

Session Tips

(All the things you'll want to know **BEFORE** your first session!)

Every recording project is special and unique and requires careful, advance planning to make the most appropriate use of time and money and have a quality project be the end result. Here are 31 guidelines that will help you do just that!

Preparing your Material and your Budget

1.) **Identify your purpose!**

Unless you have an unlimited budget, this is the first essential step you must take to plan a successful project. Is this project just for fun? Just for family and friends? Is it to get gigs? Do you plan on selling your music at shows, online and/or in stores? Are you going to send it off to labels in hopes of a deal? All of the above? These are crucial questions you must determine before going too much further as the answers will be the ultimate factor when considering the time and money it will take to give your project the best opportunity for success in reaching your goals.

If you are doing this just for fun or for family and friends then the time and money you need to invest can probably be near the minimums and still produce something you will be happy with. In fact you may consider just investing in the home studio equipment you'd need to do the project yourself. It may cost you a little more at first to buy the gear, but you'll own it and be able to record as many projects as you like and take all the time you like in doing so. In the long run you may save money on a per project basis if you have the patience to learn the craft of sound engineering *and* develop the ear for it. But, if you would still like us to make a "for fun" or friends and family recording for you, we'll do a great job and keep your costs low. Either way we'll be glad to help, even if it is just to give you advice.

If need a demo for getting gigs or entering contests, you'll need a good quality recording of your very best songs. It's now worth the investment needed to make a professional recording. With this level of quality you'll not only increase your chances of impressing club owners and booking agents, but you'll have something you can sell at your shows that will help you recoup your investment and may earn the money needed to come back to the studio to record another set of songs. Eventually you'll have enough quality material to have it all remixed and mastered as a full album if that's what you'd like to do. Project Won Studios is ideal for this level of recording and this has been the very path successfully taken by some of our clients. For this level of recording the minimum's shouldn't be counted on for a quality product you'll be happy with. Making extra room in your budget for extra time to do it right will be a wise decision. At this level you may consider bringing in a producer or asking us to help you produce the project. The extra investment you'll be making may actually save you money by the end of the project and the overall result will almost certainly be of better quality. You'll probably also want to have your final mix taken to a mastering studio. If your budget won't simply won't allow for the rates of most mastering studios, we'll be glad to take a crack at it, although mastering is really a highly specialized service and we don't profess to be experts at - yet. We're just now getting into it. Have we done it with good results? Yes we have, but there's no doubt a professional mastering house could have produced a better result. Just something for you to consider, not something absolutely essential at this level.

If you need a demo you'd like to submit to record labels in hopes of getting a deal, or you'd like to produce a full album you'd like to try to sell online or in stores yourself, you'll need the very best. At this level we strongly suggest you hire an outside professional producer who will serve as your guide throughout the entire project. Project Won Studios is well suited for most tracking and mixing on this level, but having the mix taken to a specialized mastering professional is a must and not really an option at this level if you want to have your best shot at success. Mastering on this level is currently beyond the scope and ability of our studio, but we do, of course, have a list of mastering professionals we will be glad to refer you to, and as always, with the goal of making the best match for your projects needs and your budget!

2.) **Know your material! Practice! Practice! Practice!**

We cannot stress enough the importance of having all musicians involved to know the material very well. You'll need to know your parts inside and out. Practicing at home or even in a rented rehearsal studio is very cheap compared to rehearsing in a recording studio. The bottom line is you **MUST** know your material very well - and not just "your" individual part - but all parts! As a guitar player you may not be able to play the drums, but you should still know how the drum tracks are supposed to sound. Also, keep in mind that what may sound good on stage may sound horrible in the studio. A lot can be covered up when playing live, but the recording will reveal absolutely everything! There's no place to hide in the studio! So if you're used to practicing or gigging on stage with a lot of loud amplification, we highly suggest you rehearse at least a few times "unplugged"! This will allow you to hear what everyone else is playing a lot better. The studio is not the place to work out parts or discuss among your band mates what chord sounds best here or there. When the engineer gives the signal, it's time to record the real deal and not the time for experiments if it can possibly be avoided. We further suggest you make your own rough recording while in practice or on stage and listen to it carefully. This will help you

