Everyone has a home studio these days, but many either can’t fit all the players of a band or just don’t have the gear needed for a good basic recording. If this is the case, many times it’s worth spending the money to go to a commercial studio to record at least the drum tracks.

Preparing for that recording session does require some planning, and choosing between options may be something that only you, the producer, can do.

**INITIAL DECISIONS**

Before the first session begins, a host of decisions have to be made that range from the mundane to the important. Here’s an overview of the many production considerations a producer is confronted with in a typical project.

- **Who is the engineer (or engineers)?** Your choice of who engineers the project is critical, and, like many other aspects of production, this is not an element to cheap out on. A great engineer is your safety blanket. He’ll make things sound great even with gear that’s not up to snuff and provide useful technical advice,
audio expertise, and even production suggestions when you need another opinion.

Many producers will use a top engineer for basics and mixing, and then use a less expensive one for overdubs (or engineer the overdubs themselves), in order to save some money. While this can work, the continuity of having the same engineer all the way through a project will keep the quality uniformly high and actually save time and money, since there’s the possibility for confusion when projects are handed off between engineers.

- **Is any rental gear required?** Even the most well-equipped studio in the world probably still won’t have something that you’ll want or need for the session, be it an esoteric piece of audio or musical gear, or just something that’s essential for you to get your desired sound. Make sure you plan ahead for when you’ll need the rental, and then schedule around that. An example of this could be the rental of a grand piano or a Hammond organ. You’ll want to use it as soon as it arrives, instead of paying rental time for it to just sit around.

- **What’s the best time of day to record?** This question can actually be a loaded one. While most bands would rather start early in the day to stay fresh, many singers don’t feel as though their throats open up until later in the day. While you might need only a guide vocal from the singer when the basics are being recorded, you certainly don’t want the singer to be harmed or feel abused, and herein lies the dilemma. You don’t want to start recording too late in the day, since you’ll end up having everyone burn out early, and you might lose the advantage of a few hours of the studio’s daily rate that you’ve paid for. While starting the session at 10 a.m. might not work, try to start no later than noon if possible. Many musicians want or need to get home at a reasonable hour to be with their families, and working too far into the night can upset your body clock if you’re not used to it.

- **Are there any additional musicians required?** Once again, it’s best to plan as far in advance as you can so you can schedule the other players as needed. The more players you need to have together at one time (like a string or horn section), the more time in advance you’ll need in order to schedule them.

- **What format and sampling rate will you use?** While it’s possible that you might still want to break out an analog tape
machine to record your basics, chances are that at some point in the project you’ll return to the comfort and flexibility of a DAW (most likely Pro Tools). Your choice of bit depth and sampling rate can be critical to the amount of hassle that you’ll encounter down the road. Here’s a chart that can help you make your choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling Rate/Bit Depth</th>
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| 192 kHz/24 bit          | **PROS:** Sounds fabulous. Is as close to analog as you can easily get right now.  
**CONS:** Expensive. Takes a lot of disk space, and you might need extra A/D and D/A converters. Requires a lot of computer processing on a big session. Track availability may be cut in half, and many plug-ins don’t work at this sample rate. |
| 96 kHz/24 bit           | **PROS:** With the right converters, this rate can sound a lot better than 48/24. Much better for archival purposes.  
**CONS:** Processing and track count may be cut in half in some DAWs. Some home studios aren’t capable of 96/24. Might not be worth the hassle under normal circumstances. |
| 48 kHz/24 bit           | **PROS:** A good combination of audio quality with a minimum of hassle.  
**CONS:** May be a lower resolution than the common audio formats of the future. |
| 44.1 kHz/24 bit         | **PROS:** Native resolution for CD.  
**CONS:** A major disadvantage if video is involved, which operates at 48 kHz. |

Here are some simple guidelines for choosing sampling rate/bit depth:
- If you want a good compromise between audio quality and hassle, choose 48 kHz/24 bit.
- If you’re recording loud music like rock or rap, 48 kHz/24 bit could be a good choice. The higher sampling rate doesn’t buy you enough discernible sound quality to make it worthwhile.
- You might wish you recorded at 96 kHz in the future when all formats are high-resolution and you want to rerelease older material.
- If you’re recording music for film, the standard is 48 kHz/24 bit.
- If you’re producing acoustic music like jazz, bluegrass, or classical for string quartet, 96 kHz/24 bit will provide a discernible improvement in audio quality.
- While 192 kHz/24 bit sounds great, use it only if your engineering team is comfortable in that domain and can guarantee you a hassle-free session. Not all DAW apps and converters work well at this resolution.
- Don’t mix sampling rates. While you might be tempted to use different sampling rates on different songs, do so only if your engineering team can assure you that it will be hassle-free. A 96k session might not be a big deal at one studio, but might be impossible if you have to move to another. Why limit your choices?
- What’s the order of recording? Choosing the order of recording is one of the most strategic decisions that a producer can make. Most producers like to start off with something relatively easy so the band members get comfortable with the studio and gain confidence in their playing. One school of thought says that the most difficult song should be recorded right after that first easy one so that you tackle it while you’re fresh and you have the ability to come back to it later if need be.
- What studio or studios will you be using? It’s entirely possible that you’ll be using more than one studio to record your project, as is the norm these days. Oftentimes you’ll use a studio with a room large enough to record drums or the rhythm tracks, and then move on to a smaller and cheaper room or a home studio for the overdubs. Most mixing these days is done in the box, but you may want to go old school and mix on a console at a different studio as well. That means that you’ll have to make sure that each studio can accommodate the recording resolution that you’ve chosen.
SELECTING A STUDIO

The studio or studios you choose may be critical to how well the project comes out as well as how much time it takes to complete. A studio affects a project in so many ways that it’s almost impossible to determine what the most critical item is. Everything from the acoustics to the equipment to the vibe to the staff to the location are all factors to consider when making your final decision.

