

How to Prepare for a Recording Session

Written by Alex Boccia

Okay, you have a bunch of songs written, your band has practiced playing these songs together, and now you're ready to record. But are you really prepared? This article is going to help you to prepare as an individual, and as a band regardless of your instrument or style of music. However the examples will be geared towards guitarists of some sort of mainstream style. The information comes from my long time experience as being both the artist and the producer. Recording can be very expensive and the budget of an independent or small label artist is usually very limited. I am going to tell you what you can do when you're not on the studios clock to be most efficient with your time, energy, and money once you are in the studio. This will result in getting the best sound and quality for your money. You definitely do not want to listen to your album when it's done, and be thinking "I could have done this or that to make it better", or "if only I had more time and money." Believe me these thoughts occur way more often than they should. A few of these things I am about to mention you might think are things you won't really need to do, but you have worked hard to get to this point and you owe it to yourself to do anything and everything to ensure a quality product. The studio experience should be creative, productive, and fun. A little bit of stress is inevitable, but the idea is to minimize the amount of it. I am going to list off important things to do before entering the studio and why you should do them, and what problems they will help to avoid. I want to start with this obvious, but surprisingly overlooked concept...

Know exactly what you are supposed to play. I truly am surprised by how often I have heard somebody say "yeah, I'm ready" or "I know exactly what to do", but once recording begins they show they clearly aren't ready or sure of what to do. It could be as simple as you are playing an A minor chord while the other guitarist or keyboardist is playing an A major chord. Or perhaps everyone is supposed to be playing the same rhythm, but one of the musicians is playing it a bit differently. A loud unclear practice space, as well as bad communication, is usually the source of such problems. There may be parts where you have a general idea of what you're supposed to play, but you might play it a bit differently every time. Don't confuse this with improvising. Improvising is intentional. What I am speaking of is NOT intentional, and therefore is NOT improvising. You are simply not sure of what to do. This is usually because you haven't sat down and worked out something specific, you are not sure or confident of what you should play, or you are not sure exactly what the other musicians in the band are playing. This typically results in a hit or miss performance. You don't want to risk having a "miss" on your recording. You also don't want to be sitting in the studio burning dollars and time trying to solve a problem you could have solved beforehand. A good way to test if you know exactly what to play is if you can play the entire song on your own without the other instruments present. If you can do this accurately then you really know your parts well, and the better you know your parts the better you will perform them.

Plan out how you are going to track your instrument. Often you will record your parts slightly or sometimes even greatly different than when you play them live. This could be for the sake of

continuity, the ease of mixing, or because you have more freedom than a live situation can provide. When laying out your tracks you can refer to each track as Gtr. 1 (guitar one), Gtr. 2, Gtr. 3, etc., or perhaps Dist. Gtr., Clean Gtr., Acoustic Gtr., etc. This will help both yourself and the producer to understand what will be recorded where and when. For example maybe in a live situation you may use distortion in one section, and then a clean tone in the following section. However you would rather have an acoustic guitar play where you normally use the clean electric tone. What you do now is perform the distortion part and then stop at the end of the section, fast forward to the next section where the distorted guitar plays again, and then come back to record the acoustic parts later. Here is an example of a diagram I use and my students use to plan out the tracking for their instrument in a song:

Section Instrument	Intro	Verse	Pre Chorus	Chorus	Verse	Pre Chorus	Chorus	Bridge	Chorus
Gtr. 1 Heavy dist., light delay, Humbucker PU's			X	X		X	X		X
Gtr. 2 Crunchy dist., light delay, Single coil PU's	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
Gtr. 3 Clean, reverb, chorus, Single coil PU's	X	X			X			X	
Gtr. 4 Acoustic, light reverb	X	X			X			X	
Gtr. 5 Electric w/slide, heavy delay, Strat, neck PU								X	

***The X's indicate if the instrument is played in that section**

As I hinted before it's most efficient to record all of one track throughout the entire song, and then move on to the next track, and then the next, etc. You have to take into consideration exactly how you want each track in each part of the song to enter and exit. On stage you might just hit a pedal and immediately switch from the distortion to the clean channel, but now you could do something like letting the distortion ring out as the clean guitar begins to play, and have the distorted guitar fade out. The process of planning your tracking is unavoidable. You can do it in a rush at the studio with the clock ticking away, or you can do it before the recording session and take your time and save money. All that being said sometimes a band may wish to do a live recording in which much of the aforementioned ideas may not be necessary.