identify potential weaknesses early and give you the chance to get everything fixed in practice. You don't need to be concerned with the quality of the rough recording itself. Whatever you can produce with a simple portable digital or even a cassette recorder will do just fine. Having a rough recording to hand to the engineer a couple days before your session begins will also help make the professional recording session go much smoother. Additionally, you should provide the engineer with all lyrics and charts you may have written or typed as well. At Project Won Studios, having a typed copy of the lyrics is not an option. We will need to obtain this from you prior to booking a solid date for your session. We have several reasons for this, but the one regarding the subject of this tip is because it really helps our engineer be on the same page as you are and it provides an easy reference point he or she can communicate with you about in the midst of a recording a given song.

3.) Practice with a Click Track and Headphones

If you plan on using a click track in the studio, make sure you practice with one. If you hadn't planned on it, consider it! A click track is very, very helpful in keeping the timing more accurate, and if you plan on using any sequenced material it's absolutely essential. Some drummers have a difficult time playing with a click track, and if it just won't work then it isn't worth sacrificing a natural feel on the recording, but it is still something we suggest you at least try. If you don't have a way of producing a click track to practice with before coming in the studio, a simple metronome will do fine for most songs. A variety of inexpensive electronic or mechanical metronomes should be available at your local music store. If you have the ability to practice with headphones, we suggest you do this as well as that will help you get used to the studio where you'll almost certainly be spending a lot of time with them on.

4.) Prepare all computer/sequencer/MIDI tracks and pre-recorded audio tracks ahead of time

If you'll be using sequenced tracks, such as that used by a MIDI keyboard or a drum machine, have those tracks completely worked out and polished before coming to the studio. Better yet, it would be best to get these tracks into the hands of the engineer a few days before your session begins if you will require to the studio's computer to feed the signals. Discussing this with the engineer will also determine whether or not there are any compatibility issues between your MIDI gear and our computers. If you have pre-recorded audio tracks it will be a huge time saver to get those in the hands of the engineer beforehand as well - especially if your source is analog and not digital!!! Please note charges may apply for the preparation of your audio tracks, but it will take less time and cost less to get them to us beforehand. Find a CD quality digital version of your tracks if at all possible as transferring audio from an analog recording to digital data is a slow process and often requires a little extra studio magic to improve the quality as well. MP3's, while perhaps better than analog cassette's, are not the most preferable source either, as the quality of even the best MP3 does not match the quality of an original wave file on a CD.

5.) Practice with and without vocals

If you're used to singing while playing, you'll need to practice and at least try to get through your material without singing. Ideally we'll be recording the instruments and the vocals separately, and if we're miking your instrument we can't have you singing along while recording it. When practicing without vocals you'll also be able to listen to the instrumental parts more critically and fix weak spots before coming into the studio. If your music contains any vocal harmonies, the reverse is true too! Try practicing a few times without instruments and work on getting the harmony really tight. Then have the band join in again and you may very well be able to hear an improvement!

6.) Know what you want to sound like

Part of knowing your material is knowing how you want it to sound as you've imagined it and how you want it to sound in comparison to other similar material recorded by other artists. It's a good idea to gather some samples from other commercially produced recordings and provide these to the engineer a few days before your session begins. If you can say, "I want this guitar solo to sound like..." or "the drums on this song sound really cool" and have examples of other material you can demonstrate you'll be taking a great time saving step right there. This will not only be helpful to the engineer during tracking, but also while mixing. If there are certain effects used on your favorite albums that you want on your own project, please share those as well. Ideally you'll find a single commercially produced CD that has most if not all of the elements you would like to model. With that in hand, the engineer can make some A-B comparisons and tweak your recordings until it sounds as close as possible to the examples you've provided.

7.) Prepare more songs than you plan to record

Not all songs are equal, and some will sound much better on stage than they will ever sound in the studio and visa versa. Sometimes the song is right, but it's just not coming together between the musicians. When that's the case it's best not to push it too far and move on to something else. Although you should never count on it, sometimes there is the case where you've booked an entire day and after you've recorded all your planned songs you still have time left. You're paying for the whole block of time so you might as well use it. Having a few extra songs ready will be very nice in all these circumstances.

