely on some of the channel strip, EQ and compressor emulations, but this ended up being a good learning exercise in mixing fundamentals. Most of the mixing was done with the Pro Tools 1 band and 7 band EQs, the dyn compressor, and the space convolution reverb. The Valhalla Supermassive reverb/delay was also used for some of the more ambient sections, the BF76 compressor was used for any parallel compression, LoFi was used for any saturation and the multiband dynamics plugin was used to try to control the low end on the bass. Due to the use of digital plugins rather than emulations, the mixes came out sounding more "hi-fi" than my regular mixes, but it worked with the style of mixing the band were looking for.

Despite the sessions not being recorded to a click, I did manage to edit together some of the takes to get the best parts of each into each of the

tracks. I hadn't had any experience with editing without a click, but they turned out smoother than I thought they could have.

I am still inexperienced with mastering, but during the mastering phase I used a reference track they gave me (Polar Bear - Happy for You). Although I had the mix session setup to do a demo master when I needed to send the track to people, the limiter I used was too aggressive and ended up clipping the tracks in a way that wasn't appropriate. During the final master phase, I tried getting it loud but as clean as possible, as this was not the kind of music for heavily clipped masters, like some genres of dance music are.

Post Mixing analysis

The band were pleased with the recordings I had done, which overall was the most important part. It matched the vibe of their live performances, and that was what they set out to achieve. I met all the goals outlined at the start, with the possible exception of the more naturalistic mixing style, as when talking with the band about what they wanted from the recordings, they did make a point about having some additional layers of ambience, as well as wanting to use additional effects on the trumpet. The main goal I was happy with was learning to use Pro Tools. Although I only scratched the surface with how efficient I could be with using it, developing the ability to be comfortable with using an industry standard tool will be useful in the future.

Despite the production going well overall, the main issue with the recording was that it should have been done over 2 days. This would have given a chance to be more creative both for me and the band, and additional time would have provided contingency for identifying and fixing technical problems such as the mic. Knowing this in the future will help me budget for more time in recording sessions. Keeping a stricter schedule in the studio, especially with the limited time available would have also been useful, as “live” recordings can end up spiralling time wise, unlike a live show which has to be more structured.

On a related note, while communication with the band was good, it could have been better. Finding a rapport that would allow me to give constructive criticism in the studio with musicians that I'm friends with is an important skill I need to develop.

Although I did stick to doing longer mixing sessions in Pro Tools, I did find it harder to stay concentrated. Having studio options that are easier to access travelwise would also make it easier to do more regular mix sessions.

Overall I felt it was a successful recording and mix. I liked the additional flexibility Pro Tools gave, as well as the further deep dives into improving my workflow, and, if possible, I would want to move to it as my main DAW for mixing.

References

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