

Someone emailed us, and said they were tired of recording to cassette players. So I asked Andrew to give his take on how musicians can move to the next level affordably with your home computer. This is his response.

-Marc Gunn, Bards

“How to Take Your Home Recording to a Professional Level”

by Andrew McKee

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We have only recently taken home recording to a professional level. We have played with it for a few years and have used it quite well. There are many options with varying price ranges. I'll start by giving you the bare necessities and then give you options on top of that.

First you need a way to get the sound into your computer. The obvious answer to that is a sound card. You probably already have one. Not to say this is the best way to do it but a Sound Card has a stereo input which is the same as a 2-track. For simple recordings of voice and one instrument, this can be sufficient. You can put in a second sound card but you normally run into a timing issue between one sound card and the other. That can be corrected through good software that makes it easy but is sometimes is a headache. The other problem with sound cards is the line noise or the signal/noise ratio. On normal sound cards the noise gets up to -50db or more. You would normally want less than -100db. The beauty is that with noise reduction, you can clean most of that off and still get a very good sound going through a sound card. You can do the noise reduction through most high-end recording software packages. As an alternative, you can get a PCI card for your computer that goes to a external input box. They make them for 4, 8, and 16 tracks that I have seen. The price starts around \$200 for one though. A few companies that make them would be M-Audio, ECHO, or MOTU. For a 4-track the best bang for your buck is probably the M-Audio Delta 44 which is a 4-track input/output with 1/4inch connectors. I have seen it online for as low as \$200 but if you know someone who works at a music store and can get you it at cost, it will be around \$120.

The next thing you need would be microphones. It sounds like you are recording now but even a cheap recording microphone is 10x better than anything not designed for music recording. The best general Mics are normally the Shure 57 or 58. These cost around \$80-\$100 each but you can still get descent results from a \$25-\$50 cheapo. Keep in mind you might need Mic chords, Mic stands, and an adapter to fit it to a 1/4 or 1/8 inch jack depending on what card you are going though. If you are going through a sound card, you might consider getting a simple \$50 mixer to plug Mics and direct inputs into. Then the stereo out goes to the sound card. You can control levels with the mixer that way.

For your computer, the faster the computer the better of course but storage is very important. You need a lot of Hard Drive space to store music files that are uncompressed if you are looking to keep good quality masters. If your computer seems to be slow, a memory upgrade is usually the cheapest and easiest way to speed it up.

As for software, there are so many choices advising you could be tough. Since you mentioned inexpensive, Pro Tools FREE might be something to look at. Pro Tools is probably considered the best recording software out there and it is expensive but they released a scaled down version for free and it is still there. The main problem is that it only works on Windows 95 and 98 so it is dependant on your OS. You can find it at <http://www.digidesign.com/ptfree/> . I am partial to Cool Edit Pro but it costs \$250. <http://www.syntrillium.com/> They have a scaled down version called Cool Edit 2000 that costs \$69 but if you want multitrack options, you have to add the studio plugin for another \$49. There is Cakewalk Home Studio 2002 for \$80 or so. <http://www.cakewalk.com/> That probably has what you want in it. You can also try used software stores and Ebay for better prices on software. The software is one of the most important parts to it though so well worth the money. You can try a free program called Audacity. Audacity is being developed by a team of volunteers under the open-source model and is a multi-track editor with effects. For free it is pretty good and worth a look. It might have what you need as well. It is located at <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/> .

Well that's all I can think of off the top of my head. If you have any other questions, feel free to write me.

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