



Publications

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# What to Know Before Recording in the Studio

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This piece is meant to be a guide for those of you who have never been in a studio, or who have not been in one many times. It might also be a refresher for those who record often — I believe there’s something here for everyone. Take it, read it and adapt it to your needs. I should note that I found many of these points in various places. These are not unique thoughts, but I will say that I got a great deal of inspiration from Radiogram Records and Ledbelly Recording. I believe these tips will help you save money and create a better product in the studio. I give these pointers freely, as a service to all mankind! :-)

Enjoy!

— *Joe Nottoli*

### **What to Know...**

- Choose a studio where you can feel comfortable and get a lot of work done. You have to feel good about the facility and engineer. Decent equipment is a must, but specific world-class equipment is less important than a good facility and engineer.
- Tell your engineer *before coming to the studio* if you have a strict budget. The engineer should be able to offer advice to keep you fiscally on track throughout the project. You don’t want to settle for a half-baked project because you ran out of money at the end.
- Count on and budget for unforeseen delays. It always takes longer than you think it will.
- Get enough sleep before a recording session. If you’re tired, it will show.
- Don’t listen to loud music (or have a loud practice) before a recording session. Your ears will be fatigued, and you will not be as “sharp.”
- Practice a lot before you come. Have your parts “down cold.” The studio is too expensive a place to practice.
- Know all your vocal parts and who is going to sing them. Make sure your harmonies sound great *without* music!
- Singers should practice their vocals beforehand with the volume of the music very low, so that they can hear every subtlety of their voice. The microphone can pick up everything, even the sound of your breathing and mouth noises.
- Know your solo parts. Don’t waste time creating or perfecting them in the studio.
- Every detail counts. If you can’t get your part exactly right in rehearsal, the studio will reveal your lack of preparation larger-than-life. You’ll spend more money trying to fix it.

- Use some sort of recorder to record yourself/band live. This will allow you to hear any flaws in your performance or writing before bringing it to a recording session. This may also help you get used to the idea that you're being recorded.
- Keep groupies or posers out! Guests will distract you and may sway your opinion as to how the music should sound. Such distractions will often end up costing you more money!
- Know when to quit for the day. If you're tired, it'll show in your sound and in the feel of your music. We may stop before eight hours. Marathon sessions may not achieve the best results.
- Make sure your electronic gear (guitars' volume/tone pots, pedals, amplifiers, keyboards, cords, etc.) are in good working order and have fresh batteries, etc. Noisy or crackling equipment will hurt your overall sound. Cheap "stomp box" pedals should generally be avoided unless they are integral to your sound.
- Make sure your samples or sequences are perfect before the session. You should acclimate yourself to playing against a click track (or at least have a drummer that can lock to one). At the very least, practice with a cheap metronome.
- Be sure you have new strings, drum heads, drum sticks, etc. Bring spares.
- Be sure your drums are tuned and the hardware is in good working order, without squeaks.
- Be sure your guitars, basses and other instruments are properly set up and in good working order. You or a reputable luthier, guitar shop or tech should do this as often as needed — seasonally, or depending on how much or how hard you play them.
- Prepare more songs than you plan to record. You may decide that one song works better than another, or you may have extra time to record more songs. Make a short list of the most important songs that you plan on doing and record these first.
- Get to the studio on time. At most studios, the clock starts running when you are *scheduled* to be there.
- jFX Studio provides tasty snacks and bottled water for our clients, Bring any others that you want with you, so you do not have to make a run on the clock.
- Have an idea of what you want your songs to sound like. If you have a CD of another artist who has a certain sound you like/dislike, bring it to the studio and tell the engineer what you like/dislike about it. Be aware that your "studio sound" will evolve as you go through the tracking and mixing process. Your goal should be to transcend those example CDs and sound like a great example of yourself.
- Try to decide what the "focal point" of the song is. This will give you an idea of how to better perform, track and mix the song.
- Less is more when recording. Don't decide to add parts to your songs just because you are able. Too many parts may make a mix sound "cluttered." Every "voice" should be heard. Take away as much as you can. When you can't take any more parts out without hurting the song, stop.

- Get a digital tuner and learn how to use it. You'll have to tune to any piano or other non-tunable instrument you record — not the tuner. However, many tuners can be calibrated to pianos, etc. Do it carefully, if you'd like. Retune often.
- Always bring several copies of the music, chords and/or lyrics of your songs. Include key(s), temp(o) (ii), sections, and main melodies, etc. Give a copy to the engineer and any session musicians used. Don't forget the drummer.
- If you'll need any specific equipment in the studio, please let us know ahead of time so we can make sure it's available for you, in top working condition.
- Once you've set up, the engineer will focus on each individual musician in order to properly dial-in each instrument to its desired sound. Everyone else should hang out, without playing, until their turn comes.
- After a careful selection and placement of microphones and direct inputs, channels will be selected and adjusted, preamps set and tracks armed. You can expect this process to take a while, depending upon the size of the group and the complexity of the music to be recorded.
- The basic rhythm parts are usually recorded first. This is the “framework” of your song.
- When you're satisfied with your basic tracks it's time to do punch-ins — fixing small mistakes on a track without re-doing the entire part. When you make a mistake in the studio, keep playing unless the engineer stops you. Some things you can “punch.”
- Overdubs are next. These are all additional parts needed to make your song complete. These include instrumental solos and final lead vocals and harmonies. The engineer should take the time to insure a good melodic instrument part (lead guitar, piano, etc.) and spend a lot of time getting the vocals right.
- Beware of constantly wanting to “fix it in the mix.” Some things can be tweaked; some sound can be moved around to fix bad notes. But, if you don't get it right when tracking, it probably won't sound right when you start to mix. Nothing is more expensive than an extensive editing session to “build the perfect beast.” Get it right every step of the way.
- Tell the engineer how you want the mix to sound, but don't bother the engineer much during the rough mixing stage. Many times, the client will not be present initially. Many times the engineer will try several things that may not end up working out, but this mix is not the final product. The client will then be brought in to listen to a more finalized mix. The engineer will take notes on the client's comments and make the changes. Once approved, the client will get the master, or it will go on to final mastering at a true mastering facility.
- Listen to your final mix on several different stereo systems. I choose cars, a living room stereo and a computer with headphones and cheap speakers. Listen with the volume low, then normal, then high. If the mix holds up well under these different mix conditions, then it's ready for mastering or duplication.



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- Make several copies of your master (“safeties”). Keep them safe. This is what you paid for. Mark them with session name, date, series number (1/#), phone number, whether they may be replicated (manufactured into many copies for your album).
- Mastering is the final step before the duplication of your project. Each song is brought up to industry standards for airplay through careful compression, EQ, limiting, expansion, etc. The album’s order will be sequenced. Each piece will be made to sound like it belongs with others on the album. Levels will be altered a bit to make some songs a bit louder or softer, so that the album “flows.” This is almost always done at a specialized facility, having some very specialized equipment and a pristine listening environment. The mastering engineer’s skill set is different from a tracking or mixing engineer. The final product is a piece of media labeled “For Replication.” This is what any reputable CD manufacturing house will require for duplication. Mastering houses usually charge by the finished minute of material. jFX Studio can guide you through the process. We strongly recommend that you budget for this important step for any album or demo that you do.
- Stay focused and perform your best. Remember, this is what you live for — this is fun!

