

How to Record Music on a Budget

Yes! You can make a great record on a small budget. Here are a few tips.

Must Have Equipment and Software

First of all, don't hold up your recording project for that magic piece of equipment. You probably don't need it. The differences between a decent microphone and a great microphone may only be audible when your other pieces of equipment and/or studio are also of high quality. Secondly, there is a whole industry out there trying to convince you that you need this or that piece of equipment. Don't get hung up on equipment. You can make great music with what you have. Go make it. Don't eat up precious time and energy thumbing through catalogs and E-bay auctions. With that being said, here is a short list of equipment you should have. Through out I assume you'll be using recording software: Garageband or something similar.

You need at least two microphones. If you're buying new, many mics include guides showing how various mic placements affect the sound. Play with positions and get to know how your mics react. The differences can be subtle, but important. You can get good results recording drums with two mics, but four or eight gives you more control over the sound. But this means your recording software must be able to record four or eight tracks at once. If you're using two mics, try placing a mic in the base drum and hanging the other mic over the middle of the set.

You'll want some effects. In order of importance you'll want compression, limiting, EQ and reverb. Upgrading these basic effects may be worth your while if you're not satisfied with any "factory" effects that shipped with your software. However, I do not recommend purchasing any effects beyond the list above. Put your money into better microphones or preamps if there's extra cash.

You'll need preamps for your mics if your recording hardware does not include them. If you're using a dynamic mic, sometimes a guitar preamp or even stereo receiver can be substituted for a dedicated microphone preamp. Condenser microphones usually require phantom power. Check to make sure your recording hardware has phantom power or that you're willing to invest in the additional cost of a preamp that includes phantom power. Ribbon mics are fragile. Read up on them before you buy.

Learn from Others' Mistakes

Recording is a learning process. You will make mistakes. You will slap yourself on the forehead and say, "Why didn't I think of that before!?" You will accidentally erase precious tracks. This is normal, but you can deflate the steepness of your learning curve if you do your homework. As usual, use your internets and Google machine! <http://www.homerecording.com/> is a great launch point. There's lots of great information here, but be aware of opinions masking as facts and advertisements masking as dispassionate reviews.

Use Effects Sparingly

Folks new to the recording and who have access to software effects, tend to use them, a lot. They certainly are fun to play with and you should play with them, but be careful not to overuse them in your final product. Of course, various musical styles and tastes call for the use of different effects. However, all things being equal, I recommend that effects, especially software effects, be used minimally. Also, there is a related tendency to use effects because this seems “professional.” But when recording on a budget and given the limitations of equipment etc. the heavy use of effects will often sound tinny, artificial or muddy.

If it’s Not Perfect, Do Another Take

Hard drive space is cheap, so do it over if it’s not perfect. My experience is that you, the recording engineer, will spend more time fixing a flub with software than if you made the guitarist do another take. And it will sound better. Your final output can only be as good as the basic tracks you lay down. All the software in the world cannot salvage a poor musical performance.

Spread Out the Process

You record a track. You listen to it. You think its perfect. The next day you listen to it and flaws have magically appeared. This will happen. Build in time to rerecord tracks. Listening fatigue can make everything sound like oatmeal. When mixing, try to leave a week or at least a few days between mixing sessions. Recording on Saturday, mixing on Sunday and mailing the CD off to be reproduced on Monday is a mistake. You will hear things you regret. Leave as much time as you can between each step in the recording process, preferably a week or more.

Scoop the Mids At the Start

Use mic placement and analog EQ to get the best sound into your recording software or device. If you are recording a guitar or other amplifier, cut the mids a little more than you think you should. Usually the biggest problem mixing is that the middle frequencies (600-1300 Hz or so) are muddying up the mix. Usually cheaper mics, especially cheaper dynamic mics, tend to emphasize the mids. When recording a track it is hard to think about how your sound might muddy up the mix, since the rest of the band is missing. Get a sound you like and scoop out the mids a little more. It is always best to use EQ at the source rather than in the mix. Extreme use of EQ, especially software EQ, tends to sounds artificial.

Be Realistic

You will not get the sound you hear on the radio. What you can get on a budget is a cool recording that is honest, natural and shows off your superior songwriting and

musicianship. If you try desperately to get a “pro” recording in your basement you will most likely end up with an artificial, weak sounding record that will not fool anyone and more importantly will not be played by anyone.

Great music will be recognized as such in any recording of reasonable recording. I believe that it is easy to create a great recording as long as you are realistic about the output. Yes, your fans will probably sense the recording was not made in a “professional” studio, but that doesn’t mean you can’t create a great record that music fans will cherish.