

# NO W I N SESSION



Ever wondered how to break into session bass playing? There's only one way to find out how — by asking the stars. We kick off with an in-depth interview with session and stage veteran Paul Geary, whose CV includes quality studio and tourbus time with a stellar cast of pop and rock musicians from George Michael, Westlife, Lisa Stansfield, Chris Rea, a brace of Osmonds and Gabrielle to his current gig with Nik Kershaw

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Leicester-born Paul Geary has enjoyed a long and star-studded career as a bass player — whether as the go-to bassist for a multitude of chart-topping musicians

from a range of genres, a TV, stage and studio musician or as a respected bass educator at ACM in Guildford. The late George Michael employed Paul, as did Chris Rea, Paul Young and now Nik Kershaw. Paul has travelled the world, playing in venues from stadiums down to clubs; and he's amassed a ton of wisdom that all bassists should hear.

Regular *BGM* readers will have benefited from Paul's tuition column for many years. We're lucky to have had him on our team, given his experience in the industry — so read on for memories of a career in bass like few others, as well as his tips for anyone hoping to kickstart a session career.

#### How did you get started as a bass player, Paul?

When I was around 16 or 17, I got involved with a non-denominational gospel church in the Leicester area, which is where I first picked up a bass guitar, simply because the church band needed a bass player. It was a Fender copy of some kind, and they suggested I give it a go. The guy who owned the bass showed me a little bit, but basically I just watched, listened and worked it out. By the second week I was in the band — sitting down, because I couldn't work out how to stand up and play! After a while, I was so into bass that I really didn't hear the

top-line melodies in music anymore. I tuned in to any low notes that I heard in popular songs, whether it was the Beatles or Elvis or whatever.

#### When did bass become serious for you?

After a couple of years, when I'd become pretty handy on the bass. It turned out that I had a natural affinity for the instrument: although bass has been hard at times over the years, mastering the core of it in the early days wasn't hard, and it occurred to me that it might be worth pursuing. You have to give yourself wholeheartedly to any discipline in order to improve, and that's what I did.

#### Did you have lessons?

I did have lessons, but I almost quit after the first one, because, as you can imagine, after two years as a self-taught bassist, my posture and technique was all wrong. It was like starting again. I had to rethink everything that I was doing. Since then I've become a big believer in the correct posture and the correct ways of playing. I've never had an injury for that reason. It breaks my heart when players come up to me and tell me they can't play for six months because they've got tendonitis. Students will ask me how to play a fast part such as 'Hysteria' by Muse, and their whole body will be tensed up while they're playing it. That's the worst thing you can do. You need to relax to the point where your body is not doing anything out of the ordinary.

#### What was the turning point for you?

My church had connections in Los Angeles,







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“You have to give yourself wholeheartedly to any discipline in order to improve, and that’s what I did”



## SESSION TIPS!

### Paul's advice for new session bassists

#### **Get to know your contemporaries**

I'm always asked if I have any contacts, and I do, but they're all my age. If you're a young bass student, the person you'll be working with is probably going to be your age. That person could be sitting next to you right now.

#### **Be nice to people**

Don't burn any bridges. A lot of young players think that gigs will automatically follow gigs, but it's not like that. The guy who is struggling to play something on stage right now could be giving you a job in a few years. You're all in it together.

#### **Do your homework**

When you're going to an audition, make sure you understand the artist's history and turn up prepared. The auditioning artist might say, 'Do you know this song too?' after they've heard you play the first one, and it's great if you can say yes.

#### **Humility is important**

Not long ago I played in a three-piece at a Dorothy Perkins gig: the night before, I was playing the Kremlin Palace with Chris Norman. You can't be proud, and I'm not. A gig is a gig, and I play no differently in an arena to the way I would in front of 50 people in a pub.



where there was the fabled Musicians' Institute. I'd tried to find a bass education in the UK, but there was nothing – the Royal Academy didn't even recognise electric instruments! – so in 1986, I sold the shirt off my back, got some help from the church and at the age of 20 I went to study music at the Bass Institute Of Technology. My parents went ballistic, because I gave up my job as a graphic designer just before I was about to get promoted, but I knew I had to do it. Now I realise I was probably one of the first British musicians to actually grab the bull by the horns and go out there.

