By Benjamin Fargen - GJD Contributor

Part 1

Over the years I have received countless e-mails asking how I capture the amp tracks found on my web site, and numerous others asking similar questions regarding the tones on a multitude of my musical projects. Usually the email begins, “which gear and what technique do I use in a given situation.” Well the truth is that I have a plan of attack from composition to completion. Knowing where you want to go ensures you get where you’re going. By faithfully applying the methods below, you’ll capture the best you’re gear can offer.

1. Define your composition

It’s best to define what you’re trying to capture before jumping head first into the recording process. This will help you spend more time actually playing and recording rather than stumbling through the process without any type of set goal (this is particularly import to me as I rarely have extra time for anything). Define what type of track you want to create, what guitars and amps you want to capture, and finally the instrumentation of the project; ergo, just guitars or a composition with drums, bass, vocals etc.

2. Set up your gear and clear out the clutter!

Make sure you have a clean and tidy recording area to work in. It’s best to keep as much clutter out of the way as possible in your project studio. There’s nothing worse than tangle of cords, pedals, stands etc. getting in your way as you try to work as a recording engineer and an artist at the same time. Basically, anything that doesn’t pertain to the current recording session should be moved out of the way.

3: Set up your tone

Spend a little time crafting a few tones you think will work for the composition and document the settings you have if you’re moving between multiple parts that require changing out any gear. At the same time, think about how your tone will fit with other parts of the song. Decide what type of style and sound you are hoping to convey to your listener and choose your guitar and amp combinations accordingly. This type of prep work will save you time in the end and get you closer to your goal…laying down some tasty tracks. Try to craft the best tone you can from the very start and DO NOT subscribe to the ‘fix it in the mix” plan; that never works. The guitar tones that hold the test of time won’t be the ones that need radical EQ and FX to cover up any issues with the fundamental sound.

4: Microphone choice and placement

If you can swing it, I always recommend micing up your guitar amp cabinet with two separate

and different styles of microphones, or at least one mic and one direct DI feed to the preamp. This gives you two completely different flavors to choose from or blend when it's time to mix down the project. More tonal options are always better and you can never have too many options when you're recording a guitar track. For instance, I always like to use either one dynamic mic in tandem with a ribbon mic or a dynamic mic in tandem with a large diaphragm condenser. Keep in mind these microphones do not have to be expensive or break the bank. We live in the golden age of affordable professional gear and inexpensive condensers microphones from Cascade, Audix, Audio Technica, Shure, etc will all yield great results when used properly.

Start by locating the sweet spot for mic placement on the guitar cabinet. Plug in a good set of headphones that isolate your ears from outside noise to the headphone-out of the monitor section of your recording hardware. Move the mic around in front of the speaker(s) until you find the spot where the amp has the best blend of high and low frequencies. I use an Audix I5 (similar to an SM57) up close on the speaker grill and then either a Cascade ribbon mic or Rode NT1 condenser mic anywhere from 1-3 feet off the grill for added ambience and space to the tone. You will need to experiment with the distance of the mic that's furthest back for the optimum balance of tone. Beatles producer George Martin would often get down on the floor at amp or instrument level and use his ear to choose the optimum sound… then he would then place the microphone in the exact location that his ear heard the best tone. Clearly this is not recommended when recording a cranked 50+ watt amp (ouch!), but it can be useful at lower volumes.

5: Signal Levels + Compression

One of the biggest recording mistakes guitarists make is not making the signal level hot enough while recording the track. This leads to a weak sounding tracks as well as extra added noise when it comes to the final mix. One of the best ways to get a nice hot track without peaking-out or overloading the input is to employ a little bit of compression. Using a compressor during tracking ensures that sounds are encoded at a higher level. Because more bits are used, better bit resolution results. Furthermore, by putting a lid on peaks, the compressor also helps avoid digital clipping on loud notes. Start with relatively fast attack, medium-fast to medium release, ratio between 2:1 to 3:1, and threshold set for a fairly constant 2dB to 3dB of gain reduction. This is a basic starting point that will work effectively with almost any compressor for almost any application… Tweak to taste from that point. But don't squash it out too much or all of your subtle dynamics will be lost. You also want to leave the track transparent enough so that there is room to add more compression for "effect" at a later date IE a plug- in such as the UAD LA2A or 1176 while inside the mix.

Stay tuned for Part 2

Mic placement tips found @ www.sweetwater.com

Generic Compression settings @ www.musiciansfriend.com

Cheers!
Benjamin Fargen

About Ben Fargen: *Now in its 10th year, Fargen Amplification has progressed from a small one man operation, into a thriving boutique company that ships, custom-built guitar amplifiers to discerning players on three continents. In addition to personally tuning each amp that leaves the shop, Ben also provides world tour, amp support to many of the world's most celebrated guitarists. In his free time Ben plays live and records with the band "Claire Voyant" as well as doing freelance sound design work via his side company "Pulp Audio Design"*