

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR STUDIO TIME

Rohan Healy here from Beardfire Music and The Dublin City Rounders. At the age of 15 I began working as assistant engineer in my father, David Virgin's studio on the north coast of NSW, Australia. I cut my teeth working with some great alternative Aussie acts like cow-punkers Jimmy Willing and The Real Gone Hickups and Dan Rumour who toured with the likes of The Rolling Stones. I worked on dad's albums, and I started recording my own music during this period in between east coast tours with great acts like Cat Power, Bill Bragg and Lloyd Cole. Good times. Upon returning to Dublin in the mid 2000's, I set up and ran my own home recording studio, recording mostly Dublin artists. I did that full time for 3 years. When I moved into playing live more and focusing on publishing with Beardfire, I pulled back on recording others, but it's still something I love to go back to and I do enjoy working on albums and EPs with a few talented artists in the humble Beardfire Studio.

With the above in mind I'm now going to outline below some of the things I believe to be of utmost importance when recording, things which I've learned through my 15 years in music recording and production to hopefully save you some time and heartache!

The Prep – Before You Step Foot in the Studio:

Do Your Own Demos

Recording software is so readily available, and computers are much more capable than they were 10 years ago so there's no excuse not to have some kind of audio recording setup at home. If you don't like using computers or software, hardware solutions like the Zoom H series are also available to get a super simple home recording setup going. Download Audacity, watch a couple of tutorials and off you go. Of course not everyone wants to invest the thousands of euros to build a great studio and become a great producer, but it's my belief that the modern musician must have a basic understanding of sound recording and be able to produce their own rough demos. Demo and workshop your songs at home long before hitting the studio.

Choose the Right Studio/Producer

Studio types and producers are as varied as the styles of music they can produce. Shop around. If you're a solo artist looking to produce a minimalist album, don't fork out for the world's largest studios. There was a great article published called 15 Legendary Albums That Were Recorded in Bedrooms, Kitchens, and Garages.

If you're an 8 to 10 piece funk band with a brass section and backup singers and you want to record live, then yes, you're going to need to find a studio with enough space, gear and channels to accommodate you. Nothing wrong with going to the big studios when needed. But producer expertise and track record trumps gear and setting every time. Get creative with your recording space and find a producer that "gets" what you do.

Pre-Production with Your Producer

When deciding who to work with on your album, EP or other project, be sure to have a good chat with them about their past work and what you're looking to achieve. Insist on this before hitting the studio proper, as you don't want to spend the first two hours of a recording day working out what the hell you're doing and explaining it to the producer/engineer. Some studios will offer a free pre-production, others will be paid;

either way, it's a must. During your pre-production session, reference other bands/artists of whom you are looking to emulate elements of their sound. Play an artist's song and say "I like the timedrum/guitar/vocal sound in this one" etc, or "I like the vibe/atmosphere of this one". Discuss detailed instrumentation: how many instrument tracks roughly are going down, will the band be recording live, multi-track or a bit of both, will there be drums, will you be bringing your own amps or using the studio's, and so on. Don't surprise the engineer with a trumpet or violin on recording day if it wasn't discussed beforehand – this will only waste time in studio.

With a thorough pre-production under your belt, you can go in on the recording day confident that everyone is on the same page, that the studio will be set up to your requirements and that you can focus on getting good takes.

Learn Your Songs and Parts

It sounds obvious but I've had many people coming into the studio quite unprepared - lyrics not memorised, extra harmonies or guitar parts not written or developed, arrangements not finalised. Now that's not to say you can't come up with great stuff while in the studio like counter melodies, new words and harmonies, but get your basics sorted.

The more takes you put down trying to get a good one the more time you eat up and this builds tension. Hands and voices get tired, and fatigue and frustration can set in. All of which work against a flowing and creative recording environment. Spend the days before a studio day learning your stuff backwards - lyrics, arrangements, dynamics of the songs, extra parts and ideas. On the day itself, all band members must warm up (and especially the singer). On YouTube you'll find any number of great vocal warm ups, and finger warm ups for guitarists and drummers too. If you haven't already done so, develop a good warm up routine and begin it before you reach the studio. Why waste the first hour of the studio day putting down crappy takes because you're not warmed up, or worse still strain and hurt yourself?

