



It's your project, your song, and now you need a singer. Where and how do you find the right one?

Sebastian Arocha Morton: Once the songwriting stage of the process is complete, I'll live with the song for a day or so and decide what type of singer fits best. I'll usually know if it should be male or female, and judging by some of my production choices, what genre I'm aiming for.

I'll usually start by calling singers I've worked with in the past whom I trust. If none of those people fit my vision for the song, I'll seek out people I've discovered or heard on other people's songs, demos sent to me, or just surfing the web. Sometimes I'll send a producer colleague or manager an email asking for recommendations.



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—Going For The Perfect Match

The Singer and The Song

How far do you prepare the song before you make that call?

If it's my own project I have probably already sketched out the type of song I need done. I'll make a background track for it—not a demo, but an album master in progress, meaning I don't choose weak sounds which I plan on switching for the final version, I gradually overdub as needed and then mix. Usually I'll bring in a few cowriters to help me with the songwriting aspect and lyrics, or in some cases I'll write it all myself. I'll make sure that there is enough "production" there to make it feel like it's a professional recording. By "production" I mean there's enough instruments and sonic details to make you feel like the track is going to sound great.

I know a lot of producers who just do a bare-bones demo track, get the vocalist in as quickly as possible, and then fill in the track and replace all the weak sounds after the vocalist's done. I don't really like working that way and here's why: I really believe in first impressions. If I were to walk in on somebody else's session in a studio and the beat's weak, the keyboard sounds are all generic presets and the vocals are out of tune, and someone said to me, "Oh it's just rough, wait until we mix it", I wouldn't trust them and I wouldn't really expect much from the song. I feel vocalists have the same reaction. If you take the time to make sure that when you press Play for the first time, the beat's phat, the bass is tight, and all the instruments are interesting, the vocalist's gonna be excited to do their best. That's what I want!

It's also important to make sure all the sections of your song transition well. Lift the chorus with some pads or guitars if it needs to sound bigger. Drop things out in the 2nd verse or B section if you need color variation, vocalists respond and change their singing accordingly.

How do you present the song to a vocalist?

I usually sing and record a rough vocal take myself before I even start thinking of guest vocalists, to ensure my song is strong enough melodically and will make sense. Nowadays the vocoder and Auto-Tune effects are so prominent that people don't mind hearing sketches with robotic sounding guide vocals, so it allows me to really get down what I'm hearing in my head, background harmonies included, without feeling like my bad singing will



Interview by Lorenz Rychner



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make fellow musicians and writers misunderstand the melody and hate the song.

How do you match the singer to the song?

I'm quite a versatile writer so I've used male rock singers, R&B singers, intimate singer/songwriter types, latin salsa singers, etc.. It all depends on the genre and market for whatever I'm doing.

I've said in interviews before that I don't do demos, but I've clarified that I don't do demos *for albums*. I do, however, make *songwriter demos* to pitch my songs to other artists. There's a big difference.

I am a producer *and* a songwriter; when I get hired to produce, every instrument and sonic choice needs to be the best. I try to use the best gear available and I use all the tweaking tricks I've learned for my synths and drums to be unique. All the producers I admire have a sound, a sonic stamp, whether it's Dr. Dre, Dr. Luke, Trevor Horn, Quincy Jones, The Neptunes, etc.. Their records sound like them. The reason for that is the choices they make at every single step of the way, from mics to preamps to drums to synths, everything.

On the flipside, if I'm trying to get a song I wrote cut by Andrea Bocelli, I'm not gonna use distorted Moog bass and sequences from my Virus Ti. Chances are a simple piano-and-vocal "demo" would be a better presentation. When you are doing songwriting demos, try to make them as broad-reaching as possible. You want to be able to pitch that same song to many different artists without having to make 10 different demos for it.

Sometimes simple is the way to go, that way they can imagine it however they want. You're there to sell the lyric and melody more than the

track. This also applies to the singer you choose for the song. If you want a female dance pop singer to cut your song, don't use a male jazz crooner on the demo. It's just common sense. If you know a singer who can sing in all different styles, simply reference a song that clearly shows the style of singing you want for yours, and also sing your guide vocal in that same style or as close as possible.

And how do you find and audition a new singer?

Social media is the new audition platform. Nowadays, I don't think a lot of producers audition singers on the spot because it takes too much time and there's too much commitment involved. You'll get word of mouth or article "buzz" recommendations and you check out their stuff on Soundcloud, Facebook, Myspace, iTunes, ReverbNation, etc.. It's pretty clear from several songs what the vocalist can do, and if they'll work for you.

...as long as you can believe what you see and hear...

Right—my advice to singers is to put *only* your best work up on the web. Avoid exposing vocal recordings of yours that are obviously tuned because you couldn't nail it—this could cost you the gig. It's one thing to hear Auto-Tune used as an effect on T-Pain and Cher, and it's another to hear an over-tuned "cleaned-up" vocal. To anyone who is only half seasoned in vocal work it's night-and-day obvious.

I'll hire someone who has three great tracks that show their honest passion and vocal abilities before one who has three *albums* on iTunes of which two are poorly produced and written. My reasoning behind it is that anyone who puts out poor material constantly just doesn't care enough, so—why bother?

With a new singer, how do you go about picking the right mic?

Over my years of recording there have been several mics I keep coming back to as my favorites on vocals. Of course, it so happens that they're legendary—for good reason. For male voices: Neumann U87 (vintage if possible), Neumann M149, and AKG C12. For female voices: Neumann M149, Blue Kiwi, AKG C12. There are many others, but I usually don't go beyond these.

