

6 Steps To A Radio-Ready Song

by Graham Cochrane

Thank you for downloading this guide! As a singer/songwriter myself, I know the goal of every musician in the home studio is to start creating killer songs - songs that sound so good they could be played on the radio, TV, or just about anywhere.

You probably have great song ideas already but simply aren't able to get your recordings to translate from your head to the real world and sound professional. I'm here to help you with that.

In this brief guide I'm going to walk you through the 6 steps that every radio-ready song must go through in order to sound its best.

Even if your music will never be heard on the radio, you still want it to sound good enough to hang with “the big boys and girls”.

My promise to you is that after reading this guide, you'll know exactly what it takes to get the best sounding recordings in your home studio and you'll be motivated to get back to work and start creating your best music yet. Ready to get started? Let's dive in



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STEP 1: Lyrics & Melody

The best recordings in the world start long before the recording phase. They begin with great lyrics and killer melodies.

The best vocal microphone in the world is useless if the song you're singing has a boring or hard to remember melody, cumbersome lyrics, and overall bad flow. And yet it never ceases to amaze me how many home studio musicians assume they have this part on lock and want to begin talking gear or recording technique.

Before you even think about recording, you must write a great song. Otherwise you'll have nothing worth recording and sharing with the world.

Now, what constitutes a "great" song is highly subjective, but allow me to offer what I believe are the three secrets to crafting killer songs:

Songwriting Secret #1 - Great songs have memorable melodies.

Melodies drive songs and your song must be memorable, it must get stuck in people's heads. So your melody must be memorable. Is your melody par for the course and average? If so, it'll get lost with every other song. This is unacceptable. Focus on crafting a melody that sticks with you long after you hear it.

Songwriting Secret #2 - Great songs have memorable lyrics.

While melodies drive songs, lyrics lock them into the brain. And don't worry about writing the best lyrics in the world - all you need is one really good line or phrase that stays with people. Do you have a unique or interesting concept, phrase, or line that you can squeeze into your song? Add that to a powerful memorable melody and you're on your way!

Songwriting Secret #3 - Great songs have something surprising.

Most songs follow a predictable pattern (verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus) or some variations thereof - and that's OK. But what's critical is that you leave one surprising or interesting moment in there for the listener. This could be a simple break down in the song, a unique sound, or vocal turn. Give the audience that one moment that says "This is cool, this is different."

That's it! No matter what genre of music you write - EDM, hip-hop, rock, pop, country, blues, folk, whatever - if you ensure that each song you craft has memorable melodies, a memorable lyric or two, and at least one surprising element somewhere inside, you'll be sure to have written a song that can compete with the best out there.

The good news about songwriting is this: it can be learned and you get better over time.

That's good news because it means you don't have to be born a great songwriter to write great songs. You can *become* great over time. Your songs will get better. Just make sure each one contains all three "secret" elements.

The bad news about songwriting is that it takes work. It isn't simply waiting around for inspiration to strike - or the opposite, just settling for easy to write mediocre songs.

[Rather songwriting is work - and if the best songwriters in the world view it that way, so should you.](#)

Now that you have a great song, it's important to move on and implement Step 2. Sadly, this is the most commonly skipped step in all of amateur music making.

Songwriting Tip: *Do you write lyrics first or music? I prefer to write the music first, specifically the vocal melodies - note for note - before ever thinking about lyrics. Why? [Because they create a wonderful "limitation" and framework for lyric writing.](#)*

STEP 2: Arrangement & Production

Of all 6 steps in the song creation process, this is the most commonly skipped or rushed through.

And yet in many ways it's the most fun and most helpful of them all as it has major implications on the remaining 4 steps. If you can get this step right your song has the most potential to be liked by the most people.

What are we talking about? We're talking about the arrangement of your song. The flow, the layout of instrumentation. This also includes any and all production decisions as it relates to beats, loops, and virtual instruments.

Let me ask you a question. **If you were to hear your song on the radio, would you want to change the station after the first verse and chorus?** Be honest.