#### **What bass gear were you using at the time?**

By then I had an Ibanez Axstar, because I couldn't afford a Steinberger and the Ibanez was the next best thing. I took that to the

States with me and had private lessons with Billy Sheehan. I remember him teaching me three-finger picking. The Head of Bass at BIT was Jeff Berlin, who I got on well with, although he was a bit frightening because he didn't suffer fools lightly. I was so green when I got there. I'd never heard of Jaco Pastorius, for example, although I managed to play some of his stuff.

#### **When did the idea of becoming a session bassist come to mind?**

I loved so much different music that I always knew I wanted to be a session player. The idea of going out and touring in a band that played just one genre of music never appealed to me. I loved funk, I loved R&B. I say to a lot of my students, I wish I could go back and play more

different kinds of music, because back then I wanted everything.

#### **What was the church's role in your studies?**

The masterplan was that I would come back and play gospel music, and I was up for it at first, but I started getting into secular music and worshipping that rather than any particular deity. Music is spiritual anyway, in its connection between people. I suppose I'd been brainwashed a bit: I remember I had an audition with Lisa Stansfield and they forbade me from going to it, because the music was secular. Eventually I was cast out of the church – literally.

#### **What was your next career move?**

I didn't want to get to the age I am now and



Pic by Tina K

### What basses were you playing?

I'd bought a Kubicki Factor bass while I was out in California, because I was a big fan of Stuart Hamm. The neck was made of 36 glued strips of maple: it was incredibly stable. I also bought a 1988 Music Man five-string while I was there. I sold that Kubicki a few years later, purely for the money, and it's a big regret. That said, for me, basses have to earn their keep. For strings, Jason How gave me a great Rotosound strings deal. Amp-wise, I used a Peavey TNT 100 combo which never let me down, even though I dropped it down club stairs and it got kicked and beaten up. I moved on to Trace Elliot shortly after that.

### When did sessions come along?

My first big session was Chris Norman, the lead singer of Smokie, who has a massive following in Europe. I worked with him from 1995 to 2005. Then I played with Lisa Stansfield, and suddenly jumped from playing Grimethorpe Working Men's Club to Sheffield Stadium. I remember when someone from Lisa's crew came to pick up my gear and take it to rehearsal, I realised I was starting to break through... Around the same time I played with Chris Rea and Gabrielle. All this came from the Chris Norman gig. A lot of networking followed and I played with Liberty X, Blazin' Squad and other pop acts through the 90s and into the 2000s.

### What were the high points of this period for you?

A very high point was playing with George Michael in 1997 – that was very much a career highlight. I also played *Top Of The Pops* half a dozen times with Lisa Stansfield, Chris Rea, Gabrielle and others. At the time

lines were technically very difficult to play. For example, 'The Camera Never Lies' has a processed, sequenced line with 2/4 sections. The hardest thing I ever did was *An Audience With Donnie And Marie Osmond* on ITV in 2009, it's all on Youtube. We had one day of rehearsal with an orchestral house band. It was a reading gig, and obviously I can read, but the bass parts were the slickest I've ever heard. Halfway through 'Dancing In The Streets' they asked me to step up onto this giant staircase and play a bass solo for a couple of bars. Donnie shouted 'Go Paul!' and off I went.

### Your regular gig is Nik Kershaw, who is a virtuoso musician.

Definitely. His writing stands out from all the other 80s bands, for me: there's something different about it. He was championed by Elton John for his guitar playing, and played the guitar solo on Elton's single 'Nikita', which I never knew. I've been with Nik since 1998.

### You're also an educator.

I've been teaching at ACM since 1996. I was Head Of Bass in the early days at ACM, and then I became Head Of School. I'm 50 now and you think life is going to get less busy, but it doesn't! I'm going to keep touring, because it's the core of what I do, but I'm also as passionate about helping the next generation as I've ever been.

### What's your current bass setup?

I have a great deal with TC Electronic for amps and effects, which came about through Mark King, because he and Nik are best buddies. Mark came down to ACM to do

“The idea of going out and touring in a band that played just one genre of music never appealed to me”

say, 'What if?' so I got a job at Carlsbro Music in Leeds and started playing in covers bands. I met a whole set of musicians there: it was a great place to meet people.

We played a load of working men's clubs in Yorkshire in the early 90s. It was tough, because all the bands were in competition with each other. There was one really good band called Smartass. Our agent used to say 'Go and see Smartass and watch their show, it'll help you hone your skills'.

