

Studio Design 2007— What Works For Me



A successful producer's unusual ideas about creative space

By Toby Gad

Artists are usually surprised when they first walk into my studio. In the center of the room there is a round stone table; there is no big mixing board and no vocal booth or a recording room. Instead of sound isolating panels on the walls, there are three huge windows...but yes, this is the place where most of my recent records have been written, recorded and mixed, and in this article I want to explain why I chose to lay out my studio this way.

As a disclaimer I want to say that many of the following views and opinions are personal and may not apply to every record producer and writer. However—they may be inspiring!

No inspiration from isolation

I used to work in expensive high-end studios with huge recording rooms and super-sized Neve consoles, but gradually my mindset changed regarding my perception of the ideal environment for making a record. I am a writer and producer, and to me the most important thing about a studio is inspiration. If a studio isn't creatively stimulating, there won't be any great results and all that expensive technology defeats its own purpose.

To be energized I need to see daylight, or city lights at night, preferably with a nice view. Too many days in a windowless studio not only confuses my sense of time but also makes me tired and claustrophobic. But maybe that's just because I grew up playing all day in the woods in the countryside. So when looking for a studio space I wanted a place with as much sunlight as possible.

Location location location

One of the main reasons for choosing my current studio location was the exciting midtown Manhattan and Empire State Building views. I draw a lot of inspiration from simply gazing out the window and soaking up the ever-changing scenery. I can see thousands of office windows, each of which is like a reality TV show constantly tuned in on a different channel. I witness drama in the life of hard-working people, a person getting fired, lovers kissing... and so on. That's the stuff songs are made of.

My studio is in an eighty-year-old brick structure, mostly occupied by businesses engaged in jewelry manufacturing, which reminds me of my granddad's airplane factory—rough, noisy and dusty, with things being crafted here. I feel good crafting songs here and I prefer this to the clinical environment of proper studios. I like old. Old tells a story

in itself. And I'm glad I'm the only one making music in this building. This way I feel like the "crazy music guy" amongst the four hundred jewelry workers in the building.

The round-table concept

When I write songs with artists we often start out talking about issues the artist currently has, which often leads us to an urgent topic we want to write about. Then we work our way line by line through the song. It is a process that involves many conversations and discussions about story lines and lyrics, which are best held at a round table. This way everyone feels an equal part of the process.

When writing with more than one artist, it is absolutely essential that everyone gets a fair amount of attention. Many studios have a couch here, a chair there, but everyone looks in a different direction. Some just happen to sit too far away to get heard, and a simple factor like the seating order can be the cause for unnecessary frustration and a bad song.



Three of these windows are mine!



Answers to Questions

We at Recording like to think that we know our readers, so we put to Toby the questions that we figured would be on many readers' minds:

How do you remain productive if you need to listen for outside noises when you record, and probably stop and start all the time since you don't have an iso booth? New York with all the ambulances and cop car sirens and horns tooting and jets flying overhead—how can you ever get a track done?

Also—how do you maintain good sound when the room and the reflective table and windows etc. surely must have a huge (and not necessarily beneficial!) influence on the sound you record?

Toby wrote back:

Dear Lorenz, thanks for the questions. True, some things are a compromise. I do have a thick curtain and some clutter that does some sound isolation so the room does not sound like a tiled bathroom. However, I would never trade those great windows and the view for a perfectly dead sound. What really matters is a good mic, a good preamp, and the knowledge of how to mix a great lead vocal. Sometimes I do tell the singers to get a little closer to the mic if there's a helicopter over Times Square or a garbage truck twelve stories below. But I even once recorded vocals with jackhammers in the nearby bathroom renovating and you didn't hear it in the mix.

Unless it's a very quiet song with lots of dynamics, it's really not very relevant where you record. Much more relevant is the emotion captured on "tape" and the "life" from outside does reflect and loosen the atmosphere considerably. And if there's a siren, so what, then we pause for 10 seconds, and the next take will be better. In the last 6½ years here I was never in a situation where the outside noise made it impossible to record.

On "Speechless", from the multi-platinum Veronicas record, a silent ballad which I recorded in Sydney, there was serious street noise from busses and trucks in the verse on the lead vocal tracks. I filtered a little—no-one has ever noticed it on the record. It's not the ideal scenario, but the fun we had in the hotel just outweighs the two minutes of extra mixing time!

It's perhaps a little unorthodox to say this, especially in a magazine that focuses on getting the perfect recording sound, but I believe that *what* is recorded is much more important than *how* it's recorded. Just remember the Lenny Kravitz hit record that was proudly done on a cheap 8-track!

reverbs on which I haven't changed the programs in years, the Focusrite ISA 215 for the two Neumann U87 mics on the grand piano, one Focusrite ISA 220 for the Neumann TLM 147 on the guitar amp, the bass amp direct input, and the analog vocal chain. The vocal chain consists of a Focusrite ISA 430mk2 for the Neumann tube mic, a TubeTech CL-1b compressor (works miracles) and a BSS de-esser, which still sounds better on lead vocals than any software de-esser I've heard.

