


# RECORDING

*School* »



## PRODUCTION **VALUES**

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Contemporary Large Ensembles

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Gordon Goodwin (Photo by Rex Bullington)

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*Recording School*

# BIG PHAT

PRODUCTION

VALUES

## *The Art of Recording Contemporary*

*Large Ensembles — By Gordon Goodwin*

**T**he art of recording large ensemble music has evolved over the years, along with the technology available to do it. The essential big band instrumentation has been fairly well established for 75 years, but the actual sound of a modern big band differs in many ways from its early ancestors.

Defining your own point of view about how you want your band to sound is your first task when organizing a recording session. The decision I made back in 1999 when we were putting together the first Big Phat Band session was that I wanted our album to combine the best qualities of a jazz record and a pop record. I used the records of Quincy Jones as a model, because he always seemed to have his feet planted securely in both worlds, combining the spontaneity of jazz with the attention to detail you see in the best pop music, especially in regard to production issues.

The legendary horn arranger and trumpeter Jerry Hey provided the best piece of advice to me when he recommended I ask Tommy Vicari to engineer the session. Vicari was Quincy's engineer, so there was some serendipity working there, I thought. And Vicari quickly became an important partner in defining what the Big Phat Band was going to sound like. Vicari's recordings have a remarkable clarity to them. When you listen to his mixes, you can hear everything. Want to dig out the second trumpet part? It's in there. The clarity and transparency he brings to a recording allowed my charts to really sparkle.









Goodwin (left) in the control room at Capitol Studios during a January 2015 recording session with the Big Phat Band. Behind him are drummer Bernie Dresel, video editor Jayson Rahmlow and recording engineer Tommy Vicari.

If there was a saxophone countermelody playing against a thick brass texture, you could still hear both of those easily. Vicari knew how to place the guitar and piano parts in the mix so that they co-existed and complemented each other, even when they were playing in the same register. However, we found that there was a price to be paid for this clarity because when a note was even slightly out of tune, you can hear it. If a rhythm was slightly less than tight, you could hear that, too. The transparency in Vicari's mixes actually made us better musicians because we knew we couldn't hide inaccuracies in the way you can in a more ambient mix.

The Phat Band has always recorded to Pro Tools. We have recorded in a number of studios in Los Angeles, but most often we record at Capitol Records in Hollywood. It's nice to know we are working in a room where all the gear is in good shape and is well maintained, where they have a good piano, and where the horn players feel comfortable. If a room is too dry, it can be difficult for the horns to hear each other and blend and play in tune. We typically set up a mic for each guy, along with another pair of mics to capture the sound of the room. Then it's a matter of taste as to how much of the room mics we use when we mix. Using a touch of the room mics in the mix helps round out the sound of the ensemble. This decision is often dependent on the style of the music. If we are recording a Count Basie-style chart, we may choose to use more room-mic sound, but a more contemporary sounding track may benefit from a tighter, dryer ensemble sound.

We always prefer to record the whole band at the same time, although with more contemporary grooves we may do a rhythm session first and overdub the horns later. This can also be a function of schedule and budget. If the horns

have a particularly challenging chart, you don't want to burn the rhythm section out by having to play the chart again and again until the horns get a good take.

Which leads to another topic: mistakes. Mistakes are a part of being human, and there is a philosophy in the jazz world that anything that happens during the course of a performance was supposed to happen and is what makes jazz so unique. Hard to argue. And yet, I find myself with a counterargument. Simply put, I believe that our audience deserves our absolute best effort. And for me, that means we come as close as we can to playing music that is without clams, that is in tune and has rhythmic accuracy.

At the same time, you also want the music to feel good. This becomes one of your big challenges as you lead your musicians into the sterile environment of the recording studio. People tend to stiffen up, and their performance shows that. You may get all the right notes without any obvious mistakes, but the music somehow lacks that magic that you get when performing live in front of an audience. As the leader it is important for you to set the proper tone, and keep your band relaxed so that they can forget about recording music and just start *playing* music.

When recording with the entire band, we go for full takes initially. Sometimes we may choose to re-record a particular section of a chart to have an option for editing, but you must be careful to set the same tempo and achieve the same intensity as the previous take so that they will cut together if need be. If we are recording a more contemporary style of music, we will use a click track. But using a click track with a swing feel can be risky, lest the music straighten up too much. There is a subtle ebb-and-flow to the tempo of swing music, and you

don't want to impede that with a click if you can help it. This means that you need to have a good headphone mix so that everyone can hear the bass and drums and react to one another as they would on the bandstand.

Have your music well rehearsed prior to going into the studio. A recording studio is a pretty expensive environment to be in and you don't want to be working on phrasing or checking for wrong notes with the clock running. I have a band full of experienced musicians and they all have opinions about the music, but in this setting, everything goes through the section leaders. Otherwise you are going to have too many chefs in the kitchen and things can bog down. We will do a take of a song, and then the section leaders Wayne Bergeron (trumpet), Andy Martin (trombone), Eric Marienthal (woodwinds) and the rhythm section guys will go in for the playback (although everyone is welcome to come into the booth for that). We will discuss what we want to change or adjust, and the section leaders convey that to their sections, and we go again.

Here's the thing about sessions: Things happen. You may have a five-minute chart and think, "I can get 10 takes of that in an hour!" But you will quickly find that there is always stuff to adjust and things to fix, and before you know it, an hour has gone by and you haven't given a downbeat yet. You need to budget for that and hope to get lucky. The Phat Band averages recording one chart per hour—tops. In a double session (six hours) we can count on getting about five songs on tape. Of course, much of our music has a lot of detail to it, and it takes a little longer to put together, even charts that we have been playing for a while. If your music is less challenging, you should be able to go a little faster. But you should endeavor to take the



time required to make your record as good as it can be. Records are a lasting document of your musical point of view, so don't settle for less than the best.

