

HOW TO RECORD YOUR BAND'S PRACTICE SESSION

by Bruce Bartlett

[photo: Bluegrass Millstream Band]



When you're jamming with other musicians, you tend to focus on what you're playing, so you might not hear the band as a whole. Recording a rehearsal and playing it back lets you listen to the band as an audience member. Suddenly you can hear how tight the band is (or isn't!) And you can appreciate each others' solos or musical lines when you're not just trying to get your part right.

That said, some band members might feel uncomfortable being recorded. You might want to postpone recording until the songs are nearly perfected.

There are many ways to record a rehearsal from simple to complex. We'll cover a few here.

FORM A CIRCLE AROUND A SMARTPHONE

A smartphone (Android or iPhone) has an omnidirectional mic of surprisingly high quality. If the band members surround that phone from a few feet away, it will pick up a blend of all the players.

Record in a quiet room or even outdoors, with a foam windscreen covering the mic. You can attach the phone to a mic stand at chin height or a little higher. You could even lay the phone on a hard floor, but the sound there isn't the best.

Do a trial recording and play it back over some good speakers or headphones. You might record a tune, email the recording file to your desktop computer, and play it back over the computer speakers.

If anyone is too quiet in the playback, have them move a little closer to the phone, and vice versa. Record again until you hear a well-balanced mix. You might mark each player's position with labeled pieces of tape on the floor.

A handheld digital recorder such as the Zoom H4n could substitute for the smartphone. Its mics are directional, so aim it vertically if people surround the recorder on all sides.

RECORD THE OUTPUT OF YOUR BAND'S MIXER

This method works well if your group has a mixer and a mic or direct box for each player. Place a mic near each singer and instrument, typically about 3 to 8 inches away. Instruments with a pickup can be recorded from their preamp output or with a direct box.

Have the band play a tune. Wearing headphones, your sound person can set the gain knobs to prevent clipping, set a good balance with the faders, and adjust EQ. Usually some bass rolloff is needed to compensate for the mics' proximity effect (up-close bass boost).

Connect the mixer's main outputs to the line inputs of a 2-track recorder such as a handheld digital recorder or a laptop running a recording app. With the laptop, you might use a 2-channel USB interface to get the mixer's signal into the computer.

RECORD TO MULTITRACK

Plug your mics and DI's into an 8-channel audio interface. Using a USB cable, connect the interface to a computer running multitrack recording software such as Audacity, Reaper, Cakewalk, Logic, ProTools, etc.

Use the interface's level knobs to set the recording levels. Record some songs, then mix them after the rehearsal is over. At a listening session later on, you can solo tracks as needed to hear how each player is doing.

Recording a practice lets you hear your group objectively as an outside listener would. It's a great tool for improving your band's performance.

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