Preparing Your Instruments

8.) Drums

Unless you plan on using our electronic drum kit, your own drum machine or some other sequenced alternative for generating your percussion tracks, you'll need to bring your own drum kit. If you have your own electronic kit that you are used to playing and it meets your satisfaction performance wise, even better! We are big advocates of electronic drums here - but if you aren't using any of the above you'll need to bring in your own acoustic kit and hopefully get it ready for your session in advance. The drum and bass tracks are the foundation for almost any song and it's critical we get the best possible sound from these instruments. The bass can often be the easiest to record, but drums are almost always the most difficult. Getting the mics set-up to get the best possible sound can take anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. We suggest arranging to bring your kit in the day before or at least several hours before your session begins to have it ready in advance. Otherwise set-up during the session will take a big bite out of the time that could be used for recording. We recommend you put on new drum heads all the way around and play them in a bit a couple days before bringing it in. When you arrive, don't forget your drum key! It's a good idea to tune the kit before and after bringing it in to set it up. You'll also need to identify and take care of any unwanted squeaks, buzzes and other rattling disturbances you don't want in your recording. The mics will be in very close proximity to your drums and they will pick-up everything! When practicing try not to hit the drums or cymbals too hard. For a good recording you'll need to strike them with enough force to produce a good tone and no more. It's all too easy to overplay the drums and cause all sorts of rattles, unwanted resonance and other problems! Be sure to bring in extra sticks and any appropriate padding you may need for your bass drum, and a lot of patience! As mentioned before, it can take quite a while to get the drums right, but doing so will pay off in the end and save you a lot of time and money and will reduce much frustration later!

9.) Guitars, Bass and all other String Instruments

We strongly recommend putting new strings on a few days before your session begins. Tune 'em, let 'em stretch, tune again and play them in a bit. Be prepared to tune, tune and retune in the studio. Remember tuning takes only a few minutes, but the recording will last forever! It's a good idea to bring in an extra set of strings just in case a string breaks during the session. Check all pots, cables, stomp boxes and effects pedals you'll be using to make sure they are working properly and don't forget to put in fresh batteries and bring extras! Bring extra picks and whatever else you may need to prepare for a smooth session with as few distractions as possible. Bring in your favorite amps and know the settings for each song well. Bass players may not need to bring in their amps as we generally go directly to the board for recording, but if your bass cabinet produces a particular sound you want in the recording be sure to bring it!

10.) Keyboards

Be sure to save all settings for each song in advance for quick recall. If you'll be using MIDI tracks, pre-production will be necessary and ideally we'll have all your MIDI data ahead of time. Bring all cables, pedals and power cords needed. Don't forget to bring the owner's manual if you have it handy! Hopefully there won't be a need to refer to it, but it will be nice to have for quick reference just in case. As with the bass guitar, bringing an amp for your keyboard may not be necessary, but if there is a particular sound you want from an amp you own, bring it!

11.) Vocals

Your voice is an instrument also and deserves every bit of care and preparation as any other, if not more! So, avoid dairy products like milk and yogurt the day of and evening before your session as those food items tend to coat the throat in ways that can interfere with good vocals. In session you'll need plenty of water to drink but at room temperature only. No ICE! Ice constricts the vocals cords and may result in a performance that is less than your potential. Avoid all carbonated drinks as well. If you must drink something besides water, tea is highly recommended with a bit of lemon and honey as well. Bring the throat lozenges or whatever else you may need to keep your throat and vocal cords in top condition. When you are practicing be mindful of good mic techniques. Lean a bit closer during softer parts and be sure to pull back when you are belting it out! When your about to sing words that begin with a "P" or "B" or have strong "P" or "B" syllables, be sure to tilt your head just slightly away from the mic to lessen the "pop" that usually comes with the pronunciation of those words. Of course, we do utilize pop filters to help with this also, but proper mic technique is still a must! Be sure to warm up your voice properly before the session starts and don't do anything that might strain your voice before or during your session either! Know your vocals well. If you are using backup singers, make sure your phrase entries and exits are timed tightly. Be prepared to slightly over emphasize some consonants that can easily get lost in the mix. Words that end with a "T", "TS", "D" and "FE" are especially prone to get lost! You don't want the word "life" to come out sounding like "lie" and you don't want "God" to sound like "Ga".

