Yes, You Too Can Produce a Compilation CD ~ Swinging on the Gate

by Rebecca King

"I had one moment of true glamour. On the evening of the first Swinging on the Gate recording session, I drove towards the sunset with my shades on, relishing my new role as a record producer. I learned to savor that experience, because the rest of the time was much like sitting in a small padded room with people who didn't always share my opinion."

~ R. K.

The Project

In the fall of 1999, I played at a Bay Area Country Dance Society (BACDS) contra dance in Palo Alto, California. The dance is a long drive from my home in Napa, so I spent the night at the home of Daniel Steinberg (Hillbillies from Mars) and Tee McDonald. Mary Lea was also staying there, and we talked about her recording project with Bare Necessities and the CDS Boston English Dance Collection.

The next morning, Tee commented that our own society could put out a CD. It would be a great way to showcase our excellent musicians and promote our contra dances and camps in BACDS. All it needed was someone to write a proposal and oversee the project. Daniel had given the idea some thought, but didn't want to take on all that work alone. I had written grants before, but I wondered if I could work with Daniel whose personality "shines brighter" than my own.

Co-Producers

If you're thinking about making a CD, choose your producer wisely. Deciding to work with Daniel Steinberg turned out to be one of my best decisions. He was everything a co-producer needs to be: organized, communicative, experienced, even-tempered, musical, opinionated and open-minded. We were usually able to discuss our differences of opinion in a fair way. Occasionally we both had to let go and accept a compromise position.

The Proposal

I had recently heard about a local group that had produced a compilation CD. That group sold out their first run of CDs, but couldn't reorder because of threatened legal action by an unhappy participant. That experience scared me into making sure that our proposal was carefully planned, documented and backed by legal contracts.

Our proposal to BACDS outlined and estimated costs for band application, selection, recording studio time and engineer, mixing and mastering, graphic art and layout, accounting, duplication, ownership and distribution. It also stated which tasks Daniel was responsible for and which were mine. BACDS agreed to front the cost of the project, and would be paid back through CD sales. More funding was provided through a May Gadd/Phil Merrill Endowment Fund loan from CDSS. The BACDS board requested that a couple selections of English country dance music be included on the CD, and that the BACDS logo be used in the artwork.

This all sounds pretty straight-forward, but there was a lot of discussion back and forth. I've learned that there is never a shortage of opinions.

Band Application

When the project was approved we sent out announcements to all the musicians we could think of. To apply, each band submitted a tape of the song they wanted to play on the CD. All selections on a CD are called songs, whether or not there is any singing. Each song was to be three to four minutes long. To include as many musicians as possible, we set a two song limit for every musician. They were welcome to send in multiple application tapes, but each musician would be chosen a maximum of two times. Bands were responsible for getting written permission from the composer for all tunes, unless it was considered traditional.

Along with the tape, the bands turned in an application form with the names of people in the band, tune names and the contact person for the band. The bands had two and a half months to apply.

Band Selection

Realizing that choosing the bands for Swinging On the Gate could create hard feelings, Daniel and I created a selection committee of three musicians: myself, Craig Johnson (The Guppies) and Charlie Hancock (Contrabandits). We had all submitted band applications, but agreed to not vote on our own selections.

Daniel and I had already written the selection criteria, which included how often the group played for BACDS and the quality of the group. I provided score sheets, but mostly we just listened to all the tapes, talked about them and voted. Some bands put more than one song on their tape, which gave the selection committee more room to balance the CD between reels, jigs, and waltzes. Next time I'll ask for that to start with.

Album Continuity

We knew that we were going to wind up with a hodgepodge unless we took steps to unify the overall sound of the album. To do this, all the bands recorded new material from one studio, using one engineer. We used similar mics and placement for each group, and recorded all the instruments in stereo. During mixing and mastering we tried to take a consistent approach to effects and instrument levels.

