



## Discover The Recording Artist in YOU!

In 2000 I set out to record my first solo piano album. I had written a dozen songs and the great bulk of my playing time to that point was on a digital piano. Living in Seattle, I found the studio that David Lanz, Michael Gettel, and a number of other Narada recording artists had used. I booked an 8 hour session on their famous piano. I showed up early and they kindly allowed me to warm up for a while... that was a nice touch! A lot of studios start the clock the minute you sit down at the piano. I struggled fiercely that day. The piano was so much “more” than I was used to. The overall volume, the harmonics, the overtones.... I became gun-shy and was playing as softly as I could. The engineer noticed this and put me under headphones with the volume down. This helped a bit, but I was already morally beaten as my music was sounding nothing like how I dreamed it would, no fault of the studio... I managed to get through each song, took my reference CD home, listened to about 20 minutes of it, shut it off, and completely fell apart. What a draining experience, that I was obviously *totally* unprepared for.

The next day I went down to the local piano store and rented a nice 48” acoustic upright. It was all uphill from there! After 6 months of meticulous practicing and “scratch” recording to my analog reel to reel, I found a grand that inspired me. I rented it for two weeks, crammed it into my basement and recorded the album myself. While I still sometimes cringe today when I hear these recordings, it was light years better than what I had accomplished at the big time studio simply because I had refined my touch and was able to play with some emotion, not fear and despair.

Here are some very important factors to consider when deciding if you are really ready to record your solo piano album. It’s a lot of info, compiled from my experience recording 14 of my own albums and nearly 400 new age/contemporary solo piano albums for other artists at my Piano Haven Recording Studio. Take some time to absorb and re-read this a few times. Start with one aspect, get a firm grip on it, then move on to another. It would be quite overwhelming to attempt to master all of these aspects at the same time. If you think you can, by all means... go for it! Remember, recording your music is an art-form in itself, hence the term “recording artist”. There are so many unique factors to be aware of while recording that you may not be aware. So, lets begin....

**From digital to acoustic** – this is a tough transition for anyone. I am not knocking digital pianos in any way, they are wonderful tools, I have three of them in my home! I hope you are at least playing an 88 key weighted keyboard with graded action (heavier keys to bass, lighter keys to the treble). You can pick up a very nice one for well under a grand these days. Digitals are perfect for late night playing under the headphones, perfect for dragging to a gig, perfect for sitting down at when you hear a melody in your head, perfect for throwing in the back of the car and taking with you on vacation. However, it's NOT perfect for spending all of your playing time at when you plan to

record on an acoustic. In comparison, digitals are sterile and seriously lack the dynamics of any acoustic. They are typically played at a much lower volume than an acoustic would be heard at. You have to really lay into a digital to get a “full” sounding tone. In my experience, almost every digital player sits at the Shigeru Kawai grand in my studio the first time and either plays it as softly as possible or lays into it so heavy that their music sounds harsh and brittle. It is very difficult for these folks to find and settle into the sweet spot on the piano, and play with smooth dynamics. For artists that are overwhelmed by the power and volume of the grand, I often put them under a pair of high end noise-cancelling headphones. They block out the room sound and I set the piano volume pretty low so that they don’t hold back. This can be VERY effective! The pedal is another big issue. On a digital you can stomp on it and never hear it. Try that on an acoustic in the studio and it all gets recorded. There’s no hiding it. Even when you let off the pedal, there’s an audible “thump” as the pedal hits the top of the assembly resonating all the way through the soundboard. The pedal on an acoustic needs to be ridden gently with consistent pressure from your foot, never stomping down, and never letting all the way up. This requires practice, you don’t want to have to be thinking of this as you are recording. If you don’t have an acoustic and it simply is not an option, find one you can play on. Most churches have grands, piano stores my rent you time at a grand for very cheap.... schools, auditoriums, performing arts centers have grands too. Put a big effort into getting *alot* of time on an acoustic.

**Left hand / right hand balance** you know your melody... you sing it along in your head as you play, and as you listen to your song recording. Your listener does not know your melody upon first listen. You have to translate this in such a fashion that it is incredibly clear to the listener. I was fortunate enough to have a sit-down session with renowned composer Kevin Kern in 2012. He sat with me at my piano for several hours listening to my music and helping me make the music translate better to the listener. Kevin is the master of melody, and his melodies sing way above the left hand accompaniment. He literally beat this into my brain and it was the single greatest lesson I learned about being a recording artist. He stood over me as I played and relentlessly kept telling me to quiet my left and and bring out my right hand melodies. Frustrating at first, I started dialing it in and after a while I started to hear and feel the difference. It took a lot of practice to get to the place I wanted to be at, and I still catch myself being “left hand heavy” at times, but I am all over it! Pay closest attention the left hand pinky which often hits the downbeat much harder than necessary ringing thru the whole phrase masking your beautiful melody.

