

ByteNoise

Desire As Procrastination

I don't think it's the program you use that counts, it's what you've got in your head. — Liam Howlett¹

I often get it into my head that if I had a certain tool to do the job, I'd be able to do my job much better. For instance, if I just had a modular synthesiser, think of all the wonderful music I could make.

To some extent that's true, but it's a very dangerous path. If you're always fantasising about what you don't yet have, you'll never learn to use what you *do* already have. In today's modern era, pretty much anyone rich enough to have Internet access and therefore read this article probably already has much better technology than most musicians could afford as recently as even the 1990s.

I recently bought software emulations of five different Proteus rackmounts, originally priced at about \$1000 each when they were first released between 1989 and 1997, for \$60 in *total*. Reason + Record, FL Studio, Cubase and Logic are *all* now much better than what most musicians used even recently, given that we now have plug-ins which faithfully recreate pretty much any historic synthesiser.

If you don't think music can sound genuinely professional using the kind of equipment you already have, check out Lily Allen's

song The Fear, which knocked Lady Gaga's Just Dance off the number one spot for UK singles. The Fear was mixed entirely in Logic 8, using just the plug-ins it came with out of the box.²

In far too many interviews to mention, the artist will say that there's no use in having a studio full of exotic equipment you don't have the time to understand. You should just concentrate on one or two versatile tools — pretty much anything already in your studio should suffice — and learn them inside out, so that when inspiration strikes, you already have the skills to do what you need to without having to give it much conscious thought.

You should never spend your valuable time pining after equipment you don't have. Instead, spend it learning what you do have inside out. What will make your music sound better isn't some new synthesiser, but the knowledge to fully understand the one you already have.

If you want to make better music, don't constantly try to get the very best tools for the job. Simply get tools that are good enough, then spend your time learning to use them properly, practicing your craft, analysing others' techniques and applying them to your own styles.

Listen to the very best music in your collection, but not for fun this time. Analyse it. Pick it apart and understand how it works, why it invokes the emotions it does.

What makes Aphex Twin's music so good isn't the thirty year old synthesisers he uses, it's the amount of time he spends painstakingly creating something intricate and then destroying bits of it in novel and creative ways.

What makes Moby's music so good isn't his extensive collection of vintage drum machines but his willingness to blend together whichever styles and sounds best get the emotion across, with a complete disregard for whether a modern house piano is *supposed* to sit well under an old blues vocal.

Coveting tools you don't have is just a means of procrastination. When you find yourself doing it, instead take a second to think about all the advantages of the tools you *do* have, then get to it and practice using them.

References

1. Sound On Sound: Blazing a Trail
2. Sound On Sound: Secrets of the Mix Engineers: Greg Kurstin