



**from song idea
to production
masterpiece**

*recording and production
options for singer-songwriters*

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FROM SONG IDEA TO PRODUCTION MASTERPIECE

recording and production options for singer-songwriters

So you've written a song, and you're pleased with what you've done. You've agonised over the lyrics - captured those emotions in eloquent phrases. You've honed the melody so that it perfectly fits the mood of the words. You've thought about the structure of your song - the number of verses, and choruses, and the contrasts between the sections that keep it interesting. You've sung it over to yourself loads of times with your guitar and perhaps played it to some friends who think it's great. You've recorded it into your phone. Maybe you've experimented with it in software like GarageBand or Audacity.

But now what? You know this song has potential. It deserves to be heard! If you can only turn it into a beautiful, professional-sounding production you could get it 'out there' and it would find its audience. With a creative arrangement and polished production, you know that your song could fly - and not just this song but the others that you have slaved over just as long. You know there's an EP or album that's desperate to get out, and frankly, it's time to get serious about your music!

So here's the tricky part - how do you turn those strong song ideas into even stronger finished tracks that will stand shoulder to shoulder with your favourite artists? Well, there are some different options that I'd like to walk you through - each with pros and cons, but hopefully this will give you some ideas for the way ahead.

Option 1 - be your own producer

The advances in technology in the last couple of decades have totally revolutionised what's possible to do in your own place where music production is concerned. The appeal of this approach is that once you've made the initial outlay on some equipment, there are very few ongoing costs. What's more, you are free to make all your own decisions and take all the time you need to record, program and mix your material - total creative freedom!

If that sounds good, then here are some basic things that you'll need in place to get the job done:

1. A decent laptop or home computer

Although there are stand-alone recorders on the market that don't require a computer for recording, I would strongly recommend going down the computer route primarily because the mixing and production stages are so much easier than if you're trying to do everything on a fiddly hardware recorder. Working on an iPad is also possible but ultimately more limited than a decent PC. Of course you may already have a computer that can be pressed in to service, but do make sure that it has a reasonably powerful CPU (e.g. Intel i5 or more), a decent amount of RAM (at least 4GB) and plenty of available hard drive space (50GB or more depending on how many songs you think you'll be working on). You will of course need to decide on whether to go for a PC or a Mac. They can both do a good job but some music software will only run on one or the other so check that first. Although many studios and producers seem to favour Macs (and like using Logic which only runs on Mac), there are plenty of good PC options too, and the hardware may well be cheaper for the same level of performance.

Estimated price £500 - £1800

2. Recording and production software

This is your core control-station where the work gets done. Usually referred to as a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation), there are a number of different software solutions on the market. Most of them have evolved to a staggering level of functionality, which will allow you to

record audio, record and program MIDI, program drums and other instruments that come included, edit and manipulate your audio and MIDI, mix with hundreds of available included or third party processors and effects - then export your work to wav or mp3 files etc. Most of these software packages cost a few hundred pounds but there are some free ones such as GarageBand, Audacity and Cakewalk. The offering differs depending on whether you're working on a Mac or PC.
Estimated price: £0 - £500

3. An audio interface

To get audio signals in and out of the computer you'll need an interface into which you can plug microphones and keyboards. You'll also use the interface to connect speakers or headphones so you can hear your music. Usually, the interface will come with drivers and software that allows you to control its functions from your computer - for example you can set the recording level of the microphone before it reaches your DAW software. Interfaces come in a huge variety of shapes and sizes - and prices! To get going you'll want a basic USB interface that has at least one good quality microphone input - possibly more if you're going to be recording multiple sources like guitars and keyboards. Don't be tempted to use the cruddy mic input in your laptop - and usually the laptop headphone jack also leaves something to be desired! There's loads that could be said about interfaces and what to look out for, but space here does not permit! Check out products from the likes of Focusrite, Audient, Tascam, M-Audio, and Universal Audio among many others.

