

Session Log

by Marc Urselli

In 2019, I had the pleasure of recording the album *Turning Pages* by Chilean singer Claudia Acuña (nominated for Best Jazz Album at the Latin Grammy Awards). The album was produced by the Venezuelan guitarist / composer Juancho Herrera. It features a great team of musicians such as Michael Olatuja, Carlos Henderson, Yayo Serka, Gregoire Maret, Jon Cowherd, and Pablo Vergara. Subsequently, Claudia asked me to produce her forthcoming album, scheduled for a May release—a duet album featuring pianists Kenny Baron, Fred Hersch, Arturo O’Farrill and Carolina Calvache, bassist Christian McBride, guitarist Russell Malone and violinist Regina Carter.

Claudia Acuña at EastSide Sound



Claudia Acuña mic setup with the JZ Black Hole BH1s and the Braingasm Lab FERRO for the percussion



Claudia Acuña singing into the JZ Black-Hole BH-1S

Emotion > perfection!

We discussed the project’s scope and how to get the best performances. We wanted to keep it simple, play the songs live and focus on heartfelt and emotional takes rather than perfection—I loved this idea! I believe that music should be about intention, commitment and sincerity—the performance—first and foremost! Claudia decided that we would do two takes of every song: a take in the same room with the musicians, and a take in a separate vocal booth, and then choose which one to use. For the takes done in the same room, I had to rely heavily on mic selection and Claudia’s position relative to the instruments.

Vocals

My favorite vocal mic is the Black Hole BH1s from JZ Microphones. Since I own two of these beautiful Latvian mics, I set up identical stations for Claudia: one in the live room and one in an iso booth (with a view of the live room). I ran the mics through a Neve preamp into a Teletronix LA-2A just for a touch of compression. As you can see in the photograph of Claudia with Arturo O’Farrill on piano, when I record vocals and piano in the same room, I rotate the piano so that the vocal microphone is always on the opposite side of the piano lid facing the piano. That way, the cardioid polar pattern will always face away from the instrument. I also try to maintain a healthy 6-8' distance between the two. Practice safe sonic distancing!



Claudia Acuna and Regina Carter

Piano

I used a pair of Ehrlund EHR-M condensers for the piano, going into a pair of API 512c preamps. These Swedish mics use a unique rectangular capsule and are one of my favorite piano mics. They have the most incredible lows, and since the piano is such a rich instrument and there are no other instruments on the track, having the extra low end is really nice.

Violin

On the same day that we tracked O'Farrill's piano, Claudia scheduled jazz violinist Regina Carter. I wasn't sure who would show up first to the session, so I set up all the mics ahead of time. For Regina, I chose another JZ Microphone, the Amethyst, a Class A discreet cardioid condenser with low self noise. JZ custom-engraved mine with my name on it, so it's definitely dear to me! I set it up right across from Claudia's vocal mic so the two could make eye contact and still be in the blind spot of the opposing mic. We of course used headphones in the iso booth, but when she performed next to the musicians, we didn't even have to use headphones, which the musicians loved.



Claudia Acuna and Arturo O'Farrill

New toys!

Speaking of headphones, I received the new Audeze LCD-4z over-ear open-ear headphones in the middle of the tracking session with Christian McBride. I usually monitor with my Adam Audio S5H speakers in the studio, but I was so intrigued by these new headphones that I plugged them in right away. I was blown away! Having McBride play his

upright bass and being used to my monitors and sub, I was 100% sure the bass would drop out, but to my amazement, it stayed steady, and the differences between the speakers and the headphones almost disappeared—so much so that I proceeded to use them for a significant part of that session. They really highlighted every detail and every nuance of his acoustic performance.

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Upright bass

To properly record McBride's deep and low tones, I used a combination of a Neumann KM 184 on the bridge and the Braingasm FERRO on the f-hole, going through a pair of Neve preamps. In a situation like this, where there are other instruments (or singers) right next to the bass, I usually would add a third microphone to give me a safety capture—something with less bleed. My first picks for that would be a Danish-made Remic D5400 placed between the tailpiece and the instrument's body, or a simple DI box if the instrument has that option (my favorite DI is from the other great Latvian audio company, Reflector Audio). However, in this particular case, McBride was rushing out the door to the Newport Jazz Festival (he's its Artistic Director). I didn't want to keep the crowds waiting while I set up another mic, so I went with just the two main bass mics.

