Checklist For Productive Studio Sessions

-General-

Booking out a studio to get a CD recorded and released might seem like an exciting and adventurous process, but it's important to note that there is a lot of hard work that goes into releasing a professional, commercially-ready product.

It's worth avoiding coming into the session hung over, or overly fatigued. Recording for days straight can at times feel like running a marathon, and it's advisable to come into the session fresh and aware.

The hours in the studio can build up, not leaving much time for life outside. It's important to note that bringing friends/girlfriends/family etc. to the session ultimately affects productivity negatively. It is possible to maintain greater perspective and work flow when cutting out distractions from the outside world as much as possible. When you're in the studio working, as far as as you're concerned, you are doing the most important thing in the world. Those close to you will have plenty of time to enjoy the product when it's finished.

On this note, we prefer to bring in the minimum necessary number of people for each session. For instance, if the band has a lead songwriter and are recording drums, we only bring the lead songwriter and the drummer for that session, along with the drum tech and other necessary studio personnel. Having an entire band present at all sessions is counter-productive at the best of times, and it is to be avoided whenever possible. Everyone will get their turn recording and it is more likely that they will stay enthused about the process when they haven't been through every square inch of it.

The sessions may get long, but that's never a reason to neglect personal hygiene! We all have to live with each other in the same room for days on end. Please don't expose someone else to what you wouldn't like to be exposed to!

-Pre-Production-

• IMPORTANT: Map all the tempos in your songs in BPM (beats per minute). Make sure to notate what bars all the tempo changes occur and if applicable, what time signature each section is in.

   • Notate where all the song sections begin. ie. Bar 17 – Verse 1, Bar 34 – Pre Chorus etc.

   • If possible, record demo versions of your songs for your own benefit. This allows you to hear the individual elements as part of a collective, ensuring that no out-of-key notes or chords, abrupt changes, rhythmically/harmonically cluttered sections etc. make it through.

• If you are not positive that your songs will translate well to record, invest in some pre-production time to look at the material in detail with your producer and sort out the kinks prior to recording.

• It is very important to record guide tracks for the drums to be tracked on top of. This is a necessary procedure when overdub recording that should be done with your engineer present. In a worst case scenario, the engineer should at least look over the guide tracks ahead of time.

• IMPORTANT: Ensure you know **exactly** what you will be playing before you even enter the studio. All parts, arrangements etc. should be finalised in pre-production and drilled until they are firmly entrenched in the memory. Unless your music relies on inspired improvisation, it is always a better idea to write parts, commit them to memory and practice them religiously prior to engaging in any recording process whatsoever.

• Preparation will save you countless headaches down the track. Make sure your pre-production process leaves your songs in an impeccable state, ready to take anything you throw at them down the track.

-Recording-

Drummers

• Re-skin the drumkit - preferably the night before the session. Skins sound best when brand-spankin'- new, so avoid playing them in too much. Make sure they are seated well.

• Bring the drumkit into the studio the night before your session. This allows it to acclimate to the room overnight, and will avoid many tuning-related headaches the next day.

• If you are not confident in tuning the drumkit towards your desired sound ask your engineer ahead of time as he will have contacts, or tune the drums himself.

   • Bring extra sticks, a muting ring for the snare and Moongel for the toms.

   • Oil up the pedals so that they do not squeak.

   • Separate the cymbals from the drums on the vertical axis as much as is practical for your style of play.

   • Space the kit out as much as is practical to your style of play. Cluttered kits don't record well.

   • If a whole blanket is needed to stop the bass drum sounding out of whack, then there's something wrong with the skin, tuning or the drum itself. This needs to be sorted out ahead of time. The most that should be needed is a feather pillow inside the drum.

• If you're after a punchy, fat kick sound, make sure a port is cut into the front (resonant) head. If your port is on the edge of the skin, rotate the skin so that the port is at the top.

• If playing pop/rock/metal/fusion/energetic music, try to get used to hitting the drums hard, but the cymbals a little softer. Be especially mindful of the hi-hats, as they always seem to be too loud, and never too soft on recordings.

• Practice your parts to a metronome, unless you play strictly 'live' music like jazz, blues etc. In the latter case you should practice your parts and/or jam with the band as much as possible.

   • Know the songs like the back of your hand.

   • Do not play your drums while the engineer is setting up mics around them. Their hearing is usually

      sensitive and fragile, and they will never react well to this (nor should they).

• Once the drums are set-up and mic'ed, DO NOT MOVE THEM. If you ever need to adjust something, consult with the engineer first. Moving drums mere centimeters can completely change the way the microphones pick them up.

Bassists

• Make sure the intonation/sound of the instrument is okay. If possible get it serviced by a reputable technician shortly before recording.

• Buy new strings for the bass. Make sure to stretch them out for a few minutes by hand before you begin tracking. Put brand new strings on after every 4 hours of play time, as they deteriorate in tone quickly.

   • Bring spare strings, picks, leads, batteries (for active pickups) etc.

   • Ensure your playing sits solidly with the drums. Practice to a metronome. Know the songs well.

   • Ensure that you are playing the instrument in-tune. It is common for basses to be played sharp even when the tuners say your open strings are 'in'. If you consistently play sharp, consider tuning the instrument slightly flat.