A big increase in production speed comes from the fact that I don't have to change a single cable if I want to record the various instruments. The grand piano always comes in through the ISA 215. If I decide to add a live piano part, I just walk to the piano, select the input in Logic and press Record. The same goes for the bass and the guitars or the vocals. The only times I rent studios with a separate recording room are when I need to track drums and strings.



The round table and my grand piano, complete with wireless computer keyboard.

Coaching the singer

For recording vocals I much prefer to wear headphones, sitting right next to the artist while she sings. The sometimes very subtle and complex process of coaching a vocalist to achieve their best performance is much easier when there isn't a glass wall with a talk-back button in between. Often communication involves hand movements and gestures that get lost in the translation of a "talk-back situation". To me a good lead vocal needs to feel authentic. The singer needs to precisely emote the meaning of the lyric. Few singers have the talent to simply walk up to the mic and deliver that. Most of the time getting this performance level involves a lot of back-and-forth acting and coaching between producer and singer. This often feels more like psychotherapy and being in the same room helps a lot. I'd rather put my hard drives and other noise-generating things in a sound-isolating booth than the singer.

See for yourself: Beni Barca and Ray Yau just finished a few wonderful video clips that document some song writing sessions in my studio. You can watch them at www.tobygad.com, on the Videos About Toby page. ☺

Toby Gad (gad@recordingmag.com) is a songwriter, producer, and recording engineer whose recent credits include hits with Miley Cyrus (Hannah Montana), Fergie, Kaci Brown, and others.



Why the board went overboard

I already elaborated in previous *Recording* magazine articles about the missing mixing board. Here are the reasons that led me to working without a console:

The recent improvement of Apple Logic Pro 7, with all its plug-ins, softsynths, sampler implementation and seamless integration of audio processing, made it more and more attractive to do the eq'ing, compressing, bussing and enhancing right in the box. This way I don't have to route each audio channel through a D/A converter into a console, then through a patchbay into a compressor or other outboard, and then back through the console, through the A/D converter into the computer. Even with an SSL console and Apogee converters this path obviously sacrifices audio quality which gets lost in the conversions and all the wires. As the plug-in quality came closer to or even surpassed the quality of traditional high-end outboard gear, I decided to leave almost all the audio processing in Logic Pro.

The more I worked "inside the box", the more I perceived the classic studio as a handicap. I would spend most of the time on the computer but studios often place the computer on the side and regard the mixing console as the primary working spot. Eventually I only used one input and two output channels on those huge, space-consuming 96-track consoles, and it became clear that the console had to trade places with the computer.

On the road

Working "mobile" was another big reason for me to "keep it in the box".

As the quality of laptops improved, I stopped renting studios for writing sessions in Nashville, LA, or overseas. Instead I would bring the laptop and a few essential gadgets into the artist's living room and record right there. Many artists are minors and working in the home of the artist has the great advantage of integrating the work into the family life of the artists' parents, who otherwise have to sacrifice all their time to just sit around in boring studio environments to supervise their kids.

The Logic Pro environment in the laptop is now identical to the environment in the studio. This way I return after a writing trip and there are almost no preparations or alterations for a mix. I can even prepare the mix on the laptop. Later I only add some irreplaceable analog outboard gear for one or two lead vocal channels, and I can mix on my big speakers.

Total recall

Also, the experience of "real total recall" was another reason for moving more and more processing, sampling and MIDI-ing into the box. I open a song in a Logic Pro program and everything really sounds exactly the way I saved it months ago. Even though SSL consoles, keyboards and effects units can save programs, a total recall months later somehow always ends up sounding different just because there are too many components involved.

So all that's left of the console now is the tiny remote of the PreSonus Central Station for volume and speaker selection.

Make the setup work for you

I designed a desk that places the computer keyboard and my Wacom tablet in the middle (see below). These are the most used items and they need to be in the ergonomically optimal position. Some producers have the MIDI keyboard in the middle and place the computer keyboard on top of it, but I decided to place the MIDI keyboard at the side, so I have more space for my knees under the table for the best upright sitting position when at the computer keyboard.

I sit on two different chairs, a combination that I can highly recommend for preventing back pain after weeks, months and years of endless sessions in the same sitting position. One is a Swedish Izzy Design chair (which is finally also available in the USA) and the other is a Swedish Stokke Balans knee chair, on which the spine is completely balanced and upright—but you feel it in the knees after a while, so switching from one to the other works best for me.



MIDI keys to the left of the computer workstation.

The displays are placed a little higher so my neck doesn't have to bend to see everything. This avoids neck and shoulder stiffness. Years ago I swore by my Kensington trackball, but after ten years of everyday use it gave me serious tendonitis. Trackballs and conventional computer mice make your index finger do frequent unnatural sideways movements and eventually my hands gave up on me. I ignored the pain for a long time until it got so bad that I couldn't even hold a pen anymore. This feels like the death sentence for every musician. I can only urge everyone to seek treatment as soon as you get the early symptoms before the damage becomes irreversible.

After one painful year of intense treatments and exercises my hands are finally back to normal. I learned to sometimes use my left hand for the mouse and with my right hand I only use a Wacom drawing tablet. It takes several days to get used to it but after that using a mouse feels like walking on crutches.

Minimalist signal paths

My outboard gear looks kind of minimalist these days compared to what it used to be. All that's left is two Lexicon