Practice your parts exactly as you are going to track them and make a quick demo (there are plenty inexpensive recording devices and software out there). You might come across a situation where perhaps there is a part of a song where "live" you will switch from playing a chord progression to playing a solo or lead part and then back to playing the progression again. For the recording though you may want the progression to continue to play while the solo is played. A problem that could arise here is

that the chord progression that precedes the lead part doesn't sound good when it is played along with the solo. You may have never had the chance to hear if the two parts would sound good together, and now you're in the studio wasting time and money wondering what you should play. Deming your song will help to avoid having little surprises such as "this isn't working like I **imagined** it would" or "I'm not playing this as well as I **could**", and it will imitate a lot of the challenges and circumstances of the upcoming recording session. When doing this it is also smart to decide if you will be using a click track during recording or not, and what tempo it will be set to. I've seen many cases where people don't practice to a click track (metronome) before hand, and come recording day they are unable to keep a steady tempo which results in many do over's as well additional editing costing you extra unnecessary time and money once again. Also, bringing a demo in on recording day even if it's low quality can greatly help the producer to get a better understanding of what's in store for him.

Write out tabs and/or notation of exactly what you need to play. This is something a lot of people might dread or struggle doing, but if you can write out exactly what you have to perform then that proves you know the material inside and out. The process of writing out the music will help verify if there are any parts that you are confused about even if you didn't realize you were confused. It also enables the other musicians in the band to clarify that what they are playing is in line with what you are playing. This will also prevent the problem of you forgetting any parts big or small. You will bring the written out music to the recording session, so that you can refer to it at anytime should confusion arise. Sure maybe ultimately this isn't always necessary, but again it's just helping to reassure that your project comes out sounding as good as it possible can. Also one very important thing to remember is to always be professional and prepared. Writing out your music is being just that. Who knows who this engineer or producer may know? If they think that you are worthy they might show your music to a friend who could be a record executive, concert promoter, club owner, or someone else of significance. If someone respects you then that person may do a little extra something for you, and your hard work and preparation could earn you that respect. Implementing this as well as all the other ideas in this article will give you a chance to demonstrate your work ethic.

Figure out as much as you can in terms of effects and mixing. This may be difficult for some for the reason that they do not know or understand much about the sound engineering process, but it's probably time you start reading up on it. Today's home recording software and equipment is easy to use and more affordable than ever before. It can be a good way to familiarize yourself with the sound engineering process. How a song is mixed can greatly affect the final outcome of the feel of the song. Recording and mixing has definitely become a part of the song writing process, and as a song writer you need to take it into consideration. The best place to start is to listen to recordings of music that you would want your mix or aspects of it to resemble. You will also want to prepare a list or CD of this music to give to the producer to help him get a better idea of what you want.

Know your producer and engineer. Make sure you take time to meet and speak with various producers and engineers, and compare prices. You want someone who is excited about your music and working on it. You want a producer who will really put his heart into the work. Look for a studio who often works with your style of music. While this isn't always necessary it will heighten your chances of creating a better product. Make sure you have heard other projects that your prospective

engineer/producer has worked on. Sometimes the band may be responsible for the lack of quality of their album, but ultimately a great producer will not accept bad quality. A great producer knows that their work speaks for them, and if they feel that it is unwise for them to take part in a project for whatever reason then they will turn it down. In the end the producer is responsible for guiding the project in a positive quality direction, and if they fail to do so it says something about their abilities. You have already invested a lot of time and money into getting yourself this far and you are about to invest a whole lot more when recording begins. Don't just pick the first producer you come across or the one whose location is closest. Choose the one you feel comfortable with, and that you feel a connection with. Communication is key. If you find that you are struggling with communication between yourself and the producer that means your music will struggle to come out right. Also keep in mind no matter how comfortable you are with your chosen producer or engineer, and no matter how much you may trust them, never pay them all the money upfront. You may negotiate a half now half later or a pay as you go plan, but never give them too much. This can lead to your producer/engineer losing motivation. They can begin to get lazy, or focus more on other projects they may have going on. Dangle the prize in front of them all the way till the end of the project. Last thing I have to say about this portion of the article is make sure you get the individual tracks that you record. If things happen to go south you may have to switch your producer or engineer.

Have your instrument restrung and setup before recording. New strings are essential for your guitar to produce its best tone. You may want to change them a few days before, so you have a chance to break them in. Keep them clean and change them throughout the recording process if need be. Also make sure that your instrument is tuned and intonated. If it is not tuned and intonated you can end up with sour notes. We all know how dreadful out of tune notes sound. It is such a silly mistake to make, so don't make it. If it's a drum set make sure you have new heads or ones that are in great condition and that they are tuned. If you are a vocalist make sure that you reserve your voice, avoid eating and drinking certain things that may dry out your vocal chords, and that you don't smoke. Every instrument has a way of being set up and tuned. Make sure you don't forget this process.

Keep in mind that the recording procedure itself is a creative process, and you may have great ideas pop up on the spot which can be a great thing. However, the idea is to prepare as much as you can beforehand which will then leave you with extra time to try out these ideas when they occur. For other learning resources and information about myself visit www.alexbochia.com. Thanks for reading!

Oh yeah. One last thing; don't forget to TUNE, TUNE, TUNE!!!!!!!!!!