

# How To Get The Most Out of a Recording Session

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## 1. Preparation

Whether you want to record a single, EP or album, one of the most important parts of recording is the preparation you put in before you hit the studio. The more time you put into the preparation, the more you can get out of the recording experience.

### Practice

To make sure that you are ready to record, practicing your instrument effectively will make a huge difference to how the recording session will go. For example, **going over everything that you will be recording at least once per day for a week or so before the session** is an effective use of your time. It will mean that when you arrive to the session, you will be able to perform confidently and get the best takes possible at the time of recording. It can be disappointing to listen back to your final recording and hear mistakes or poor takes that could have been performed better if only you had practiced a little more. If you are well rehearsed, it will also mean that you can get through the recording process much more quickly, which will save you money spent on studio time.

**Practicing technique** can also be helpful to make sure that you are putting less conscious effort into your playing, and can achieve a much more controlled or pleasing sound from your voice or instrument. Practicing along to a **metronome** is also valuable. Many people turn up to a recording session and have never played to a click, and it can really be off-putting if you have never done it before. You will not always record to a click, but it can often help a recording sound better and can make editing and changing things around later much more easy.

**If you are in a band, holding a series of practices** leading up to the recording session will make sure that the whole band is gelling and that the recording will come out sounding cohesive. If you are a vocalist, **memorising lyrics** will make performing much more effortless, exciting and comfortable.

### Equipment

Make sure that the equipment you are going to take to the session (if any) is well maintained. Give it a clean, get new strings, sticks or drum heads. If you have your own microphone, consider taking it, as you may already know what results you can achieve with it. If you feel like your gear is not up to scratch, check if the studio has something better or consider hiring. It might help if you put a little time into researching what equipment would suit you best, and you can have a talk about it with whoever will be recording you.

### Exercise

It can help if you are in shape, especially if you play a physically demanding instrument, but being fit will help you in most circumstances. I'm not talking very much here, maybe just a little walk here and there, or a few press-ups from time to time to get the blood flowing.

### The songs

It is a good idea to get the music you will be recording together before the recording session. You might be recording vocal covers over a backing track, original songs or traditional music, but it is worthwhile to **have a plan of what you are going to be recording**. If you are going to leave a lot of the music down to improvisation, it is still important to have a general awareness of where you will go with the songs. It is sometimes great to experiment with ideas in the studio, but this can increase the amount of time spent recording, which means you will have to consider that when budgeting for your session. A recording session will generally go much more smoothly and quickly if all of the material is written or decided on before starting the recording process.

### Record Demos

Recording your own **rough demos onto your laptop or even your phone** can help with the songwriting process, and will let you look at the songs in a different way. It can also help with practice, as you can play along to them before the recording session. You can also send the rough demos to whoever will be recording you to give them an idea of what you will be doing and will give them a chance to prepare too.

### Pre-Production

This is often a great way of getting things right, especially if it is a larger project you are working on. Meeting with the producer or engineer early on means that you can talk about how you want to orchestrate the whole project and whether or not you are **going for a specific sound or atmosphere**. If you will be recording to a click track, it is often good to get it sorted in pre-production so that you can practice to it before the session and you can turn up and play comfortably on the day. At Black Cave Recordings, we prefer to do this in person, but we can do it over the phone or through emails if necessary.

## 2. Booking the Studio

### Budget

It is often tricky to find somewhere that suits your budget and will deliver exactly what you want. Have a look at what funds you have available and contact a number of recording studios with your project proposal to see if you can afford them. There are different routes you can take when recording a project. Black Cave Recordings can take you to a fully kitted-out **recording studio for the whole project**, which will cost a little more than other options, but there will be more high-end equipment at your disposal and the rooms are built to have a great sound.

We can also **record anywhere** you like with a mobile unit, for instance at your band practice space, a concert hall or your own home, which can ultimately save you some money while still getting great results. You could record certain elements at the studio (such as drums) and record the rest elsewhere, saving you money overall. This all depends on your budget, so it is good to know your plan and how much money is at your disposal. Mixing and mastering should also be considered when budgeting, as those will also have to be carried out once you have finished recording. If you go with the same company for recording, mixing and mastering, you can often get a package discount

### Length of the session

The time it takes to record will depend on the size of your project and how prepared you are (this is why I stressed the importance of preparation earlier). If you want to get an idea of how long it will take, **play through the material you will be recording from start to finish and time it**. Then think about how many takes you will need for each song. Three takes per song is usually going to be enough. If there are a few sections that you aren't happy with after a third run through, consider the time it will take to add those.

