

STUDIO RECORDING 101 FOR THE MUSICIAN

CONCEPTS TO HELP ENSURE YOUR MUSICAL SUCCESS

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Countless musicians, including me, have dreams of making an outstanding professional recording or becoming studio musicians. Unfortunately many musicians, including me, have often gone into the recording studio with a lack of knowledge or understanding of how to prepare or deal with the studio environment they will confront. I am providing this guide based upon my recording experience primarily in jazz combo, big band, and jingle sessions, generally learned on the job, and sometimes under trying circumstances. I am not including information on recording gear, acoustics/microphone placement, studio fees, physical product, copyright, marketing, licensing, and so forth. That information is contained in various texts devoted to the music industry available at the best book stores or on-line.

While there is no easy road to recording studio success, I hope that this guide will assist you in your journey. Please consult studio professionals in your area and comb the internet for “how to” videos and articles on the recording studio process. There are music industry/recording forums on *LinkedIn* as well excellent magazines on recording, though those are aimed at engineers. Check various music periodicals for columns or articles on recordings as well as music/product reviews.

Remember, it’s not about you; it is about the music and the ensemble! The key elements you need to succeed include: a positive attitude, aptitude, total preparation and musical mastery, flexibility, consistency, creativity, patience, team spirit, spontaneity, and the ability to LISTEN, LISTEN, and by the way, LISTEN!

YOUR PREFERRED SONIC ENVIRONMENT:

- What are your favorite STUDIO jazz combo recordings sonically?
- What are your favorite STUDIO recordings of your primary instrument sonically?
- Where and what year were the recordings made, and who were the recording engineers?
- What appeals to you about the sound of the recordings?
- When listening, consider the recording balance of the instruments, stereo separation, clarity, tone (flat, dark, bright, and so forth). Is the sound that is full or hollow, close or remote?
- Do the instruments and the ensemble sound natural – even if they are amplified?
- How much reverberation is used? Is the sound “wet” or “dry”?
- Is the sound natural or electronic, distorted or clear, compressed or life-like?
- Which leads to the most important question for you to answer in your own recording project: **WHAT DO YOU IT TO SOUND LIKE?**

ADVANCE PREPARATION AND REALITY CHECKS:

- What is the purpose of the recording session?
- Are you the ensemble leader, featured performer, a side-man with the group, or have you been contracted for a particular recording session?
- How much time and effort must you and/or the band have to prepare before the session takes place?
- STUDIO FEES: Reach an understanding up front and in writing in a contract if possible before the session takes place. Is delivery of a final mix included? Who is paying the bills?
- YOUR FEE: If you are hired as a “sideman” to do a session, what should you be paid? Will there be a contract is this a union or non-union session?
- Investigate several studios, engineers, the sonic environment, lighting, parking, security, a “hang” area.

- If possible, observe a session preferably in the style or ensemble format you will record.
- If you are the leader, work with the engineer to select the best day and time for a 3, 3 & ½, or 4-hour session. If this is the band's first session, less is better than more, be conservative in your initial goals.
- How much lead time will you need to fully prepare X number of pieces for recording?
- Select works to be recorded with the length per piece set for the time you have to record.
- Determine the degree of musical difficulty and where to place each work in the allotted time.
- If at all possible, perform the music in two different locations in the order that you plan to record.
- Make a scratch recording from a laptop, zoom recorder, or a phone with video to get an idea of how the music sounds away from the band stand.
- A typical recording session is 3 to 4 hours, with at least 30-45 minutes for the musicians to arrive, set up drums, amps, keyboards, etc., get comfortable, mics placed in proper location, headphone mix and balance, warm up (some), and THEN do mic level checks/balance before recording begins. Add time for playbacks, breaks, mic adjustments, musical modifications, and so forth. The engineer works BEFORE you arrive and AFTER you leave.....
- Album or even demo recordings may require multiple sessions, depending on the musical format, style, amount and difficulty of the literature. More costs more than less.....

WITH A LITTLE HELP FOR AND FROM MY FRIENDS:

- Provide CUE sheets – title/composer, basic arrangement information, solo order, featured musician(s), dynamic levels, endings, and timing(s) for the performers, the engineer and an assistant (a friend who knows the music as well as you do or can read a score) to count down events during the session.
- Well in advance of the session give the engineer a “scratch recording” or links to groups playing the music you will record. Note, some people think this is a bad idea.
- You may/may not have time to do multiple takes. You may/may not be able to “play along and punch in” to repair mistakes – this depends on the engineer and studio gear sophistication.
- For commercial dates, you MAY play with a click-track through the headphones. This is generally not done for straight ahead acoustic based jazz recording sessions.
- Agree in advance to the order of selections: 1) something comfortable, 2) something more challenging, 3) the most challenging piece, 4) and finish with something less challenging.
- If you have two hours for actual recording, four works is a good number with approximately 5-9 minutes per piece. Be happy if you get three pieces recorded to everyone's satisfaction.
- WOOPS FACTOR: You will need time for false starts, flubbed entrances, obvious mistakes, missed cues, and the “and then I said...” solo, and so forth.
- ATTITUDE: maintain your patience and purpose, give and take, forgiveness, respect and celebration. It's not about you....it is about the music and the ensemble!

