

Artist Underground

Milwaukee's best all-digital recording, mixing & mastering

Work Methods and Band Preparation Guide

by Troy Stetina

Budget and Pre-Production

The better prepared you are, the faster you'll get done and the better you'll sound. A good quality demo for a four-piece rock band will probably run somewhere around 40-80 times final recorded length. That works out to about 10-20 hours of studio time for a 15 minute demo CD. A full-length CD release is done to an even higher standard. Figure on 80-120 hours+ for a well done, 60 minute CD. Of course, these are rough estimates. Some bands have come through much quicker and others spent longer. And of course, other styles that rely upon samples and sequencing can be far different in terms of time—usually faster. But it's all up to you to decide when you have reached your goals. Just keep in mind that overly rushing things can be counterproductive.

If budget constraints are significant and you need to save money, limit the number of songs first. After all, it's far better to have just two songs that sound good, than a lot of lousy-sounding ones! Adequate preparation is the other important aspect of saving money and doing an efficient recording. Pre-production is the best method. Try to record yourself on a home system or 4 track—even a boom box—to demo your songs first and do a “dry run.” If you can do this, you are encouraged to bring this in prior to the session, so we can hear what you have in mind and develop appropriate recording strategies. Make sure you can all play the songs “in your sleep.” Also, make sure your instruments are in good working order before the session. A lot of time can be burned up changing strings, tuning drum heads, and fixing bad jacks.

Should you decide to do pre-production in the studio, we can offer professional arrangement advice and even co-write music with you if you should so desire. Finally, you should realize that this is a learning process and look to the long run as well as the short term product (your CD). Every insight you gain through this recording experience will make your next recording effort that much better.

Reference Material

We suggest you bring in some well-produced CDs in the direction of how you'd like to sound. We may use them at the start to point us generally in the right direction, but we can go much further if needed—even analyzing and duplicating individual instrument tones when necessary. Later during mixing and mastering, the use of good reference material is even more critical because after listening to the same music many times, one loses some degree of objectivity. Your ears adjust to the way things sound and you need to jolt them back to some familiar standard. And it's nice to be able to switch back and forth between your mix and a \$50,000+ major label mix and realize that you are indeed right there “in the ballpark”!

Tracking and Overdubbing

Some bands prefer to record all together, “live,” to keep their familiar feel and momentum. This is also a bit faster and often keeps more of the “rawness” factor. A higher quality performance may be obtained by tracking drums first, along with just scratch guitar/bass/vocals (to keep the right feel), and then overdubbing the scratch tracks one at a time. This way you can fully focus

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on each element. But either way, it's your choice. BTW, our iso booths are "wall-wired" into the control room so guitarists and bassists can play in the control room where they can hear the mix much better and lock into the drum groove easier. That is my preferred recording method. Of course, you can all see one another, and through the talk-back mic everyone can speak to and hear one another (although we often like to mute the drummer, so we can laugh behind his back).

Your Performance and Editing

You want to sound your best or you wouldn't be here. Your best performance is our goal, too. We may make technical (sharp/flat, rushed/dragged) or "feeling" suggestions for ways to try to improve your takes, should you welcome that, but often the best method is to simply give you a "comfort zone" to freely stretch out and experiment. For focal points like lead vocals and solos, we often do multiple takes then select the best of each, pulling it all together into one composite, "super-take." We realize that the best performance is not necessarily the most technically correct. Sure we are listening for that aspect of course, but it's more about attitude and emotion. After all, pitch and timing can be fixed with proper editing... but there is no "add emotion" button on the computer!

And that brings up the issue of non-linear editing. We can literally correct timing errors and pitch trouble with a few mouse clicks. However, there is a limit. A mediocre performance can be made good, a good one can be made great, and a great one can be turned into perfection. But a lousy performance can't be made perfect! Expect a few minutes per song for typical cleanup on good takes. A few hours per song for heavy duty help. BTW, you'll quickly find that when recording at this kind of quality level, there's literally nowhere to hide—all your mistakes and timing inconsistencies will be laid bare! Of course you don't want to sound mechanically perfect (unless that's your style). That's where the producer comes in, defining what's important to fix and what's just a little grease in the cogs, for "feel."

To Click or Not to Click...