Recording Live vs Multi-track

Presumably you'll have planned out whether you are recording live, multi-tracking or both during pre-production, but it is recording day where those choices begin to take effect. Whether you're solo, duo or a full band, recording live is the most time efficient choice, however you MUST be well rehearsed. You can get a full album's worth of material down with a couple of solid days in the studio doing live takes. You may then choose to overdub extra instruments or fix up small mistakes.

If you're recording a full band live you'll need access to a pretty serious studio with enough quality mics, stands, cables and channels to record everything at once, plus you may need a drum booth and vocal booth if it's louder/heavier music. Recording via multi-track requires much less space and gear, but much more time as you'll be playing over the same 3 or 4 minute song every time you lay down a track, instead of just once to get the take. Something important to think about when entering the studio!

A final point on live versus multi-track is to do with energy and dynamic. A well engineered live session has an energy impossible to replicate. The feeling of being in the room as a piece of music was captured in its entirety while listening is something you don't get from a song layered over, a track at a time. It's not always practical to record live due to technical limitations or genre, but the benefits are noticeable in the great old live studio recordings - that's why many modern acts, particularly in the singer

songwriter, alt country, rockabilly and Americana genres are going back to live take recording.

It's not the best you'll ever play, it's the best you'll play today

The studio can be a high pressure environment. Even if you're recording in your home studio or a friend's place, you still want to make the most of your time and get the best result. So it's important to have the right mind set and expectations. One thing I find useful myself, and something I tell people I'm working with, is that this is purely a rendition of your song. It may not be the best you'll ever play it, but we want it the best you can play it today. Many great bands and songwriters like Lou Reed, The Smiths and Frank Zappa (to name a few, the list is huge) re-recorded and remixed their own songs across many albums and releases with different moods, arrangements, instrumentation and performance nuances. So to take a little of the pressure off, think of your recording session as a snapshot in time, a rendition of the piece performed as you are today, with the tools available at hand, and not the be all and end all. With that said, a little pressure is good. You're making a recording, one that you want people to listen to and enjoy forever. If there's something bugging you about the tune and you know it's going to keep bugging you, go for another take.

Trouble Shooting and Technical Difficulties

If you've never been in studio before let me just tell you that things can and will go wrong. Data can be lost, cables can break, computers can crash, strings can snap and much much more. Just be prepared beforehand, stay cool and don't let a technical problem put you off your creative spark. This is the reality of the studio, from home recording to the top professional studios.

I remember I was asked by a band to produce a session in the famous Windmill Lane Studios in Dublin a little while back. Mid-session a buzzing sound appeared and it took the engineers 30 minutes to identify and solve the problem via a process of elimination; soloing, muting, swapping out mics and cables until the faulty unit was found and replaced. 30 minutes of a 6 hour session is a hefty chunk, so don't waste it. When things go wrong, bring your lunch break forward, keep warmed up, practise any last minute tricky bits and don't stress. If a catastrophic problem occurs, any decent studio will refund or reschedule. Expect problems and you'll be prepared if they happen and pleasantly surprised if they don't!

Fatigue and Fussiness

When you spend 8 or more hours in the studio putting down tracks and listening back to mixes, tiredness does set in. Your ears will fatigue as will your mind, and this can lead to some disheartening moments. I can't tell you the number of times I've been working on a song for a long period of time and become convinced that it was utter rubbish, only to come back the next day or next week with fresh ears and be pleasantly surprised with how good it sounded! You can't always trust your ears after a long studio day so take a break from listening before making big calls, and trust in your producer as the second pair of ears when having doubts. Often valuable time and energy is wasted making changes and doing extra takes because of tired ears.

