

Fonte Labs Podcast – Episode 3 Recording and Mixing Music

Jeremy Fonte
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- With the introduction of digital recording and fairly cheap recording software, anyone can now begin recording music at home.
- A basic recording setup for a solo project will require at least one microphone, and possibly more if a drum set will be recorded or to add depth to acoustic guitar recordings. I've made do with one microphone as long as I've recorded music, so I would imagine most solo projects could also get by with one.
- You'll most likely want an external recording interface, or perhaps internal if you have a large desktop computer. There are USB recording interfaces that work very well at this point. Mine has two inputs, which can accommodate either 1/4" plugs (like a guitar cable) or XLR plugs (balanced microphone inputs).
- While you can mike a guitar amplifier, you can also plug it straight into the recording interface and use the functionality most recording software provides for simulating and modeling guitar amps and cabinets. While I do think my tube amp sounds better than some of the models, they're great for experimenting with sounds you might not be able to create with your particular amp.
- There are also many, many effects in most recording software – far more than the four or five stompbox effects I have. Everything from chorus to flanger to fuzz to tremelo is available. There are also spacious reverbs and delay/echo effects that go beyond what most amps provide for reverb.
- When you're recording vocals you want to be sure to give some space from your mouth to the microphone, especially if you're belting or screaming. Keeping the mike too close when you're really singing loud can lead to clipping in the recording, where it basically distorts from far too much input volume. You can always make vocals louder but you can't always eliminate clipping, so try to err on the side of caution when belting.
- The same goes for recording a guitar plugged into an amplifier. You can record an amp at just about any volume. Too low and the amp will sound weak, and you might even hear the sound of your "unplugged" electric, that is, the tinny sound of strumming or picking your strings. Too high with the mike too close and the sound will be clipped, making it sound unnatural. Always try recording a bar or two of guitar before committing to a specific amp setup or microphone distance. You want the full range of sound from the amp but also it should be loud enough to sound powerful and solid. This applies to both overdrive and clean guitar.

- Perhaps the most important “effects” in a musician’s toolkit are the compressor and limiter effects. These tools help to raise lower volumes and lower high volumes, creating more even dynamics.
- One highly popular recording trick is called “double tracking”. This makes vocals sound solid and rich, guitar sound expansive and powerful; basically you just record two takes of particular vocal performance or guitar riff, then place them in the same “space” – same pan, volume, and reverb. The slight differences in tone and pitch create a sort of modulation effect that is highly appealing.
- Another trick is to record two takes of an acoustic or electric guitar part, or even a synth, then pan each take to the far left and far right. This gives a feeling of great spaciousness to the mix. I particularly like this technique for acoustic guitar (steel-string).
- The importance of a decent sound card or external recording interface becomes clear once you’re monitoring sounds while recording. Lesser interfaces will have noticeable delay and/or drop audio while recording, which can be extremely frustrating. With enough tracks, even playing back the whole song can cause the audio to drop – so it’s crucial to have a decent recording interface.
- You’ll want a good set of studio-quality headphones for recording – typically large speakers, with overhead design. For \$50 to \$100 you can find some quality headphones that will suffice.
- One annoying occurrence with headphones occurs when you’re recording acoustic instruments or vocals – if the metronome click in the headphones is loud enough, the mike will actually pick up the sound and record the click on the track. So be sure to set the phones volume low when recording with a mike. This doesn’t really apply if you’re miking a loud guitar or bass amplifier, which is typically both very loud and far away from the phones.
- While I’m a big fan of reverb, it’s worth mentioning that more reverb is not always the best solution, especially with vocals. Drowning the entire sound out with reverb on every track can make it feel muddy and, unless you’re going for a new age sound, a bit out of place. Choosing to make a few tracks in a song have high reverb can provide a spacious feeling without ruining the song. The same goes for delay or echo effects.
- If you want to record shredding guitar but perhaps don’t have the cleanest articulation, using a fuzzed out amp model can provide lots of distortion without much added noise – it will pick up every note and smooth it all out a bit to cover up slight mistakes with picking this or that note. If you feel your articulation is clear and solid, try switching to a normal overdrive or even experiment with clean sounds.
- Using an EQ is very important, typically on most if not all tracks. If you mike a guitar amp a little too closely, you can try cutting out some of the bass and lower mid frequencies to clean it up. Likewise, vocals can have the mids and upper mids boosted for a more pleasant sound. I typically prefer a scooped bass guitar sound when it’s in the background, which is achieved by lowering

the lower mids. When the bass is featured, I actually like a lot of low mids to make it sound thick, punchy and expressive. A lot of reverb effects have a high cutoff for the reverberated sound – setting this high will retain high frequencies and give the reverb a brilliant sound, whereas setting it low will give a duller, darker reverb.

- If you're using synths with a keyboard or MIDI controller, the sound is typically expressive and dynamic due to touch sensitivity for the keys, and/or pitch and modulation wheels to alter the tone of the synth sound. However, when synths or synth drums are programmed, that is, written in the recording software note by note, often the volume is the same for every note. Try adding a little emphasis on certain beats and making other notes quieter. Just spending 15 minutes to make the beat or synth lead sound natural will create a much more enjoyable song overall.
- That wraps up this episode of the Fonte Labs podcast –
- Thank you and goodbye.