

## **MUSIC: WHY WE RECORD**

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As you learn about recording techniques for music, it's wise to remember that music is a wonderful reason for recording.

Music can be exalting, exciting, soothing, sensuous, and fulfilling. It's marvelous that recordings can preserve it. As a recording engineer or recording musician, it's to your advantage to better understand what music is all about.

Music starts as musical ideas or feelings in the mind and heart of its composer. Musical instruments are used to translate these ideas and feelings into sound waves. Somehow, the emotion contained in the music—the message—is coded in the vibrations of air molecules.

Those sounds are converted to electricity and stored magnetically or optically. The composer's message manages to survive the trip through the mixing console and recorders; the signal is transferred to disc or computer files. Finally, the original sound waves are reproduced in the listening room, and miraculously the original emotion is reproduced in the listener as well.

Of course, not everyone reacts to a piece of music the same way, so the listener may not perceive the composer's intent. Still, it's amazing that anything as intangible as a thought or feeling can be conveyed by tiny magnetic patterns on a hard disk or by pits on a compact disc.

The point of music lies in what it's doing now, in the present. In other words, the meaning of "Doo wop she bop" is "Doo wop she bop." The meaning of an Am7 chord followed by an Fmaj7 chord is the experience of Am7 followed by Fmaj7.

### **Increasing Your Involvement in Music**

Sometimes, to get involved in music, you must relax enough to lie back and listen. You have to feel unhurried, to be content to sit between your stereo speakers or wear headphones, and listen with undivided attention. Actively analyze or feel what the musicians are playing.

Music affects people much more when they are already feeling the emotion expressed in the song. For example, hearing a fast Irish reel when you're in a party mood, or hearing a piece by Debussy when you're feeling sensuous, is more moving because your feelings resonate with those in the music. When you're falling in love, any music that is meaningful to you is enhanced.

If you identify strongly with a particular song, that tells you something about yourself and your current mood. And the songs that other people identify with tell you something about them. You can understand individuals better by listening to their favorite music.

### **Different Ways of Listening**

There are so many levels on which to listen to music—so many ways to focus attention. Try this. Play one of your favorite records several times while listening for these different aspects:

- Overall mood and rhythm
- Lyrics
- Vocal technique
- Bass line
- Drum fills
- Sound quality
- Technical proficiency of musicians
- Musical arrangement or structure
- Reaction of one musician to another musician's playing
- Surprises versus predictable patterns

By listening to a piece of music from several perspectives, you'll get much more out of it than if you just hear it as background. There's a lot going on in any song that usually goes unnoticed. Sometimes when you play an old familiar record and listen to the lyrics for the first time, the whole meaning of the song changes for you.

Most people react to music on the basic level of mood and rhythmic motivation. But as a recording enthusiast, you hear much more detail because your focus demands sustained critical listening. The same is true of trained musicians focusing on the musical aspects of a performance.

It's all there for anyone to hear, but you must train yourself to hear selectively and to focus attention on a particular level of the multidimensional musical event. For example, instead of just feeling excited while listening to an impressive lead-guitar solo, listen to what the guitarist is actually playing. You may hear some amazing things.

Here's one secret of really involving yourself in recorded music: imagine yourself playing it! For example, if you're a bass player, listen to the bass line in a particular record, and imagine that you're playing the bass line. You'll hear the part as never before. Or respond to the music visually—see it as you do in the movie *Fantasia*.

Follow the melody line and see its shape. Hear where it reaches up, strains, and then relaxes. Hear how one note leads into the next. How does the musical expression change from moment to moment?

There are times when you can almost touch music: some music has a prickly texture (many transients, emphasized high frequencies); some music is soft and sinuous (sine-wave synthesizer notes, soaring vocal harmonies); and some music is airy and spacious (lots of reverberation).

### **Why Record?**

Recording is a service and a craft. Without it, people would be exposed to much less music. They would be limited to the occasional live concert or to their own live music, played once and forever gone.

With recordings, you can preserve a performance for thousands of listeners. You can hear an enormous variety of musical expressions whenever you want. Unlike a live concert, a record can be played over and over for analysis. CDs, vinyl, or sound files are also a way to achieve a sort of immortality. The Beatles may be gone, but their music lives on.

Records can even reveal your evolving consciousness as you grow and change. A computer audio file or CD stays the same physically, but you hear it differently over the years as your perception changes. Recordings are a constant against which you can measure change in yourself.

Be proud that you are contributing to the recording art—it is done in the service of music.

Bruce Bartlett is a recording engineer, musician, audio journalist and microphone engineer ([www.bartlettaudio.com](http://www.bartlettaudio.com)). His latest books are "Practical Recording Techniques 7th edition" and "Recording Music On Location 2nd edition."