

HYPERREAL AUDIO

CHOOSING A STUDIO

The Engineer

Where should you go to record? The better question is: who should you record with.

The most important thing about a studio is the engineer, and you shouldn't think of them as just a technician with access to gear. This is someone you're going to spend a lot of hours with, and you need to be comfortable around them.

Green flags

What a good engineer typically does, beyond just hitting record:

- Replies to messages reasonably fast
- Asks upfront how many songs there are, what sound you're after, whether you have demos and backing tracks
- Has most of the studio prep done before you show up
- Quickly reads the aesthetic of the project, accurately weighs the difficulty of the parts against the musicians' skill and the time available, and does everything to get the most out of the session
- Does everything to keep musicians comfortable without losing focus
- Stays attentive during takes, catches performance nuances, and checks that the gear is working properly
- Tactfully flags performance issues, checks whether something was intentional, and offers solutions
- Suggests safety takes and extra channels if musicians seem unsure about a sound or a part
- Works for as long as you do, without taking personal breaks
- Records DI on bass and overdriven guitars by default
- Reminds the drummer not to toss their sticks onto the snare before the cymbal sustain tails off
- Records punch-ins with overlap and keeps an eye on edit quality
- Edits and comps on the fly while musicians catch their breath before the next take
- Confirms what format you need the source files in, and delivers them right after the session or by an agreed deadline
- Organizes the multitrack cleanly: channels labeled and numbered, files sorted into folders with names and tempos
- Sends a roughly balanced rough mix in mp3 along with the multitrack

Red flags:

- Doesn't reply for days at a time
- Books the session without asking a single question
- Shows up late, then spends another couple of hours on things that don't require you being there
- The gear at the studio doesn't match what was listed on the website or agreed on beforehand
- Gets up and leaves during takes, scrolls their phone, stops paying attention
- Barely reacts to the performance, or insists on re-recording a passage over and over when it's obvious to everyone that it's not going to get any better
- Brushes off your attempts to explain the artistic vision
- Comes across as arrogant or indifferent, mocks the musicians or the material, wastes your time on unrelated conversations
- Records sections but doesn't comp or play anything back right away
- Promises the recording "today or tomorrow" after the session, disappears for a week, then sends a messy pile of files and vanishes for good

A well-prepared band working with a good engineer can get an impressive result even at a modest studio. A bad engineer will always find a way to ruin the recording, no matter how good the musician or the studio.

Onto the studio itself

How to figure out what sound you're actually after and what studio to look for:

- Ask more experienced friends and/or your mixing engineer: show them your demos and references, ask what it would take to get that sound. Don't be shy about messaging bands whose records you like and asking where and how they recorded.
- Use search engines and AI: look up interviews with musicians and producers, photos and videos from studios, technical details on albums you like.
- Go through the websites of studios in your city and nearby major cities, listen to work samples, reach out to the staff, explain what you're after, and get a feel for how they communicate.
- The single most important thing at a studio is the live room. It can be a small room with no echo at all or a hall big enough for an orchestra – live room has a big impact on the sound of the raw tracks, especially the drums. Distinctly roomy drums, like on Shellac or Pearl Jam records, can't be recorded in an overly dampened rehearsal space, and a dry, close sound like on Songs for the Deaf can't be recorded in a big, reverberant room.
- Most studios list a technical rider on their site – all the gear and mics they have. Before booking a session, go through that list and look up YouTube demos of whatever interests you: specific drums, amps, cabinets, mics. It's not much effort, and it goes a long way toward your band having realistic expectations of the sound.

The Harsh Reality

Don't get discouraged if you can't find the exact conditions your favorite record was made in – there's almost always a workaround if you get creative.

The Room

No studio with a big live room nearby? Look at concert venues, assembly halls, skateparks, the stairwell outside your rehearsal space, houses you can rent for a day, even churches – as long as you can set up gear there and have enough time. There's also drum reamping: a signal recorded in a small room can be played back through a speaker placed in a bigger, more lively sounding space, and you record the sound of that room.

Keep in mind that the "tail" on the drums in a record you love is often not just the room's natural reverb, but a combination of the instrument's own sustain, the room sound, samples, and digital reverb.

Gear

What if the amp or drum kit you really want isn't available anywhere? There's no universal recipe, but the general logic looks something like this:

- Most amps are variations on the same handful of circuits, and you can swap them within the same sound family. No Soldano SLO – use a Peavey 5150 or a Mesa Dual Rectifier on the orange channel. No JCM800 – a Sovtek will do fine.
- The guitar or bass sound on well-known records is often a blend of several amps, effects, cabinets, and mics that complement each other. You can record them simultaneously or use them for different parts. There's a good chance you can put together a genuinely great sounding setup out of the gear available to you.
- With drums, it's not the brand that matters, but the shell sizes and construction, the hoops, the heads, and the tuning.
- Same goes for cymbals – look past the brand and pay attention to diameter, alloy, hammering, weight/thickness, and finish, and most importantly, listen to the sound.
- If the gear you want isn't available anywhere, do as you would at a show with someone else's backline: dial in a usable tone, then listen to how it sounds recorded. If it works overall, go ahead and record it – and always record a DI track alongside it.
- Don't forget that the cabinet and the speakers are at least half of the guitar tone, especially for overdriven guitars – the same amp through two different cabinets can sound like two different amps.

Priorities

Tone is made up of a lot of factors, and they don't all carry equal weight. Setting the human factor aside, the chain looks like this: instrument → amp and cabinet (if any) → mic + room → preamp → converter. Don't fixate on the last two – the best preamp in the world won't save you if what's going into it is a mediocre sound.

Focus on what you can actually control: show up to the session in good shape, with a well set-up instrument that fits your needs, and a rough idea of what your recording setup should look like.

Important

The music scene is small, and reputation is expensive within it, so most things get handled on a handshake. That said, a couple of things take unnecessary risk off the table: get the scope of work, timeline, and price confirmed in writing beforehand (a text thread is enough, you don't need a contract). Agree on what format you'll receive the source files in. If a studio asks for a deposit, that's normal practice – just make sure the amount and the refund terms are also agreed on ahead of time.