

HYPERREAL AUDIO

DRUMS

PREPARATION

Click Track

- If a song holds a steady tempo, use a click during rehearsals. Find the exact BPM where the song feels both weighty and energetic – not rushed, not sluggish – by nudging the value a couple of bpm in either direction. Don't default to round numbers: sometimes a single bpm changes how a song feels, especially at slower tempos.
- If different sections of the song require different tempos, work out those values and build a click track with tempo changes, then rehearse with it. Create a distinct count-in at the beginning and set up cues before every tempo or section change – this will make it easier to learn the song and avoid getting lost.

Free Tempo

- If your material genuinely works better without a click, if the style and genre call for free tempo – definitely film your rehearsals and record demos. Make sure your natural tempo drift sounds good and happens where it should. Don't rush fills, stronger beats and slower part. Don't slow down when moving into faster grooves. Lock in the right feel for the track and try to reproduce it on every run-through, so the rest of the band gets as used to it as possible – without that, they'll have a hard time locking in with your drums during the recording session.

Working Out the Part

- Work out a part you can play comfortably. Account for the nerves that show up at sessions and shows. Fills that are too demanding are guaranteed to come out sloppy under adrenaline, and grooves will come out crooked.
- Think about how your patterns, accents, and fills sit against the rest of the band's parts. Aim for a part that fits the song like a glove – drums like that always sit better in the mix. Sometimes a stop hits harder than a fill would, sometimes guitar riffs sound clearer without drums doubling them. On the other hand, climactic moments and spots where the other instruments are doing less often work great for a busier pattern or a bigger fill.
- Think about how toms and cymbals sit across the stereo field: for example, when you're playing the ride cymbal, accents on a crash to your left usually end up more audible in the mix than on a crash right next to the ride.

- Distribute low end and high end through the song deliberately: where to hit the cymbals harder or lighter, how opened or closed the hi-hat should be, where to drop the cymbals out entirely, where adding kick during a fill helps keep the pulse going, and where it's not needed.
- If the band needs count-ins to come in together, work them out during rehearsals. A count-in played on an open hi-hat can't be cleanly edited out afterward – the sustain will hang, and the big following hit will end up smeared. Only play count-ins on cymbals if you want to hear them on the record; otherwise, count in with your sticks or come up with a lead-in fill instead.
- If a song calls for the whole band to cut off together at a certain moment, make choking the cymbals part of your part and rehearse it that way. If the guitarists cut their sustain but the cymbals keep ringing, muting them during mixing will not sound as naturally as choking them by hand would sound.

Performance

- Film rehearsal drum-cam footage of every song you're planning to record. Pay attention to how your hands and feet move, your posture, the balance across the kit, and how consistent your attack is. What are the weaker links? Which fill comes out sloppy on every run-through? Where does the attack get inconsistent? This will help you focus your practice and show up to the session better prepared.
- Among performance issues, pay extra attention to hands and feet falling out of sync. For example, if the kick and snare are supposed to hit together and the foot lands slightly early, you get a flam. That's essentially impossible to fix without losing something in phase, transients, and the overall natural sound of the kit.
- For heavy and rhythmically dense material, it's usually better to be slightly behind the beat than to consistently push strong beats ahead of the click.
- During rehearsals, pay attention to the sound of your snare and kick, and keep it consistent wherever there needs to be same level of attack. The best rock, pop, and metal drummers in the world have this skill down cold – their raw tracks often sound like compression and samples are already applied. Consistency doesn't mean hitting as hard as possible all the time – it's about a steady, predictable presence in the mix, a good balance across the kit, and dynamics that build and fall off logically.
- If your material combines fast elements like blast beats with big open grooves, think not only about how to really nail the blasts or fills, but also about not overdoing it on the slower parts: because of how compression works, in the mix a hard hit can end up as a snap with no body. That's exactly why a lot of extreme metal drummers play slower grooves fairly restrained.
- Get in the habit of not tossing your sticks onto the snare or making noise right after a song ends. This keeps you from ruining the fading sustain on tape – otherwise you'll have to re-record that last hit separately. The exception is if you're deliberately going for a scrappy, "the drummer just got up and walked off" vibe – in that case, toss away and rattle the hi-hat stand all you want :)