Estimated price £150 - £800

4. A decent studio microphone

If you're wanting professional-sounding recordings, then at least one good microphone is essential. Again, this is a huge subject in itself, but I would recommend choosing a large-diaphragm condenser microphone with a pop shield - these are generally well suited to vocal recording. Condenser microphones usually require phantom power to operate - the power is delivered by the XLR cable that also carries the audio, so your interface of choice will need to be able to supply phantom power (most do). There are other types of microphone that

can work well, notably dynamic microphones, but they are often better for stage use and don't always have the fidelity that you'd want in the studio (there are exceptions to that - but this is a general rule). Don't forget a decent XLR cable and a sturdy mic stand to mount it on - these types of microphone are not designed to be held in the hand during recording. Check out products from the likes of Rode, Aston, AKG, Audio Technica and sE Electronics among many others.

Estimated price £200 - £1000

5. Studio speakers or good headphones

Being able to hear what you're doing, especially at the mixing stage of a production is pretty important! Most audio interfaces will have a headphone socket that means you can work on headphones - but get a decent pair that are designed for critical listening. Most 'consumer' phones will have a pretty skewed and uneven frequency response which make audio production work very difficult because you can't really trust what you're hearing. Studio loudspeakers (or 'monitors') can be easier to work with and are more comfortable during long sessions, but will be more expensive. Again, avoid the temptation to work on cheap 'media speakers' for the same reason you'd avoid cheap consumer headphones. Using speakers makes item 5 on our list even more important. You'll also need headphones for when you're recording your vocal to hear the backing track coming back from the DAW. Check out products from the likes of Genelec, KRK, Adam, Dynaudio and HEDD among many others.

Estimated price for phones: £100 - £500

Estimated price for speakers: £300 - £2000

6. Decent acoustics

Home recordings can easily be compromised by poor sound on the microphones. Even with a great mic, if you're recording your voice or guitar in an untreated room, it will probably sound 'roomy' as the sound bouncing off the walls comes back in to the microphone and gives unpleasant ambience and resonances to the sound, which is nigh on impossible to fix on the recording afterwards. Similarly, the sound from you loudspeakers will be affected by the room and make for an uneven listening experience. Therefore some acoustic treatment is

important. Many books are written on this subject, but as a bare minimum, put up plenty of padding (duvets and blankets etc) behind and in front of your microphone recording area to create a 'dry' acoustic environment. You can buy specially designed 'reflection filters' to put round the microphone to help with this. Even that doesn't overcome the issue of external noise from traffic etc, so you'll need to find the quietest place in your house! Check out products from the likes of Studio Spares, sE and GIK acoustics among others.

Estimated price for basic acoustic treatment: £40 - £300

7. A MIDI controller

Unless you are planning to record only acoustic instruments such as guitar, then you will probably want a MIDI controller keyboard, even if you don't really see yourself as a keyboard player. This is so that you can control software instruments that are running in your DAW software - most MIDI controllers don't generate their own on-board sounds. So if for example you wish to add some strings or drums etc, you can call up a software instrument that produces that sound then play in the parts from the MIDI keyboard which would be connected via USB, or via your interface. So this may not be essential, but if you are wanting to fill out your song arrangement with other sounds it's going to be extremely useful. Check out products from the likes of Novation, M-Audio, Akai and Korg among many others.

Estimated price: £100-£600

So there you have it. For about £1000 (or even less if you shop around and get the most basic options) you can set yourself up with an elementary studio and you're a big step closer to turning your song idea into a dazzling production. However, there are some obvious issues with this approach. With all of the above items, there are a dizzying selection of options and permutations. Not only do you need to know a bit about the recording process itself, but you need to have a good working knowledge of the software and hardware items you've purchased - once you've navigated the maze that is shopping for gear!

In addition, it's one thing to know your way around the software and equipment, but quite another to be a master at using it in a musically

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satisfying way. To make a truly professional sounding production you'll need to become proficient with the following techniques:

- mic placement
- audio comping, editing and tuning
- drums, bass, keys and synth and strings programming and MIDI editing etc
- appropriate use of EQ, compression, reverb, delay and other effects
- DAW automation for volume, panning, FX levels etc
- mastering processes

Each of these areas can take years to master. But some people do! So if you're prepared to put in a lot of time and be realistic in expecting your early efforts to be less than stellar, you can get a lot done - and it can be a lot of fun :)

However, there's an elephant in the room here - it's the assumption that if you have the gear and know how to use it well, then it will all come good and the hits will start flowing. But what if you don't know how your songs should be developed in the first place? It's all well and good knowing (for example) how to program some drum parts, but are they the *right* drum parts for your song? You may have a great understanding of EQ and compression, but will that help you create a compelling song arrangement? The big question is, do you have a vision for your song in terms of arrangements and parts, and are you able to turn that vision into reality using the tools that you've invested in? If the answer to that question is "no" or "I'm not sure", then it might be time to think about option 2.