• If you are after an aggressive tone, then you need to play aggressively. If you are after a warm tone, then you need to play in a subdued way. The final bass tone is almost completely under your control, and your performance shapes the way it will sound.

Guitarists

• Since guitarists are commonly the only players burdened with the task of recording multiple takes of the same parts on top of each other, we tend to nominate one rhythm player out of each band to record all the rhythm tracks on the CD. This is for the purpose of consistency, clarity and keeping the final mix uncompromised. Each player sounds different through the same gear, so it makes sense to attempt to keep the record as consistent and sonically ideal as possible.

• Make sure the intonation/sound of the instrument is okay. If possible get it serviced by a reputable technician shortly before recording.

• Buy new strings for the guitar. Strings will dull down quickly, so it's important to only restring the instrument the night before, or the morning of the session. We commonly switch the strings over again after each day of tracking.

- Bring spare strings, picks, leads, batteries (for active pickups) etc.

- If you have locking tuners, bring an allen key of appropriate size.

- Avoid using a floating tremolo loaded guitar for rhythm parts. The springs will make noise and the guitar won't hold tune and intonation as well as a fixed bridge loaded one.

- If using a tube amp, ensure it has been re-tubed recently and sounds good.

- Practice rigorously to a metronome. You may be the only player tasked with playing at least two identical performances, possibly even 4 or beyond. You need to play consistently and sit well with yourself. If you have a recording rig at home, practice quad-tracking the same rhythm parts.

• If you are playing heavier material, make sure to DIG IN to the strings. Bring out that aggression with as little amp gain/distortion as possible. There is a middle ground to be had here between aggression and knocking the string out of tune, but with practice (and the right string gauge) it can be found.

Vocalists

• Practice good microphone technique. Stand up close to the pop shield when singing & back away for the bigger punctuations. Try to control yourself dynamically, rather than relying on a compressor for it.

- Don't have a big night out before coming to the studio. Make sure your voice is fresh & ready to go.

- Bring a bottle of spring water and keep it at room temperature. This is the best ingestible vocal aid you can have.

• You may be asked to repeat certain phrases a multitude of times in search of that 'perfect' take, so make sure your voice is up to the task.

• If your voice is on the fringe, then don't push it. The last thing anyone wants is for the vocalist to start croaking midway through a recording session!

-Editing-

• Allow some time for the editing of drums prior to recording the instruments on top. Unless the drummer is superhuman, you will find the odd mistake you want fixed. This can be done in natural- sounding ways like combining parts of one performance with another. The beat doesn't have to be rigid and machine-like, but it *does* need to keep solid time.

• Pitch correction, comping, cutting, pasting & correcting timing errors are all editing, *not* mixing processes. Ideally, all this should be done before a track is presented for mixing.

-Mixing-

- • Ensure that the session or tracks you are providing are in a comprehensible state.

- • Provide all tracks as consolidated audio files, unless prior agreements are made to take certain tracks as MIDI data. Tracks should all line up to the same starting position.

• Make sure that all editing has been done ahead of time & that unused takes & files have all been cleaned up.

• Ensure that all 'silences', amp hiss, and noises which aren't the musical signal itself have been edited out of the provided tracks.

• Name the tracks *consistently* across all your songs/sessions. For instance 'Kick' in song 1 should be 'Kick' across the entire project, rather than 'BD' in song 3.

- • Export your tracks at consistent volume levels between songs. *DO NOT NORMALIZE*.

- • Be descriptive as well as consistent with your track names. Main vocals should be distinguished from backing vocals, cleans from shouts, gangs from individual vocals. Different singers should be denoted. Different guitar parts or players should be denoted. Changes in tone between songs should be denoted.

- • Provide a MIDI file containing the tempo map information for every song.

- • Unless prior agreements are made, ensure all tracks requiring it have been re-amped.

- • One song per folder.

- • **IMPORTANT!** *Check* your files. Re-import everything you've bounced and ensure that it all lines up correctly, and nothing is wrong. Triple check before sending files off to be mixed, because it will save you tons of hassles down the track.

• We prefer if the songs are provided as consolidated tracks at whatever bit depth and sample-rate they were recorded at. The preferred rate is 24-bit 44kHz.

- • If tracks do not meet the above criteria they will NOT be accepted.

-Mastering-

- • Send a copy of the songs, clearly labeled by their final names, along with a written album playlist order & any relevant notes (such as settings and mix changing between songs).

- • Make sure to provide stereo bounces of the tracks at whichever bit depth and sample rate they were mixed at. We will take stems, but they will incur an extra charge.

- • Always provide lossless audio files in an uncompressed format.

- • Provide the artist name, album name, and song titles with their appropriately correct grammar, spelling and punctuation. Be sure to include any specific requests for crossfades between songs. Provide ISRCs if applicable.

Final Words

All the preparation tips & advice given here is based off countless studio experiences by a multitude of producers and engineers. They detail what will work towards achieving everyone's goals quicker & more efficiently. Getting the preparation down allows you to enjoy your experience in the studio rather than be snowed under by stress and deadlines. Because at the end of the day, what's truly important is the music, and the more time we can dedicate to it, the better the end product will be.