CHAPTER 8
PREPRODUCTION: THE MOST IMPORTANT STEP

If you’re working with real players, the most crucial time in the entire recording process is before you actually record, which is known as preproduction. Almost always, the more time you spend in preproduction, the smoother the recording will go. In preproduction, the songs are chosen, arrangements are worked out, and parts are learned so well that the only thing to concentrate on during recording is the execution of the performance.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU
Preproduction is often much more than the process of working out songs. For a producer working with a new artist or band, it’s a time of getting to know each other. It’s important for the producer to learn the likes and dislikes of the artists he or she is working with—be it food, music, or politics—in addition to their working habits and idiosyncrasies.

Knowing these things can help the producer determine how far to push a singer, or discover what gets the best performance out of the guitar player, or the signs that the drummer is getting tired, or the hot-
button issues of the day to stay away from. If you’re going to be working closely with an artist, even for a short time, the more you know about him or her, the better you can serve the project.

One of the most important aspects of getting to know an artist is learning what music she loves, was influenced by, and is listening to now. Back in the days of the vinyl record, one of the most effective ways of doing this was for the producer to go to the artist’s house and have them throw a bunch of albums from their collection on the floor and then describe what they liked and didn’t like about each one.

Today, it’s more about looking at a favorite Spotify playlist, but the same thing is accomplished. Among the questions to ask might be the following:

- What do you like or dislike about the artist you’re listening to?
- Do you like the sound of the recording?
- What recordings do you like the sound of?
- What are some of your favorite records? Why?
- What/who are your biggest influences? Why?
- If you have a body of work as a producer already, what does the artist like about you? Why?

You can add any number of questions to those above, but can you see where this is heading? This is the information that you need to help attain the artist’s vision.

It gives you a common point of reference so that you can say, “Let’s go for a sound like the lead guitar on The Cure’s “Boys Don’t Cry,” and have the artist know exactly what you mean because you’ve found out in preproduction that’s one of his favorite songs.

Or if the artist says to you, “Can we get the sound like on The Weeknd’s “Can’t Feel My Face,” you’ll know exactly what he’s talking about.

**SELECTING THE SONGS**

Selecting the songs for the project is usually a function determined by how much preproduction time you have. If you don’t have a deadline to worry about, you might work on songs that have strong hooks but are incomplete or have a weak arrangement or structure. If you don’t have a lot of time, however, you might be looking to use only the songs that are in the most record-worthy shape—ones that you know will sound good, and that you can therefore easily record.
As you’ve read in Chapter 6, songwriting is a craft, and the more you do it, the better it gets as you learn what works and what doesn’t. The more you record, the more attuned your ear becomes to what to listen for with arrangements, so an artist or band that’s on their fourth album will have songs that sound much more together than an artist or band on record number one. Because of that experience, the songs will be in better shape, any changes can be made faster, and the pre-production time will be shorter.

It’s always a good idea to work up at least one extra song in addition to the ones intended for recording. There are two reasons for this: first, if an intended song just isn’t captured to everyone’s expectations during basic tracking, you’ll have an alternative available. Second, sometimes you may have a little extra time during the basics stage, so it’s nice to be able to take advantage of that opportunity and use it wisely by working on another song.

**PREPRODUCTION REHEARSALS**

The preproduction rehearsal is the stage where much of the heavy lifting of the project takes place. This is when the songs get honed until they’re deemed ready for recording. Here are a number of tips and tricks to get the most out of your preproduction time.

**You Gotta Hear Yourself**

For players to hear the nuances of their parts and determine how to integrate those parts with all the others in the band, they need to be able to hear themselves and everyone else equally well.

One of the problems that young bands have is that they tend to crank up the volume before they learn a song or work on any changes to its parts or arrangements. It’s best to learn a song or change its parts at low level first so that everyone can hear each other’s parts, and then play it at normal stage volume once things have been worked out. This will save you a lot of time later, when you have to go through the song player by player and part by part to find out why something isn’t sounding right.

In fact, sometimes the best rehearsals are the ones that happen in someone’s living room with only acoustic guitars and drum pads. These kinds of rehearsals can be surprisingly effective, since it’s easy to hear what everyone’s playing and especially easy to hear the vocals (it’s great for working out harmonies). Of course, bands that have been
gigging for a while find working this way a lot easier than do new play-
ers who’ve been together for a short time.

**Practice in the Round**

A really good rehearsal technique is to set up in the round so that everyone is facing one another, instead of setting up like the way you would on stage. This configuration allows each player to hear him or herself really well, as well as the rest of the band. It’s also the way that almost everyone records, since it’s so important to have eye contact when you’re doing a take. When people play in the round, everyone has to control their volume a bit so they don’t blow out their fellow band members, but that’s not such a bad thing, is it?

**A Few Rehearsal Tips**

No matter what kind of music you’re producing, the following rehearsal tips can help things go a bit smoother and enable you to get the most out of your preproduction time.

- When going over a song, stop as soon as there’s a train wreck and work it out. Talk it over to see what everyone is playing, and then play just the problem part until everyone gets it. Sometimes the problem may be in the middle or at the end of a section, so if the band is able to play just that section, great. Most bands, however, find it easier to start four bars before or even at the beginning of the section to work it out. That’s okay—whatever it takes to make things sound great!

