

# Getting Started

**I**N POPULAR MUSIC THE DRUMS HAVE ALWAYS PLAYED A PROMINENT ROLE. The vocal will always be “king” but the drums really drive the song. The drums have to support the guitars and bass and should also help the vocal make sense in the context of the song. Sometimes the listeners key into the drums first. Maybe a drum intro keeps you listening and heightens the anticipation for the vocal. Maybe the drum track explosively accents something in the song that just would not feel right without it. No matter what, music would not be the same without drums.

This is especially true in all types of popular music. Regardless of the genre, the drums need to lead, follow, or get out of the way!

When a song is being written, one of the first decisions that is made is its tempo. The melody and chords need a tempo to help them get where they’re trying to go. A change in tempo can have a serious effect on the song even as it is being written, so it is important to establish the tempo early on. Once the tempo is established and the song starts to take shape, it is natural to start filling in the blanks about what the drums might be doing in the song. Sometimes this is done with a simple sequence or drum machine. This can be very useful at helping the songwriter keep track of where he wants the song to go. Often, the repetitive nature of a simple drum machine pattern will be the first inspiration to create a meaningful drum part to enhance the song.

As the chords change so do the drums. Finding the right combination can be important to the presentation of the song. Although a great song can stand up with just a vocal and piano or a vocal and guitar, a great drum track can make all the difference in the way that the listener hears or *feels* a song.

## Considering the Role of the Song

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Without a song there would be no reason to record the drums; well, unless it’s a drum solo but then, that’s not a song! The song has a huge influence on how you should approach recording the drums. Is it a loud song? Quiet song? Fast or slow? Sparse or dense? All of these concepts will usually lead to some early conclusions about what is needed. There is no reason to stick to convention when deciding what is needed but it is imperative to make a decision about what role the drums will play in the song.

A songwriter generally hears something in her head regarding what is the right sound for a song. There could be a favorite band that the songwriter is listening to and this could influence (albeit unconsciously) how she hears the drums in the song. She may be trying to write a new take on her favorite song and will be satisfied only if the drums sound just like *that* song. She may want the drums to be barely present and only supportive. Or, if the drums or the groove inspired the song in the first place, they may be at the forefront. In any case it is necessary to establish the drums’ role in the song before setting off to record a drum track.

# Not For Sale

## Recording Drums: The Complete Guide

Consider the different approaches when recording an artist without a band and when recording a band:

- ▷ When recording an artist who does not have a “band sound,” the options for interpretation can increase dramatically. Some artists prefer to shake things up and change things drastically from song to song, thereby relying on their voice to be the record’s unifying element. Perhaps different backing musicians may be employed on different tracks, which create even more dissimilarities between songs. This can make for interesting but difficult tracking sessions. It’s not uncommon to record different songs at different studios during different time periods using different players. The differences, however, allow the songwriter to explore many avenues while still being themselves. Oftentimes the mixer is the last person charged with unifying all these diverse tracks and making it sound like a record.
- ▷ When recording a band, things are a little less interpretive since *the band* is what is being recorded. Their sound is created by the combination of what the players bring to the big picture. There is often a unity that exists from song to song, and sometimes from record to record. The drums’ role in the band is pretty well established and may not change much, regardless of the song. This makes a straightforward approach more likely to work when deciding what to do about a drum sound. The drummer *is* the drum sound; it’s just a matter of capturing that sound accurately. If you think in terms of a live concert, the drum sound does not change much from song to song. This basic approach can work well in the context of a band recording.

However, within the framework of a band there is still room for changes in tone, perspective, and ambience, which can add dimension to the sound of a record. Instead of one sound for the whole record the listener is treated to different rooms, drums, cymbals, and overall mix approaches. The personality of the player will always come through if recorded properly. The band sound *is* the band sound, no matter the approach. Some bands embody this more than others!

In the 60s, 70s, and 80s it was common to track records very quickly and record all of the drum tracks over a short period of time. Using this approach there were few changes from song to song in terms of the drum sound. In the 90s and even more so now, it became more common for bands to record one song at a time. There may be no regard for continuity and *today’s* drum sound is only pertinent to the current track. This is particularly true of bands that record themselves or record in their home studios. Perhaps a song is written, then demoed, and then recorded over the course of a day or two. The process may begin again on the next day with the next song. This may lead to extremely varied approaches and very different drum sounds from song to song, which can make things very interesting indeed!

This can also lead to problems that may not rear their ugly heads until it’s time to mix. What might have seemed perfect at the time may all of a sudden seem anemic or substandard compared to other tracks. Although these changes from song to song can make for interesting listening, they can also shine a bright light on things that didn’t quite go right! This is why it helps to have a plan.

## Having a Plan from the Beginning

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Once the artist and producer have established their vision of the ideal drum sound, the recording engineer should create a plan of his own. After all, it’s the engineer’s job to paint that picture for them. This should never be some haphazard occurrence; there should be a plan in place before you tune the first drum or place the first microphone. This is not to say that things can’t change or that there may not be happy accidents, but it helps to have some kind of target to shoot for.

No doubt, George Martin and Geoff Emerick had preliminary discussions about each Beatles song that they were about to record. After John and Paul wrote their wonderful songs they would discuss production and sound ideas with Sir George. George Martin would then inform Geoff Emerick about their collective vision so Geoff could figure out how to create the sound they were after. This all happened before they ever started miking anything. They were still spontaneous and creative during the recording session but by then, the framework for the production of the song was already well established.

It's no different for you (aside from being John, Paul, George or Geoff)—you should make your decisions about production early. Big or small. Bright or dark. Ambient or dry. Dead or live. Decide what is needed and head down that path.

### Drawing Inspiration from Other Artist's Drum Sounds

Listening to another song's drum sound may be a way to present an example of what an artist is looking for. At times this can be very helpful. Other times it can be extremely detrimental.

Allow me to explain: When the recording engineer can listen to a sample of what is desired it can help crystallize what is needed without the need for clear, technical descriptions from those who may not be technical in the least. Think: "I love the way this snare sounds" instead of "I think we should use a Ludwig Black Beauty with a 57 on top but lean heavily on the M49s in the room." Although this may be useful information, it depends on who is delivering the message. In the Internet age these technical descriptions have become more commonplace from people who don't have any technical background but gleaned this information from websites and Internet forums. Their attempts to sound authoritative can impair the engineer's problem-solving process by leading him down the wrong path.

"Drummer X used drum Y and mic Z so that's what we should do here." Sure. Let's get right on that. An audible example can explain what is desired by the artist and allows the engineer to determine what approach is needed to achieve this result. Even if it doesn't involve mic Z (as much as I love those).

On the other hand, listening to another recording can set up the likelihood for dissatisfaction with whatever drum sound is put together. To some artists, if it doesn't sound *exactly* like the sample recording then it *just won't work* (insert tortured scream here)!!

"I want it to sound just like John Bonham!"

Hey, me too!

But unless the drummer can tune the drums and hit them like Bonzo, has fantastically well-written songs to play, and has a castle in the English countryside to record them in, you will probably fall short.

**TIP:** It's important for the artist and the engineer to maintain perspective about what is realistic.

Using other sources as a guideline *can* help you push yourself a bit more than you might otherwise. It may give you a target that seems out of reach but forces you to continue to explore what is possible. You may arrive at something that you had never thought was possible simply because you were trying to emulate some other kind of sound.