

Project: Studio

by Loren Alldrin



Gear, There, Everywhere

This month, Pro Audio Review gives you the scoop on over 4,000 pieces of equipment. As a certified gear fanatic, I get a little dizzy when I consider how many blinking LEDs, twisty knobs and crisp cardboard boxes that adds up to. Sound familiar? For many, gear is the stuff dreams are made of.

Truth be known, my infatuation with equipment has been mellowing over the years. Where I once saw cool gear as the key to great recordings, I now see it as a tool to capture great performances. It's been a long, slow process to arrive at this point, one punctuated by some formative events I'd like to share.

Flashback #1: my first band. What we lacked in musical ability we more than made up for with enthusiasm. Like most bands, we were sick of boombox recordings and longed for the day when we could record in a *real* studio. It never happened. Instead, I bought a Fostex 1/4-inch 8-track rig at the ripe old age of 17 and recorded our band myself. We still sounded bad.

Flashback #2: several years later. Having been bitten by the recording bug, I graduated to a 1/2-inch 8-track deck and recorded local bands in my modest studio. My recording technique had improved a great deal (as had my gear), but getting good-sounding recordings was still an uphill fight. I remember one particular session where I spent all day trying to get a workable drum sound. I tweaked mic positions, taped napkins to heads, replaced heads, chased buzzes and re-tuned drums. The drums still sounded bad.

Flashback #3: two years ago. I moved to Nashville, where's there more musical talent working in the nearby Shoney's restaurant than there is in most small towns. Suddenly, great-sounding recordings were easy. Sure--I had learned a lot about recording in the past years, and my gear had improved quite a bit. But these facts didn't entirely account for the *dramatic* improvement in the tracks I was recording. The key was the caliber of musicians now in front of my mics, from great vocalists to rock-solid percussionists to scary guitarists. That most of these musicians wielded top-notch instruments didn't hurt, either.

One session springs to mind. I spent about 10 minutes miking up a drumkit in the usual fashion. I sat down at the board, brought up the inputs and was *knocked over* by the drum sound. I didn't have to move a mic, touch an EQ knob or tape a winter flu-worth of tissue to the heads. The tracks sounded amazing because the drums (and the drummer) sounded amazing.

Just a Tool

These experiences--and many others similar--have taught me a great deal about what equipment can and can't do. A lousy performance captured with stellar gear, for example, is still a lousy performance. A bad-sounding instrument will usually defy lavish equipment and production budgets to remain, at it's essence, a bad-sounding instrument.

On the flip side, an inspired performance recorded with ho-hum equipment is still an inspired performance. A great instrument will deliver scrumptious sounds even if the

mic isn't perfect for the task, or the preamp is a little too thick in the middle, or the cheap reverb lacks the depth of a \$2,000 model.

Am I proposing that gear doesn't really matter? Not on your life. When a performance is creating some goosebump magic, having the best-possible equipment in the signal path just makes a great thing even better. Even small improvements in gear can add up to a noticeable sonic difference in the final mix. Preserving a great performance with the clarity and reverence possible is what this issue is all about.

My point is simply this: equipment is only one part of the recording equation. Buy new equipment whenever you can and use it well, but don't become obsessed with that magical piece of gear sitting just beyond your equipment budget. The tools we use are very important, but they should never take precedence over the craft they're used for.

I'm preaching to those folks who would rather spend \$500 on a new mic than \$50 hiring somebody who can really *play*. Those folks who would rather spend their time tweaking a reverb pre-delay than making sure the vocal actually communicated something. Those people who purchase racks full of top-notch equipment and never record anything. You know who you are.

Remember--it's all about the music.

Loren Alldrin is Pro Audio Review's Project Studio editor, and the author of "The Home Studio Guide to Microphones" from Mix Bookshelf.