- Find the part of the song that needs the most work and concentrate on that first. Slow the song down to a tempo that’s easy for everyone to play, and then gradually bring it up to speed until everyone can play it cleanly.

- Sometimes it’s best to start with the chorus, especially the out chorus, since it usually repeats. If a band is working on groove or tempo, the out chorus is the section of the song that’s played the most, and probably has the song’s hook, so it’s easy to remember. Starting with the out chorus can give you confidence about playing the rest of the song.

**PREPRODUCTION DEMOS**

No matter how well preproduction rehearsals seem to go, it’s impor-
tant to make a preproduction demo recording, too. Why? You never really know how a part sounds until it's recorded.

Also, getting a band out of its safe and comfortable environment will make them play differently. Psychologically, it helps a band to know that when things sound different in a new environment (as they will when recording takes place) that it's not necessarily a negative thing.

The preproduction demo doesn't have to be expensive. In fact, the cheaper the better. Even someone's home studio will do, because you don't care about the track count or quality as much as discovering just what each instrument is playing. What you're trying to learn is how well everyone is playing together and whether the arrangements and song structures work.

Don't spend too much time recording the demo. A couple of passes of each song at the most is all that's necessary, unless there's a major train wreck. Performance mistakes are okay, as long as you can hear the complete form of the song.

Don't worry about overdubs or layering unless it's for a quick run-through to see if an idea works. Perfection is not the objective for the demo; obtaining information about the song structure, the arrangement, and the individual parts is.

After you listen to the recording, or even just listen to playbacks while recording, it should be apparent what needs to be fixed or improved (which should take place at another round of rehearsals). Listening will also help the players as they hear what they're playing against everyone else. It's not uncommon to hear comments like, "I didn't know you were playing it like that," during a playback.

The idea behind all of this is to get the parts down so that the real recording can be done efficiently and with no surprises, and so that the players can concentrate solely on their performances instead of having to learn new parts. Many times, by the time a player learns the new part in the studio, his performance has suffered so much it takes an additional session just to capture a great performance. Spending an ample amount of time in preproduction will hopefully eliminate that scenario.

**HOW LONG SHOULD PREPRODUCTION TAKE?**
The length of preproduction time has a major impact on your final recording, since it's ultimately determined by the songs that you pick to record. The more preproduction time available, the more time you have to work on songs that aren't all together. The less preproduction
time available, the better off you'll be picking songs that are ready to go, even though they may not be the best.

You always hear about label acts that work out things in the studio, and you'll have to assume that no matter how well prepared you are, some of that will happen anyway. That said, the purpose of this book is to get you through a recording project efficiently and easily, assuming that you have a limited budget. It's always better to spend more time in preproduction than production: for one thing, it can be a lot cheaper if you're using a commercial studio, and for another, it's less stressful.

Below is a guideline that I like to use, but realize that each situation is unique, so these numbers might not be in the ballpark for your particular project. For a band that's never been in the studio before, allow time in the schedule for the following:

- At least two rehearsals of preproduction per song to be recorded.
- One session to record a demo.
- One rehearsal for each song for fixes as a result of the demo.

That means for a 10-song album you'd spend 22 rehearsals (10 songs plus an extra x 2 = 22 rehearsals), a day for the demo, and another 11 rehearsals for fixes—for a total of 34 rehearsals.

For a band of studio veterans who've made records before, allow time in the schedule for the following:

- One rehearsal of preproduction per song to be recorded.
- One session to record a demo.
- Half of a rehearsal for each song for fixes as a result of the demo.

That means for a 10-song album you'd spend 11 rehearsals (10 songs plus an extra = 11 rehearsals), a session for the demo, and another 6 rehearsals for fixes—for a total of 18 rehearsals.

Of course, many other factors come into play that could make you take these guidelines and throw them in the trash can. The band could be on its fifth album and everything might be so together than a lot less time is needed. Or maybe the band wants to record live for a really raw-sounding punk record with no overdubs, so again, a lot less time is needed.

Maybe it's a jazz or blues band, where there won't be much re-
corded beyond the basic 12-bar song structure with few overdubs and layering. Or perhaps the band has limited time for rehearsal because of touring or family commitments. All of these factors play into how much preproduction time you’ll need or get.

**IT’S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT**
As we’ve been saying throughout this book, it’s the little things, the nuances, that make a song sound great. We’ve talked about these things before, but let’s list them again, because these are the things that you’ve got to have down.

- Everyone must know their parts inside out.
- The starts and stops in the song must all be played together.
- Everyone must be able to play the same part the same way every time (except if it’s jazz or blues).
- Everyone must know the dynamics of the song.
- All rhythms must be in the pocket and the songs must groove.
- The turnaround between each song section must be defined.
- Attacks and releases for each part must be executed together.
- The sounds of each instrument must be layered so that nothing clashes frequency-wise.
- The tempo must be right for the song.
- The band must be in tune.
- All vocals must be in the best range for the singers.
- Background vocals must be defined and tight.

These are the things that you should be concentrating on during preproduction rehearsals.