**Emotion and dynamics** – many first time artists come into the studio simply hoping to play their song without making a mistake. I know that was my mindset when I recorded my first album. This can result in a sterile performance, lacking emotion, space and dynamics. Go to the place in your head that inspired the song you are about to play. I mean, REALLY GO THERE! Take 20-30 seconds of quiet, or however long it takes, to get there before hitting the first note. Allow the music to expressively build in sections, like riding long, slow (or fast) big waves. These expressive dynamic changes really rope the listener in. My good friend and fellow solo piano artist Doug Hammer taught me about *tension and resolve*. Hanging on the end of a phrase with a chord that feels unresolved, then leaving some space (air), and then resolving it. Leave the listener hanging, then pick them up. Take a moment to check out Doug’s song “Travels”. Do what you can to keep your mind focused on the inspiration all the while. You can practice this all at home!

**Breathing** – make sure you take continuous long/deep breaths while playing. Years ago, I realized I was pretty much holding my breath as long as I could to get thru a section (awful habit), then taking a loud gasp between phrases. Not only were these gasps audible in the recording, it was a terrible way to play. You need oxygen to peak perform. All of your muscles tighten when you hold your breath. This affects your touch and control on the piano in a profoundly negative way. Take an objective look at your breathing when you play. My good friend and fellow composer Chad Lawson taught me how he plays so controlled with such a remarkably soft touch. He relaxes every muscle in his arms and hands as he plays. I made a conscious effort to try this and immediately felt as though I had better control of my touch. Try it, it might blow you away!

**Extraneous noises** – let’s talk about “hammer drops”. You probably don’t notice them, especially if you play a digital, but on an acoustic piano, after you depress the key, you let go. The hammer falls back into a resting

position, making a (hopefully) very subtle “thunk” sound. This sound gets recorded. Now some of this sound is unavoidable, but just slightly riding the key back up with your fingers can alleviate most of this noise. It is especially evident if you are playing very softly, or with both hands in the upper registers. The falling/landing noise is low frequency and can really impact the recording. I have learned to tame these drops, and a handful of players I know have mastered this to perfection. If you were classically trained, you may very well have what I call “*dancie hands*”, the hands flying gracefully upwards after releasing the keys. It makes for added beauty when performing, and helps an artist express emotion. But those hammers fall loudly back into place. You won't likely notice the hammer drops when watching a performance as the sound of the piano drowns them out as it travels across a room, but with a close mic'd piano in a quiet environment, they are there. Now in the studio, I can remove about 95% of these noises without affecting the piano sound at all. The problem is, it takes time. Each one has to be removed one at a time. I recently mastered an album that had upwards of 100 very audible hammer drops in EACH SONG! Nine hours of work later, they were erased. An artist that has this pretty well under control can still expect about 1-2 hours of this work in mastering. Back to the sustain pedal briefly, it's the same concept. We can remove pedal thumps without affecting the piano sound, it is just time consuming and can raise your mastering costs significantly.

**Editing** – it's not voodoo, everyone does it, and don't buy into the myth that you should come into the studio and nail all of your songs perfectly in one take. It's NOT going to happen that way and it's quite OK. You can play your song, fix your mistakes as you go having your engineer edit out the “oopsies” after you make it to the end. You can also record your song all the way through, then go back and “punch in”, fixing sections with mistakes after the matter. Another option is to record a number of full takes of each song, pick the best one of those takes to use as the “working” track, and pull sections from other takes to fill in the weak areas of “working” take. Ideally, your tempo and touch will be consistent and match from take to take to make this approach work. So, you have several different approaches you can take to getting the best of your best. Some studios will not do editing during your recording session. They will make you book a separate editing session often weeks after. You may not find out until after the editing session that an edit or two won't work for some reason, and you then have to book another recording session. A waste of time and money.... Don't go to these studios.

**Budgeting** – I get asked all the time... how much will it cost to record my album? There isn't one answer to that question. Each artist requires vastly different amounts of time. I've seen artists knock out a whole album as quick as 4 hours. Some take 30+. It depends on how prepared you are and how well you do “under pressure”. The pressure of recording can get to some. They start playing “not to make a mistake” and the music sounds stiff and sterile. They get nervous and lose their flow, making many mistakes, then getting frustrated and all goes downhill. The average time it takes is about an hour per song, and that's for a well prepared artist. That's time for a few takes, some listening back (don't skip this step), some editing and/or punching in, and perhaps revisiting the song the next day for another take, or two. I do not book sessions longer than 5 hours in a day. It's quite rare that any artist (and any engineer) can keep their best game flowing that long. Recording is draining, both physically and emotionally. Ear fatigue can set in and judgement becomes impaired. Ideally, we like to see the artist walk away with two VERY solid takes of each track, allowing them to pick the one they like best. Then comes **mastering**, which is the job of putting the finishing “polish” on the recording and making it “airplay ready”. There are many steps to mastering. The average mastering at Piano Haven in 6-7 hours for a full album of 55 minutes. This can vary though, largely depending on how many “hammer drops” or pedal noises need to be removed, as well as track count and total album time.

