



How We Make Our Quarantine Videos

My music partner Lou and I have developed a quarantine method for making music "together." I've been asked about our nutty process, and though software and equipment vary a lot, I thought I'd offer some of the more general aspects of our cobbling together a passable video performance. We have ten-year-old Mac computers and somewhat newer iPhone 7's.

Cheat Sheet

We have always used cheat sheets and there's no reason to stop now. They usually feature both lyrics and chords, and when it fits on the page, I use 14 point Helvetica bold. Usually we clip these as close as possible to our phones so it looks like we're looking toward the viewer, approximately. The exception to this is when one of us is, for the most part, accompanying the other, who is singing the lead. In that case, we clip the lyric sheet over toward where the other person would be standing if we were really together physically, so that it looks like the accompanist is looking at the lead singer. Lou invented this trick. In any event, we try glancing toward the other's pretend location every now and then.

Visuals

We have found the lighting we like is indirect. I use a cheap clamp light above, to the left, and in front of me, aimed upwards at a big white posterboard sheet. A secondary light, diffused by a sheet of yellow legal paper, is pointed right at me but is of a much lower wattage. I use another fairly bright light to light up the background. Lou uses a similar setup, with bounced lighting. TIP: If your face looks too washed out and bright, increase the brightness of the background, and change into lighter colored clothing. If it looks too dark, do the opposite. I know there are ways to adjust brightness in the iPhone itself, but I find it less confusing just to move the lights around and change shirts. I like to think it's how Red Green would do it.

For head-size reasons, we try to keep our noses 24 inches from our phones. I measure with a 24" handcrafted foam-core plank. Lou uses a 24" quilter's ruler.

Recording Procedure

The lead vocal -- me for example -- almost always records first, using a metronome. This regular beat makes it easier for the other person -- Lou, for example -- to eventually play and sing along. I use an online metronome via computer and listened to with earbuds. My video is uploaded to DropBox either directly from the iPhone or via the computer. Lou downloads the video onto her computer, and while listening to it on earbuds and reading along with the lyric sheet, sings and plays along, recording it on her iPhone. (I record into my iPhone's built-in mic while Lou uses a lapel mic hooked to her iPhone. She does this because she can put the lapel mic near her voice, otherwise her accordion drowns it out.)

Lou is fabulous at figuring out harmonies, so often (tho not always) she is second to record, if it's a song we sing together in harmony. She then uploads her video to DropBox and I download it.

Video Editing

I find YouTube instructional videos of great help, but here is a rough description of our methods. I assume most video editing software is similar. Using iMovie (version 10.1.6) I open a "new" project. The window is divided into three main panels. I drag and drop Lou's video "clip" into iMovie, which puts it in the "my media" panel (upper left). I then go to the "background" menu and select and drag a background into the main "working" panel (bottom). This background often doesn't appear in the final video, but I need a background to be able to position Lou's clip. At this point I select and drag the Lou clip into the working area, positioning it above the background clip, and selecting "picture in picture" using the "overlays" tool menu. This will allow me to position the clip where I'd like it to appear in the final. This is done in what I call the "positioning" panel, in the upper right. Once I've selected Lou's clip, and chosen "picture in picture," her clip will appear in the "positioning" panel with adjustment handles on its corners. I position her clip so it takes up half the frame. (You can see what your finished video will look like in this "positioning" panel.) At this point, Lou is on the left, and the background fills in the right half of the frame. I then export this mess by going to the file menu and selecting "share" and from there selecting "file" and storing it on my Mac. Now I begin a NEW

"project" and drag and drop the "Lou-and-background" clip I just made in the "my media" panel of the new project. I also drag and drop MY video clip into this panel. Next I drag the "Lou & background" clip into the "working" panel, then I drag my clip into that area, placing it above the "Lou & background" clip, and selecting "picture in picture" as before. In the "positioning" panel, I then manipulate the size and position of MY clip so that it fills the half of the screen not filled by Lou. This is the way it will look in the final, with no background visible, and each of us filling one half of the screen.

At this point I concentrate on the audio, first by syncing Lou's clip with my clip. This is done in the working panel, by selecting and dragging one or the other of the clips until they line up exactly. Then I adjust the relative volumes. That's really all I do with sound. Once again I export the video (file>share>file). And once again I open a new "project" and bring in the video I just exported. It comes in as one complete clip, which I then drag to the "working" panel. Sometimes at this point we like to run it through a softening filter to hide our ancient furrows; we use an appropriately named filter called "cartoon" in iMovie.

I then go to the "titles" menu and select one, drag it to the beginning of the video, and choose the font, etc. Add a few more touches, and then do the lyric captions. This is done like the titles, but instead of dragging them to the beginning of the video, I drag them on top of the video and position them appropriately, phrase by phrase. I stick another title at the very end with the URL of our website on it. I'll once again do the file>share>file thing, and wait until it's exported to file. THIS is what I upload to the web.

I've had to leave out a lot of little scrappy details here for the sake of article length but would be glad to answer any questions about this crazy procedure, though I'm NOT an expert by any means, and know just barely enough to do what we're doing. If you'd like to see our results, you can find 'em on our website, among other places. Thanks for wading through all this! Miss you!!!

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WZ for Oct 2020