This brings me onto fussiness. Everyone is different in the studio. Some artists are quite easygoing and happy to do their best take and allow the mixer/producer to suggest ideas and put the whole thing together. Others are much more controlling and hands on. Neither is right or wrong. However, too lackadaisical an approach will produce an unprofessional sounding record and a recording by a perfectionist may never be released

at all. Be honest and realistic about your own personality. If you're a bit slack, make sure your producer/other musicians can whip you into shape and get the best out of you. And on the flip side, if you are too fussy and hard to please, be sure to delegate some control to your producer/other musicians who can make the final call and say "enough, that mix is done".

Getting project backups/Stems/Individual instrument tracks

When your recording project is complete, make sure you get copies of everything! A full backup is very important if you want the option to re-mix, re-master or add/remove elements from projects at home or in another studio at a later date. So many people forget this step and have lost whole projects and weeks in the studio.

Typically it goes like this; artist receives final mixes/masters, a year or two goes by, artist wants to revisit old recordings, contacts old studio, old studio either doesn't exist or has deleted old project to free up hard disk space. Get your backups immediately after working with the studio to avoid disappointment down the road! When asking make sure you get the following: Project Files (will only open in same DAW - Pro Tools, Logic, Sonar, etc. - as was first recorded), Stems (recorded audio regions, will open in sequence when associated project file is opened) and Individual Instrument Tracks (dry or effected instrument tracks bounced out individually as WAVs, can then be loaded into any DAW software).

Getting sick of your songs before release

This is a common phenomenon. You've spent countless hours recording, mixing and mastering your release. Scrutinising, asking advice, thinking it's amazing, then doubting yourself. Naturally, you can burn out on your own material, and it's not a nice feeling when you're convinced that what you've just spent weeks, months or even years working on what sounds like crap to you.

But there's two things you have to keep in mind. Firstly, you'd feel this way with any work, not just your own. Even your favourite album, if you had to break it down, listen to and work on it for weeks and months on end would begin to lose some of its magic and appeal. Add to this the fact that you have deep personal investment in the recording - it's your voice, your words, your experiences and your performance - and you can see how frightening the thought of releasing it can be. Secondly this album isn't for you, it's for music fans. People hearing it for the first time with no intimate knowledge of the workings behind it will have a very different and usually positive experience if produced well. Know that your favourite albums by your favourite artists, while beautiful and awe inspiring to you, were sweated and laboured over in just the same way, with the same doubts and fears you feel. On almost every large project I've worked closely on, by the time it's finished I can barely enjoy listening to it. A few months later, however, I'll revisit it and almost always will be quite impressed, once the technical issues and little quibbles are forgotten and I can just enjoy the work like any other. Remember who you're recording for, and give your work the benefit of the doubt. Get it out there and in time you'll be able to appreciate it.

Closing Thoughts

Obviously the subject of recording is about as broad and deep as the ocean. There are as many ways to approach recording as there are producers, but hopefully I've laid out a few useful general tips for songwriters and musicians taking their first steps into recording, and possibly a titbit or two for those more experienced as well. The main thing is to create the best representations of your songs that you can with the talent and resources

available to you, and try and have a bit of fun too! Good luck, and all the best with your recordings.

About The Author

Rohan Healy, a dual citizen of Ireland and Australia, is owner and CEO of Beardfire Music. After studying acting, music, legal studies and commerce at Trinity Catholic College Lismore, Rohan began a full time career in music which has spanned the past 15 years. In that time Rohan has written, recorded and produced 10 solo albums, appeared on The Voice UK and Busker Abu with The Dublin City Rounders, shared the stage with the likes of Cat Power, Lloyd Cole and Jim Lauderdale, booked and performed almost 1,000 shows in Australia, the UK, Ireland and Europe and has dozens of production, songwriting and performance credits on other artists' works.

Rohan also studied acting at The Australian Theatre For Young People and appeared in a number of stage plays as a young adult. Rohan works closely with father David Virgin (Healy) (of SPK, Sekret Sekret) and brother Al "Quiff" Healy (of Quiffs N Coffins) on The Dublin City Rounders, The Annual Dublin City Rounders Alt-Country Song contest and the running of Beardfire Music.

Rohan offers personal music business consultation on booking, management, live performance coaching and music exam prep, publishing and royalties, and is a music producer at Beardfire Studio.

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