Choosing, Prepping, and Tuning Instruments

- Think about which instruments actually suit your material – don't just sit behind whatever drums and cymbals happen to be at the studio. If you have reference bands in your genre, look up what their drummers use. Find and listen to demos of those instruments on YouTube.
- Look for videos showing the same drums tuned differently and with different heads. Build a basic understanding of how each choice affects the sound.
- Talk to your band, experienced drummers, and engineers about how to get the sound you're after with whatever's actually available to you.
- Do not underestimate the importance of cymbals or cut corners on them – they're the one part of the kit that's hardest to change during mixing. Cheap, thick cymbals like the Sabian B8 line tend to be pitched too high, and combine harsh highs with kitchenware midrange. There's no way to make those sound like a Meinl Byzance or a Zildjian K set in the mix. Pay attention not just to sizes, but to weight/thickness, finish, and hammering as well.
- Give real thought to the snare sound: if you're used to a high tuning with good rebound, but the band your singer has in mind for reference uses a low, muted snare, it's better to catch that mismatch at rehearsal than at the mix. Experiment with different drums, tunings, and heads ahead of time.
- All the instruments and hardware you're bringing to the session need to be serviced and fully ready to go. A squeaky pedal will be audible on the recording, and swapping it for an unfamiliar studio one at the last minute does not make for a better session.
- If you have a good drum throne of your own, bring it to the studio.

Communication with the Studio

Make sure to tell the engineer in advance about your goals, references, and desired sound, and which instruments you do and don't have. This affects the choice and tuning of the kit, mic selection, choice of live room, and how many channels you'll record on. If the studio has more than one kit, agree in advance on which one you'll be playing, so it doesn't accidentally get rented out on the day of your session. Confirm the condition of the heads. Ask what mic setup is planned, and pass that information along to the person who is going to be mixing the record.

RECORDING

Physical Readiness

- The day before, avoid any activity that could result in your hands, legs, back, or brain feeling worse off.
- Get a good night's sleep.
- Warm up briefly and spend some time on a practice pad before you leave, again during setup and soundcheck, and once more right before recording if needed.

Soundcheck and One-Shots

- Budget at least two hours for drum setup and soundcheck, especially if you're planning to try out different instruments. Import your tempo tracks, demos, and stems right away, and get the monitoring dialed in.
- If you're using a drum tuner app to tune the kit, write down the settings you land on.
- After the soundcheck, record one-shots – single hits with full sustain, a few hard ones, a few at a mid level attack, and a few lighter ones. Do this for the kick, snare, and toms. Cymbal one-shots are optional and used far less often. This is a safety net in case of an occasional bad hit and material for sampling that sounds more natural and unnoticeable in the mix than any third-party samples.

Recording and Picking Takes

- The next step is choosing how to record: full takes or in sections. If you're recording basic tracks live, it's probably full takes. If you're recording separately from the other instruments, do a test take of the whole song at full effort: if the issues add up to roughly less than 10% of the track, record full takes and then comp the final version from the best ones, punching in tricky sections with overlap where needed. If the first takes come out mediocre, go straight to recording in sections.
- When recording in sections, comp and listen to the edit points right away – and at the end, don't forget to listen through the whole assembled track.
- Judge a good take not just on clean execution and tight tempo, but on dynamics and overall energy too. If a take has the right feel and energy and no major mess-ups, keep it and move on to the next thing.
- Don't forget the last hits of each song, and choking the cymbals and hi-hat. Don't count in on an open hi-hat if you don't want to hear it on the final track.
- Keep an eye on the tuning of the kit, especially the snare – it loves to drift under hard rimshots.

Fixing Issues

Here's roughly the priority order for issues:

- first, re-record anything that noticeably doesn't comp together
- then deal with flams between hands and feet (these can't be fixed painlessly in editing)
- third, check for overall cleanliness of the performance and noticeable tempo drifting
- fourth, maybe try and improve the finer aspects of the feel and groove.

Don't re-record anything without understanding exactly what you're trying to fix – don't waste time and energy for nothing.

Once Recording Wraps

- Agree with the engineer on when you'll get the fully comped and edited drum tracks – the rest of the band will need time to rehearse to them before recording their own parts.

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