

## MILITARY MOVED TO ACTION BY SONGWRITING CONTEST *by Annie Cornelius*

The songwriting contest, Songs from the Soul of Service, was announced in the military newsletter, Stars and Stripes recently. The contest, sponsored by the Dallas Songwriters Association (DSA) has been supported by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and all branches of the military. Hundreds of entries from such far-flung places as Germany, Greenland, Iraq and Afghanistan have been received.

In every conflict the voices of the men and women who serve to protect this country have captured the feelings on the battlefield, and this generation is no different. Some of the song titles received include "Tainted", "Why Soldiers Cry", "Rock of Freedom", and "Waiting for Daddy."

The brain-child of Dr. William Brown, a member of the DSA Board, Songs from the Soul of Service has garnered hundreds of entries, many accompanied by comments that highlight the opportunity of self-expression for service members. "It is not important to me whether I win or lose," said Air Force Staff Sergeant Shaw, "I just would like to share this [song] with others in the service." Air Force Sergeant Mason Added, "I can't wait to enter my music; just to be heard is an honor."

Improvisation is part of the proud military tradition while under the triple threat of enemy attacks, forbidding conditions and lack of access to proper recording equipment. Army Staff Sergeant Ham found a unique way to gain privacy for his entry. "I NEVER expected to be sending in some material dealing with these knuckleheads out here trying to kill us. I worked with what I had, which was a small recorder, so I went to a port-a-john out here that was set apart in the desert from the others. The recordings came out fine sound-wise and hopefully the way I had to do the forms will be easily understood by you guys."

Songs from the Soul of Service is accepting submissions from men and women in active duty from any part of the world until February 15, 2006. The winners will be feted at a celebration at Ft. Hood, near Austin, Texas, on June 10th. Winning songs in seven categories will be included on a compilation CD. Information on the contest is available on [www.SongsSoulService.Org](http://www.SongsSoulService.Org), and any donations are used to cover the expenses associated with the contest.

## BEYOND THE HOME STUDIO *by Ian Dickson*

A couple of years ago, like many songwriters and musicians, I put together a home studio which took advantage of digital technology. Although I am still in awe of what can be accomplished at home with a relatively small investment, I have come to realize that technology is not the entire answer. The output from my home studio is good, but there is still a material difference between what I produce and the overall feel of the CDs from my favorite artists.

Since I wanted my CD project to be as good as I can possibly make it, I decided to talk with some experts. First I spent some time with Tom Faulkner. Tom is not only a gifted songwriter and musician; he is also a skilled recording engineer and producer. Tom's CDs represent some of the best quality production that I have ever come across. I also scheduled a few hours of recording time at Patrick McGuire Recording in Arlington to gain some first hand experience. This was a real education for a solo singer/songwriter who thought he knew something about playing and recording.

What I learned from both Tom and Patrick was that there are subtle differences that separate a pretty good home recording from a truly professional product. It all revolves around the small details in a few critical areas: The Gear, Playing with precision, The engineer, The session Players, and miM doDn & maMtering

**The Gear** – The first thing that I noticed about Patrick's studio was the relatively dead sound inside the room. The acoustics are such that unwanted echoes don't make their way into the recording. You can always add echo, but it's tough to take it out. The next major improvement over my home rig was the quality of the mics, preamps, cables, monitors, and outboard gear. Taken individually it takes an experienced ear to tell the difference between good, all purpose audio gear and the pro gear, but all these small differences in the signal chain add up to a noticeable difference in overall quality. I could spend the thousands of dollars required to match the gear, but I'd do it at great risk to my marriage.

**Playing with Precision** – Some lessons are painful, but necessary. My painful/necessary lesson from the studio experience was that I'm a sloppy musician. Years of solo playing, and playing in casual club bands ingrained some bad habits that do not work well in the studio. Listing all my bad habits would require another article, so I'll just give you the highlights (lowlights). (1) I tend to play ahead of the beat. This is a common problem among solo singer/songwriters. If the initial scratch tracks are off the beat, then adding other instruments becomes a real struggle. (2) Capos change the tuning. This is not much of a problem for a solo guitarist, or if you and the other half of your acoustic duo are using a capo on the same fret. This is a problem if you are planning to overdub other instruments. (3) I sometimes rewrite chords when I play my songs. Okay, so I'm always searching for a better sound so I drop and add notes here and there. (4) I ad lib intros, turn-arounds, and various other sections in songs. Both of these habits create a real problem when you come back to replace scratch tracks with final versions.

I'm sure that none of you are as sloppy as I am, but the next time I undertake a recording project I will be much more precise in my approach. Prior to entering the studio I will practice with a click track (metronome) until I am able to play the songs reliably on the beat with consistent structure (introductions, verses, choruses, bridges, turnarounds, tag lines, etc). I will also check the tuning on the guitar before every take of every song.

**Engineer/Producer** – I discovered most of the glaring sonic problems myself as I would at home. However, there is nothing like a set of skilled, unbiased ears that can hear things that you can't. There were many times during the session when something sounded wrong, but I had no idea what it was, or how to correct it. I could have worked through most of them, but it would be extremely time consuming and it would still leave many of those subtle sonic anomalies that plague my home recordings.

**The session players** – Good session players have a unique skill that goes beyond musicianship. They pick things up quickly and they know how to make you sound better. They play for your sound and not their glory. I was delighted to find that although Dallas may lack in the number of studio players compared with Nashville, or LA, the Dallas area does not lack in quality. You can find musicians here to match any style.

**Mix Down and Mastering** – This is another area that could fill a book. Let me just say that all the gear in the world can't replace a set of ears with 20 years experience when it comes to bringing individual tracks together (mix down), and bringing the songs together into a professional sounding CD. Once again it's not that I can't get 80% of the way there in my home studio. It's that the last 20% is what separates great sound from good sound.

I am not suggesting that you can't achieve world class results from a home studio given enough money, time, and skill. I do believe however that an experienced recording engineer, professional studio musicians, and a well equipped studio may be the most effective and efficient way to produce the sound quality that your songs deserve. The studio experience can be very pleasant if you approach it with the proper research and preparation. There is no need to go to Nashville, Los Angeles, or New York. There are many fine recording facilities in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. A little research will help you find the best fit for your project, style, personality, and budget. *Happy song writing!..... Ian.*