**Left Brain vs Right Brain** – the artist in you needs to pay homage and respect to the business of music. There are certain things from a biz standpoint that you MUST consider, even though they may very well yank hard against what the artist in you wants. This is one item of balance you absolutely must have in order to succeed in the music business. ALL the most successful artists I know have developed this balance:

1 – *study your genre*... listen to the artists' music who are successful. Ask yourself “why?”. Their music may not

appeal to you personally, but there's a reason they have many of thousands of fans on streaming platforms. Chances are, there two common denominators. *Melody & Emotion*. Melody that returns at least 5 or 6 times in the track. It can vary, but the base melody is there. I've heard it referred to as an "ear worm", a melody that gets pounded into your head and you can't get rid of it. Emotion is raw and intangible, but I can tell when an artist is emotionally present when listening to their music. I can tell when they are not, as well. The dynamics are key here, from a gentle touch, smooth crescendos to powerful sections, and back. Use of space and air, rubato, tension & resolve.

2 – *song length*... Today's streaming platforms favor shorter songs, in the 2:30 – 4:30 range. Anything over 5 minutes and they pay a larger royalty per spin. As a new artist, you need to give yourself the best shot at being discovered and liked by curators. They are quite unlikely to place your 6 minute song on a songlist or in a premo position for plays. They don't want to lose their listener to another station/format which is very likely to happen around that 5 minute range. Whisperings Solo Piano Radio tracks when listeners click off their broadcast and they told me it's almost always on songs 5 minutes + , so play the game & keep it concise.

3 – *song order*.... regarding your digital distribution to streaming platforms, front load the songs. All your best ones up front. You are trying to get discovered and listeners/curators who stumble across your music are likely to give you 30 seconds to catch their interest, then they move on. Avoid LONG intros to your song, you lose listeners there. Get to the meat of track quickly. If you are planning CD manufacturing (many artists are now skipping this all together) you can express yourself as you wish with a different song order.

4 – *artist name & track/album name*.... be creative here and do your homework. Make sure you & your song can be found on streaming sites. If your name is Mike Johnson, try a search at a streaming site for that name... you will see hundreds of artists with that name. How will they find you? They likely won't bother searching. Play with your name. I had an artist with a long and unattractive last name. I talked her into using her middle name as a last name. She was very appreciative of this advice (her family was not). Same with song titles. "Sunny day" is great, but there are hundreds of songs by that title. I like titles that are "less descriptive and unique". Every time I name a song I search a major streaming site to see how many songs by that title show up.

5– *track/album art*.... invest in this, the right image really helps sell the song especially for the unknown artist. A picture of you at the piano in your living room might be inexpensive and easy to do but it is not a draw to a listener. Be artistic and creative, be colorful, capture and compliment the mood of the music. Hire a graphic designer. Don't cut corners here (or anywhere)!

6 – *orchestration*.... and by this I mean adding ANY instrumentation. So many artists come to me after their first album saying "this time I want to add orchestration, nobody is picking up my first album (solo piano) so I think this is the ticket". It's not, pure and simple. My point is, *don't change your plan or your music as a reaction to initial results*. It takes time for music to get traction. You are spinning a web, it's a slow and arduous process. There are no overnight solo piano stars, none! You must be patient and stick to what you are doing. It took me 'til after my 3<sup>rd</sup> album was released to be able to pay ONE monthly bill with my music income. But I was spinning my web, and it was working, and it grows exponentially. Today, my first album from 2001 makes me about \$30k per year! Solo Piano fans know what they want, it's solo piano. It's a significantly larger genre than "Piano with Ensemble". It's a whole different genre with less crossover between fans than you might think. I am proof of this. I released my 8<sup>th</sup> album "Synfonia" which was fully orchestrated, after 7 solo piano albums. The predominant response from my fans was "why did you do that? please go back to your solo piano music". And, the proof is in the numbers. My solo piano albums are all 77% - 92% "thumbs up" at Pandora. Synfonia has never tipped 50%. Also, the album was extremely expensive to produce. I personally love the album, as it was gift to my father, who loves the symphony. Keep it simple, keep it solo! Solo piano music far and away the #1 sub-genre for New Age Music on major streaming platforms

In conclusion, be as prepared as you can.... Do factor all of the above, make it your path. Go into the studio with a positive attitude and let that vibe shine through in your music. You will continue to improve from album to album. Love, appreciate and respect "where you are at" at each phase of your development. Don't compare yourself to other artists. Develop your own special sound and compose/record your music for one reason, because you love to! Whether you record at Piano Haven or any other studio out there, take these tips to heart and give yourself a chance to have great sessions, great memories and take a big step toward a rewarding carrer!