Most songs are super repetitive from a songwriting standpoint. And like I mentioned above, that's OK. What's NOT OK is a simple repetitive song that has a boring arrangement. One in which every verse sounds the same and every chorus sounds the same.

Think about it - with most popular music, after you've heard the first verse and chorus (the hook) you pretty much know the entire song. So why keep listening?

On most great radio-ready songs, the arrangement is so interesting and always changing that you DO want to keep listening. How do they do it? By strategically introducing new and different elements to the song as it progresses.

Here are some common examples of elements YOU can introduce into YOUR songs to keep the arrangement/production interesting:

- Vocal harmonies
- Vocal effects (telephone vocal, distortion vocal, etc)
- Percussion (shakers/tambourines)
- Synths/strings/pads
- Doubled (or tripled) vocals
- Doubled guitar parts
- Half-time feel or tempo changes

Also keep in mind that great songs with killer arrangements don't just add elements to the song, they strategically take things away to keep you listening. Some examples include:

- Dropping out all instruments except vocals and drums
- Cutting out everything but the vocal and one guitar/piano
- Removing the bass guitar/synth for a verse

The goal of a good arrangement is to take the listener on a journey and keep them engaged and excited every step of the way.

You do this by introducing (and removing) different elements from section to section, from first note to last beat. No two parts of your song should be exactly the same. Listeners' attention spans are becoming shorter and shorter and they will "move on" if the song doesn't progress.

Personally, creating a great arrangement of my own songs creates a tension. I want to feature all the cool guitar parts, vocal harmonies, and drum break downs - but I can't do it all at once. **I have to force myself to save some elements for later in the song, trusting that the surprise and wait will be worth it.**

If you can take your well written song and systematically walk through each section (intro, verse, chorus, verse 2...) and ask yourself this question, you'll be fine - "*What is new or different about this section?*"

Once you can confidently say each moment of your song is fresh, engaging, and different (even in a small way) you're ready to begin Step 3.

Arranging Challenge: *I want to see how good your ears are (and how much you've been paying attention to Step 2). [Take a listen to this real life demo of a song and then the final "real" recording.](#) How many different arrangement elements can you notice? Write them each down.*

STEP 3: Recording

We've written a great and memorable song. We've crafted a powerful and engaging arrangement. Now we come to first step that actually deals with the sonics of capturing a great recording. Finally!

When it comes to sonics (i.e. how your audio will actually sound in the end), no step is more important than this one. The recording (or "tracking") phase is what makes or breaks your final product.

Ironically, no sooner do new home studio owners get into recording do they start to believe that the mixing phase (Step 5) is where all the "magic" happens. They grow disillusioned with recording, thinking it purely as a quick "capture the performance" phase and want to move on to bigger and better things.

I know this is true because I deal with tens of thousands of students every month who express this sentiment. I also know this to be true, because I'm the same way!

But if you want a radio-ready song, please hear this important truth: the recording phase is truly where the magic happens - so don't rush it and don't settle.

Let's first assume you already have the necessary equipment to begin recording. If you don't (or are simply unsure if you have what you need) [here are the only 5 things you need to get going.](#)

Also if you are looking for some specific setups, [here is a \\$300 studio rig you can use.](#)

So, assuming you have the gear in place and your song is written and arranged - here are the three key recording truths you need to keep in mind in order to get great recordings in your home studio...

Recording Truth #1 - Mic Placement Is Everything.

What matters more than what mic you use to record is *where* you put the mic. This is called mic placement - and it's the difference maker. Did you know that if you move your mic an inch or two closer or farther away from your instrument or voice it can drastically change the bass response? Or that by angling a mic 90 degrees you can turn up (or down) the brightness?

Don't just settle for the first place you put the mic. Experiment and tweak until you are getting the sound you hear in your head. To help you out, [here are 4 ways to get more out of your current microphone\(s\)](#).

Recording Truth #2 - Recording Too Loud Is A Problem.