Option 2 - go to a studio with a producer

If you find option 1 a bit overwhelming in terms of knowing what to buy, setting it up, learning the software AND being able to create something really musical with it all, then there is another way.

You can go to a studio where you know that all the gear that you'll need is available, along with someone who is an expert on using it! A producer will have experience not only in the technical aspects of audio production, but also years of experience in working with song arrangements, knowing which sounds are likely to work where, and have the creative flare to come up with exciting and original musical ideas that you may not have thought of. If you find the right person, you will feel that you are in 'safe hands' and relax a bit more in the knowledge that someone with experience and training is 'on the case' to make your song as good as it can be. In addition, the equipment that they're using is bound to be better quality than the home setup options I mentioned and the whole environment will be tailored to create high quality music - unlike your kitchen table at home! Plus, you've saved yourself the very considerable expense of buying lots of gear that may not get you the results you'd hoped for anyway.

So what are the downsides of the studio & producer approach? The biggest potential issue is having to take the risk of putting your creative ideas into the hands of someone who may end up butchering your precious music. You've poured your heart and soul into this, and it's frankly scary to have to rely on the musical judgment of someone you don't know. What if they change your song beyond recognition? What if they insist on a tempo, feel, or style that you don't like? What if they take over and you end up feeling left out of your own production? And what about the money?! Aren't producers and studios really expensive? At least with option 1, if you invest your hard-earned cash into equipment, you have it for life, and can keep working on it until you achieve what you want. With this producer route, you have to pay every time, and you have nothing physical to show at the end of it - just some music which you really hope will have turned out as you imagined. So yes, it's a risk.

So what can be done to mitigate the risk and increase the chances of ending up with something you're thrilled with?

Answer: **choose the right producer!**

Let's talk about how to do that and what to look for.

There are thousands of individuals and studios out there offering music production services - everything from teenagers in bedrooms through to large music agencies offering production and marketing packages. But what is right for you? Well here are some things to consider when you're googling for producers and studios and feeling bewildered:

1. Genre

Most producers will specialise in particular genres, be it rock, pop, EDM, hip-hop etc etc. They may be fantastic in their specialist genre, but if your music isn't in that mould, then they will struggle and it probably won't go well. Be wary of producers who claim to be able to work in any genre - if they're Jack Of All Trades, they're probably Master Of None, although there are obviously a few skilled, cross-genre producers around. So if you're a singer-songwriter, look for someone who works in song development and arrangement for that field.

2. Experience & creativity

You want to know that the person you're working with isn't doing this for the first time! If you see a producer who looks like they may be a good fit for you, check out their past work - does it sound amazing? Does it fit with your sound? Is there some level of variety in their sound or is it too samey? While you probably don't want lots of different musical styles on your album, obviously some variety is important and the producer's past work will help give you an idea of the breadth of their creativity.

3. Personality

Being good at music production is not enough to make a great producer. All the best producers also have excellent people skills! Make sure you find someone who is friendly, listens to you, puts you at your ease, takes your ideas seriously, is polite and isn't forceful with their own ideas. And if they make you laugh then that's even better! The way you relate with each other is a hugely important part of a successful partnership. You will get an idea of how they're going to be from emails and messages. Do they respond quickly and politely? Even better is to speak on the phone and have a real conversation. However, the best thing you can do is have a face-to-face meeting and see how you get on with them. You will fairly quickly get a sense of whether they truly want to serve you and your music and help you do your best work. If you're going to pay them your hard-earned cash, then you owe it to yourself to check them out first and see if it's a good fit.

