



FadeOut

Recording Guitars in the Age of AI

Guest Editorial by Sean Halley

It might sound odd to say, but in today's crazy world it's gratifying to know that we're still recording guitars. In an age where entire productions can be created by simply typing a few sentences, I'm chuffed that AI hasn't quite replaced all of us yet.

That being said, the new AI production tools have changed the game somewhat, in that everything they spit out is proper studio quality. These models have been trained on the most accomplished musical performances and recordings of all time, so a GAI classical piano performance isn't emulating anyone you've likely ever met, it's emulating Martha Argerich or Keith Jarrett (with technique beyond the reach of mere mortals) playing a killer Bösendorfer in an amazing venue.

The same goes for recorded guitars. The guitars these models have been trained on have been played and recorded by THE top cats, so we need to get better at recording ourselves pronto to make sure that our stuff can compete. I'm certainly not throwing in the towel yet, and you shouldn't either—the world is counting on all of us to keep the "ore" in "organic."

To me, it feels like a call for return-to-basics thinking, where taking three steps back can be inspirational. Instead of reaching for the ease of a preset when creating sounds, maybe dig a bit deeper and try to deconstruct what you're hearing. For all of us who came up before the Internet existed, we had to experiment, fall on our faces, fail miserably far too often and generally make do with musically-skinned knees, so to speak, on our way to sounding good.



So if you have an amp and a microphone, have at it. Get a sound together that you like standing next to the amp, and then put a microphone on the speaker and try to capture it. Move the mic around in front of the speaker until you find a place where what you hear in the room translates to the recording. Bang! Some of the most interesting crunch tracks I got in college came from miking my amp with a set of Walkman headphones, so experimentation is key.

You're not off the hook if you use a modeler either—there are still lots of things to learn about how amps interact with guitars and speaker cabinets. If your modeler supports impulse responses, listen to a ton of them to get a feel for what they do and what you like. I personally favor large speaker cabinets when using IRs, because 1x12 and 2x12 captures usually sound small to me. It's probably just habit from a long commercial session career, where there was always a 4x12 cab in a booth with a bunch of mics on it, and all the guitar tracks went through the same setup.

When it comes to the effects side of the equation there is a world to learn there as well, and not just the various types of effects and what they do, but also how they behave when you change their order. Delay into reverb sounds different than reverb into delay, and it's good to know why. If you want to create the wide and clean stereo effects that you hear on records on a live take, consider running your time-based effects at 100% wet, and then print their output to separate tracks (so you'd have a dry guitar with a pair of 100% wet effects tracks) while recording. It's a cool sound that can make a trio sound huge.

The promise of generative AI is truly amazing and I'm not bagging on it. However, we're all in this together, and it's our responsibility to keep the tribal knowledge of this guitar recording stuff alive. If we do, new and inspiring sounds will continue to be made, and music won't devolve into pure text regurgitation. We're counting on you! ➡

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