

# BROADWAY IN A STUDIO

CAST ALBUM RECORDING FOR *FALSETTOS*, *SHE LOVES ME* // BY ANTHONY SAVONA



The *Falsettos* cast album featured seven vocalists in the main room of Avatar's Studio C and the four musicians who make the show's orchestra in iso booths.

Photo: Joan Marcus

Confession time: As a young man, I believed that Broadway cast albums were recorded right there on the theater stage—actors in full costumes and makeup going through the motions of the show to an empty theater. How else could that flavor of theatrical musicality be properly captured? As I would later find out, it was captured where so many other great musical moments are, in the recording studio. Although my original theory wasn't too far off...

"Some London cast recordings are done in the theater, with an audience," says Kurt Deutsch, co-owner of Sh-K-Boom Records and producer of many, many cast albums. "The reason we can't do it here in the theater is that if you use the theater, every single member of the Local 1 union has to get paid for the recording, and it makes it too expensive." (As with most rules, there are exceptions, as Deutsch explains that the Sh-K-Boom release of the *Passing Strange* cast album was recorded at its theater in front of a live audience.)

A former actor, Deutsch started Sh-K-Boom Records with his then-wife, Sherie Rene Scott, also a Broadway actor, because the record deals he saw for Broadway performers and the shows themselves didn't really benefit either. "Shows never made money off of their cast albums because the royalty structure was archaic. So we started a business model

where the producer of the show co-owns the master with me. It is an asset and another marketing tool—and they can make money on it."

Even in the familiar confines of a recording studio, creating a cast album has its challenges. The union performers all get a week's pay for every eight hours of studio time, so speed is essential. Plus, you have to work in between the eight performances a week.

Of course, playing through rehearsals, previews and the weekly shows means that your artists know their material really well. How long does it take to record the music? "Typically one take and a safety of each song," says Lawrence Manchester, a frequent engineer/mixer on many Sh-K-Boom releases and also music mixer/producer for NBC's *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, adding that with such tight schedules, preparation is key. "I take a full day to set up. Plus, I always try to see the show from the audience perspective and make a trip to the pit to see the setup—see

their natural environment and sight lines to the conductor. Find out what is important for the performers."

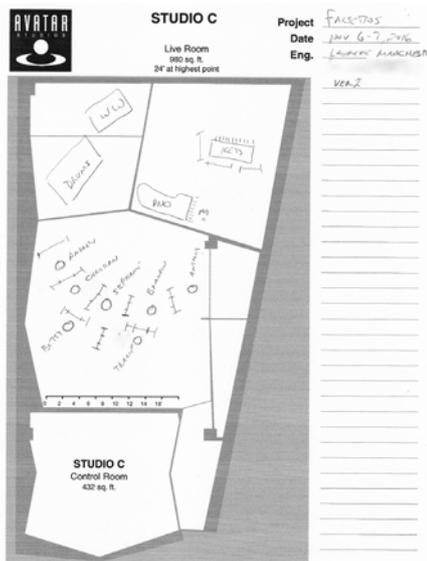
For producer Deutsch, preparation means working with the show's composer and director on what gets included in the recording script—figuring out which songs, what dialog and sound effects, if any, are included, and so on.

"After a take, I would give notes to the director, who would talk to the performers," Deutsch explains. "The orchestrator is in the studio, as well, to make sure the music is right and all the notes are being played. A lot of people are responsible for making sure we get everything we need in the can with control and isolation so we can build from there."

Cast album productions are as diverse as the shows they represent. To demonstrate, Deutsch and Manchester walk us through the recording of *She Loves Me*, which was done live with a full orchestra ("Fifties style," as Deutsch calls it), and *Falsettos*, which was a smaller affair with a four-piece band and seven vocalists. Both *She Loves Me* and *Falsettos* have been released on Ghostlight Records, an imprint of Sh-K-Boom.

## SHE LOVES ME

The 2016 version of *She Loves Me* was a Tony-nominated, limited-run revival of a musical first seen on Broadway in 1963, which is based on a play



Studio setups for recording *Falsettos* in Avatar Studio C, left, and *She Loves Me* at Avatar Studio A, New York City.

by Miklos Laszlo that also became the basis for the classic films *The Shop Around the Corner* and *You've Got Mail*. The musical ran at the famed nightclub-turned-theater Studio 54, where the orchestra was placed on the sides of the stage along with conductor Paul Gemignani, who inspired Deutsch to record the album using this semi-retro approach.

There are not many rooms left in New York City that can handle a full orchestra, but Avatar Studios is one of them, so they get the bulk of work from Sh-K-Boom. Avatar Studio A held the full orchestra (strings, woodwinds, bass, horns, harp, accordion, and keys) for *She Loves Me*, with drums and percussion in one large booth toward the rear left of the studio and the singers placed in another spacious booth toward the rear right.