4. Facilities and equipment

You want to know that all the right tools will be on hand. Part of the reason for not doing everything at home is because you want the best possible sound for your record, which means great microphones and pre-amps, professional interfaces, a powerful computer, high fidelity monitoring, a great selection of music software, and a comfortable, well treated acoustic environment. And hopefully the whole place will have a great atmosphere where you feel you can be creative.

Sometimes producers will themselves rent out a well-equipped studio space to work in, but many will have their own studios which offer these high-end facilities. A producer working in their own room at home may be able to do amazing programming for EDM or modern RnB etc, but if you're needing acoustic instruments and voices captured at their best, then a purpose-built studio space will always be best.

That might seem appealing and it should - the vast majority of successful records have the involvement of a separate producer if not an entire team of people. But what about the cost? Well that's harder to estimate because it all depends on who you decide to work with, how long it takes and what work is involved in your specific project. Paying studio fees might seem unappealing but I would encourage you

to think of it as an investment in your music and yourself. When thinking about a budget, remember that the producer has probably invested hundreds of hours and thousands of pounds into their skills and equipment - which will be utilised to make your music sound great. What would you expect to spend on a meal out which gives you a couple of hours of pleasure, or a holiday which might be fun for a couple of weeks? Compare that to the lasting joy of creating an amazing record which allows you to express yourself in a unique way and will still be bringing pleasure in years to come. It also increases the potential for the music to do well commercially and bring income back to you. And it may still end up costing less than buying your own equipment!

Option 3 - mix and match

The third approach is really a hybrid of the first two. It can work well to invest in a small amount of home recording equipment to make demos and try out ideas that are more sophisticated than simply singing into your phone! Ideas that you work on at home can be developed to whatever degree you like, but there may well come a point where you feel that your song needs another pair of ears and some additional expertise to take it to the next level. So that might mean asking a producer to add some parts to what you've started, or helping re-record vocals etc. Often it will also involve mixing the finished song because mixing is itself a critically important and highly skilled process.

Mixing can make the difference between a song sounding like a dodgy bedroom demo or a professional radio-ready track. Although collaboration in the early stages can make a vital difference, many artists choose to essentially self-produce their work, but still hire a mixing engineer to create that polished mix at the end. If you're working in software like Logic or Pro-Tools on your home system, then you may simply be able to share the project file with the producer and he or she can work on it from there. If not, it's usually straightforward

to bounce out your individual audio tracks for each song so that they can be imported into the studio DAW for further work.

How I can help...

Here at North Brighton Recording I am ideally positioned to help you, especially if you think that option 2 or 3 are your best options. I work at the studio as a producer and mixing engineer and I've helped many singer-songwriters develop their songs into fully-fledged productions that are all over Spotify and YouTube! I would be the first to admit that I'm no expert on rap or RnB, but I'm skilled with acoustic arrangements and capturing amazing vocal performances, as well as programming emotive parts that fit the song. Whether your sound is up-to-the-minute contemporary with electronic elements, or something more classic, I can help make the vision a reality. If you're feeling stuck and don't know how you can develop your songs, I will be on hand to suggest creative ideas and help implement them. In addition I can give advice about how to get your songs distributed on streaming platforms such as Spotify and iTunes.

To give an idea of the process, I usually invite the artist in to the studio, talk about the direction they want for the song including stuff they do and don't like, then make a basic guide recording with them on a click. After that (often when they've left the studio), I'll start creating arrangement/sounds/programming ideas until I land on something that feels right. I'll share the ideas with the artist, and if they like the direction it's going, I'll continue refining the ideas with their input. I'm a good keyboard player and good at programming drums, bass, & synths, but I don't play guitar so often the artist will add guitar parts if that's what's needed, or we can bring in session players. When it's all sounding good, we'll re-record the vocals properly and add BV's etc if needed. Finally I'll mix and master the song - or that can be done elsewhere if the artist would prefer. At every stage of the process the artist is involved and has final say on all decisions, but I'll give my opinion.

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If all this sounds like what you need, I'd love to chat with you and make some awesome music together!

Visit today at northbrightonrecording.co.uk. We can arrange to chat on the phone about your project or make an appointment for you to drop in, see the studio and chat through your ideas and challenges over a coffee.

www.northbrightonrecording.co.uk

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