

# HOW TO BECOME A

# REMOTE SESSION DRUMMER

*Becoming a session musician is the dream of many a drummer. So what's the quickest route to finding yourself playing in a studio? Build your own...*

WORDS: JAMES HESTER



**JAMES HESTER**  
James has a diverse CV from Island Universal/Domino Records artists Malakai and Portishead's Geoff Barrow to punk nutters Cars On Fire and Pitchshifter's Mark Clayden. He is Head of Drums at BIMM Bristol and author of the critically acclaimed drum book *Mind Over Meter*.

**F**rom the Foo Fighters to Bon Iver, the boom in home recording has seen many multi-platinum albums being recorded in basements, garages, bedrooms and even log cabins.

Whilst not as well publicised, the amount of musicians tracking their parts on major releases from the comfort of their own homes has been going north as quickly as recording budgets have been going south. I have run my own studio for more than 10 years and have noticed that the increase in interest in my own studio has coincided with the reduction of bookings for me to go to commercial studios.

As the work has increased, so has my investment and my development as a businessman, engineer and drummer. The kind of work that I do varies from recording tracks for TV, film, library music, record labels, pre-production, songwriters... the list goes on. While playing music has always been and will

always be my first passion, we drummers have a tendency to be fascinated by the recording process. A quick search online reveals plenty of drummers that are under the impression that a basic website, a cracked copy of Logic and three karaoke mics are all they need to become the next Butch Vig. As with anything in life, whilst the gear can be paid for on a credit card, the skills that will see a burgeoning CV of work that carries on long after 'Karaoke Mic Boy' is back taking burger orders rather than studio bookings cannot.

Developing your business, engineering and playing skills takes time and effort. Over the next three months, myself and a group of seasoned studio pros (see 'Experts' panel on page 75) will look at these topics in detail and hopefully point you in the right direction if you have considered this route, or if you are part-way down the road already. This month we're focussing on the key aspects of the business side.



James Hester in his home studio

# THE BUDGET

**A**s any aspiring Alan Sugar will tell you, getting the figures right is the difference between viability and failure. Whether you have a limited budget or a blank cheque, it's critical that you spend the right amount in the right places. You need to consider what you're playing, where you're playing it, what the sound of that is being picked up by and finally what the sound is ending up on. This is the signal flow and, without exception, our panel agreed that focus and money needs to start with the drums and the room, then mics and pre amps and finally A/D converters, computers and software.

Russ Miller sees it as a simple process. "I've heard amazing recordings with lo-fi gear and horrible recordings with great gear. It really comes to what's being played first, what it's being played on second and what it's being played through third. So that's the order."

Whether you have your studio space already or you rent/buy a separate place, this will probably be your greatest expense, so choose it very wisely. What's the access like? Is the security good? Can you achieve the sonics in there that you'll need? Is there storage? Will noise be an expensive issue? Is the cost of insurance going to be crippling? Before you sign-off on a room, you need to become a sound proofing (noise leaking in/out of the room) and acoustics (room sound) expert, or know and enlist the help of one - or ideally both, like Ralph Salmins has.

"If you have a honky room, try to dry it up," he advises. "Most people have smallish rooms so dry the room up so you're not getting any nasty reflections. You'll never get them off of a recording. You don't need to spend a lot of money on it. I started with budget gear - I couldn't tell the difference with a Mackie pre-amp or a Neve pre-amp. Now I can. Get

some modest gear and just get going with it."

Where and how you spend the money is critical at both the inception and the continuation of the project. Russ Miller knows you need to rein yourself back sometimes.

"Make the studio focused and effective financially. The studio is the business, the playing is the art - we need to keep that in its highest regard and it has to be the focus always. I'm constantly trying to make sure I'm keeping the studio up to date but financially viable. For instance it's easy to blow \$25k on the new Pro-Tools update - but the studio is working! You need to work out if and when you NEED to have the gear/update or whether you're going to get it because it's cool to have."

## ✓ CHECKLIST

Taper the budget with the most spent towards the front end of the signal flow: drums, room, mics/pre-amps, A/D converters, computers/software. The room is critical, it may not take the lion's share of the budget (unless it sounds horrific inside and there's lots of leakage in and out) - it's a critical stage to get spot on.

**"MOST PEOPLE HAVE SMALLISH ROOMS SO DRY THE ROOM UP SO YOU'RE NOT GETTING ANY NASTY REFLECTIONS"**



Focus and money needs to start with the drums and the room...

# REMOTE SESSION DRUMMING

## THE MARKET

**T**urning your practice room into a suitable recording room can be tricky, time-consuming and expensive. Before you start ordering building materials and studio equipment, you need to find out if there's a market that you can be part of. Of course, if you are already doing sessions in studios, it's another service you can offer your clients that might help their budget. There's a growing trend of busy session musicians such as Ash Soan who realise that along with regular studio sessions for the likes of Adele and Seal, there's a big future for 'working from home'.

"I'm aiming to do it as I think the future will be more remote-based," says Ash. "I think there will always be signed acts going into commercial studios, with a producer, using session musicians etc, but the signs to me are that more and more artists are happy with the results and of course the lower budgets that remote recording can offer."

It's worth bearing in mind that the 'build it and they will come' mentality will require a huge outlay and slow financial return until you build up your client base, so it's worth considering what other services your set-up might provide you with.

Along with countless sessions at his own studio, Pete Riley produces the cover CD on this very magazine every month.

"Whilst it is becoming popular, the investment can be high and as every other drummer acquires similar set-ups, so the opportunities can reduce," Pete tells us. "However, gaining an understanding of how the recording process works, hearing yourself played back regularly and having control over your sound can be satisfying."

### MAKING MONEY

Emre Ramazanoglu uses his London based studio for a multitude of projects, including production, writing and recording for artists such as Duffy, Natty and the Prodigy plus labels such as Trojan and Polydor: "I've actually just finished a drum-based library album for Westone Music called *Drums Rule The World*. It's a great way of using downtime



Session star Ralph Salmins has built his own commercial-sized studio called The Bunker

**"THE SIGNS ARE THAT MORE AND MORE ARTISTS ARE HAPPY WITH THE RESULTS AND OF COURSE THE LOWER BUDGETS REMOTE RECORDING CAN OFFER"**

and can also be quite lucrative. It's worth a bit of research if you're interested."

Pitchshifter drummer Jason Bowld has worked with a wide range of artists from Bill Bailey to Killing Joke. His drums on the latest Pop Will Eat Itself album *New Noise Designed By A Sadist* were recorded at his home studio. "It's becoming more popular and this means it will be harder to make a full-time living - for me, it's another niche in my career - it's one of

many ways I earn a living. I have done drums for commercial videogames, commercial albums, pre-production and of course recording for my own enjoyment - I also help people track their own drums whilst coaching them if they require it, for their own personal ventures."

US drummer Russ Miller has played on many Grammy recordings. His well established private studio has developed from seeing a



gap in the market he was already in.

"Generally speaking, it's a continuation of what I was already doing, transferred to my own room - major movies and TV and major record label work through to independent stuff," he says. "We also do a large percentage of my solo projects such as albums, instructional videos etc. We have a Final Cut edit suite here too so we're expanding to do online lessons from my website."

The ability to file share and send audio relatively quickly anywhere in the world has changed the options a producer or songwriter has when it comes to having drums on their recordings. Producers and writers I work with, such as former Ozric Tentacles guitarist turned TV and film composer Gavin Griffiths, know having great live drums can separate their

work from the rest of the pack. "You can't beat live drums," Gavin says. "Even TV composers, since the bar is rising very high now, are looking to get as authentic as possible with all aspects of their compositions."

### THE BIG TIME

While most people go for smaller, more focused drum rooms, UK session legend Ralph Salmins has built a more commercial-sized studio, 'The Bunker', which has been graced by many artists such as Georgie Fame, Lulu, Gary Husband, Billy Cobham, Jocelyn Brown, McFly, David Sanborn, Michael McDonald and Ginger Baker, along with his gracing many a track with his own drums.

"Most of my work comes from people that I already know - maybe there's a jingle and



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Rhythm CD editor Pete Riley's home recording set-up



Inside Ralph Salmins' own studio

### CHECKLIST

Be sure that there is a market to be part of - there is an increase in the use of remote sessions, is this something you can tap into?

Can it be an additional part of something you are already doing?

What other ways could you use your studio to generate income?

there's a very short lead-time; they need stuff done quickly - quicker than it would be possible in another studio. Quick projects, one-off tracks and, on occasion it could be a project where they want me to spend more time on something than would be possible in another studio."

With record label budgets being cut at an increasing rate, keeping the project in budget and at a high standard is becoming one of the trickiest jobs a producer has. Cliff Jones, former frontman for Britpopers Gay Dad and now an EMI songwriter, producer, journalist and TV/film sync consultant, knows the key for a producer in this day and age is balancing both the books and the final song mix. Cliff has used remote sessions for years, including myself and Ian Thomas.

"I'm doing increasing amounts of it because it's cost effective," he says. "I like the fact that drummers with their own studios know their own sound, they've worked on a sound over a period of years - they know how to control the dynamics, the tone, how to get the cymbals sitting in there just right and not overpowering anything."

CLIFF JONES	EDWIN WALL	DONE - INVOICED DONE - INVOICED
COLIN EDWIN/ SOUND WALL PROJECT	CONCUBINES SUICIDE VOLT	- GOOD PARTS - DEMO APPROVED - DONE - STEMS TO PREPARE
	MEMORIES DRUNK	- WAITING FOR APPROVAL - DONE - STEMS TO PREPARE
	STH SONG	- HOLD - ARRANGEMENT TO CONFIRM
GAVIN GRIFFITHS	SUN GOD DARK KNIGHTS	- CHARTED - DRUM PRE PRO TO DO - CHARTED - " " " " "
AU ROSS	SONG 1 SONG 2	- DONE - DONE
	SONG 3	- PARTS APPROVED - TRACK

James Hester uses a whiteboard to keep track of his workflow

## WORKFLOW AND FEES

Getting the clients might seem to take all of your time to begin with, but this is only the start. Once the interest builds, you need to think about what and how to charge, what you are charging for and how the process will work. The way I like to work with Cliff Jones is my usual work flow: Cliff will tell me about the artist, the song, the vibe and suggest some reference tracks - both for sound and approach. I'll then record one or

Logic - the individual drum stems are bounced and sent via Drop Box for him to mix. There are variations to this system but the key is to be organised and have a system. It's easy to end up agreeing a fee with a client only for them to request endless retakes, changes of parts, drums etc. Emre explains, "Always read or listen carefully to the brief. As you get more experienced you'll get better at really understanding what the client is asking for, but you've got to get close with your first

### ✓ CHECKLIST

Agree the fee and what the work-flow will be at the same time, ie: how many tweaks, approval versions, how specific the parts and gear selection will be from the client's end. Consider every single step of the project and price accordingly.

and the quality of your product is crucial. Pete Riley elaborates: "Maintain communication with the client. Don't make promises you're unable to keep, ie: when you can complete the work. Don't undercharge; recording without an engineer can be hard work. Lay down exactly what you're willing to do for the fee, ie: not make unending adjustments to takes."

### SET YOUR PRICE

While a regular session would usually be charged by the half-day or day, remote sessions are mostly priced on a 'per track or album' basis. In the US, their union has firm regulations as to the way sessions are charged but over here, things are more flexible. Gavin Griffiths knows that quality, time and effort are reflected in the price. "It'll take you a whole day to set up the requested sound, then record, comp files etc, even for one song," he explains. "You could do deals on more songs, since the set-up might only need doing once. I would imagine paying £150-250 for a session which may be one or two songs then a sliding scale for further songs with the same sound."

As your experience grows, you'll be able to estimate how long it will take to set up, get sounds, record and prepare the track for submission - no two tracks are ever quite the same, as Jason Bowld outlines: "I try and stick to one set rate - a seven-minute prog-rock track is going to cost more than a three-minute pop song! You have to look at the time you put in as it's not only just recording drums, it's preparing the files or stems and any editing that maybe required."

## "ALWAYS READ OR LISTEN CAREFULLY TO THE BRIEF. YOU'VE GOT TO GET CLOSE WITH YOUR FIRST VERSION"

two full takes and send them over to him as MP3s for approval. If there are further suggestions, I'll go back and redo the track, perhaps with three or four takes, but often Cliff is happy with my first approaches. As I see him regularly and he uses Pro-Tools, I burn a DVD of the session (he can see my plug-ins and settings for the rough mix) and 'it's a wrap'. This is the same process I've been using on the Sound Wall Project except that Andreas, the producer, is in Italy and works on

version, especially with a new client."

Jason Bowld is careful to remember that this is a business too: "Don't release the separate drum tracks before full payment! Send people an example mix of the drums with their music in MP3 form so they can approve. It's important to make people aware of what they are paying for - professionally recorded drum tracks."

Setting the correct price for your musical and recording skills, the time you spend on it

# CONTACTS

**Y**ou have the studio, how can people find out about what you do, how you do it and how to contact you? While the main way of getting work is still word of mouth and recommendation, people do seek out collaborations online. My work with Italian producer Andreas Bonizzi came from a 'cold call' after Andreas heard some tracks I wrote, recorded and uploaded to Sound Cloud. Creating and maintaining a web presence is a critical way to keep you in people's minds and keep them up to date with what you are doing, as with Emre's approach: "Make sure you have a holding page with good demos, even if they only link to Sound Cloud, and an active and buzzing Twitter/Facebook. Go to producer hangouts like Sonicmeet, or the MPG (Music Producers Guild) gatherings and see what contacts you can make there. People often make requests for remote drumming services on music forums like Gearslut, too."

Most of the people going to these sources will have been directed or recommended by someone else, so you need to make sure you get across who you are, what you do, how you do it, what gear you use, who you've worked with, etc - with style and clarity. Bad pictures, a poorly proof-read website and impossible navigation are a turn off. Your website is a fairly static version of this so the bulk of it needs to be here. You need to direct people to read this, so keep updates with links to it going on Facebook and Twitter. Your web presence can often turn into your audition, as Ralph explains, "Meeting people is still the primary way. Then they check you out on the internet, though - it's important. They say, 'Who's this guy? Oh he's done that and that and that - cool', so it's a shop front for you."



Keep your eye on online developments, advises Russ Miller

# ONLINE

**T**here are two internet focuses for the remote session player - promotion and marketing, and as part of the workflow. The online session world is exactly that - online - and will develop along with it. The use of YouSendIt-style sites for big files, private servers or Digidelivery to transfer files around the world at relatively quick speeds is allowing collaborations to happen that Cliff Jones sees as both creative and exciting: "I think it's a wonderful way to work and I think we're seeing some really interesting developments as a result of being able to send stuff around the world digitally. Damon Albarn works collaboratively with musicians all over the world remotely. He often does it on his iPad, which is crazy... and brilliant!"

The development of speed and bandwidth is something that Russ Miller is watching with interest. "I think the remote session thing is getting more and more popular and is only really limited by the speed on the internet. We can do 'Live Producer Sessions' here where the producer is on iChat and we have Pro-Tools feeds into that, the same way I do my online lessons at my website. At the moment, we can't shoot 18 tracks of 14bit 48k audio in real time over the net, we have to do MP3 roughs and work through ideas and get approval via email etc. Maybe one day we'll be able to do that and do it live in two different studios in real time. You have to keep your eye on developments there." **R**

## CHECKLIST

Increase your knowledge of how the internet functions and is developing.

How will you deliver your stems (individual drum tracks) as they can be big files?

Build/have built a professional website and create a Facebook page, Twitter feed and Sound Cloud account - include vital information and excellent audio content. Stick to relevant info and update it regularly.

**PART 2**  
WILL FOCUS ON THE  
SKILLS OF DRUM  
RECORDING  
AND PRODUCTION

## THE EXPERTS

Contributing their knowledge and wisdom is *Rhythm's* expert panel



### CLIFF JONES

Cliff enjoyed a number of top 40 hits and produced two acclaimed chart albums with Gay Dad. He then became a songwriter for EMI music publishing, a noted record producer for major labels, TV composer and A&R consultant.



### GAVIN GRIFFITHS

Former Ozric Tentacles guitarist Gavin is a lifelong

professional musician, composer, producer, engineer, and wizard of all things spiritual. Gavin's huge CV includes writing for Atmosphere Production (now part of Universal Production Music UK). He lives and works from his own purpose-built recording studio in the south west of England.



### EMRE RAMAZANOĞLU

Emre has been working as a session drummer and programmer in the dance and pop scene. He ended up getting more and more involved in the studio world and now spends his

time producing/engineering/writing/performing.



### ASH SOAN

Ash's studio credits read like a who's who of popular music. His current project The Producers, with Buggles super-producer Trevor Horn and 10cc's Lol Creme, showcases great writing, great playing and great recording.



### RUSS MILLER

US session legend Russ's CV includes Nelly Furtado, Andrea Bocelli, Hilary Duff and Ray Charles, plus over 50 films and TV shows. Russ is

the author of the highly acclaimed drum book/DVD *Drum Set Crash Course*.



### PETE RILEY

*Rhythm* CD editor, well respected educator, tutor at ACM and author of books such as *The Crash Course For Drums* and *Double Trouble*, Pete is a highly regarded drummer and recording engineer, working with Paul Gilbert, Phil Hilbourne, Guthrie Govan and many more.



### JASON BOWLD

Along with Pitchshifter and This Is Menace, *Rhythm* columnist Jason (see

Session Tools, page 94) has worked with Bullet For My Valentine, Fightstar and many others. His positive work ethic is further echoed by other international producers that Jason has worked with such as Machine, Ulrich Wilde, Al Clay, Andy Sneap and Sterling Winfield.



### RALPH SALMANS

One of the UK's 'go to' sessions players, Ralph's expertise in drums and recording led to him recording the sample CD *Beats Working: 5.1 Drums* at the legendary Abbey Road Studio 2 as well as *Abbey Road '60s Drums*.