

I'm Doug Fearn and this is My Take On Music Recording

Recently several people have suggested that I do a series of episodes featuring listener-submitted recordings for my critique.

At first, I was not particularly enthusiastic about this idea. Sure, I can make lots of comments on someone's recording technique. We all do it all the time, even if we don't say it out loud.

But where do you draw the line between technical issues and more abstract creative decisions? I've thought about this quite a bit and I'm not sure there is definitive line between the two.

After all, we each bring our own aesthetic to our recordings. If we all did things the same way, all our recordings would sound the same. There would be no progress in the art of recording. That's not a good thing.

I decided to go ahead with this and see what happens. More details on that in a minute.

Thinking about this reminded me of session I did in the 1980s. We did all kinds of music in my studio back in those days. We were in Philadelphia, so a lot of our work was with R&B artists. But I had one staff engineer who was good at recording the "New Wave" bands – a genre that later became Punk.

Frankly, this wasn't my favorite music, but I could appreciate it done well. But my engineer really understood it and he was very good at capturing that sound.

One of the bands that came in often was starting to get a following and record company interest. My engineer worked with them to develop a sound, and they were putting together an album. I had to agree that they were good, and the sounds were amazing.

A tracking session was booked, but the day before, the engineer had a family emergency and could not do the session. Instead of cancelling, he asked me to engineer it.

I protested, saying I couldn't possibly get the sound he got. I did not have the deep understanding of the genre that he did. I knew the guys in the band, and felt good about them, but I did not feel comfortable recording them.

My engineer argued that I could do it. He would write down everything about the session: the mics he used and their placement, the processing and eq he used, even the track layout he was comfortable with.

I reluctantly agreed to do it, but I felt very uneasy about the session.

The band arrived, and since we were already friends, they were very supportive of my venture into their music.

I set everything up according to the plan and we began the run-through of the song we were going to cut. Most things in the studio were similar to what I did, but mic placement and instrument placement were somewhat different. The band was helpful here because they knew precisely where they and their mics were normally placed.

I sat in the control room and was instantly amazed that it was sounding very much like what my engineer's sessions with these guys sounded like. I marveled that the same room, the same mics, the same gear could produce a sound that was quite different from what I normally did.

We recorded a take and the band came into the control room to listen. They were happy. I was happy. We got the track cut, added a couple of overdubs, and left the session pleased with the results.

When my engineer came back to work and listened to the track, he was happy with it, too.

I had learned something new, and I captured the sound that they and their engineer wanted. That was gratifying.

By the way, the band was soon signed to a major label and did very well.

As much as I was pleased that I had captured the sound that everyone wanted, I couldn't help but think that this was my colleague's sound, not mine. I would have done it differently. Undoubtedly less effectively, but it would have been my sound.

I can go back to recordings I did 50 years ago and my style is totally evident even in those earliest sessions. You could interpret that as I haven't made any progress in 50 years, or you could say that I have always had a sound in my head that I wanted to capture. It's my style, and it continues to work well for me and the people I record.

You have your style, which undoubtedly is different from anyone else's style. At least it should be. If we all achieved the same sound, the world of music would be very boring. A computer could do it. No need for an engineer.

That's not the world I want to live in. I relish the way each one of us interprets the music before us in a unique way.

I am constantly overwhelmed by the great sounds I hear other people get. I used to analyze the recordings, trying to figure out how it was done. On occasion, I tried to duplicate the sound, sometimes successfully. Like the Punk session, I could do it. But it wasn't me.

I soon learned that it is perfectly acceptable to admire and enjoy everyone's work, even if it is totally different from what I would do.

So, this is my dilemma when it comes to offering critiques of someone else's work. I could explain what they should do in order to duplicate my sound, but is that useful?

Often, I hear things in recordings that are purely technical problems. It could be bad acoustic space, poor microphone choice or placement, poor gain structure in the recording chain, over- or under-use of effects or processing, or mixes that are not going to translate well into real-world situations.

Those kinds of things are easy for me to hear, and I can make suggestions on how to fix them.

If there are technical issues, I can probably identify the likely source and provide some troubleshooting tips to clean things up. Same with room acoustics problems.

After that, it gets tricky. What if the recordist is just starting out, recording in their bedroom or basement, with relatively low-quality equipment. They are doing the best they can with their limited experience, and what they have to work with. Chances are, they are not recording the most musically talented people in the world. Is it fair to criticize them for that? I'd say no. But I might be able to offer some suggestions on how they might do better with what they have to work with.

And, unfortunately, there are some very enthusiastic people out there who just do not have the talent to capture music effectively. They can't hear the difference between good and poor recording. What do I say to them? Maybe they just need more time to develop their ear by listening to good recordings and learning to tell the difference. Or maybe they are just not cut out to be a recording engineer.

Or they just don't care. It's not important to them.

Another problem is that I have little first-hand experience with several of the genres that are most popular right now. I may not understand the goal of the recording style. I am not qualified to judge these recordings, or even comment on the technical quality, if over-driving and distortion, or other extreme processing, are an intrinsic part of the sound.

Despite my misgivings, I would like to see if this proves useful to people.

So let's give it a try. If you would like to hear my podcast critique of your recording technique, send me the full-resolution file. Depending on how many I receive, I may offer critiques for all of them that come in. Or there may be more than I can handle, so I might pick out a few that I think would be useful to a wide range of people.

Or maybe there is insufficient interest to provide any worthwhile service. That's OK, too. It's an experiment.

I would play your track in the podcast episode. Unfortunately, the audio quality in podcasting is not very good – it's a fairly low bit-rate MP3. For the things I want to point out for improvement, the low-res audio might be good enough to hear the problem. For more subtle problems, I might use a low-res version for the podcast, but provide access to the full-resolution version on my podcast web site, dougfearn.com

You could choose whether you wanted to be identified or not. Either way is fine with me, and if you feel better being anonymous, I respect that.

Regardless, I do not intend this to be anything other than an occasional episode. The usual mixture of my tutorials and interviews with interesting people will continue.

You can send your recordings to me via any of the usual channels for transferring large files, such as WeTransfer, Dropbox, or even your own FTP site. Send the download link to dwfearn@dwfearn.com. The link is in the description for this episode. Send completed mixes for an overall evaluation, or if you

want some suggestions on an individual track, just send that. In any case, send the high-resolution file (not an MP3).

I'm looking forward to hearing what you are doing!

And if you have any suggestions for topics, email me with your thoughts. This, and a couple of recent episodes, have been the result of your suggestions. Keep them coming.

Thanks.

This is My Take On Music Recording. I'm Doug Fearn. See you next time.