12.) Brass, Woodwinds

Bring your instrument in top condition. Sticky keys, pads and such in need of replacement are not good things in the studio. Be sure to bring extra reeds, valve oil, slide grease, or anything else your instrument may need.

Preparing Yourself

13.) Make sure you come to the studio well rested

You should make sure you've booked your sessions to accommodate for a good rest before you show. Depending on your schedule - and ours - this may not always be possible, but you should know that it can be self-destructive to your project and your sanity to attempt an eight to twelve hour recording session after you've already put in a full day at your job or you've just traveled several hundred miles in a car or stuffy airplane seat. Book your sessions on days you have don't have to work or schedule special time off. An all day session may very likely push you to your limits as it is. You don't need to begin your session already at a disadvantage!

14.) Make sure you are eating properly in the days before and during your session

For an optimum recording, your health will need to be at an optimum as well. As mentioned before, if you will be singing, avoid dairy products. Bring water bottles, throat lozenges and anything else you feel you may need to keep at your best.

15.) Wear comfortable and quiet clothes and dress in layers!

You need to be as comfortable as possible during your session to have maximum endurance. You'll want to avoid being too hot or too cold, so, it's best to dress in layers so you can adjust to being hot or cold by adding or removing clothing. Try to avoid clothes or accessories that can be noisy. All this is good advice in general at any studio but let this serve as fair warning that at Project Won Studios it can and most likely will get VERY hot in the studio! There are no windows to the outside and to avoid compromises in isolation and sound quality, our studio was built with no HVAC installed! We do have fans handy, but those are always turned off during tracking. For this reason we strongly encourage you to be able to dress down to the minimum that will still be appropriate. We'll take breaks out of the studio as needed and you'll find a striking difference in the temperature of the other rooms and outside when you exit the studio. That said, since there is also no furnace in the studio either, a session they may get very hot could start very cold! We usually try to get the temperature up to a comfortable level before a session begins, but that is not always possible. So again, dressing in layers cannot be stressed enough! Consider yourself warned and dress accordingly!

16.) Mentally prepare yourself

The recording session can be a lot of fun - and it usually is. We LOVE what we do, and we hope you will enjoy your session just as much. But some parts of it may be stressful, frustrating and sometimes downright maddening. You need to come prepared for this. Yes it is fun, but it is also VERY hard work and you'll need to be aware of your limitations! What can you do to re-energize? When is it best to take a break or quit for the day? These are questions you'll need to answer - and we'll have our own input for you as well. Coming in without adequate rehearsal is the number one source of frustration that causes mental breakdown, and so let us mention again that you need to know your material very, very, very well!

17.) Choose a leader and spokesperson

There always needs to be someone acting in the role of a producer, even if there is no one who bears that exact title. If you are using an outside producer you'll need to work closely with him or her, but let the producer be the one who speaks with the engineer. If you are not using a producer you'll need to elect a band member to step in that role. The same goes if you are intending to have us help produce your project. Ideally we'll communicate details to just one person who represents the band. If five people try to make requests, inquiries and suggestions to the engineer it may result in a lesser quality production as no identifiable leader may cause chaos and confusion. Be sure to come to the studio in complete agreement with all other band members. Agree or agree to disagree on everything *before* coming in! Even on a donation basis, the studio is too expensive to waste time arguing, so please be in agreement with each other and choose ONE person to represent the band!

18.) Become familiar with the recording process and basic studio terminology

What is a click track? What is overdubbing? What does striping mean? We could write out the complete process to post on our web site, but there are already plenty of other resources already written and available all over the internet and in your local libraries and book stores to inform you on the process. Additionally we will go over all the basics of what to expect when we meet with you for your initial consultation. The tips on this page will give you a pretty good idea, but there is always more to learn and we encourage you to educate yourself as much as possible before coming in. That said, your greatest education will come by simply doing it! Anyone who has been in the studio before can tell you what a surprising experience the first session was! If this will be your first time in a studio, prepare for your expectations to be thrown out the window! Wait... we have no windows! Oh well, you know what we mean!

