
Tips & Tricks

Open Up the Middle

[Welcome to a new FOH feature. In Tips and Tricks we will have sound folk of all shapes, sizes and genders tell us how they accomplish specific tasks. In the first installment we get a dose of compression advice. Got a tip or trick that works for you? Send it to tips@fohonline.com.]

For wide, wall-to-wall backing vocals, here is something I have been doing for quite a while now.

First, I assign all backing vocals to a single VCA group, then also assign them to two subgroups, let's say subgroups one and two. On subgroup one and two I insert a stereo compressor — in my case a tubed ADL 1500 (I use a tube for warmth) — into the insert points on the subgroups. Then I pan subgroup one fairly hard left and subgroup two fairly hard right. In my case, usually 9 and 3 o'clock. You want to be careful when you go past 3 and 9 o'clock — things can some times get weird out that far. I am not saying I don't go past 3 and 9, I do. I am just saying pay close attention when you get that wide.

Next, I take the effect sends on my backing vocals and run them through a harmonizer and de-tune about 3 cents down (that's minus 3 cents) and return the output of the harmonizer in stereo to two channels in the console, and pan them left and right. Next, I do the same thing with two more effect sends but run them through a reverb — usually on the largest hall setting it has — and return those into a pair of left/right channels, again panning those to 9 and 3 or beyond. Now I have to warn you, using that large of a ‘verb can get you in trouble quick. The trick is to barely mix it or blend it in real light and subtle.

Now back to the subgroups, and the reason I do this. With the backing vocals assigned to the VCA they are just straight ahead vocals that usually are trying to get in the way of the star or lead singer, but with them assigned to the sub-groups, you can clear them right out. When you lift the sub-groups, the harder you lift them, the wider they get, until they practically sound as if they are in the sides of the P.A. — leaving a big hole in the middle for the lead vocal. The harder you push on the comp, the more the backing vocals stick out and the wider they get. With the harmonizer and large hall ‘verb I can get three voices to sound like six. I also use a similar thing for my horns, I assign them to a sub-group as well, but without a comp inserted, just so I can bump them in and out of the mix on special horn parts.

The same principle can be used with less gear. Just lifting the sub-groups will usually bring anything assigned to them out over the mix, even without the comp and harmonizer and ‘verbs. And if you don't have a harmonizer, a chorus unit works just fine. What we are doing with the pans and VX is creating space. Space for that money-making lead vocal.