

160 GREAT JAZZ VENUES

DOWNBEAT®

Jazz, Blues & Beyond

SNARKY
PUPPY

OMAR
SOSA

ADAM
RUDOLPH
BLINDFOLD
TEST

PRISM

Kevin Eubanks
Eric Harland
Dave Holland
Craig Taborn

BRASS
BANDS:
THE
NEXT
WAVE

SPECIAL
SECTION:
RECORDING
SCHOOL

JOE
FERLA
IN THE STUDIO

ODED
LEV-ARI
PRODUCTION TIPS

JAMES
CARTER
TRANSCRIBED

FEBRUARY 2014

U.K. £3.50

\$4.99



DOWNBEAT.COM

LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

In the Studio with Producer ODED LEV-ARI

BY MICHAEL GALLANT

PLAYING a killer solo on a midnight club date is one thing—but capturing that same ephemeral fire in a studio setting can be another challenge entirely. Without the right preparation, even the most inspired and talented of players can find their music falling flat when their horns end up in front of a mic and the red “recording” light goes on for the first time. So what can be done to help those new to the studio capture the transcendent, awesome-sounding take that their music deserves?

Putting such lightning in a bottle is what producers like Oded Lev-Ari specialize in. A co-owner of Anzic Records in New York City and an accomplished pianist, composer and arranger, Lev-Ari has produced recordings for such artists as Anat Cohen, Marty Ehrlich and Amy Cervini. Here are his thoughts on conjuring and crystallizing jazz magic in the studio.

DownBeat: In your experience, what’s the most important thing that musicians should keep in mind when it’s time to record?

Oded Lev-Ari: When you go into the studio, remember that you’re trying to capture what’s actually coming out of the instruments. Sometimes, there can be the temptation to make the recorded product sound different from what the instruments and music actually sound like in the room. That’s the wrong way to go about it. To end up with a great-sounding product, you have to start with great-sounding music. There’s a lot that can be done to that end before you ever set foot inside the studio.

Can you describe one example?

OL-A: When you’re recording, you can become aware of things that you don’t necessarily hear every day when

you’re playing live. So the studio is a very different experience than being onstage. It’s a much more detailed view, like looking at the band under a microscope, and it can be pretty jarring if you don’t know what to expect. Mentally preparing yourself for that close examination of what things *actually* sound like, and not being thrown off by it—even if you hear things you don’t necessarily like—is important.

That microscopic examination can be a useful thing too, right?

OL-A: Absolutely. The scrutiny that you get in the studio allows you to consider what you’re recording at a different level.

What do you recommend as pre-studio homework?

OL-A: You should strive to do whatever you can before going into the studio so that you can be focused on the music once you actually get there. For a trio that plays a 10-bar head and improvises for 5 minutes, that calls for very different preparation than for a big-band date with complex arrangements. The point is to do whatever you can ahead of time to make sure that you’re comfortable. A lot of times when people go into the studio, they get too distracted by technical details, and that can be a mistake.

Like what?

OL-A: People can spend hours figuring out what microphones to use, talking about what kind of console the studio has and looking for the ideal mic placement for a session. Those are all important things, but

the hardest thing to capture in the studio is the emotional impact of the music, and fixating on tweaky details can get in the way. I like to remember that great-sounding recordings were made in the 1960s with very few microphones, everybody recording in the same room, and limited sonic isolation between musicians. Those are albums that we *still* refer to as great recordings. So highly technical aspects are not the most important things for artists to focus on.

Do you prefer to have musicians record in the same room, or do you want them sonically isolated in different spaces in the studio?

OL-A: It depends on what material

BILL WEST/MORELAND

you’re recording, but my knee-jerk reaction to producing jazz ensembles would be to have everybody in the same room. Great-sounding recordings happen because there’s great interaction between musicians, everyone’s comfortable and everyone can ignore the mics and just make music.

Physically, there are also important things that happen when instruments are in the same room. I remember producing one jazz album where I recorded three cellos and a bass. For one section, I had the bass playing with a bow, and during rehearsals that playing caused sympathetic resonance in the strings of the cello. Even though the cellist wasn’t playing at the time, we still heard the overtones and richness that came from the instrument. That sort of thing can’t happen unless



the instruments are in the same room and physically close to each other.

When is it helpful to have the instruments acoustically isolated?

OL-A: If something goes wrong, you have the option of fixing it without having to do the whole take again. You can replay a solo or part of a solo, for example. You can also drastically change or correct the sound of an instrument—though in a purist way of thinking, if you need to change the sound of an instrument that much, either you picked the wrong instrument or player, or you're trying to twist the recording into representing something that didn't happen in the room to begin with. That goes back to my first point: Make sure that everything sounds like you want it in the room to begin with.

What's your ideal recording room?

OL-A: This might be an annoying answer, but it's whatever room the musicians feel comfortable in, physically and emotionally. Some musicians care if there are windows or no windows, high ceilings or low ceilings; all of that is important to pay attention to. If a room doesn't have the outboard equipment or console that everybody is talking about, but it feels physically good to you, then go for that rather than trying to tweak the technical aspects.

What about the acoustic qualities of a room?

OL-A: A tracking room at a recording studio is a lot like the sound box for an instrument like the guitar, violin or piano. The room basically func-

tions as another instrument, and you don't want the room to have an opinion about which frequencies are louder than others [*laughs*]. If you walk into a tracking room and your voice sounds like your voice should sound, and the piano or bass sound like a great, rich piano or bass, then you're on the right track.

How should musicians make themselves comfortable in the studio?

OL-A: I encourage some musicians I'm working with to bring things like pictures, little objects or even candles, if it's not against the fire code. With singers in particular, I'm looking for the emotional content or meaning in the performance, and it can be hard to get a singer to open up sometimes if he

or she is stuck in a small vocal booth with a big mic in front of him or her. Plus, having every single lip sound and breath amplified in the headphones can be disconcerting, so whatever can get the musician in the right, comfortable place emotionally is helpful.

The pictures and objects—bringing them in helps make the recording process feel like something really special. In religious practices, there's a lot of symbolism and ceremony that brings meaning to what you do and takes you to a different place spiritually. Anything you can do to bring that same process into the recording studio can help you create the sounds in the room that you want to capture.

But some people just want to get in front of the mic and play, and that's OK, too.

When should artists spring for a well-known, professional studio, as opposed to a more DIY approach?

OL-A: If you're developing material in the studio, it can take too much time and cost too much money to do that in a commercial place. But if you know what you want to lay down and have done your preparation so you can knock out the recording in a day or two, I would absolutely recommend going to a professional facility. At this point, there are some great-sounding rooms available to musicians of all sorts. There aren't a lot of them left and they're not cheap, but you can rent them at reasonable rates and you're getting a great amount of bang for your buck—great mics and equipment, a carefully built room and hopefully a house engineer with an experienced set of ears who knows the room and where to place instruments.

Many problems are resolved before they even become problems when you go to a good facility, so if you can afford to rent one, it makes a lot of sense. And think about all of the sound that these rooms have experienced! The history of a great, old recording space can help create the ceremonial atmosphere that brings things to a different place.

What other advice do you have for musicians in the studio?

OL-A: I've heard that a very famous pianist and very famous producer once tracked an entire Grammy-winning album with one of the piano mics accidentally set up backwards. That [anecdote] puts technical questions about things like mic placement in perspective. Again, if you have a great-sounding piano and a great player, that's what's most important. It's all about the performance, the musician and the music.

DB