

## How to Collaborate (On or Offline)

Originally posted on <http://www.soundtempest.net/>

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In an age of increasingly cheap and easy-to-use music making technology, more people are becoming both hobbyist and professional musicians every day. The amount of albums being released per year is rising **almost exponentially**, and one need only look at the exploding number of music networking sites to realize how many people are now in this field. A sizable portion of new artists are not bands, but rather solo musicians, with an entirely DIY attitude. There is a prevailing sentiment that the one-man band or self-made artist is the **pinnacle of 'cool'**, and with powerful software and hardware tools, it's easier to pull off than ever before.

However, there are many important benefits to collaboration with other musicians, even if you are principally a solo artist rather than a band in the traditional sense. Most obviously, others may be able to **fill in for your weaknesses**, and vice versa; if you are a strong lyric-writer but your melodies could use polish, another writer could easily boost the marketability of your songs. If you're an ace producer but not an instrumentalist, a real guitarist can add flair and realism to a beat that puts it into a truly pro level. It's rare to see even the most successful solo artists working completely alone all the time - **no one** is perfect.

Creating a stronger final product is not the only immediately tangible benefit. Insight into the methodology and compositional or production techniques of another person can be extremely valuable. **Collaborating** even once with a more experienced musician can **seriously improve your own abilities**, leading you to a faster, more efficient workflow or opening up your mind to new ways of writing.

Slightly less tangible, but equally important, is the **social aspect** of collaboration. Unlike being in a band, collaborations are often one-off events. You need not live or tour with your collaborator: in fact, you may live thousands of miles away. You are not forced to make an entire record together, nor does there have to be some kind of deadline. Collaborations can be entirely for fun, greatly reducing stress and potentially leading to stronger friendships with the musicians you choose to work with. If nothing else, your "network connection" becomes stronger, since working with somebody will increase familiarity.

Here is a small sampling of the ways in which you can work with other musicians.

## Close Collaboration

This is perhaps the most direct and obvious method of working with another person; it consists simply of both musicians working on the same song at the same time, in the same geographical location. One person might play a few notes of a melody, and the other tweaks that melody immediately after. Lyrics are written together, and ideas for arrangement and instrumentation are shared and discussed constantly.

Close collaboration is probably the **purest** form of co-writing, as over the course of the creation of the track, both musicians will likely end up with equal input. Delegation of roles can still occur; for example, if one person plays the piano and the other does not, the former would be tasked with crafting any piano parts (though the other person would still have input on how that part fits in.)

A primary advantage to this method is that it takes place in **real time**, with no technological barriers of any kind to collaboration. If one person has an idea, he or she can immediately describe it (verbally, through humming/singing, or playing) and get feedback. The disadvantage to this method is that it only works if both parties can be **together at the same time**, which is of course not possible in many cases.

## Back-and-forth

A popular method of collaboration over the internet, this approach involves the musicians sending audio and/or MIDI files back and forth for each other. For example, Producer A may start the track, writing 30 seconds of guitar and bass parts, then send those 30 seconds to Producer B, who then tweaks the existing 30 seconds, adds another 30, and sends the result back. This continues until the song is complete. If both musicians use the same DAW software, or use only MIDI files, the collaboration can be even closer, as **every aspect** of the in-progress song can **be edited by either party**.

For those of you with slow internet connections, you may be concerned that sending files back-and-forth regularly like this is not feasible. However, keep in mind that high quality audio is not important until the **very final stage of the song**. If you're just exchanging compositional ideas, it makes much more sense to use MIDI until the end, when the arrangement can then be fully realized via high-quality samples and/or live instrumentation.

If you need to share ideas through recorded audio, **use compressed MP3 or OGG** at lower bitrates (128kbps is a good number) rather than WAV or AIF. When you finally need to upload or send the larger files, use a service like YouSendIt to transfer them reliably.

Delegation of tasks is more common when working in this manner. One person can handle all the drum parts, while another records guitar and they work together on all other aspects. Ultimately, it is up to the individuals to decide what specific breakdown should be used (if any.)

## **Outsourcing**

The name for this might not be so appealing, but it's actually a **very** effective method of collaboration. It is especially useful when **multiple musicians are involved**. One person is the primary writer, arranger, or producer, who works with other musicians possessing particular skills (instruments, arranging, mixing, and production) that contribute specific parts to the piece. An excellent example would be a producer of dance music laying down an instrumental track, then asking a vocalist to write and record a vocal part, or a country writer recording piano and vocals but working with a guitarist for acoustic and electric lines.

Outsourcing can be done either on or offline, and should not be confused with simple session playing (work for hire). In this case, though the primary writer can be doing the most work overall, they are not actually writing every part. Other musicians are still writing, performing and contributing, and their level of involvement can extend past their own parts. A vocalist can help craft the arrangement and instrumentation of a given section, for example, to make their vocal part fit in well.

This method of working is really the **only viable one for larger collaborations**, where it would be impractical to use either of the first methods of collaboration due to time, geography, or technical restraints. It enables multiple musicians to work on the same piece simultaneously without stepping on each other's toes, provided the primary arranger maintains clear perspective of the "big picture" for the song.

Despite the name, outsourcing does not necessarily mean that the primary arranger is doing the most work overall, or that they have the most important role. They may simply be crafting a basic arrangement, while other musicians flesh out the instrumentation, add new writing, and then finally produce and mix the track.

## **Finding Partners**

Though some people might say it's a bad idea to go into business with your friends, there's nothing wrong with collaborating on music with them. Looking to your own social circles for partners is the **best place to start**. They don't even necessarily have to be musicians; if you know a great writer, perhaps their skills will come in handy for pairing a lyric to a melody you created.

If you can't find any collaborators in your personal social network, it's time to expand! There is no shortage of musician and producer communities online. For example, [Just Plain Folks](#), besides being a

wonderful organization for independent musicians, also hosts a thriving set of message boards. Hip-hop and electronic artists can make use of such sites as [FutureProducers](#) or [DogsOnAcid](#), while any artist using a computer in some part of the creative process will be in good company over at [KVRAudio](#). If you're looking for "real-life" collaborations only, [Craigslist](#) or flyers at your local grocery store would probably be your best bets.

One caveat to collaboration; it is very important that you ensure all parties are on the same page when it comes to finances and copyright. In other words, if you are collaborating with a writer with the assumption that you will each be equal copyright holders with equal claims to the proceeds of the song, make sure the writer knows that. He or she might have other ideas in mind.