One of the most common mistakes I see people making in the home studio is that they record their tracks too hot (too loud). This is because somewhere along the line someone told them to record as loud as you can without clipping (that red light at the top of your meters). [Unfortunately because digital is different than analog, that's horrible advice.](#)

To get a cleaner and more musical recording, grab the gain or volume knob on your audio interface or preamp and turn it down so that your audio signal inside your software is peaking at around 50% to 75% of the way up the meter. No louder. Your recordings will sound cleaner, clearer, and more musical if you follow this advice.

Recording Truth #3 - You Must Think Like A Producer.

Traditionally, major recording sessions involved not just a recording engineer but also a producer. And what does the producer do? He casts the vision for what the recording should sound like. While the engineer would choose the right mic, placement, and pre-amp level, the producer would map out what kind of sound everyone was shooting for.

Today in your home studio, YOU are the producer, not just the engineer. You have to wear both hats. And what that means is you must map out what you want the song(s) to sound like before you ever hit the record button. [Move away from asking things like "What do good drums sound like?" to asking "What do I want these drums to sound like?"](#) Commit to a sound/vibe in your head and then execute.

If you let your recording sessions be shaped by those three truths, you will succeed. If you spend time playing with the mic placement until you get the sound you want, record at a nice conservative volume, and do everything from a producer's mindset - committed to a sonic vision, your song will sound great.

Maybe not at first - but over time you will get better.

That's the good news about recording: it's an art form, not a science. You can learn it and improve.

Once you've recorded all the tracks you want for your song it's time to move to Step 4 and tighten up those performances so they are a bit more polished.

Recording Challenge: To help you think like a producer and record better sounding tracks, I want you to do some homework. Take 20 minutes today to listen to 3 of your favorite songs by your favorite artists and write down descriptive words for their sound. How would you describe the drum sounds? The vocal sounds? What elements do you like or not like? Why?

Step 4 - Editing

One thing I love about digital recording these days is the power of being able to quickly and easily tighten up and edit my performances. This means I have yet another tool to help sound my best in the studio. Welcome to my love for editing!

Before digital recording, editing was a pain in the neck. You literally had to take a razor blade and chop up tape. Then you had to tape the tape back together at the right spot. Insane right?!

These days you can cut, copy, move, slide, or adjust any track effortlessly and all the while keep things sounding natural.

The goal for the editing phase is to simply clean up, tighten up, and tune up anything that isn't quite up to your standards. I recommend you do this after all recording is done and before you move on to the mixing phase.

The problem with the editing power all modern recording software (DAWs) has these days is you can easily go overboard and suck the life and vibe out of your tracks. That's not the goal here. Instead I want to give you the four editing moves I do on every song that can help make your recordings sound more professional but without sounding robotic...

Editing Move #1 - Comp Your Multiple Takes.

Did you know that in most software these days you can record multiple takes on one track? For example, when singing the lead vocal you can record three different takes and keep them all. Then when you get here to the editing phase, you can do what's called comping (creating a composite track) to give you the best parts of each of those takes.

Before doing anything you want to comp together your lead vocal, drum takes, bass recording, or whatever you captured multiple takes on. [Here's an example of how I do this with drums.](#)

Editing Move #2 - Tune Your Vocals.

I've worked with good singers and I've worked with bad singers and I can tell you that I can only count on one hand the number of times a vocal performance didn't need any pitch correction at all.

Whether you use something like [Autotune](#) or [Melodyne](#), pitch correction is a normal and helpful tool in the studio. Why? Because singing with headphones on is an unnatural environment. Even the best of singers can struggle to sing perfectly in tune in the studio. And having notes that are obviously sharp or flat can be a huge distraction to a recording.

I recommend you embrace pitch correction, but apply it only as needed - where the vocals are a distraction. A little here can go a long way!

Editing Move #3 - Clean Up Vocal Breaths.

Once you've tuned up your vocals I highly recommend you go through and clean up any distracting vocal breaths. This will give you a more professional and polished presentation of your vocal performance.

