

Making Your First Home Demo



Handy tips to get the best home demo first time out

You have dreams of making it to the top but whether you want to be the next Steps or Marilyn Manson you'll need a marketing tool - a demo which you hope will earn you more than the usual ten seconds of record company ears.

First steps

Making your own home demos has two big advantages over the commercial studio. Firstly it's cheaper apart from the initial outlay for the basic equipment which could comprise as little as a multitracker, mic and headphones. Secondly you can spend as much time as you want perfecting your recordings.

You should be aiming to capture the best performances and recording quality possible so try and allocate your time sensibly. Make sure you can record with no disturbances such as screaming kids, passing lorries or the Red Arrows doing a fly past as these will surely ruin your best of vocal takes. Try and set a mood with low lighting and create an atmosphere - and that doesn't mean lighting a million joss sticks as the smoke won't do your voice any good unless you want to sound like Joe Cocker at six in the morning.

Whether it's a band or a solo demo you should first decide if you will be utilising midi. If you do want to use drum machines and sequenced keyboards and don't want to waste spare tracks then you're going to need some sort of midi sync set up.

Choose the number of songs you'll be recording but it's best to pick your best three or four. Remember to put your best song first on the demo and make sure there's not a three-minute intro. You want to be into the meat of the song within 20 seconds or so to prevent your demo ending up in the dustbin with all the others.

The band

You will quickly need to organise tracks at your disposal and decide if you have enough left on your multitracker for live drums. If there is no place at home for the drum kit or it would be too loud and would annoy the neighbours then consider recording the drums or part of the band at a rehearsal room. Naturally to record drums you will need plenty of mics and a decent mixer to cope. When recording live drums always remember the type of mics needed for the different parts of the kit, mic placement and drum tuning and dampening.

Alternatively, if the drummer is prepared to bite the bullet you could use a drum machine but try and give drum patterns a looser, live and more human feel by shifting the odd note slightly off the beat rather than ruthless quantising.

Of course you don't need all the members of the band in at the same time which could be handy if you have only got a room the size of a shoebox.

Solo

It's a lonely life on your own but things can be a lot easier with no argumentative colleagues moaning their middle eight vocal is flat or the hi-hat is too low in the mix.

You can free loads of tracks for live recording by using drum machines and sequenced keyboards, allowing you more time to concentrate on getting the vocals and any other live acoustic instruments right.

The onus will be on you to deliver the goods and be self-critical at all times because unfortunately although you might be a John Lennon you won't have a Paul McCartney to bounce ideas off. So try and get a few friends in to play the parts you can't do or just to add a bit of variety to the performances.

Recording techniques

You can get away with DI-ing much of the equipment but naturally you will have more difficulty getting good vocal and guitar recordings. It is easy to simply DI the guitar but you will probably get a better rounded and more

authentic sound if you put a mic on your amp. The tried and trusted Shure SM57 or 58 would do the trick. With an acoustic guitar try and use a large diaphragm condenser mic but take care with placement to capture the right balance of guitar and your room.

With the vocals it is important to set the mood and build yourself up for a big performance. Do use a pop shield to stop those popping ps ruining your take. If you can't afford a proper one then a coat hanger and a pair of nylon stockings will do the trick. Where you get your stockings from is up to you.

It is always recommended that you use a bit of compression on the vocals to even them out and perhaps even more during the mix.

Generally, always try to keep the recording levels at a sensible level and avoid clipping because digital in particular is unforgiving at high levels.

Furthermore, go for the "less is more" attitude with your song arrangement. Don't bury your tune in dozens of overdubs that clutter the song. Let it breathe!

The final polish

Take a break after your recording is complete otherwise you will be approaching the mixdown stage with tired ears. Mixing is an art itself and takes hours of trial and error to achieve the right balance of instrumentation. Start with the basics - drums, bass and guitar and work from there. Add the keyboards and then vocals. Compare your mix with CDs in your collection. Is the bass too low in the mix or are the vocals too loud?

Then start adding some EQ and effects, but be sparing. Aim particularly for a little reverb on vocals, guitar and parts of the drum kit. It is always best to leave the kick drum and bass guitar dry and at the centre of the mix. Try not to pan the drums and keyboards full left and right as they will engulf the whole mix and appear 50ft wide. Just imagine you're watching a stage performance and try and position the different instruments accordingly left to right and front to back.

Try your finished mix on a variety of hi-fi set ups and compare the results. You could even try standing outside your recording room to listen to the mix and see if anything stands out as too loud. To get close to a commercial CD recording, make sure you get the loudest mix possible without clipping even it means a little more compression. Back up your recordings on a variety of mediums for safekeeping and future copying.

If you do get a record deal, give me a mention.

Gary Hopkins