



## As seen on the show: Make music

Plus, tips to improve the quality of your sound

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You don't need expensive equipment to get started making music on your PC. Below, are some guidelines to getting started the easy way.

### Ultra Simple Way to Get Started

Kids and beginners of any age can have lots of fun by simply using a computer microphone (about \$20) plugged into the microphone jack found on most PC sound cards.

You can get started by using the sound recording utility program that's provided as part of the Windows operating system. Plug in your microphone to the microphone "in" jack (colored red) and then start up the Windows recording program by clicking *Start, All Programs, Accessories, Entertainment* and finally *Sound Recorder*. Click the red record button on the pop up menu and start singing, playing an instrument or rapping. Click the black square "stop" button on the program and then you can listen to what you've recorded.

### Improve Your Experience with a USB-Connected Microphone/Line Recording Box

Plugging a microphone into a PC's sound card works, but you'll quickly discover that your recordings may be very noisy and weak. Standard sound cards found in off-the-shelf consumer personal computers are fine for producing clear sound output, but often incorporate very limited recording capabilities. One way to bypass the limitations of a standard sound card is to opt for an external microphone interface recording/amplifying solution.

Many USB-connected external mic/line in recording boxes are available today for under \$200. These boxes offer built-in amplifiers to make it possible to input clean vocals and acoustic instrument sounds, or directly connect an electric guitar or bass guitar. Note: some models also accommodate MIDI connected keyboards.

For several years a number of music recording gear companies have created USB connected total recording solutions for PCs and Macs (Aardvark Audio, Edirol and M-Audio produce good examples). These products were originally intended for on-the-go laptop based recording solutions, but they can also offer a solid solution for beginners on laptops or desktops.

Combine one of these boxes with a ¼ inch or XLR type microphone and you can boost the quality of your recordings considerably. Expect to pay \$50 and up for a decent microphone and up to \$20 for an XLR type cable (if you use an XLR microphone).

The M-Audio MobilePre USB box my son and I have been using lately is a good example of what this product category has to offer. Priced at about \$149, the small box connects directly to a desktop or laptop using a standard USB cable. It supports two ¼ inch microphone and/or electric instruments, or two XLR-type microphones. A standard headphone jack is provided, along with stereo microphone input and stereo output jacks.

Once connected, the M-Audio MobilePre box becomes the PC's overall sound system for playback and recording. You can connect your microphone and/or electric instrument to the box, adjust the volume of the incoming signal and produce remarkably clear recordings given the modest price of the unit.

### Lessons Learned and Tips

- **Power Pays Off:** As with all things multimedia, the more powerful your PC and the more RAM you have the smoother and more responsive it will be when it comes to music recording and editing. For people using Windows-based software, a PC featuring a Pentium 4 processor-based PC with Hyper-Threading Technology and at least 512 Megabytes of RAM offers a solid platform.

- **A word about microphones and cables:** One of the things you'll quickly discover about home recording on a PC is the value of a good microphone and, equally important, the value of a good shielded XLR type microphone cable. When my son and I started, we used inexpensive microphones with permanently attached, thin lines. Yikes! The noise and hiss were very bad. It was an amazing experience when we got our mixing board and the TASCAM controller and started using good, XLR-type microphones and cables. All the noise was gone! There are two types of microphones – dynamic and condenser. Dynamic microphones are used for recording and live performances, whereas condenser microphones are generally used for recording only (as they are very, very sensitive). Expect to pay at least \$60 and up for good microphones, and about \$25 and up for good microphone cables.

*Ralph Bond is a guest on MSNBC's 'The Future is Now: Tech Summit 2004'. The show airs live from New York on March 21, Sunda, 8 p.m. ET on MSNBC .*

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