

STRAIT MUSIC RECORDING

GETTING READY FOR THE STUDIO: PLAN, PLAN, PLAN

Artists are often impatient to get into the studio and start recording right away, only to discover there's not enough time or resources to finish what they intended to do. It takes a lot of time and careful planning to achieve good results (and a lot more time to achieve world-class results!). There's no "magic button" in the studio that an engineer can push to speed up the process, or to create more or better music than is set before them. A lot depends on the artist and the work. This article is intended to help those new to the process of studio recording and to share a few thoughts on the planning of a successful project.

HOW MUCH IS THIS GOING TO COST?

This is a good question. It depends on what the artist is trying to do. A better question would be "What is my budget?". If you put a cap on what you're expecting to spend, then you can find out whether what you want can be done with the amount of money available. Of course its only natural that you would want to spend as little as possible, but once you know your budget, everything else will naturally fall into place. You may discover that you may not have enough resources to do what you want all at once. This may be disappointing, but it's important to be realistic and save yourself a lot of grief later. The studio can help you plan your sessions to be as time and cost-effective as possible.

HOW DO I PLAN THIS PROJECT, I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG THIS WILL TAKE?

Lets walk through a typical session with an artist playing acoustic guitar and singing vocals. A few days before the session you'll want to give the engineer or producer a simple recording of your song (nothing fancy) and lyric sheet. This will give the engineer an idea of what's to come, and make it easier to "prep" the studio for your session, saving a lot of setup time. This gives you the opportunity to make any last minute changes to your song and to check its length. Most commercial songs run at about 3:20. Make sure your songs have a beginning and an end. Restring your guitar. Check your tuning throughout the session. This is especially important if you want more instrumentation later on.. If you're looking for a more complete arrangement to track to or are recording to a sequence, you'll need to get this prepared and to the engineer BEFORE your session.

PLAYING TO A CLICK

It's a good idea to play to a click track or some type of rhythm reference if you intend to add other instruments. This tightens up the recording, and can be removed at mix time. Some people have difficulty following a click track, so practice with a metronome or rhythm box before the session. If you have timed your song and know the tempo, the engineer will know how long to record a click track and can have it prepared before the session starts.

ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR. . .

Put the headphones on, listen to the click and try running through the song once. This gives the engineer a chance to check levels and make sure everything is working ok. At this point you're probably about 1/2 hour into the session. "Lets try one" says the engineer. Take a deep breath and go. Stop recording if you're having trouble hearing yourself the way you need to. After the first take, do another right away while your mind is still fresh from the problems of the first take. This second take is often the best. Listen back. Don't worry too much about the sound through the headphones-let the engineer worry about that. Make sure all the parts are correct and the timing and pitch are good. Most artists use these guitar and vocal takes as "scratch tracks" and record the final tracks later. This gives the engineer more flexibility in mixing and allows things like combining the best vocal takes. After a couple of tries, move on to the next song. Don't be surprised if an hour or more passes trying to get this exactly right. The next couple of songs should be easier now that you're settled in. Make your performance as solid as you can. Everything that follows is supported by this foundation.

A THREE HOUR TOUR

Most vocal sessions tend to run about two to three hours. Most people are able to do as many as three songs in this period of time if all goes well. Different people "peak" at different times, after which it gets harder and harder to deliver a good performance. It's best to stop then set up another session.

At the end of the session listen back to the songs and plan what you're going to do the next session. Remember this is only a rough approximation of the final recording, so hold off any major decisions until you've had a chance to come back to it fresh. Don't be tempted to mix now. Your ears and the engineers ears need to rest after the sonic assault they've just been through.

THE NEXT SESSION

Listen to your tracks fresh from the first session. If each part was recorded separately the engineer can sometimes collect the best parts of multiple versions of your song into one great track. You may wish to re-record a song or replace a vocal take. Finish your basic "core" tracks before adding harmonies and other parts. Tracking instrumental parts tends to be somewhat easier than vocals so you can book more time here.

THE MIX SESSION

Are all your parts done? Its time to mix! The engineer will need to book pre-session time to "prep" the tracks for mixdown and remove all the leftover junk tracks and noises from the sessions. This also gives the engineer a chance to get the songs in the "ballpark" and saves time during the session for the big decisions. Mixing is fun, but can also be nerve-racking- as they used to say, "vinyl is final". It's not unusual in the industry for a mix

engineer to spend a whole day mixing one song! You may not have the budget for this, but give the mixer as much time as you can. Some people want to be there for mix, some prefer to let the mixer do this on their own. Making a really good mix is a rather tedious process that takes a lot of concentration and as few distractions as possible. Most people who have sat in on a mixing session with a really good meticulous engineer will after a while do almost anything to get out of there! You should also limit the amount of people giving input on the mix. The guitar player will want one mix, the drummer another. You need someone who has a good grasp of the work as a whole to make the decisions, usually the producer or songwriter.

THE NEXT STEP?

The nice thing about recording is nothing spoils- you can always go back and refine your work. If you save your original tracks you can always add or replace tracks and re-mix. Often though, your music will have a shelf-life and its often best to finish it up and move on.

You should realize by now that recording is long, hard work! A lot depends on you for the results you get. It takes time to “get it right” even if you’re very prepared. Many artists want to concentrate on the art and leave the details to the studio/producer. This is ok ! Learning to record and mix is a lifetime learning process. Not everyone wants to produce/record themselves. It’s often hard/impossible to wear so many hats, or to be objective enough to judge your own work. There’s a reason most top engineers are close to middle-age - it took them that long to learn to do it! Even if you never intend to produce your own recordings, you should get some recording tools of your own and practice. This will get you used to the process, and will help you get your parts together before the big session. Good luck and happy tracking!

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