Setting Up

19.) Show up on time and with only those who are necessary to the project!

... or you can show just a little late, but **PLEASE DO NOT** show up early! Yes, we know this may sound odd or even contrary to some of the other things we've already mentioned, but at Project Won Studios it seems like we are always running a bit behind and we don't want to be too embarrassed when you show up to find us still working on preparations! Ideally your acoustic drums will have been already set-up the day before, your MIDI tracks will have already been loaded into our sequencing computer and any audio tracks will have been transferred from the source into our computer as well. So ideally, there won't be too much that would be gained by showing up early anyway! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE do not bring anyone with you that is not directly involved with the production of the project!!! Our studio is relatively small in terms of physical space and bringing individuals who are not directly involved with producing the music is simply a bad idea! Yes, we do have a lounge and places for artists to take breaks and relax, but these spaces are also shared with residents living above the studio and aren't meant to be occupied for the duration of a session by the artist's guests. Exceptions can be made for people shooting photos or video of your session or those required to give assistance to artists with disabilities, but our limited space may become less than ideal as a result. **Young children that require supervision are especially discouraged!** CAN it work with someone watching the children in our lounge? Yes, but this may create difficulties for everyone that we'd rather avoid. If there is simply no way to avoid this, we do have a few child appropriate movies and toys set aside for these occasions, but we still strongly discourage it! The bottom line is, unless they are a musician, your producer, or someone else who is REQUIRED for the project, PLEASE don't bring them along!

20.) Bring Plenty of Patience

Recording the first song almost always takes the most time. Mic placement and level settings may vary from time to time, but once it's all set for the first song it's usually just a minor adjustment that may be needed. But setting up for the initial recording takes time and is usually handled one instrument at a time and that can be a boring to the other band members who aren't involved at the moment. But don't ever think that meticulous set-up is a waste of time! On the contrary, doing it right at the outset will save time later - and saving time almost always means saving money and avoiding frustration!

21.) Communicate with the Engineer

If you don't have a producer, have your chosen representative communicate with the engineer. The start of the session will be the last opportunity to make sure the engineer has all the lyrics, charts and any other documentation that may be helpful to him. Make sure he understands what you want and listen to him carefully when he tells you what you can expect from him and what is and is not reasonable or even a possibility.

Recording

22.) Emotion is King!

It's emotion and feeling that make a great song great. The technical aspects, important as they are, should always be secondary to how the song feels. If there are minor errors in a given part but it still feels right, it just might be worth keeping anyway! When you make a mistake don't stop unless the engineer stops you! We can go back and "punch in" and "punch out" new segments to fix errors later. Drums are about the only thing we have to get right through and through in a single take as they are the most difficult to fix, but even with drums there may be opportunities at a break in the music to stop and redo a part. So again, let the engineer tell you when to start and stop and when an entire take must be done over again or fixed with punch recording. Whatever you do, don't let endless takes and retakes kill the emotion - because the most technically correct song without emotion is worthless!

23.) Keep the Focus

Spend most of your time where it is most important. Don't emphasize parts that may take away from the focus of the song, which is generally the lead vocals. Figure out what "carries" the song and devote most of your attention to those aspects.

24.) Keep in Tune

Before you begin a new song and during any breaks take a few moments to check your tuning. There's no excuse for being out of tune when it's such a quick and simple thing to fix. Remember, the recording will last forever!

25.) Record "Dry"

It's almost always best to record "dry" or in other words - without effects. In most cases, effects are best added later when mixing. What may have sounded great at your last gig may or may not sound great in your recording. Effects can always be added to a recording, but it is nearly impossible in almost all cases to remove effects recorded with the original takes that are later determined undesirable. Some effects, like distortion, wah, phasing and other fancy stuff that are absolute necessities to the desired sound are usually OK to record a first take with, but let your engineer tell you what is ok to record "wet" or in other words, WITH effects, and what should be recorded "dry".

26.) Do it right the first time!

