



At Home At Circle Studios: Home recording with Neumann Mics

April 2000 by Mike Dayton - Song writer, recording artist, editor

A revolution is shaking the foundations of the music business. I'm proud to say I'm part of it. I represent what is probably the biggest trend in the recording industry today: the dedicated amateur musician with a few enthusiastic friends and a respectable home studio.

By day, I'm the editor of a weekly newspaper. In my spare time, however, I write songs and record them with friends. I've been doing that for five years. I see songwriting as a way to capture the emotional twists and turns of living. My background is in writing, and I usually approach each song as a short story, with lyrics that build upon one or two central images. Sometimes my music matches the words, sometimes it heads off in an entirely different direction.

When I speak of a revolution, I'm talking about the ability of amateur musicians like myself to produce a CD. Among my four regular bandmates, we have three CDs of original compositions.

Home recording is nothing new. What has changed is the availability of affordable recording equipment. The market is awash with a dizzying array of high quality compressors, CD burners, digital processors and recorders, equalizers--and yes, microphones. Manufacturers that once catered solely to the professional engineers have begun to target the high-end consumer market. Neumann is no exception. They now make several microphones within the reach and budget of the serious home engineer.

The net result, in my opinion, has been a blurring of the line between the professionals and the project studios. Can I get as good a recording as the professionals? No. But I can get very close, and I can burn a CD, or import it into my computer and stream it across the Internet. My guess is that there are thousands of project studio engineers out there just like me. We all face the same struggle: how to get the best sound possible on a limited budget.

It took me a year or two of fumbling around to figure out what folks in the recording industry have known for ages: the most important component in the recording food chain is the microphone. Everything on down the signal path lives and dies by the initial source. Once that light bulb went on, it didn't take me long to find Neumann mics. I now have three--a 184, a 103, and a tube 147.

I don't mean to sound like a commercial for Neumann. It's just that my results improved tenfold after I started using their mics.

Recording at my home--named CircleStudios, after my street--gives me the luxury of time. I regularly tinker with mic placements and combinations. Often the results are horrible. Occasionally, they're perfect. In one experiment, I boosted the levels on a micpre and moved a 103 in extremely close. I was after an intimate sound for an original song, Horizon. Written in memory of a close friend, the results I got in a three-hour session expressed exactly what I wanted to say in a reflective, quiet voice. To this day, it's one of my favorite and most effective songs.

I've learned through trial and error how to capture an acoustic guitar, although it seems like I struggle anew with each song and setting. My friend Jim writes and plays traditional blues-based slide guitar. Lately, we've been using the 184 two-to-three feet from his guitar, aimed at the 14 fret. We got excellent results on several recent recordings. On my own songs, I prefer the 103 particularly when recording a D-28. I find it easier to get a fuller sound with more midrange. For vocals, I invariably turn to the 147. You always read about the warmth of a tube sound. But what impresses me is the 147's smooth transition between notes and its deft handling of sibilance. For a good example of that, check "Crabshack," my personal ode to the complications of competing love interests, at www.circlestudio.com I recorded the main vocal using the 147. The backing track I used a 103.

I used all three Neumann mics when my buddy Brian laid down drum tracks on Crabshack--the 103 on the snare and toms, the 184 as an overhead, and the 147 on the kick drum. In my humble opinion, the 147 makes a great kick drum mic -- the sound I got was perfect -- a really tight punch, and clean enough so that you could occasionally hear the creak of his pedal. By the way, on the very next song, I replaced the 103, which was poised between the high hat and the snare. I was afraid Brian was going to clobber it with a drumstick.

I've heard people say the type of microphone you use is not that important when recording electric guitar. Don't believe 'em. I got the best electric guitar sound I've ever recorded using a 103. It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon--a perfect day to crank up the electric guitar. I was tuned to open G and was playing through a vintage Gibson tube amp and an old distortion box. At the time, I'd had the 103 about a month. I decided to try it out on that set-up. I set the microphone about six inches away, just off-center of the speaker cone. I slightly compressed the signal, then recorded a couple variations of a simple 1-4-5 pattern. The guitar sound I got had all that low-end growl from the distortion box, but it also had a great treble sheen that I hadn't gotten in other recording sessions. Before the day was done, I added a throwaway vocal -- some gibberish about coffee -- and named the song "Coffee Break."

Long live the revolution!