Let’s look at each of these factors individually:

- **The location.** Location is important for some artists and not so much for others. Some might want the studio to be located as close to home as possible, while others might want to be as far away from possible distractions (like fans or family) as they can get. Sometimes, just a little extra drive time might take an artist out of her comfort zone. For example, an artist who lives in West L.A. or Santa Monica wouldn’t even consider driving to a studio in Burbank or Glendale, even though it’s less than 20 miles away. Sometimes even only driving to downtown Hollywood can be considered too far at less than 10 miles, so driving distance can be a factor.

- **The vibe.** Every studio has its own vibe, which stems from its location, decor, cosmetics, and staff. Some studios are high-tech and sterile, while some are funky yet comfortable. Some artists will perform better in a studio located in an industrial park that reminds them of their rehearsal facility (see Figure 9-1), while others respond better to something that’s modern and ultra-slick (see Figure 9-2). Usually, the longer you stay in a facility, the more the vibe matters, so that factors in to your final selection as well.

![Figure 9-1: Some Artists Perform Better in a Smaller Studio](image-url)
• The staff. Nothing can turn a client (that's you and your artist) off as much as a disengaged or an incompetent studio owner or staff, so be sure to check with other producers and get recommendations before booking a place. A great staff can easily make up for many shortcomings of the studio if the people are fun and accommodating, but you need a core competence in the basics of studio management first.

• The deal. You may want to book a great place that everyone wants to record in, but if you can't afford it, you might need to reconsider your choice. That said, a studio's advertised rate usually isn't its final price. Most studios will cut you a deal off the "book," or advertised rate, depending on several factors including, for example: how busy they are, how long you intend to stay, and whether you have a reputation as being a hassle-free client. Talk to the studio manager or owner; tell him what you need and how much you have to spend, and you might be surprised how accommodating he can be.

• The studio size. Are you going for full-band takes, or are the drums the only instrument you intend to record for basics? This factor will determine how large a recording room you'll need as well as the type of isolation that will be required for each instrument. If you plan on tracking an entire band at once, the size of the tracking room will be critical, since larger is definitely better. Unfortunately, most of the really old large studios are now a thing...
of the past, but most commercial studios can accommodate at least a rhythm section. If you’re creating mostly electronic music with a few overdubs, then you’re probably more concerned that the studio has enough room that you feel comfortable and has a small overdub area.

- **The acoustics.** Most commercial studios have a recording room that sounds reasonably good, but each studio will sound different depending on when it was built. Throughout the years, studio acoustics have gone back and forth in popularity between reflective, “live” sounding rooms and relatively dead rooms, and you want to be sure to book a room that will give the sound you’re going for. Generally speaking, rock and live recording (like jazz) tend to work best in a livelier, more reflective room, while R&B and dance work better in a dead room, although these are broad generalizations and there are certainly plenty of exceptions. You’ll find a lot more live rooms available though, as the dead-room era was mostly a byproduct of the late ‘70s disco era. Remember, it’s a lot easier to deaden up a live room than it is to liven up a dead-sounding room.

- **The gear.** Sometimes the gear that a studio has is the determining factor in helping you decide which studio you’ll use. Maybe the studio has an API console (or even just a rack of their mic preamps) and you like the way they sound on the rock band you’re about to produce. Maybe the studio has a great collection of vintage keyboards or guitar amps. Maybe the studio has a great microphone locker. All of these things play into your selection of the right studio for the project.

It’s always a good idea to pick the best studio you can afford when recording the basic tracks. As I said before, the basics are critical to the outcome of the final product, so this isn’t the place to skimp. Overdubs might be a different story, as you’ll see in Chapter 10.

**The Assistant Engineer**

If you’ve booked a commercial facility, chances are that you’ll have an assistant engineer assigned to your session. Don’t underestimate how important this individual can be to you, as the assistant is the key to making your life easier as you record. If the assistant is really good, he can provide the following:
• Intimate knowledge of the studio and its quirks, from finding the best-sounding places in the room to record, to the contents of the mic locker, to which mics are working well, and to what the idiosyncrasies of the console and patch bay are.
• A great working knowledge of the house Pro Tools system (or whatever DAW you choose to work with).
• The scoop on the best places to order take-out or get food delivered from, as well as knowledge of the best restaurants nearby.
• Information about any musical instruments and amps that the studio may have, as well as the rental services available.
• Information about any house computer systems and wireless network connections.
• Documentation of the session, from track sheets (yes, they're still used) to mic-placement charts and setup pictures to marking the console tape if there is one in the studio.
• A good pot of coffee!

Above all, a great assistant is transparent. When you really need him, he's there, and all other times, he's in the background but always paying attention to what's going on. If the assistant sees a problem, he tells the engineer at the appropriate time and it's the engineer's job to take care of it. A good assistant never displays a bad or negative attitude, and always leaves his or her ego at the door.