Studio drummers are familiar with playing to a "click track"—essentially a metronome that keeps the tempo perfectly even. For live drummers with little or no studio experience, this is often the biggest single stumbling block. Now truth be told, you don't have to keep absolutely perfect timing—a little fluctuation is tolerable. But if you *can't* play to a click, it is likely that you're fluctuations are beyond the "tolerable" level. So we highly recommend that before recording, get a metronome in your drummer's ear for a few weeks, practicing all your songs to a click. The band will get much tighter. In the studio, this translates into a clearer, punchier sound and more professional-quality groove. This is ideal to shoot for. Yet, if you haven't mastered the click, all is not lost. In many cases a few run-throughs with a click, pinpointing trouble spots, is enough to improve a performance considerably even if we ultimately choose to track without a click (because it is perhaps distracting the drummer and causing more trouble than it's helping).

On the other hand, drummers that have mastered playing to a click may or may not use it depending upon the situation, and therefore, may choose not to use it without any negative consequence.

Arrangement Changes

The computer editing system gives us unparalleled flexibility in terms of arrangement. Should you later want a shorter, radio mix or extended version of a song, we can seamlessly cut out to shorten, or loop sections to lengthen a song at any time. This can also be handy for that occasional situation when basic tracks were laid down incorrectly... "Hey, that verse needs to be two phrases longer!" No problem.

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Special Sound FX and Drum Looping

If you have any special requests for film-type sound effects (i.e., rain, breaking glass, car noise, etc.), let us know. We can probably get it. We can also create drum grooves and loops from scratch to fit any style and tempo.

Mixing and Mastering

This is where it all comes together. We recommend not trying to mix on the same day as tracking or editing. Start with fresh ears! Sure, we'd make more money by packing everyone in for 12 hour days, but here we are more concerned with the quality of our finished products.

A good mix is a balancing act between separating the instruments on one hand and yet allowing them to gel together an appropriate amount. A typical low-budget studio mix allows everything to muddle together without being able to distinguish the details and nuance of the instruments. Avoiding this fate is a two-fold issue: 1) a tight performance and/or appropriate editing, and 2) a knowledgeable use of EQ. Basically, the instruments must not be allowed to mask one another excessively. While there are no absolute rules about how any individual instrument must sound, there are very definite principles governing how they combine and whether they will obscure one another or not. But there's even more to it than this. Fundamentally, a good mix also has to capture and deliver the right attitude. And, it's got to drive—with some energy—and sound good on any different stereo system, quiet or loud. That's asking a lot.

Total mixing recall allows us to store every aspect of the mix in the computer. When we get it to sound good, we run the multitrack mix and create a two-channel (L/R) stereo mix that sounds *exactly* as we have prepared it. We then master this, running it through several finalizing processors which “smooth” or “polish” the sound somewhat as well as increase it's “punchiness” and raise the final levels so your CD sounds appropriately loud. Unlike most other studios, we also mix and master using a variety of stereo speakers because, after all, you are going to be listening to it on stereo systems... It's got to sound good in the real world, not just in the studio control room! This is a big, big problem in many studios because everything tends to sound good there, in an ideal setting and played on the best monitors money can buy. The real test is on *your* stereo at home, in your car, on your boombox, or on the radio.

The real beauty of total recall computer mixing becomes apparent at this point. Even with proper use of reference material, a person will tend to lose some perspective after hours of mixing. So instead of wasting time and laboring over every fine detail right away (you may even make things worse as your ears get numb), we get a rough mix up and sounding pretty good on first instinct. Then we run it, master it and burn a CD-R so you take it home. Now you can judge the mix on your own time and on your own terms—right on the systems that you are most familiar with. After a few days, you'll have more perspective and a much better idea whether the balances are exactly right, or if things are skewed a bit. You can then come back into the studio and we'll make final tweaks, re-run the mix and mastering precisely, giving you exactly the same thing but with your specific changes. Undertaken repeatedly, a mix can be honed to absolute perfection and true major-label quality is achievable.

I wish you the best. Don't hesitate to ask any questions you might have. Good luck with your project, and maybe I'll be writing about you in GuitarOne magazine soon! Or even doing your transcriptions for Hal Leonard Corp.!

—Troy Stetina