Guitar

If you know anything about me, then you know I love ribbon mics! I pulled out some of my favorites for jazz guitarist Russell Malone. I always try to set up two microphones for an electric guitar, one on the amp and one on the guitar itself, even if it's not a hollowbody. It doesn't matter that you're only getting the wimpy plucking sound of the strings. The gold is that little extra high end you get when you mix that signal in and blend it with the dark tone of the amp—you can rely on it to add some clarity and intelligibility to the mix in very subtle ways. I went even a step further for this album and set up a stereo ribbon mic in front of the guitar. I didn't do this for the stereo spread, but to impart some semblance of roominess and spaciousness to a song that would otherwise be entirely mono (since both a guitar amp and a vocal are mono sources). My favorite stereo ribbon microphone is the Polish HUM Audio RS-2, an imposing, almost 2' long beast that can record in stereo or M/S. It has its own remote-controllable built-in preamps—an amazingly designed mic.



Claudia Acuna and Christian McBride - Acuna singing into the JZ Black Hole BH1s and McBride using a Neumann KM 184 pointed at the fingerboard and a Braingasm Lab FERRO on the f-hole

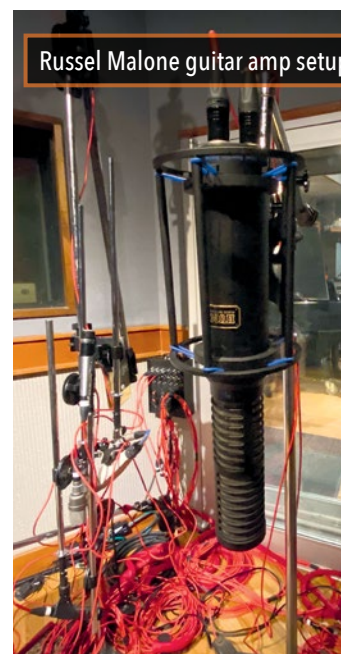
Malone came in with just his electric guitar, and I set up my 1965 Fender Twin Reverb for him and miked it up with one of my trusty and cool British Reslo RB 30/50 ribbon mics. I love these beautiful little ribbon transducers. The Beatles used them at The Cavern Club as vocal mics in the 60s, and I've seen them in old photographs being used on horns in jazz clubs. When I started collecting them, I fell in love with their sound and design. I owned ten of these mics at one point but eventually sold six, since I never use more than four at once (such as for a string quartet). All of mine went through the capable hands of Stewart Tavener (Xaudia Mics, York, UK), the leading figure at Reslo and the guru of ribbon mic restoration in Great Britain. [he's also responsible for the Extinct ribbon line; the BM9 was reviewed in the January 2020 issue... -Ed.] Stewart takes old Reslo mics and does what he calls 'The Beeb' upgrade, which brings them back to 1961 BBC specs and adds an approximately 10dB boost. He replaces the ribbon inside, swaps the transformer, converts them from 50 to 300 Ω and reverses the motor assembly so the ribbon element is closer to the front. I've had four of my Reslo mics beebed—it's all about authenticity for me!

Authenticity

Making this record with Claudia was a stark reminder of how much authenticity really matters to me, more than perfection—it's often undervalued in today's record-making. Most engineers and artists chase perfection and record in a manner that affords the most freedom to edit and alter every aspect after the fact. When you capture a vocalist in the same room with another musician, you get an actual performance that you cannot tune and auto-correct afterward.

When it was time to select the best takes, guess which ones were chosen? Claudia almost always chose the take performed in the same room with the musician—a testament to how much vibe and emotion can be conveyed when people track together in the same physical space. I know people can't always make records like this, but I hope to inspire you to put everything you have in every take you do, and commit. I'll choose an imperfect performance with nuance, intention and emotion over cookie-cutter smooth perfection any day.

See you next month! ➡



Russel Malone guitar amp setup

Marc Urselli is a Grammy-winning engineer working out of New York City and London. Read about his current projects and past successes at marcurselli.com