Add the same amount of time again per musician/instrument if you will be recording more (unless it will be a live band recording), and you will be getting close to a rough estimate of time needed. You can then factor in breaks, chat and setting-up, etc. but that generally depends on how you feel and how organised you are.

### Location

Have a think about where you would like the recording to take place. Is the location of the recording studio important to you? **Are you willing to travel far to get the recording done?** Would you rather be able to record at a location of your choice and move around? Some studios have the capacity of staying/living there for the duration of the whole project, which can be very convenient (don't be afraid to ask the studio whether or not you can do that).

## 3. The Recording Session

### Turn up on time

There's not much more to say about this, but it shows you are serious and professional if you turn up on time to your session. It also will mean that you'll have a longer recording session than if you turn up late and will not be paying for time that you are not there.

### Warm up

Whether you warm up before you get to the recording session or while things are being set up, it will mean that you are ready to go when the record button is hit. It is important to warm up so that you **don't do yourself any damage while recording**, as a sudden start can be detrimental to your muscles and body. The first take is sometimes the best because you are fresh and have a clear mind, so being warmed up at the start of the session is massively beneficial.

### Take breaks

It is important to take breaks so that you can recover from the physical exertion of playing music. **Don't be afraid to take rests** because you want to fit as many takes into the studio time you have. By taking breaks you may end up with less takes, but those takes may very well be of a higher quality, which is ultimately more desirable. It is also important to bear in mind that sometimes taking **too many breaks can interfere with your flow or concentration**. If you record a number of takes, you might get more of an idea about what you want to achieve and where to take your recording musically. You might have the right energy and feel, and if you take a break it might be difficult to get back into the mindset you had before the break. Make sure you get the right balance between working and taking breaks.

### Keep hydrated

Drinking water throughout the recording session and eating properly is important so that your body and mind are in the right state to deal with whatever you are attempting. When singing, hydrating your voice is important, and when playing an instrument that requires a lot of exertion, you will need water and food energy to keep going. **Don't skip breakfast.**

### Take (constructive) advice

It is often difficult for a performer to accept advice on how to play something better or mistakes that they are making. It is easy to feel like 'I know best', but make sure that you don't take comments personally, as (most of the time) they are just trying to help. **Having a second opinion from someone who is listening and not playing is sometimes invaluable.** The producer can often give great help with what to do and what not to do, as they usually have an amount of experience of working with musicians and are often musicians themselves. Bandmates can also be of help with this. Deliberating over getting the 'perfect take' can cost a lot. The producer/engineer and bandmates should be helpful in knowing when to move on.

It can be useful to speak to whoever is recording you before you start so that it is clear whether you want direction from them or not, and if so, how much. It can be very useful having input from a producer, but it can also interfere if you have a clear vision of what you are trying to achieve.

### Be professional

Presenting yourself in a professional manner shows that you are committed to what you do. When recording, it is beneficial to **focus on the task in hand and not mess around.** You have to remember that you are more than likely paying per hour, so the more time you waste, the more you will have to pay to get the recording finished. You will also be around expensive equipment, so make sure that you don't mistreat it.

### Enjoy it

Have fun while you're recording. It can be daunting when you have a bunch of microphones pointed at you that pick up every little move you make, but if you do your best to **feel relaxed and enjoy it**, it will show in the way that you play or sing, and whoever will eventually listen to it will feel that too.

## 4. After the Session

Put your feet up and have a rest! Listen back to what you've done and make sure that you are happy with it. If there are parts you don't feel 100% sure about, go back and do them again if you can, as it's not good to have doubts. Do not have the attitude of "we can fix it in the mix", as sometimes it really cannot be fixed.

Mixing and mastering is the next stage, and however you decide to do it, you can be happy that you've done the best you can at the recording stage. I might go into a little more detail about the next stages in another PDF.

All the best,  
Andrew Rankine

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