Using Daniel as the session producer also kept the sound consistent (although I helped with some of the sessions, especially if he was performing). His job was to listen critically to instrument sounds and help with mic placement, watch out for instrument intonation problems and help with decisions about instrument isolation and overdubbing. He directed the flow of each recording session by deciding when to try for another take, when to listen to what they had and when to piece together parts of several takes. He took copious notes to help sort out the takes and tracks when it came time to mix. He also made the coffee.

Recording

Several months earlier I had researched studios in a central location. Because of his experience with acoustic folk music, Derek Bianchi with Muscle Tone Studios in Berkeley was an excellent choice. It is a small all-digital studio, using computer-based editing and a Yamaha O2R digital mixing board with automation. Though some traditional musicians prefer the warmth of analog tape for recording, we found the overdubbing and mixing process to be greatly improved using computer-based tools (and an engineer who knew how to use them well). The number of musicians involved made recording session scheduling difficult at this busy studio.

Compilation CDs take more recording time than projects by one band because the set-up and

mic placement is different for each band, even if they play similar instruments. We allowed four hours for each song, with the understanding that bands could use more studio time if they needed it, provided that they pay for it themselves. At the beginning of each session, the members of the band signed recording contracts, and a band photo was taken for the liner notes.

Roughly half of the groups kept to the four hours limit for the recording studio. Larger groups took more time, as did groups that overdubbed to allow a player to play more than one instrument. Most of the sessions went smoothly, but many bogged down with some sort of problem, whether it was technique, tone, confidence or inner fears. The tracks are rarely as good as you'd like them to be, but as our engineer said, "You learn to love your foibles."

Mixing and Mastering

The process of finding a good honest sound for each instrument, editing and assembling the instrument tracks, and setting the many recording levels also took more time than we anticipated because we had to start from scratch with each band. We budgeted two hours per song, but in the end, we often needed closer to four hours per song for mixing and mastering.

My advice is to listen to acoustic recordings and compare the sound of the instruments. Which tone is your favorite? How much bass and treble do you like? The possibilities are endless and certainly worth a good fight or two.

Album Order

With all the different styles of music involved, it was difficult to pick an album order. We made a chart listing the key, genre, energy level and instrumentation of all the songs. We then assembled tapes in possible combinations, discussed them calmly, reached for each other's throats and finally compromised.

Art Work

The art design and layout turned out to be a bigger job than we'd bargained (or budgeted) for. In addition to the cover art, the insert has photos, tune and personnel descriptions for each of the sixteen bands. Duplication companies have templates to download and computer programs that they accept. We switched duplication companies mid-stream, which saved us money and gave us a better quality product but added work.

I collected liner note information from all the bands, and sent the information back out to the bands for proofreading. However, over the months of the project many changes were made and some of the information was retyped. I must have proofread the pages a thousand times, but didn't notice that Erik Hoffman's name was spelled "Eric" on one of the pages. I caught the mistake just before the CDs were sent for printing, but the duplication company had to make new color proofs for us to sign. I paid for this myself, but it would have been cheaper for me to file a name change for him with Alameda County.

Distribution

We are in the middle of distributing the CD ourselves, so it's too soon to tell what works best. The participating musicians and local callers have the opportunity to buy CDs at a wholesale rate, and sell them at a retail rate, keeping the profit. CDs are also sold at BACDS dances and camps, and through the CDSS store.

The total cost of the project came to \$21,475.00. The response has been great, and we have

recovered about a third of the project expenses in the first nine months.

We're getting a lot of positive feedback about the CD and feel very proud of the great playing and creativity that all the musicians brought to the project. We not only met our goals of recording a snapshot of the San Francisco Bay Area country dance music scene, but wound up with an album that is listenable and fun.

To order the CD "Swinging on the Gate" from the CDSS Store, visit our website at www.cdss.org/sales.

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"Yes, You Too Can Produce a Compilation CD" was published in the CDSS News, issue #165, March/April 2002.