Which of these I pick in a given situation—again, to me everything is about serving the song. Whatever makes the song as good as possible. In a way I always feel like a movie director when I'm producing, because I have to remember the script (song) came first, so my choices have to align with that. It doesn't mean you can't experiment and write on the spot, change direction, etc., it just means that there was always



an initial idea that made you begin a track, add chords etc.. Something made you decide the instruments and everything else, all the way up to the vocal stage where you are now, so just trust your gut and go for what you instinctively feel goes with everything you've already done.

By what criteria do you choose mics according to style?

Mics have a certain sonic signature, just like guitars and keys. Tube mics like the Neumann M149 are great for intimate gorgeous detail and warmth, but sometimes, on big dance tracks for example, a mic with more midrange, like a Blue Kiwi, can help the vocalist cut through and sound very energetic. Sometimes mics as

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phenomenal as the AKG C12 are just too huge sounding, with too much low mids for an '80s electro-track vibe.

So even though I could put up four mics in front of the vocalist to try, there are usually conditions that make me choose something based on past experience. I usually choose two and then pick one.

Another key factor is the preamp. A great mic through a mediocre preamp sounds completely different. I use a Manley Voxbox for condenser mics and a Langevin Dual Vocal combo or a Neve 1073 for tube mics.

These are rather pricey items...

Of course, I've named all the really expensive gear, but this principle applies to all levels of budget. Every expensive piece of gear has a similar, less expensive counterpart by some competing manufacturer or at times the same company. Take RØDE mics, for example. They even look like Neumann U47s but cost five times less and are also tube. Do your research, if you're reading this and I mentioned the Blue Kiwi which costs \$2K, you'll realize you can get a Blue Dragonfly for \$600 and they share a lot of the same qualities. Use that and you'll get in the ballpark of the same sound.

My advice is to get to know your preferences and buy the best piece of kit you can afford that still falls in line with those preferences. Meaning, if you make aggressive hip hop with loads of compression, you don't need a \$4000 tube mic. Chances are that your vocalist is very aggressive and loud and even a \$60 Shure SM57 dynamic mic could do the trick incredibly well.

In fact, it could be better than a vintage, dark mic for your purpose. Tailor your gear to what you want to achieve, not to what you see other people getting.

With a new singer, how do you go about picking the right key?

The key I can usually figure out from hearing other recordings the person has done, by doing some background research on that person before the session. If the track is already heavily layered and the key is just a big problem, I'll pass most of the instruments into Melodyne and temporarily transpose them while the person is in the booth. Then when the vocalist leaves, I'll re-record MIDI and instruments accordingly.

How to you go about teaching a singer the song?

I provide a guide vocal which is very detailed and complete, sometimes even including some ad libs at the end. This used to be a big problem 10 years ago before Auto-Tune really worked, because if you didn't have a good voice or chops to lay down energetic performances, it could actually hurt the session. But as I mentioned earlier, nowadays, with compression, eq, Melodyne and various tricks, you can have a very energetic guide for the vocalist to really understand what you're going for. Uptempos are usually the most problematic for non-singers to demo.

What if it's a song for a female voice?

If you're trying to go for a Lady Gaga or Katy Perry vibe and you're a male producer with no singing chops, your best bet is to use a vocoder. At the end of the day, if it sounds "genre appropriate" and cool and modern, the vocalist will understand and feel inspired to give it a go. Of course, I always encourage vocalists to add their flavor, ad libs, and just really go for it. If there's anything I don't like I can always edit it out, but you can't really add anything if it's not there to begin with. More takes is always better in this digital age.

How to you go about teaching a singer the expression you're after?

The expression is always the most important and difficult part, and of course the hardest to explain. If my guide vocal I laid down doesn't translate what I want, I always keep an iPod or an iPhone with Spotify handy, with some good examples of songs in the vein of what we're doing. It's easy to reference something on the spot and clarify the confusion.



Of course, I'll try singing it into the talkback mic as well as I can first. Problems can occur when what you need is more of a creative ad lib from the vocalist. I'll usually try to hire people who are also writers and artists themselves, in whatever genre I'm producing. It's hard for someone who usually sings country to understand what you mean by saying: "Give me a Mary J. Blige-style ad lib", but an R&B or hip hop singer will know exactly what you mean.

How about matching individual singing styles to the song?

Yes—something else that's hard to explain is exactly how much vibrato to use. Especially with classically trained singers, for that I'll usually reference people like Sade, Everything But The Girl, Sarah McLachlan, etc.. You're not usually aware of it when you're just enjoying a song you

love, but hearing vocalists with very little vibrato at the end of their phrases is very interesting, it's usually the norm to add it on extended phrases.

What's your final advice for those with less experience?

Build your awareness by listening to great records. Experience gained from critical listening to all the recordings which inspire you is really the key. Figure out why certain recordings are just much cooler than others, and as you listen closely to every aspect you'll find consistencies throughout them. You might realize you prefer singers who sing close to the mic and have lots of compression, to sound larger than life, like Seal and Sade. Or you might like more rootsy, roomy, natural sounds like Bob Dylan and Los Lobos.

Some artists' particular expression leads to the mic and tracking choices, like with the artists mentioned above. The bottom line though is, how do you serve the song? How do you make something *awesome*?

Write it, arrange it, and then begin making gear choices that are relevant to the final song. If you don't have the experience to know what an awesome song sounds like *finished*, then find a song that's most similar to yours in genre, style, sonics, and overall mix aesthetics, and A/B constantly while you're tracking. You'll learn a lot. ➤

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