

Session Sensei DON'T LET 'EM SEE YOU SWEAT, PART I

by Scott Healy, keyboardist for *The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien*

In the studio you need to focus and play great, while doing business, networking, and maintaining the vibe that keeps a client calling you back. This is even harder if you're at the edge of your comfort zone as a player. I was recommended last week to lay down an accordion track on a band's new record, and the accordion and a mic in the same room makes me nervous. I've done a fair amount of recording accordion, but it's not my first instrument, and still makes me feel like a nervous kid. But I do have some coping strategies that help me maintain my cool studio veneer.

Homework. The producer had told me the tune was Rockabilly with a Tex-Mex flavor. "Think Flaco (Jiménez). Think *Conjunto*." I hung up the phone, hit iTunes and YouTube, and started to study one of the world's greatest recording and


performing artists. I grabbed my squeeze-box, hit the woodshed, and tried to cop the basic feel.

Show 'em what you got, not what you don't. I brought three accordions, each with a distinctive sound – giving a client a choice breaks the ice and gets them listening. When asked "Which one gets the sound I want?" I could've launched into a lecture about the difference between an authentic button box and the piano accordion I play, but I just presented my trusty little Hohner, which comes close. The client loved it, and that was that.

Don't panic. The tune was fast, long, multi-sectional, and *very* grooving. There was no chart, so I grabbed a piece of paper and made myself a roadmap: Intro, verse, chorus? No, pre-chorus, *then* chorus – second time through the verse is a bar



shorter (good to know). I tried to get the form right and understand the energy and arc of the song. No one has noticed that I'm just hanging on; on the contrary, they're impressed that I'm transcribing a tune in real time, something my Nashville friends can all do in their sleep.

A little showmanship goes a long way. Turns out feel was more Rockabilly than *Conjunto*; the chords were bluesy, so I could do my rootsy Americana thing, mix in a Tex-Mex turn, and it would work just fine. As I donned the headphones I looked up. Through the glass I could see my audience: the band, engineer and producer, plus their friends and family eagerly anticipating my performance – *gulp!* This was beginning to feel like a show, and I was act one. *Now how does this tune go again?* Tune in next month to see how the story ends. . . . 

Session Sensei DON'T LET 'EM SEE YOU SWEAT, PART II

by Scott Healy, keyboardist with Conan O'Brien

When we left off last month, I'd been called in to play accordion on a fast-paced session with unfamiliar and difficult music. I'm not that comfortable on accordion, and a large contingent of the band's friends and family was peering at me through the glass.

I scrutinized the chart I'd scrawled and asked, "Do you want to take this in sections, or . . ." "Nah, we're just going to do takes and see what happens," came the reply.

Digital recording lets us track lots of takes and pick the best one, and these days, that's exactly what most people do. Some producers even "comp" together a track out of the best material from many passes. This is a great opportunity to stretch out and try different stuff. It also assumes one can get through the track, something I had not yet

accomplished. I had barely learned the tune and I was already on the spot to match a band that had been rehearsing for weeks and playing together for years.

On the first take, we had a couple of false starts as we tried to lock into the Tex-Mex rockabilly groove, but it was pretty good overall. I'm buried in my chart, watching out for the odd number of bars in the verse and the deceptively simple chorus.

"Nice," I was told. "On the next take, we'll mute the guitar, and *you* play the solo." By the fourth time through, I was really getting it, internalizing the odd form and anticipating the musical twists. My written chart started to fade away – I wasn't so much counting anymore, just painting in broader strokes.

On take 7, I thought I'd nailed it, but they

wanted one more: "Just try anything, go a little crazy. We can always go back and edit." I thought take 7 was better technically, but as we listened to my final, "crazy" pass, I realized that despite a few fluffs, it had better energy. I bet that on the final record, that entire track will be there – no edits or comping, just an honest performance.

The moral of the story is that music works best when, mentally, the written chart fades. This is why bands rehearse, and why you have to internalize the music you're playing, even if it's on the spot as a hired gun. A combination of experience and reverence for the recording process helped me navigate uncharted territory and do a good job. Now, back to the squeezebox woodshed! 