If the thought, "fix it in the mix" ever occurs to you, please get that out of your head as fast as possible! Don't rely on any studio magic we may or may not possess to fix a problem that we may or may not be able to fix in the mix! It's too risky to proceed with known errors that need fixing in hopes to hide or get rid of them later. It's simply better to do it right the first time. This will almost always save time and money. So don't ask the engineer "can you fix that?" When there is a problem that he knows is best to fix in the mix, he'll let you know! Otherwise assume the issue needs to be taken care of during the tracking session. Yes, this can be very tedious and seemingly time consuming, but in reality, it's usually saving time! There's no time like the present!

27.) Again, be patient!

Multi-track recording can be tedious and time consuming, but it is the way to go if you want professional results. In a Multi-track session we layer the parts in succession one or two instruments at a time. Almost always we record the drums and the bass first since that lays the foundation for the rest of the song. Most of the time we'll also record a "guide" or "scratch" vocal and guitar track that we'll replace later but will help the musicians we're recording the "keeper" tracks at the moment to get through the song. Unfortunately, and unlike a lot of larger studios, our control room is rather small, and not the place to "hang-out" when you aren't directly involved at a given moment. So when we're not recording a particular instrument or vocal track, all musicians not involved in the immediate procedure may need to take a break in the lounge, take a walk, or go get the band something to eat, (and if you really want to score points, bring back a treat for the engineer as well!)

Mixing and Mastering

28.) Let the engineer do the first mix alone

Throughout the tracking process and at the end of the session we'll let you hear the raw tracks as they were recorded. Major errors and things that should not be left to a "fix in the mix" solution will be identified and fixed immediately. But as you are listening to the tracks it will be good to take notes on what you would like in terms of EQ, Reverb, Delay and other effects to be added later. If you don't know the technical terms you can express them with adjectives like, more "punch" or less "muddy", too "bright" etc. The engineer will most likely know what you mean. When the recording session is finally complete, compile your notes and have a band meeting. Decide what you would like to occur in the mix and then have your chosen representative communicate this to the engineer. All this is assuming you don't have a producer. If you do, let him or her communicate this to the engineer. Once this communication has occurred, let the engineer work alone to produce the first mix. This may take hours, days or even weeks after the recording session has ended, depending on the size of the project. We'll be mindful of our schedule and the urgency of your time requirements to work as quickly as possible without compromising the quality. When the first mix is ready, a reference CD will be provided for you to analyze and evaluate the engineers work.

29.) Listening to the first mix

After the first mix has been produced for you, take it and listen to it at soft, moderate and louder volume levels and always in a variety of different playback devices and different environments such as your car, your home and anywhere else you can imagine your listeners enjoying your music. Try to avoid excessive volume as that will fatigue your ears and distort the "true" sound. When listening to it at low volume levels try to listen to individual parts. Are all instruments well represented? Is the focus upfront or clouded by the background? How does the song sound overall? Be sure to keep this in mind and not pay too much attention on one individual part that is not intended to be the focus of the song. Your bass player may want his part to stand out, but that generally won't help the song unless it's bass you intend to have as the focus overall. In other words, don't let individual part bias get in the way of evaluating the song as a whole, but on the other side of the coin, there should at least be some presence to all the parts and components that went into making the recording.

30.) Test it again!

After the first mix is complete, post analysis may reveal the need to remix. Before ordering the remix or calling it "good", make sure you give the first mix an audience of people that are not in the band. Play it for family and friends and play it for others who will listen to it objectively and give you an unbiased opinion as well. This is really important! Make sure you provide opportunity for feedback amongst the type of people that represent your target market. You obviously wouldn't want to have someone who listens only to country western evaluate your Hip-Hop CD! Now is also the time to compare it with the commercially produced CD's you should have provided the engineer for A-B reference. Is there something missing that can possibly be fixed? Take notes, have another band meeting and have your representative get back in touch with the engineer. Hopefully this process will not be necessary more than once, but be prepared for it to take several rounds before your mix is marked "final".

31.) Master it!

Depending on what your intentions and budget is for the project, you may want to consider sending the final mix to a professional mastering House. If you are seeking the attention of a record label or hoping to sell this in the retail market we suggest you do not consider this important step just an "option". Do it! Make the investment and have it mastered! You'll be glad you did! Once again - the recording will last forever!