

Who are you?

or

How to disappear completely, while trying to get noticed.

True story.

I watched a music video yesterday. The video had a couple of good ideas and looked pretty good for an unsigned artist. The artist was female, kind of young and kind of good looking – I guess.

I am not being difficult. I really don't know. After watching her video, I am not sure of her age – not even ballpark. Okay, she's likely older than 13 and younger than 40. I am not of her ethnicity and I have no idea what she stands for or who she is as an artist or a person. The video tried very hard to follow an idea of what video "should be", so did she, and so did the music.

Speaking about the music, I have no idea what kind of voice she has, or if she can sing or write songs. Her vocals were heavily processed, a lot of the music was either loops or sounds like loops, and everything was very compressed. I don't think there were any real instruments or any custom writing in the arrangement.

If I spent four minutes watching a video and listening to a song and I have no lasting impression, then there is something very wrong.

Isn't the idea of a video to showcase the artist? Or at least the song?

There are several tools that artists use to tune their vocals. All of them change your voice. Autotune and its clones not only tune, but also mask the true sound of your voice. Add heavy compression and a filter or two and the character and nuance of a voice are eliminated.

While she might be a good singer, a beautiful woman and an interesting person, this artist has no chance of showing it. With heavy filters on the music and visuals, she has become "any/every female singer between 14 – 39".

She went to great lengths to hide... to be discovered.

Being interchangeable and not leaving a lasting impression is the opposite of what an artist should want. What to do?

Give your voice a chance.

Choose the microphone that works for your voice, not the microphone that happens to be in your friend's vocal booth. Make sure that you do not eliminate the character of your voice in mixing.

Sometimes a heavy vocal effect can be a storytelling tool or there is a good reason for it. Not being able to hit the notes should not be the reason you use effects.

Artist or DJ?

Loops are great tools, but loops do not contain your "heartbeat" or character. Loops do not respond to your vocal line. Loops do not use an inversion when you need a new color the second time around. Loops are other people's music that you are playing, just like a DJ.

Whatever your style and background, your music should be custom-made. The fewer pre-made elements the better. The more you shape your material to be unique the more you are an artist. Please check out my other text about music writing for a fuller exploration of this topic.

Ok, everybody in the first row!

High frequencies make a sound appear closer. Combine high frequencies and a lot of compression and it is "in your face". If everything has a lot of high frequency and is heavily compressed, everything is in your face. This is another good way to lose nuance and character.

Your voice might sound dull after everything else has been treated with an extra layer of high frequency and heavy compression. This usually means it is time to heavily treat the vocals as well.

While this might not be good advice for 2014, this is good music advice:

Keep everybody's high frequencies under control, so there is a room in front of the "band" for the vocals. The end result is that the vocals will not need to be treated in order to cut through the noise.

What is hip now is not hip when you hit the market place

Having idols and learning what works is great. You might be happier and more successful aiming for something that is more "you".

Real life and pen and paper solutions:

Write about your topics, write songs that have your heartbeat, your sensibility and that support your stories. Stay away from producers / songwriters that would make you sound the same as their last ten productions. No sound is more unique than your voice, and you should protect it. Find a way to turn who you are and what interests you into the core of your artist persona.

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