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Off You Go: Your First Session

Once your levels are set, the engineer will record you singing a take of the song. Take that famous deep breath and let 'er rip, singing it like you mean it. Afterward, the engineer may make some sonic adjustments and then you can take a swig or two of water and lay down another pass. I recommend doing four or five passes, then taking off your headphones, sitting down with your engineer and having a good hard listen to all of them.

After listening, you may find that one pass is just perfect the way it is—fantastic! Move on to the next song! But if you're made of flesh and bone like the rest of us, it's more likely that you'll find one that's almost perfect, but needs a few fixes. This almost-perfect pass shall then be called your comp (short for composite) track. Then you'll either find good versions of the lines you're looking to replace on one of the four other passes and copy those lines onto your comp track, or you'll actually re-sing the parts you need to fix directly onto your comp track. Then, when that one's done, move on to the second song. Lather, rinse and repeat...

Making the Best Recording Since the Beginning of Time

This was a trick chapter sub-heading; you do not need to do this. What you DO need to do is to get out there and start booking giglets, and therefore you need a really good recording that represents your talents well. So please don't spend lots of time obsessing over the pitch of this syllable or that one, or over this guitar chord or that one; believe me, your listeners won't be. They just want to like what they hear, and that is a purely intuitive process. So if things sound really good, finish your recording in a timely fashion and move along to the giglet-getting; I promise you that over the course of your long, illustrious career as a professional singer, you'll have lots of time to obsess over things like guitar chords and pitch-correction.

A Rant About Pitch Correction

Pitch correction is a popular method employed by engineers to digitally correct pitch problems on a vocal track. Various software programs do it (Auto-Tune by Antares is a popular one), and different levels of doctoring are needed on the pitch-correction spectrum. Sometimes an engineer puts a small amount of pitch correction on a well-sung vocal track, just to make it sound nice and cohesive and...perfect, and other times an engineer will hand-tune an entire vocal track that isn't sung in pitch, syllable by syllable (which can take hours or days) to make it nice and cohesive and...as perfect as possible. An extreme amount of pitch correction can be used when a singer is not so good, but it is also used to enhance some of the best singers in the business, so I'd say that pitch correction does have its place and its function in recorded music. It isn't common knowledge, but most recordings heard by music lovers around the world contain some level of pitch correction. If you want to hear pitch correction gone wild, take a listen to the godfather of auto-tune, hip-hop artist T-Pain.

Hi.

That's a powerful little piece of the English language, isn't it? And no doubt one that has stood the test of time. Combined with a smile and direct eye contact, this little word can be a mighty-big icebreaker. "Hi" can lead to questions such as, "Is this seat taken?" or "Have you seen this band before?" which can then lead to, "I'm (insert name here)," which will then elicit a response. Before you know it, you might be having a conversation with the drummer/bass player/guitarist of that band you really like who needs a better singer.

Ask the people you're chatting with what they do; people, especially professional musical ones, love to tell other people what they do. Tell them what you do, where you've played, whom you've played with, etc. Always be complimentary when speaking of your musical colleagues or accompanists; as your mother may have told you, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all!" You may find out that you have colleagues in common whom you both adore, and that puts you in a great position: You're no longer a total and complete stranger because you know and like the same person! Then, watch the person you're getting to know relax and open up to you a little bit more. We professional singers love it when that happens. The more people you get to know, the more often you'll have this kind of interaction.

The next time you go hang out, try using this little word and see what kinds of connections it can help you make. You'll get to meet new people, and even if they're not in the music business, you may make new fans who liked chatting with you so much they make a point to come out and see you play next Friday night.

The Four Questions...and the Four Ws

As your chatting and schmoozing with your new pal comes to a close, now's your chance to ask some very important questions :

- Ask if they have a business card. If they do, exchange yours, and then...
- Ask if they have any upcoming gigs, and then...
- Ask to be put on their gig mailing list (because you will go check out their band), and finally...
- Ask if you can put them on your gig mailing list.

When you get home, even if you're tired, write their four Ws on the back of their business card, so you'll be more likely to remember your conversation.

What are the four Ws? Who, What, Where, When. Here's how your four Ws could look:

WHO: John Jones—cute bass player from Cheddar Domination

WHAT: Has a beagle (Holly), skateboards, talked about punk rock, loves old cars

WHERE: Crazy's

WHEN: 12/10/10

Headliners actually write their own 45- to 50-minute, one-man/woman show, which is generally performed one evening per week, two shows per night.

A Note for Production Singers and Lounge Band Singers

If you are a production singer or a lounge band singer, you are considered a “crew member” while on board the ship. This means lots of things: You will be sharing rooms with others; yes, that can be a little claustrophobic, but you have a floating hotel on which to roam and cities and continents to explore on days when the ship is in port. You may also have crew duties, such as being on crew safety drill teams or other jobs that don’t pertain to music. However, depending on the ship, you may get extensive health benefits and all kinds of other perks. (For example, every crew member is medically covered if they get sick or injured while working on a cruise ship.) The only singers who are not considered crew members are headliners; they are freelance performers.

Headliners

Headlining is the coveted gig for singers and performers who love having audiences all to themselves. Generally, a headliner has been in the business for some time (both on and off cruise ships) and loves being the star of the show; if this gig is something you aspire to, you’re going to have to get some real professional experience under your belt. Headliners enjoy lots of fringe benefits that the production and lounge singers don’t: They can work without a six-month contract and are generally flown in to gig for a week or a few weeks. They get paid a much higher salary than other singers on the ship; and they usually have their own cabin.

Headliners must have a talent agent; it’s nearly impossible to get these kinds of gigs without one. But here’s the kicker: Headliners actually write their own 45- to 50-minute, one-man/woman show, which is generally performed one evening per week, two shows per night. (They create a 20- to 25-minute version of their show, too; sometimes a headliner will split the bill with another entertainer for during their weeklong contract.) As a headliner, you select the songs, write a script of the things you will say between songs, and have charts of your tunes professionally written out for the bandmembers assigned to your show for the duration of your contract. This can be a good thing if the band is good, and a not-so-good thing if the band is just okay. You also have to be savvy about lighting and sound, and be able to run your own rehearsals with the musicians (another reason for you to know how to read music!).

As a headliner, you can also consider making a CD of songs to sell after your show. (Some cruise lines will allow this, but they’ll probably take a cut of your CD sales.) If you’re working with a great sound person, you might be able to get an excellent live recording of a particular show and voila! There’s your CD. It’s a great way to make extra money while singing and seeing the world!

You Got the Gig—Now What?

Congratulations, you’re a pro! You’re singing live, in front of lots of people, for money. Gigging can seem very daunting, but hey, you’ve been doing giglets so you know what to expect, or at least you think you do. Here are two important words of advice: