

# Vocal Cords: 5 Steps to Recording Remote Vocals

By [Cliff Goldmacher](#)

Sure, you can load your DAW software onto a laptop, grab a mic and a few cables, and take your show on the road. However, even the best gear takes a back seat to ingenuity and good engineering sense. As a veteran of many a remote-recording session, here are some tips I've learned regarding the acoustic space, mic selection, the signal path, and monitoring.

## PREPARATION

We'll assume you've already recorded the instrument tracks, and now need to go to a singer who can't come to you. Make a submix of your tracks (including any desired plug-ins) so that you're not taxing the laptop's CPU while recording. This also provides "CPU headroom" for a quality reverb plug-in if your vocalist wants to track with one. Mute (or mix way down) instruments with "unstable" pitch references, such as slide guitars, violins, cellos, acoustic bass, and so on. These tracks can distract your vocalist, and make it tough to stay on-pitch. Preparation also means checking out the space before the session. For example, you may find that certain times of the day are more conducive to recording than others.

## THE ACOUSTIC SPACE

Given that you'll likely be working in someone's living space or garage, don't expect acoustic treatment. Remember that it's far easier to add reverb or delay to a dry track, than to remove unwanted ambience from a track recorded in a "too live" environment. Find a space you can deaden to get the cleanest, driest vocal possible.

Believe it or not, closets make great vocal booths. The more clothes, shoes, pillows, blankets, and towels in there, the better! If the space is still too live, drape a few blankets from ceiling to floor. It's crucial that the singer not face a hard, flat surface. Avoid creating reflections that the mic will pick up. Also, deaden the ceiling directly above the singer. A blanket and a few thumbtacks can be highly effective.

The space should be relatively small to create a cozy vibe for the singer, as well as cut down on unnecessary reflections. You'll need enough room to fit the singer, a mic stand, and, possibly, a music stand. Ideally, you'll be able to run a mic cable and headphone extension cord under the closet door, and set up your recording gear right outside.

## CHOOSING A MIC

You'll want a mic that minimizes any unevenness in the recording environment. I've had very good luck with the Shure SM7. Originally designed as a broadcast mic, the SM7 allows the singer to get right up on the pop screen while still delivering a clean, warm vocal sound. You'll want this proximity for the same reason you deadened the space—to minimize any stray room sound in the recording.

Condenser mics are tricky because they can sometimes be too sensitive. However, a great compromise is a condenser mic designed for both live and studio applications. For example, because the Shure KSM9 was engineered for noisy, live situations, it does an excellent job of avoiding almost all off-axis reflections, while delivering a clear, detailed vocal recording. To keep your remote recording gear to a minimum, take the time to find a mic or two that deliver consistently.

## SIGNAL PATH

If you want to compress the vocal signal on its way into your DAW, here's a software workaround so you can leave the hardware at home. Bring the vocal signal into an auxiliary track with a compression plug-in. Set the attack and release to medium, the ratio at about 3:1, and then adjust the threshold to take around 3dB off of the hottest signal on the way in. Then, bus this track to an audio track that captures the compressed audio (Figure 1).

## MONITORING

Portability is key, so bring in-ear monitors instead of bulky headphones. While not inexpensive, a good set of in-ear monitors provides accurate, detailed audio information, and blocks out distracting external sounds. Unlike most over-the-ear headphones, in-ear monitors virtually eliminate headphone bleed, as well. As most portable audio interfaces offer only one headphone jack, you'll probably need a headphone splitter (with separate volume controls for each set of phones) to send the signal to your singer and you.

## BRING IT ON HOME

My favorite expression about recorded data is "If it doesn't exist in two places, it doesn't exist." Before leaving, burn a DVD, or copy your audio to the client's hard drive as a backup. Who knows what can happen to a laptop on the way back to your studio?

Remote recording, given the proper preparation, gear, and flexible attitude, is often great fun. It's a nice break in the routine

to get out of the studio and capture sounds in a new environment. And, who knows, it might even be a way of generating additional income.

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