Studio Study
Capturing the Unintentional Performance

Backstory

In 1992 I was working as the recording engineer on the Robert Cray CD that was released later that year under the title *I Was Warned*. We had been working for a few days and were getting ready to make the initial recording for what would become the title track. We were recording what is called “basic tracks.” That is, we were just going for final takes of the bass and drum parts, even though Cray was playing guitar and singing along. Everyone in the band was playing together so that the “feel” for the whole song, with the whole band, was present. The assumption was that the guitar, keyboard, and vocal performances would be rerecorded later when more time and attention could be paid to them. For this reason Cray’s guitar amp was boxed in a little isolation crate. This setup wasn’t best for recording but it prevented the guitar sound from “bleeding” into the other mics. This would allow it to be replaced later without problems. Cray thought he was doing what is called a “scratch track”—something for the rhythm section to groove to but not something intended to be used in the final recording (eventually it would be “scratched”).

To help with the “feel” Cray played a guitar solo during the section where he planned to redo his solo later, in the middle of the song, and he played a long solo in the vamp (the ending groove section that usually fades out). As it happened both solos, including the ending solo—the longest guitar solo on record for Cray—were so spectacular that as soon as the take was over everyone (except Cray) knew that both solos had to be on the final CD recording. In fact, not only did those solos appear on the
record but the vamp solo was also featured in a subsequent radio special on the fortieth anniversary of the Fender Stratocaster guitar.

At first Cray dismissed the idea of actually using these original solos—he had assumed that it was a “scratch track” and that he would be doing them over again. Many artists are plagued by the notion that they can always do better, and it is especially hard for some to accept a performance when they thought they weren’t even trying! It took some time—and the continued enthusiasm of all of us at the session—for Cray to recognize how good that performance had been.

In a recent discussion with Cray I asked him if he believed that this performance had something to do his assumption that it was “not for keeps.” He now readily admits that it had a whole lot to do with it. Even after eleven CDs (including many international releases on major labels) Robert Cray is still affected by the “pressure” of the red recording light. Despite all that experience, what many consider to be his finest moment on record came from an unintentional performance.

**Producing Advice**

Walter Benjamin did not miss the significance of unintentionality. In “The Task of the Translator” he focuses on the slippery slope of interpretation of intention. He asserts that the translator must strive for the “language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets which all thought strives for.”

Tensionless indeed! Translation is an apt metaphor for the recording of a musical performance and tensionless is an apt word for describing the best of unintentional performances. So how do those of us who are involved in the translation from performances into recordings assist in uncovering the musical “language of truth”?

As a recordist one of my primary jobs is to put the artist at ease. There are many techniques for doing this. Beyond the need to make the technical part of the process as transparent as possible are the more psychological tricks that are meant to ease the artist’s performance anxiety. Of course encouragement is basic, but most of the more subtle approaches speak to this issue of intentionality. One comment that I use frequently and that is surprisingly helpful for a struggling, self-conscious performer is: “I can hear you thinking. Stop thinking!” The humorous element softens what may be an uncomfortable request for less self-consciousness. Very often artists will recognize that they are “thinking” too much and that they just need to relax and “play.” It’s no accident that play is the operative musical term.
Along these same lines is the request for a musician, regarding the construction of her particular part, to “make it more remedial.” This is a comment born of the tendency for musicians to overplay—especially in the studio. Overplaying is usually a symptom of anxiety and self-consciousness. Again, humor eases the request for an altered approach to performance—a request that may be fraught with undertones of criticism. For those of us who work regularly with studio performance, the difference between a self-conscious performance and an unconscious one is usually immediately apparent. “Usually” is an important qualifier and sometimes “reading” performances is difficult. And of course, there is much more involved here than a simple distinction between relaxed and overthought—there are considerations regarding musical execution and other subjective elements in judging performance as well. Nonetheless, a lack of self-consciousness goes a long way toward an outstanding musical performance.

The relationship between these performance considerations and contemporary audio practice yields an interesting snapshot of contemporary cultural values. A transparent recording is one that places the least amount of apparent mediation between the performance and the recorded audio. Transparency may be desirable, but as recordists we must keep focused on the more important objective—if naturalism is the goal, it is the performance that needs to be naturalistic more so than the recording. The widespread move of professional recording out of the commercial studio and into the home reflects this desire by trying to make the recording experience more familiar and more comfortable. So how does current recording technology play into the capture of unintentional performances?