Recording improvised solos present another challenge in the studio because they are so dependent on inspiration. While you might get a great solo on your first take, the ensemble may still be a work-in-progress. Then on the next take the ensemble is tight and the soloist has a letdown. You have essentially four choices:

- 1) Go with the track with the good solo.
- 2) Go with the track with the good ensemble.
- 3) Keep doing takes until both the solo and the band are good.
- 4) Do an edit so that you preserve that inspired solo and also have the tight ensemble you want.

These are all legit choices, and here is where the rubber meets the road in this business. In a perfect world, you want both. Personally, I am not against doing an edit in the ensemble parts in order to protect an inspired performance by a soloist. Those kinds of solos are precious, and once again, it is the balance between those two components that make this music come alive. There are some kinds of improvised solos that can be overdubbed later without a noticeable effect on the music's unity.

Your decision about overdubbing will depend on many factors, including schedule, your soloist's comfort zone and your personal aesthetic about the topic. Personally, I think it is always better for musicians to play music together at the same time, but sometimes that isn't possible. Of course, another advantage to overdubbing after the basic tracking session is that you don't have to do it in a fancy room like Capitol Records. A smaller studio is a great option to do supplementary recording on your project, and your budget will thank you.

While we always record the ensemble all at once, there are certain instruments that we will overdub, usually those with more delicate textures such as flutes, clarinets, nylon string guitars, etc. You need isolation on these tracks, and having trumpets or drums bleeding into these mics will degrade your ensemble purity when you mix.

A word about Pro Tools. This is an amazing and seductive program. A skilled engineer can manipulate a performance in astounding ways, and this can be quite a useful tool at times. Say it's 1 a.m. and you are mixing a track and discover a wrong note. It's too late to call the musicians back in, and you have to turn the mix in the next morning. You are a few clicks away from tuning that note and moving on. I have no objection to this, assuming the wrong note was an aberration and you are not coloring the music in ways that it doesn't exist in its natural state. It is here where your taste and judgment

play a large role. Over the years, certain people have assumed that we do a lot of edits and fixing on the Big Phat Band records, and I can honestly say that we never alter the music in ways that we cannot replicate live. People who have heard our band live can attest that we sound the same onstage as we do on our recordings. This is how I define my use of this program, but you should determine for yourself how your use of Pro Tools makes your own music the best it can be.

After the recording is finished, your work is about half done, because mixing and mastering large ensemble music can be a time-consuming process. While experienced ensembles maintain a good internal balance as they play, there are always ways to improve on that when

live. Then listen to them in a new environment—your car, your home studio, with earbuds on your laptop. You'll be amazed as to how different your mixes sound in different media and contexts. This can be kind of maddening, but with experience you will find your sound and know what works and what doesn't.

Next up is mastering, which is a mysterious and amazing process. I always think our final mixes sound pretty good, and then our mastering engineer goes to work and they get even better. We have used several industry legends as mastering engineers, including Bernie Grundman, Doug Sax and, more recently, Paul Blakemore. These brilliant artists adjust the sound and balance from track to track, but also



Goodwin checks in with the Big Phat Band's saxophone section: Brian Scanlon (left), Sal Lozano, Eric Marienthal, Jeff Driskill and (out of frame) Jay Mason.

you mix. It is a painstaking process of going through the chart and making sure nobody is sticking out, ensuring that a chord is balanced—tons of small details that add up to a rich and nuanced mix of the song. It is here that you make decisions about reverbs and panning (e.g., kick drum and solos up the middle, trumpets up the middle, saxophones on the right, trombones on the left) and the more you dial down on the mix, the more stuff you will hear that you may want to address. Notes that didn't bug you at first now seem out of tune. Rhythms that seemed fine now reveal themselves to be sloppy. Once again, the amount of tinkering you do at this stage is a matter of taste and it is certainly possible to edit the life out of your track. Fortunately, Pro Tools has an "undo" button. You must find that sweet spot, where you have given your mix its due, but without crossing the line and creating some sterile contrivance.

When your mixes are done, get away from them for a while. Let your ears regain perspec-

add a final dash of magic to the music, dealing with issues like tonal imbalances, which are hard to define, but once they are corrected, the music is much more pleasurable to listen to.

Recording large ensembles is a collaborative effort. It's a combination of the composing and arranging, the performances by the musicians, and the technical and artistic skills of your engineering team. I have been so fortunate to have the aid of such people as Vicari, Gregg Field, Dan Savant, Jorge Velasco, Michael Aarvold and many others as we do our best to document this music that we love. Good luck with your own recordings—we all look forward to hearing them. **DB**

Keyboardist, woodwind player, bandleader and producer Gordon Goodwin has built a reputation throughout the music industry for his composing, arranging and playing skills. In addition to leading his 18-piece Big Phat Band and other ensembles, he has worked with Ray Charles, Christina Aguilera, Johnny Mathis, Toni Braxton, John Williams, Natalie Cole, David Foster, Sarah Vaughan, Mel Tormé, Brian McKnight and Quincy Jones. Goodwin's efforts have earned him 21 Grammy nominations and four Grammy wins, along with three Emmy Awards. Visit him online at [bigphatband.com](http://bigphatband.com).