"The drums get a lot of mics, so I can get a fairly tight, contemporary sound," says Manchester. "I generally go with a Shure Beta 52 $\frac{1}{2}$  combo for the kick drum, and I use Avatar's large collection of Neumann KM86s for overheads and on certain percussion instruments because you can adjust the pickup pattern to omnis or figure-eights to your advantage. For snares, I use a Shure SM57 on top and Sennheiser MD441 on the bottom. I use an AKG C451 on hi-hats and smaller clip-on mics for toms, like Sennheiser 604s where I can get in tight without having to put up a mic stand—you can get overtaken by the number of mic stands you have to use."

In the main room, Manchester says he "used a lot of room mics—my Neumann M50s and more KM86s on each section leader of the group. Woodwinds are individually miked with AKG C414s or some Sennheiser MKH 40s."

In the back room, the vocalists were separated by windowed gobos, miked with

Sennheiser MKH 800s and facing forward so they could see the conductor. "We left the panels open so they could hear the orchestra without headphones," adds Manchester. The performers were all offered headphones, but many opted not to use them. "We knew they performed that way in the theater, and the cast was comfortable with hearing the orchestra in the room."

As for leakage, it wasn't a problem, explains Manchester: "I had the option to close panels if needed, but I didn't. Leakage is something people are averse to these days, but if you take some chances, try some things, and employ your microphone theory, you can get really close sounds—nice, beautiful sounds that have some space to them—and even if there is some leakage, it can be very workable."

Everything was brought into Avatar's custom Neve 8088 40-input console, along with a few Focusrite and Grace outboard mic pre's. "With the Neve, the mics go to the large fader then to the Pro Tools recorder," says

Manchester. "That allows me to ride the vocals as they are being printed to the recorder and work with the dynamics of the singer so I can make sure, if they are singing softly, that I can ride them up to a healthy recording level and, similarly, if I know there is a big note coming up, I can pull them back and make sure we are not overloading anywhere."

"You want the big notes from the singer, but not to push," agrees Deutsch. "You try for intimacy, but keep the energy and intensity that they deliver on stage."

## FALSETTOS

Like *She Loves Me*, *Falsettos* is also a revival, comprising two one-act plays featuring the same characters, originally staged years apart. This is not the first time that it has been performed as a complete play on Broadway; but it is the first time that the show will be preserved as a whole on a cast album. "With revivals," says Deutsch, "it is important to give the audience something on this version that they haven't had before."

Deutsch, Manchester and the *Falsettos* crew moved into Avatar Studio C to capture the show, where Manchester did a little "reverse engineering," so to speak, which meant he placed the band in the iso booths and the singers in the main room. *Falsettos* has a four-piece band—a drummer (with glockenspiel and xylophone), a pianist (who was also the conductor), one woodwind player (oboe, flute, clarinet and saxophone), and a keyboardist with an elaborate split keyboard setup that had a whole sequence of patches programmed ahead of time, so the player could layer up left-hand bass with samples of tuba, harp, celeste and classic synth sounds.



Photo: Lloyd Bishop

Lawrence Manchester, recording and mix engineer for many of the Sh-K-Boom releases, and music producer/mixer for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.

“Studio C has a lot of booth options built around sliding panels that you can open or close as needed, with glass windows and great sight lines,” says Manchester. “I put the piano and keyboard in one booth, which allowed me to leave the lid full-stick and I didn’t have to blanket it off, so I got a nice open sound. The drummer was in his own drum room, and the woodwind was in a small booth.”

“In the big room,” continues Manchester, “the singers faced the music director with direct eye contact for two-way visual communication, separated from each other by windowed gobos. Yes, there was leakage, but the direct sound was nice and clean, so that even when they were all singing together, I had a clear sound on each of the Sennheiser MKH800s. The comping and the editing process also involved cleaning out the leakage when they were not singing, which was a little tedious, but worth doing.”

All the feeds went through Studio C’s Neve VRP 72-input console. This time there were headphones for everybody.

*She Loves Me* cast member Jane Krakowski and cast album producer Kurt Deutsch.



Manchester’s overall approach to recording cast albums is to “keep the recording chain very clean for the simple reason that you do so few takes of each song. I try to minimize the risk that a piece of gear might go foul—no inline compressors—and I try to leave a lot of headroom on my mic pre’s so that if a singer goes for a big note, you can catch it on the first take. I tend to go conservative with my levels so there is room for surprises, and I use modern condenser mics instead of classic tube mics, which might introduce artifacts.”

### CURTAIN CALL

For Deutsch, there is no doubt in his mind that every musical needs to have a cast album. “Even if it is not a hit, for a show to have any chance at a future life, they have to have an album,” he says. “Licensing companies will first ask if there is an album. If

there is no recorded album, it is like it didn’t even exist.”

Fortunately both *She Loves Me* and *Falsettos* will live on — along with all the other shows captured forever by Sh-K-Boom Records. ■



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