The Unintentional Computer

The motivations of unintentional production are in sympathy with what one author characterized as “the freedom to write crap.” The word processor page is a liberating medium: we can discard, erase, rewrite, and refine at will. Early recording technologies were very restrictive, and their lack of editing capabilities may have contributed to inhibited performances. What was badly done remained badly done. The great advantages of magnetic tape—its reusability and its editing capabilities via tape splicing—led to its refinement in the postwar period. Final musical performances began to be constructed by editing together different sections of tape from many different takes. The guitarist Les Paul invented multitrack tape recording, which provided the capability of layering performances together to create
one master recording. This expanded the idea of multiple takes used to piece together recordings from individual parts.\(^3\)

Multitracking revolutionized the process of making recordings but there remained severe limitations on the “freedom to record crap.” The process of multiple takes and of rerecording by individual instruments and individual portions of compositions was liberating, but the destructive nature of the tape-based format still inhibited a variety of editing functions. DAWs have finally granted to sound and music a level of freedom similar to that of the blank page. The following three capabilities, each a product of digital audio technology, have liberated the recording process:

1. The virtually unlimited amount of nondestructive (nonerasing) recording and editing within any ongoing recording project.
2. The ability to make very high quality recordings for a relatively small amount of money.
3. The ability to easily alter both timing and pitch of musical performances.

The combination of nondestructive recording and virtually unlimited recording time\(^4\) has really created the “freedom to record crap.” Previously, agonizing decisions over attempts at retakes often had to be balanced against the price of losing (erasing) the previous take. In the digital environment any number of takes may be tried without concern for track and tape limitations. This can create a nightmare in the quantity of editing chores later on, but it can also allow experimentation and risk-taking on a level previously inconceivable.

The ability to have very high quality recording at a very reasonable price has enabled a whole new paradigm of musical process. Traditionally, because of budget constraints, the demo recordings of songs and song ideas were created at home or at inexpensive studios. In these environments the quality of recording was not considered acceptable for commercial release. This meant that if the opportunity arose to create a commercial recording of the same song the entire recording had to be started again from scratch. This led to endless hours of frustration as artists and producers attempted to re-create things they especially liked about the feel or performance of the demo recordings. This process was sometimes referred to as “chasing the demo.” In my experience we were never able to satisfactorily reproduce the things we loved the most about the original demos.
With a DAW it is possible to purchase one or more channels of “signal path” (the complete chain of recording from microphone to final analog to digital conversion into the computer) that matches the general quality level of top commercial studios. For the relatively small price of a few thousand dollars per channel one can record very high-fidelity audio at home. With a single channel of signal path the all-important vocal tracks can be recorded at one’s leisure. Once the investment is made all subsequent recordings, whether serious attempts at final takes, or middle-of-the-night experimentations with vocal approaches, may be suitable for final commercial release.  

A typical scenario in today’s DAW environment is reflected in the process for a recent record I made with the songwriter Bonnie Hayes. Hayes had recorded many of the songs as song demos in her DAW. We started working on the final recordings right in the same Pro Tools files as the song demos. Most of the elements were replaced eventually, and live drums and bass were recorded to replace the drum loops and keyboard bass she had used for the song demos. However, many of the vocal performances remained from those early recordings. Try as we might, we could never recapture the freshness of those first vocal takes, many done immediately after the song was written. They expressed the enthusiasm, immediacy, and energy that accompanied the inspiration that was necessary to write the song in the first place. Because these “demo” recordings were done in the same recording format, with the same level of high-quality signal path that we used for all the other “final” recordings for the CD, not only were we able to use these early recordings but there were no technical compromises in doing so, and thus the “first take” vocal that was an essential part of the composition of the song has become the “final vocal,” just as Robert Cray’s “scratch track” guitar solo continued on to the final version. The unintentional performances were seamlessly integrated into the historical legacy that is now a commercial release. This process dissolves many of the complications associated with previous methods of moving from creation to performance to permanence.

The new functionality provided by computer-based recording and processing has resulted in other gains in relation to the capture of recordings of unintentional live performances. For example, throughout the history of multitrack production of popular music the drummer has been the one least able to really take advantage of the flexibility of the technology. This is because drum kits are very complex instruments—actually a combina-
tion of many instruments including both drums and cymbals—that are very different in sustain and timbre. For the most part the drum track was needed as a basis for the other performances, and it was usually not possible to replace parts of a drum track because the myriad of resonances (especially from the cymbals) prevented the seamless insertion of a new piece of a performance. As result, the normal process of overdubbing—and especially the further refinement of “punching in” (replacing small parts of a performance while retaining the remainder)—has not been available to drummers. Typically they had to play their part as one complete take. The nondestructive aspect of computer-based recording, combined with the editing power of cross-fading between digital recordings, has given the same flexibility to drummers previously enjoyed by the other players in most pop music production. San Francisco bay area drummer John Hanes expressed it this way:

The Pro Tools revolution has had an enormous effect on drummers, inasmuch as it is no longer crucial to get the bitchin drum take for everyone else to overdub onto. Now I can record like the real musicians—go for a take, fuck up a little, and punch in. This has freed up my playing significantly.9

Other DAW capabilities have allowed us to keep performances that previously would have had to be discarded. The ability to fix timing and certain pitch aspects of recorded performances has revolutionized studio production. Sometimes great musical performances have some simple flaw that previously rendered them unusable. It may be a single note that is slipped out of time in an awkward-sounding fashion, or it may be the pitch of an otherwise inspired vocal performance that goes slightly out of tune at the very end of the last note in the line. We may now fix these undesired aspects of an otherwise brilliant (perhaps unintentional) performance through tools in the digital domain. I have had to erase many great musical moments because of some small flaw that could not be fixed and that the artist found unacceptable—this is no longer the case. Of course, this may be taken to extremes, and many have bemoaned the excessive fixing and polishing of recordings, sometimes taken to the point of sapping all of the life from the original recording. No matter how the technology and the user conspire to manipulate sound via recordings, ultimately it’s the listeners who must decide whether they are the beneficiary or the victim of these practices.
Value and Judgment in Musical Performance

For all the expansion in production capabilities, what is the true value created in the process? Are we gaining from the capture of a vastly expanded number of performances, or are we fulfilling a legacy implied in the newfound “freedom to record crap?” Suffice it to say that this really lies totally within the domain of the subjective. It is easy to side with Greil Marcus when he articulates the distinction between a good and bad record as follows:

Now, by a good record I mean one that carries surprise, pleasure, shock, ambiguity, contingency, or a hundred other things, each with a faraway sense of the absolute: the sense that . . . someone (the singer, guitarist, the saxophonist) wants what he or she wants, hates what he or she hates, fears what he or she fears, more than anything else in the world.

By a bad record I mean one that subverts any possibility of an apprehension of the absolute.\textsuperscript{10}

The invocation of the absolute suggests the realm of the unintentional performance. I suggest that some quality of unintentionality is an essential part of the kind of performance Marcus wishes to celebrate here. Marcus’s sentiment also reminds us of the importance of the relationship between the artist and audience. The ultimate effect of the unintentional performance requires travel on the two-way street implicit in Marcus’s observation. It speaks to a reciprocal relationship between expression and the reception of that expression. For a performance to be judged as good it must be judged—that is, it requires the listener’s participation in response. Yet, while I maintain that unintentional performance may be an essential element in accessing that sense of the absolute, these judgments remain primarily subjective, applicable only on a per recording / per person basis.

Other authors have arrived at similar conclusions regarding the personal nature of the experience of music. As previously cited, Roger Beebe observes that “Because ‘authenticity’ is for many authors merely the best metaphor for a certain kind of pleasure, there may be as many authenticities as there are pleasures.”\textsuperscript{11} Thus the argument that some know what is authentic simply continues the authenticity myth by “insisting on a false opposition between critics/academics (‘fake’) on the one hand, and fans/musicians (‘authentic’) on the other, as if it were impossible for someone to occupy all these places at once.”\textsuperscript{12}
Similarly musicians are not necessarily interested in or capable of making judgments about their own performances. In relation to the application project above, jazz musicians often rely on producers to pick among various takes. Cray initially rejected the idea of using his “scratch” solos on the final recording; his own expressed sentiment regarding these solos is thoroughly in line with the conclusion that “musicians are often surprised at what they create and often only retrospectively comprehend what they were attempting to articulate.”¹³

I have focused here on a single performance by an accomplished musician. One may debate the relationship and relative merits of skillful and unintentional performance, but as noted in the following from Marcel Proust, the bliss of ignorance also needs to be recognized on its own terms:

> That bad music is played, is sung more often and more passionately than good, is why it has also gradually become more infused with men’s dreams and tears. Treat it therefore with respect. Its place, insignificant in the history of art, is immense in the sentimental history of social groups.¹⁴

Good or bad, music is changing, and the activities and capabilities described here raise many questions regarding some of the fundamental relationships in musical performance. The final section in this chapter tackles questions regarding the evolving relationship between composition and improvisation, the nature and meaning of musical form, and a continuing discussion of rhythmic “feel.”