

Making a professional audio recording

To help you plan your recording I've written some guidance notes for consideration. I hope this covers any questions you may have but feel free to drop me an e-mail if there's anything you need clarifying.

I've divided the process into 4 sections:

1. The arrangement
2. Recording
3. Editing and mixing
4. Mastering

1 – The arrangement

The first rule of making music should be "THERE ARE NO RULES" although most artists build on material that they have heard before – altering and developing as they compose and arrange.

Your arrangement is just as important a part of the final recording as any of the technical aspects.

My advice to all artists is to have a clear picture of the style and musical approach you want to portray in your final recording. Doing this will help you maintain focus and control over the recording process.

2 – Recording – live or studio?

Performing for an audience is a shared experience. I've been witness to performances from bands of "questionable ability" which were rapturously received – as long as the band enjoyed themselves as well then it was a great gig! Sadly, I've also paid high ticket prices to see artists of global reputation and been bitterly disappointed.

Live

Ideally, we could take the recording gear out to the (hopefully) great gig – press record and then hope that we could capture that audience excitement as well as a great performance. Not as easy as it sounds – few albums recorded live are worthy of calling "Great" (but there are some exceptions that are outstanding)

Studio

Sitting in front of strategically placed microphones we try to mimic the musical and emotional impact of being "right there" with the artist. It is at this point that it is worthy of engaging the services of a competent recording engineer. Listening to a recording is quite different from the live music experience. Technical errors such as "out of tune" or "out of time" can

be identified at the first listening by most people (with or without musical training). A competent engineer can "iron out" many problems but it is preferable to get things right first time.

One at a time or all together?

One great advantage of today's multi-track recording techniques is that all instrumentation does not need to be recorded at the same time.

It is common for instruments providing rhythm foundation (e.g. percussion, bass, rhythm guitar) to be recorded first and then other accompaniment added at a later time.

This approach does allow for the arrangement to be built up in "manageable" elements (and any minor technical errors corrected before moving on).

That said, many singer/songwriters or small combos will record their entire arrangements at one time – performing several "takes" to ensure that they have a choice of "best performance".

3 - Editing and Mixing

Time for some professional help here. Although the advent of digital audio technology has made a wealth of tools available, the time taken to get things right has not got any shorter.

Minor timing or tuning errors are sorted out this stage.

Mixing involves balancing the elements of a recording so that the whole thing sounds harmonious.

This may involve the inclusion of ...

1. Equalisation (EQ) – Accentuating or diminishing certain frequencies to help emphasise important elements of the recording (akin to altering the tone controls on your home hifi).
2. Reverb – recreating the "space" within which the recording was done – so providing "depth" to the recorded sound.
3. A long list of "effects" could also be added to provide tonal textures to the recording e.g. Chorus, Delay, Harmonic exciters etc. to suit your needs.

4 – Mastering

"Mastering" is applied to add the final gloss to a mix. Once your songs are recorded and mixed, they can be shaped, scooped, equalized, compressed etc. so that they sound as though they belong together.

Some producers concentrate on making mixes loud so they can compete with other commercial records when heard on the radio or on your iPod.

However, an important element of the mastering process is to ensure that your recorded songs still remain true when played over a wide range of audio equipment (sonic quality varies immensely between professional sound systems, home hifi ,mp3 players, monophonic radio or even cellphones.). In conclusion carefully processing (*mastering*) the finally mixed recording can add elements which will make your recording stand alongside any commercial label release.

Finally

I could ramble on in great detail about the technicalities but I hope I've included enough to give you an idea of what is involved.

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