I can't tell you the number of songs I've listened to by students where I'm distracted by the lip smacks or random breaths - no matter how good the rest of the mix sounds. Simple vocal breath cleanup can make all the difference.

Now, some people like to edit out every breath, while others leave it all in. [I prefer a hybrid approach that gives you the best of both worlds.](#)

Editing Move #4 - Tighten Up Drums & Bass.

With the power to edit everything the temptation comes to actually edit *everything!* I don't recommend it. Instead, once your vocal is cleaned up and tuned up I recommend you go for a final big win, which is to manually tighten up your drums and bass tracks where necessary.

The key here is to do it manually and to do it only where necessary. Don't make the mistake I used to make which was to try and quantize every drum hit and bass pluck so that they were all locked to the grid. Rather, move through the song systematically and manually cut and slide any notes where you need them.

The big takeaway for editing is this: a little touch up goes a long way, so keep things natural and subtle.

When you can listen through your recorded tracks and not have anything jump out at you tuning or timing wise, you know you're ready to move on to Step 5.

Editing Tip: *When editing multitrack drums (i.e. kick, snare, overheads all on different tracks) be sure to group them all together before making edits. That way they all slide together and stay in phase. Also be sure to add tiny crossfades at every edit point to ensure no pops or clicks occur.*

Step 5 - Mixing

If recording is capturing the song, and editing is polishing the song, then mixing is making that song jump out of the speakers and hit you in the face (in a good way!).

This is the part of the process where you take a great sounding set of tracks and present them in their best possible light through use of things like volume, pan, EQ, compression, reverb, delay, and saturation.

Some of you might skip this step, downplaying its importance. Others of you might overcomplicate mixing by making it more than it really is. The wise home studio owner, however, sees mixing as a critical and yet simple step in the process.

When you boil it all down, a great mix is really comprised of 5 main phases...

Mixing Phase #1 - Volume & Pan.

The most important thing you could do is spend time listening to the song on loop in your software and adjusting the volume faders and pan knobs until every track seems to be in the optimal place and the song sounds well balanced. Forget any effects at this point. Just create a good balance with what's there.

[A helpful practice is to set a timer and create a 10 minute mix.](#) This forces you to trust your instincts, respond to the music, and create an initial balance that best represents your song.

Mixing Phase #2 - EQ.

Your EQ plugin is your most helpful and powerful tool when it comes to bringing clarity and excitement to your mix. Try and use your EQ to cut out the bad frequencies, enhance the good, and open up sonic space in your mix.

[In general I'm a fan of subtractive EQ, meaning using EQ as a cutting tool more than a boosting tool.](#) This creates two huge benefits: more clarity in your mixes and more headroom. Both of which lead to more musical sounding mixes.

Mixing Phase #3 - Compression.

Next to EQ, compression is your best friend. Use this to control the volume of things like vocals and pianos as well as to bring punch, fatness, and energy to your tracks. Often the most confusing of all tools, compression is one of your most powerful.

[One thing that might help you to better understand how compressors work is to view them as simply an automated volume fader.](#) Nothing more. Nothing less.

Mixing Phase #4 - Reverb & Delay.

Once you have a well balanced mix that has been cleaned up with EQ and enhanced with compression, now is a great time to bring in some ambient effects to turn your dry home recorded tracks into a more studio sound. Using tools like reverb (which emulates the sound of rooms or halls) and delay (which is like an echo effect) you can make your music sound larger than life.

[It's easy to go overboard with these effects so consider one reverb as a "glue" to give all your tracks a unified space.](#) Then consider delays and echos on the lead vocal as a more obvious "effect".

Mixing Phase #5 - Automation.

This is an advanced move, but a powerful one nonetheless. After creating a balanced mix that is well EQ'd, compressed, and tastefully dusted with reverb and delay it's time to breathe life into the tracks by automating things like volume and pan.

Your mix should be a living and breathing thing, and [the power of your software will allow you to turn elements of your mix up or down at different points of the song to bring attention to themselves or create variety.](#)

Mixing is truly where great recordings come alive, but if you're newer to this it might be hard to know just exactly the power of a good mix.