TIPS FOR BEFORE AND IN THE STUDIO:

- As said above: what is the purpose of this recording session? This is not a concert or a club date.
- As said above: select works to be recorded and exact length per piece in the amount of time you have.
- As said above: determine the degree of difficulty and where to place each work in the allotted time.
- As said above: determine solo orders and durations per piece – this is not a club date or a concert – longer is not better.
- ABSOLUTE MASTERY of all materials to be recorded is essential for each piece.
- Set a consistent tempo for each piece, MM = __, practice with a metronome, check tempo span in rehearsals. Remember, you will generally not use a click track for a jazz combo recording session.
- Practice the hand-off from one soloist to the next; make sure no musical seams are showing.
- Musical cues can and should come from the drums to set up what is coming up next.
- ENSEMBLE UNITY: style, technique and purpose on each piece. Is it musically convincing?

- Rehearse in a recording studio type of setup – employing some separation, maintaining visual contact.
- Depending on your instrument, stand and/or sit when you record – practice this several times, especially if you are reading either out to the music stand or looking down at the music.
- Anticipate the amount of physical and visual closeness, or isolation among musicians in the studio.
- IN THE STUDIO: make no unnecessary sounds on your instrument, stay focused, and do whatever the engineer asks you to do.
- SAY WHAT? Prepare to play the softest, loudest, busiest, most difficult and simplest music for the engineer.
- LIGHTING: Can you see the music perfectly on the stand? If you need a stand light, bring your own with an extension cord and outlet box.
- I-PAD FOR MUSIC DISPLAY: if you are not using paper, bring your foot switch if you use one, your power cable and a strip. Be prepared to screen adjust lighting.
- HEADPHONES: Decide if you will be “double” or “single” muffed – impacted by the degree of separation and/or isolation in the recording studio.
- HEADPHONE MIX: What do you want to hear while you are recording? You should be able to adjust the mix you get in the headphones through the outputs on the box. However, if there is no box and you need something in the headphone mix, ask the engineer for help.
- TUNING/INTONATION: (1) if you are using the studio’s acoustic piano, you should request that it be tuned – you may have to pay for this or it may be provided. (2) Bass and guitar should tune before the session begins. (3) Revisit individual and band pitch before each piece via electronic tuners or the piano – which may change depending on room temperature. Pitch differential is constant, prepare to adjust.
- COUNT OFFS 1: who is doing the count-off for each piece? Rehearse/practice with the last two counts said very soft or not at all. On some pieces the drummer may do a simple set up, a full measure, part of a measure, one or two beats in tempo. The verbal count goes in front of this and ends on the last two counts or very quietly.
- COUNT OFFS 2: the impact on breathing for singers, woodwind and brass instrumentalists, breathe in time, a breath crescendo, not rushed or emotional in response.
- ENDINGS 1: Avoid drawn out fermatas unless EVERYONE can see the give of the release. Determine how long an ending “long note” will be, use drum seal offs, short endings, vamps with fades, whatever removes guess work in the ending.
- ENDINGS 2: do not move or make any sound after the last note release for at least five seconds. This allows the “sound cloud” to clear, especially if there is a loud cymbal crash or a piano “walk up” on a soft chord alone to a fermata, and so forth.
- TIMING: Know when enough is enough and when it’s time to move on to the next piece.
- BREAKS 1: Get up, stretch and move after each piece, even if just for a couple of minutes, and stay hydrated. Avoid caffeine and sugar.... Bottled water is your friend, keep it handy.
- BREAKS 2: Give the horn players a break; have the rhythm section record without them.
- REMAIN POSITIVE: T.T.T. (Things Take Time) and PIAST (Progress: it’s a scary thing!)

THE DAY OF THE SESSION – especially if you are the leader or a key performer in the band

- Get a good night’s rest.
- *Feed the engine* – no junk food and limit the caffeine. No smoking, no alcohol, no drugs.
- Find your personal focus point – return to it repeatedly.
- Dress comfortably and appropriately for the studio temperature. Bring a light weight jacket as some studios are very cold, which will impact your instrument and you.
- Mental and Physical Warmup: I advise doing some at home as once you are in the studio, an effective warm up may not be possible.
- Will you need your own music stand with a piece of carpet or felt on the rack to remove any clatter?
- Drummers/Percussionists: prepare carpeted or felt racks for sticks, mallets and brushes.

- Large gear: you might be able to deliver your gear the evening or day before the session – it depends on how busy the studio is and if there would be an extra cost for storage. Make sure you are insured!
- BRASS: bring an old towel for the floor to catch water from your instrument.
- Everyone: double check your instrument as applicable and bring pads, swabs, fuses, extra patch cords, valve oil, reeds, strings, extra sticks/mallets, tools for simple repairs, and anything you might need.
- Use your personal amps, keyboards, drums, percussion, gear, etc., and make sure it's all in perfect working condition.
- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive before the session is to begin to unload, park and setup. Ask for help from your colleagues if needed to set up and to tear down and repack.
- DON'T BE LATE or UNPREPARED, and DON'T MAKE EXCUSES: The music will suffer and the engineer's work cannot be done successfully without your commitment to the highest musical and personal standards.

FINALLY - Be grateful for the recording experience and thank everyone, especially the engineer whose work continues when you are finished. While basic recording gear, how-to-guides, and software is readily available at a reasonable price, many musicians will never have the opportunity to record in a professional studio. When it is your turn, be more than prepared, give it as much as you humbly can to the session so that you and everyone else will get as much out the experience as possible. Experience will be your best teacher!

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