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What, no pitch correction?

Raising a flag on vocal effects

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As a sales pitch, it's unique, if not downright baffling.

"Absolutely no vocal tuning or pitch correction was used in the making of this record" reads the sticker affixed to every copy of "Miss Fortune," the latest CD by singer-songwriter Allison Moorer.

The average consumer would be forgiven for wondering what pitch correction is, and if the Cubs will be able to use it this year.

Pitch correction is actually one of many computer-based tools that producers use to make singers sound better. Using increasingly common studio software such as Pro Tools, flat notes can be fixed, off-key vocals can be spruced up and entire performances can be cut and pasted together from several different takes.

According to industry insiders, many successful mainstream artists in most genres of music -- perhaps a majority of artists -- are using pitch correction. Now some in the music industry think the focus on perfection has gone too far.

"Vocal tuning is contributing to the Milli Vanilli-fication of modern music," says R.S. Field, who produced Moorer's record. Putting the sticker on the record, he says, "was sort of our little freak flag."

Nothing new

What a singer sounds like has always been manipulated and massaged by producers: The difference nowadays is that it is so easy to do -- maybe too easy.

"Pro Tools is the industry Frankenstein that's taken over," says Nashville musician and producer Mark Nevers, who has worked with country artists such as George Jones and Waylon Jennings and indie bands the Silver Jews. "Everything has to be exact, and I blame engineers and producers. It's been overdone."

In the past, a producer would force singers to redo subpar vocals again and again, but "now they just have them sing it five times in a row, edit that together and then use Pro Tools" to tune it, according

to Nevers.

"My own opinion is that it can be a very, very handy tool, but unfortunately now it is something that is cropping up on the records of artists who can actually sing," says Andy Karp, vice president of A&R for Lava/Atlantic Records. "You're hearing [computer program] Auto-Tune all over, and that's a shame. It also maybe suggests to record companies that they need to focus on finding artists who sing well as opposed to just look good."

According to several producers, the practice of tuning and correcting vocals is especially prevalent in mainstream country music. Studio software can help artists hold a note for what seems like forever, and can help them sound as if they can belt out high notes as easily as Patsy Cline could.

"That country music production scene is a pretty rigid environment," according to Timothy Powell, a Chicago-based producer/engineer. "The artists are at the mercy of the producers and the record companies and everybody wants it to be perfect -- they go out of their way to make it perfect."

Powell, who specializes in recording live performances by everyone from Paul McCartney to Eminem, says he's even starting to see vocal tuning devices show up in concert settings.

"That's more of an ethical dilemma -- people pay a premium dollar to see artists and artists want people to see them at their best," says Powell, who adds that at this point, live pitch correction is much less prevalent than lip-syncing by pop artists.

A natural progression

Still, in a world where every magazine picture is airbrushed and many films feature computer-manipulated images, some see the use of high-tech buffing and polishing as a natural progression for the music industry.

"Tobey Maguire didn't really swing from all those building in 'Spider-Man' -- that was done with special effects," says Hank Neuberger, the Grammy-winning producer who runs Chicago Recording Co. "Recordmaking today is not much different."

Pitch correction is "more and more economical and easier to use, so artists and producers are saying to themselves, 'Why not?' especially since many singers are simply incapable of performing in perfect tune, even though they may be great communicators," he says.

In fact, some artists actually like what tuning software does to their voices. Cher reportedly loved the robotic vocals that engineers created by cranking tuning software to the max on her hit "Believe," and other artists have consciously used programs such as Auto-Tune to create a specific vocal effect in their music. Many producers value tuning software because it allows them to keep one entire vocal take together -- they can just clean up a few little mistakes rather than cobble together a less authentic performance from several different takes.

Even those that don't like the slightly mechanical sound of overdone pitch correction aren't advocating a ban on it.

"I'm not a purist about it, I've used it," Field says. "I use it sparingly -- my goal is to never have it sound like an effect."

Powell says, "It's just another tool in the studio. Some people think it's an evil thing or it's cheating, but with the advent of multitrack recording, where you don't do all the music at same time, if the vocalist doesn't do one word right, you can just go back and correct that."

Chicago engineer/producer Ken Sluiter says "when used creatively, it sounds really cool, and you can get great results."

"When Cher does it, it sounds cheesy," he says, "but when Radiohead does it, it sounds great."

Besides, Neuberger notes, it can't make a terrible singer into a divine diva. "There's a lot more to singing than pitch. It can't transform you into a pop star, but it can help."

Why bother?

But really, why bother fixing every little thing? Despite the pressure on record companies to produce hits, especially in light of the music industry doldrums and the general economic malaise, Karp thinks artists and producers should take more chances, not play it safe.

"Keep in mind most people out there don't care if a vocal's in tune or not," Karp notes. "The only people who really care about it are producers, artists and [industry insiders]. The public doesn't care. The public reacts to timbre of voice, the quality of a hook, a lyric. If you think of all the classic songs, the ones that have moved you the most," they probably weren't perfectly in tune on every note.

It's worth noting, as a couple of the producers we spoke to did, that one of the biggest sellers in recent years was the soundtrack to "O Brother, Where Art Thou," which featured bare-bones roots music -- and who would dare "correct" the vocals of bluegrass legend Ralph Stanley?

Like earlier industry controversies regarding digital recording and even synthesizers, Karp predicts this one will fade in time.

"Anytime you have something new like that there's a tendency to overuse it," he says. "Maybe when it becomes just another plug-in on your system, it'll turn up a little less frequently."

How Pro Tools works

So how does studio software such as Pro Tools work? Not much differently from most word-processing programs. To create the perfect vocal track, for example, a producer will digitally record several takes of the singer. The producer then can look at each of those takes on a computer screen, and use a mouse and a keyboard to cut and paste together the best parts of each take. When an experienced engineer or producer is doing the cutting and pasting, the edits are impossible to hear.

Once the best vocal take has been assembled, the producer can run the entire take through a program that automatically tunes every note; the software does this by guiding bum notes toward the note that should have been sung. Another, more time-consuming method involves using software to tune individual notes, words or fractions of words. For those who want to be extra-safe, there are also devices on the market that plug into a studio's mixing board and correct a singer's vocal before it's even recorded.

-- Maureen Ryan

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