[So to help you I've put together two examples of a song before and after mixing.](#) Listening to these examples you'll instantly hear the power of what a simple mix can do for your song!

Mixing Tip: *Don't let mixing overwhelm or confuse you. [At the end of the day, the simple secret to mixing is summed up in one word: balance.](#) If you can focus creating the right balance of your tracks in all aspects of the word you'll do fine.*

Step 6 - Mastering

Finally we've come to our 6th and final step in creating a radio-ready song. Welcome to the mysterious world of mastering. This is the final step that takes your great sounding mix and makes it presentable to the rest of the world.

Ironically many newer home studio owners mistake mastering for mixing, thinking mastering is where you make your song sound amazing. When in fact mastering done well should be the most subtle of all the steps.

Originally mastering meant simply taking the mix from the studio and preparing it for the final medium for music consumption: whether it was a vinyl, CD, or MP3. And it still is that process. Over the years however it's also come to include some EQ, compression, and of course loudness maximizing.

And while there are people who specialize in mastering, I'm a champion of self-mastering and now I want to give you my quick and easy two-step mastering checklist so you know exactly what to do to prepare your song to be shared with the world...

Mastering Step #1 - Reference A Pro Mix.

After you've crafted your mix of your song it's time to make sure your mix is in the ballpark of a professional song. This is one of the most powerful steps you can take.

Simply import a pro mix of your favorite song in a similar genre as yours, put it on it's own track in your software, turn the volume down so it matches that of your mix and flip back and forth. What do you notice about the pro mix that your mix doesn't have (or has too much of).

[Using a simple EQ on your mix's master fader you can do some subtle moves to bring your mix more closely in line with that of the pro mix.](#)

Mastering Step #2 - Get Your Mix To Commercial Volume.

Now that your mix is a little closer sounding to a pro reference, it's time to get your volume up to commercial standards.

Have you ever mixed down your song, brought it out to your car, only to discover that it sounds so much more quiet than everything else? Yeah - me too.

The secret is to use a limiter. And the best part is most DAWs comes with this tool. No need for additional mastering software. [You can increase the volume of your mix in a musical way in only 60 seconds using this simple method.](#)

Now, mastering can certainly be more complex than that, but at it's core if all you do are those two steps: reference a pro mix and use a limiter to get commercial volume, you'll be in business.

Going back to Step 5 - Mixing, my goal is to always mix in such a way that hardly any work is needed in mastering other than volume, and I suggest you work the same way.

Mastering Tip: *When doing any processing on your mix for the mastering phase, whether it's EQ, compression, saturation, or stereo widening, make sure that you level match the output of each plugin so you aren't making the mix louder (except of course for the limiter). The reason is that [we always think that louder sounds better](#) so unless you match the plugin output to the level without the plugin you can't know for sure if you're making things better!*

It's Time To Make Music!

That's it my friend. You now know the 6 steps to crafting a radio-ready song in your home studio.

You've learned that it all starts with writing a great song with an engaging arrangement.

You know that recording is truly where the magic happens in the studio and that you can even tighten up your tracks with some subtle editing moves.

You know the 5 phases of a great mix and even the 2 steps to a radio-ready master.

You have all the information you need to get started. All that's left for you is to...well...get started!

You see the truth about recording music is this: you will only get better results if you get a lot of experience.

As Jon Acuff would say, you have to “put in the reps” as a home studio owner and start writing, recording, mixing and releasing music. It's the only guaranteed way to improve at this craft. And to be honest, it's a whole lot of fun!

I want to thank you for downloading this guide and for reading it! If you ever get stuck in your music making journey I'm here for you.

With 1000+ articles and videos on the subject of making music in the home studio, The Recording Revolution is your place to check in and get the info you need.

And you can always reach out to me to say “hi” anytime. I'd love to hear from you!

Now, stop reading this and get back to work in your studio!

Here's to making better music,

Graham Cochrane (*Founder, RecordingRevolution.com*)