

Song Arrangement Tips • Key Ingredients to a Great Song

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Arrangement, Melody, and Tone in the Studio

Some of the biggest concerns when it comes to achieving a successful recording are the arrangement, melody, and tones of the song. You've probably hammered out most of these elements in song writing or rehearsal sessions. What may surprise you is that, for whatever reason, sometimes the first time you record a song it becomes clear that some aspect of the whole thing isn't really working.

The process of recording and playing back the track can expose problems – out of tune melodies, off-key notes, and poor timing, not to mention bad tone choices and wonky gear. Although song creation relies heavily on music theory (a deep subject in its own right, for sure), for the purposes of our next discussion, we're going to focus on the elements that can specifically improve a recording session.

Let's take a look at the most important song arrangement tips, melodic, and tonal concerns when recording.

Let it Breathe

One of the biggest mistakes musicians make, especially when playing in a group, is to fill up every measure of the song with notes. Guitarists tend to cram leads, break-neck riffs, and heaps of effects into everything they play. A drummer will often put in more fills and ruffs than the song really calls for. The first rule of thumb when recording is: less is more.

Song Arrangement Tips Part 1

Check out classic players like Chet Atkins and Eric Clapton, both great lead guitarists, but each put tons of rests in between licks. Lead lines and melodies should let the underlying chord structure of the song breathe. Additionally, the more melodic notes overlaying the chord progression the more "crowded out" the vocals will become. Putting rests in melodic lines to allow the song to breathe lets the lead vocal shine on top of the song, where it belongs.

Keep it Familiar

Unless you're going for something overtly experimental, you should keep the arrangement of your songs firmly planted in familiar territory. The formats below are pattern examples:

- Intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus-outro
- Intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-solo-verse-chorus-outro
- Intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-outro

Of course, variations are possible and widely accepted. For example, it's common to "tease" the chorus with pre-chorus sections in order to build anticipation within the song. The number of verses can go up, and the chorus can be repeated multiple times. Extra solos and bridges are relatively common. But the underpinning verse-chorus-verse structure is the basis of all types of pop music, and it should generally be your starting point for country, pop, rock, and contemporary Christian music.

The Sonic Palate

One of the more common mistakes that can happen in recording is trying to apply the palate of sounds used in a live setting to the recording. Sometimes, this doesn't work as well as other options.

One example would be using guitar amplifier stacks in the studio. While plenty of bands do use 4x12" cabs in-studio, using a smaller amp can yield lower noise and better sound. Since there is no need to "project" over a loud den of sound in the studio, as is the case in a live setting, a smaller amp is frequently more practical. Brian May of the 70s rock band, Queen, famously used a very small combo amp with high-quality circuitry in the studio.

Another tip for guitarists: use the neck and middle pickups in your guitar to create subtle, intriguing tones in the studio. Live, many guitarists rely on their bridge pickup to "cut through the mix." The other pickup positions can introduce cool sonic textures that will sound nice in recording.

Similar tips can benefit other instrumentalists, too. Vocalists can take the most liberty in the studio. In a live environment, singers are tasked with projecting over the band, but in the studio they can take advantage of the quiet background to introduce subtlety and dynamic. Done tastefully, lines can be sung at a whisper, for example, with great effect.

Final Thoughts

As you can tell, arrangement, melody, and tone are key ingredients to a great recording. Sometimes, problems in these areas become apparent only in a studio setting. Resolving issues like overbearing leads and excessive notes, as well as arrangement and tonal problems, can really take a song to a whole new level.

Don't be surprised if you become painfully aware of problems such as these when you first start recording, because it happens to everyone. With a little trial and error – and the advice of a competent engineer – you'll be up and running making great recordings sooner than you think.

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Tags: arranging songs, music arrangement, song arrangement tips, song writing tips

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