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Paul Manousos Reveals his Vocal Approach for 'Common Thread'

By [Greg Reynolds](#) | May, 2008

There is no question that Paul Manousos can sing, but all of that talent would be for nothing if not for producer Steve Fisk (Pell Mell, Nirvana, Soundgarden, Screaming Trees) and engineer Ian Pellicci's work in capturing Manousos' performance on his newly released album, *Common Thread* [Shock and Fall]. Together with Manousos' backing band, The East Bay Wrecking Crew, the production duo commandeered San Francisco's Tiny Telephone Studios, and banged out one helluva folk-infused, alt-rock album in just three days. Here is how Fisk and Pellicci crafted the vocal sounds for *Common Thread*.

Stand Up

Proper posture is very important, so stand up tall. Manousos says he places the mic "a little higher than my mouth so I have to step up to it. The capsule is just about at the top of my upper lip, so I definitely need to lift up my heels to get right up on the microphone." Why? Because positioning your diaphragm correctly not only allows you to breathe easier, but it also extends your maximum lung capacity, resulting in better and stronger notes.

Move

If you like to move around a bit when you perform, pick a mic that can accommodate you—such as a stereo mic. Manousos hates having to stand still while delivering an impassioned performance, so he prefers to use a Neumann SM69, which has two capsules mounted in a coincident position that can be rotated 270 degrees.

"The SM69 can handle a lot of volume, and it gives me the leeway to move side-to-side, and back off the mic when I feel I have to,"

explains Manousos. “The two capsules provide a lot more coverage, and less off-axis response, so your vocals should retain a uniform sound—even at a variety of angles. On average, I was probably three to four inches from the microphone. But when I got really loud, I’d pull back as much as ten inches. The SM69 allowed me to perform as I like to perform, and its stereo image added a sense of depth and fullness, so I didn’t need to double everything.”

For backup vocals, Manousos said the team employed a similar stereo approach that Fisk recalled as a trick Stevie Wonder used on older recordings.

“Stevie would use a matched pair of mics to get a stereo effect, so we tried the same thing,” says Manousos. “We placed two identical mics approximately eight inches apart from one another, and then I stood in the center and did my backing vocals. We hard-panned each mic left and right, leaving the lead vocal in the middle. It sounded huge.”

Start Tough

Although you should warm up your voice before singing, that doesn’t mean you should always ease your way through the tracking process. Although it may seem counterintuitive, Manousos believes in *starting* with songs that are more difficult to pull off.

“I don’t want to have to deal with thinking about the technical aspects of singing,” he says, “so going through the more challenging pieces first gives me the opportunity to get my vocal strength up, and develop an understanding of how I need to shift my approach for the other tracks. Once I know where I’m at, I can focus on being emotive, concentrate on the dynamics, and make sure that the song is affecting me like I want it to affect other people.”

Capture the Right Vibe

“We wanted to get a live feel on this album, so the guys surrounded me with three gobos in the tracking room, and just let me sing with the band,” says Manousos. “I was amazed by how well the tracks were separated when we soloed the vocals. If you turn your amps away from your drums, and isolate your singer, you can track the whole band live without getting tons of signal bleed. Sure, you’ll have a little bit of spillover, but that ambience can help make your recording sound thick and energetic.”

www.paulmanousos.com