I was in three or four of these club bands. This was essentially my apprenticeship. I did the lights and set up the multicore to the desk as well as playing bass. You'd do two sets a night, and the bingo was between the two sets. We'd be in the dressing room and you'd hear screaming and bottles smashing from the club.

it was the ultimate music TV show – a real thing to aspire to. Then there was Geri Halliwell, Simply Red, the Lighthouse Family, Dane Bowers, Sophie Ellis Bextor, Rachel Stevens, Westlife... It's a long list.

### What about touring?

So many great venues. I remember playing a stadium in Outer Mongolia with Chris Norman, and I played Hyde Park during the 2012 Olympics with Nik, in front of 80,000 people. Then there was Wembley, G-Mex and Hamburg. Great places to play.

### You've done a lot of pop stuff. Should we assume that the bass parts are easy to play?

No, that is a misconception. When I did the Here And Now festival with Bucks Fizz, the

some sessions and I loved his TC amp, so I got in touch with them and they began supporting me. I use their RH450 and 750 heads with 1x15 and 2x10 cabs in different configurations, plus the Corona chorus, Ditto looper and a phaser. For basses, I use my Music Man StingRay most of the time: it has a Glockenklang preamp fitted by Andrew Taylor-Cummings at Anaconda. I also have two lovely Overwater basses which Chris May made for me. I've always used Rotosound strings, even before I knew Jason How. At the end of the day, your tone is in your fingers. I use loads of different gear at festivals, but I always get the same sound. I rest my case! ■

Info: [www.paulgeary.com](http://www.paulgeary.com)



# SESSION STARS SPEAK

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Nick Beggs, Lee Sklar, Mo Foster, Sandy Beales and the Musicians' Union's Sessions Officer Pete Thoms advise us on the pleasures and pitfalls of a career as a session bassist

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## NICK BEGGS

**BANDS:** Kajagoogoo, Ellis Beggs & Howard, Iona, Lifesigns, Mute Gods

**SESSIONS:** Steven Wilson, Steve Hackett, John Mitchell, Howard Jones, John Paul Jones, Kim Wilde, hundreds more

INTERVIEW: Mike Brooks

"That's the thing about it – it's big, it's ungainly and if you put it in the wrong hole it can really hurt!" Don't flinch, readers: it's just Nick Beggs, bass-playing chameleon and session ace, describing why he can't use his Chapman Stick on every session that comes his way. "I'd play it all the time if I could fit it into everything," he says. "Tony Levin seems to be able to make it work in a lot of places but even he doesn't put it on everything."

Session bassists, take note: theory can help. After his ear- (and eye-) catching performances with Kajagoogoo in the early to mid-80s, Nick's bass playing talents were in much demand, although he had to take himself back to college to gain the theory he needed. "I didn't know the difference between major and minor scales," he tells us. "Everything I did in Kajagoogoo was just based on my ear: I couldn't read music or note anything down, I cut my teeth on prog-rock but I came at it from a guttural response, so I went to Basstech in Acton in 1987 and studied with Rob Burns and Terry Gregory who both taught me to read music. I was reapplying it as I was learning it, because it was time for me to stop being an artist and time to become a musician."

Alongside his current work with Steven Wilson, the Mute Gods and Steve Hackett, Nick is constantly approached to add his deft skills to sessions: he carefully selects which projects he can actually contribute to. "I don't like recording studios, because I don't believe I deliver my best stuff in them," he says. "I record at home on my

own, with enough time to get the sound how I want it, and enough time to learn the piece of music without any pressure. I know how to get the best out of my instruments: what I use depends on the track."

Every session is a different experience, and Nick approaches each one with an open mind. "Sometimes it's a question of educating people," he explains. "I've always had ideas about how something should sound sonically. People might not know what they want, so if I can help them to reach that point, that makes life easier."

With so much experience behind him, Nick has the following words of advice for anyone wanting to approach the murky world of sessions. "There's two approaches: commerce and artistry. You can look at it as making a living, and being the everyman guy who covers all the bases – but then, do you really sound like you? Are you being asked to sound like a well-known bassist, or are you being asked to sound like you? I've had to do both. It's also important to be able to spot and identify your own shortcomings, because you can't please everybody. Big names have gone into sessions and not been able to please the artist or the producer, and you have to accept that that might be a possibility – but every day you get paid is a good day." ■

The Mute Gods' new album *...Tardigrades Will Inherit The Earth* is out now on InsideOut Music.

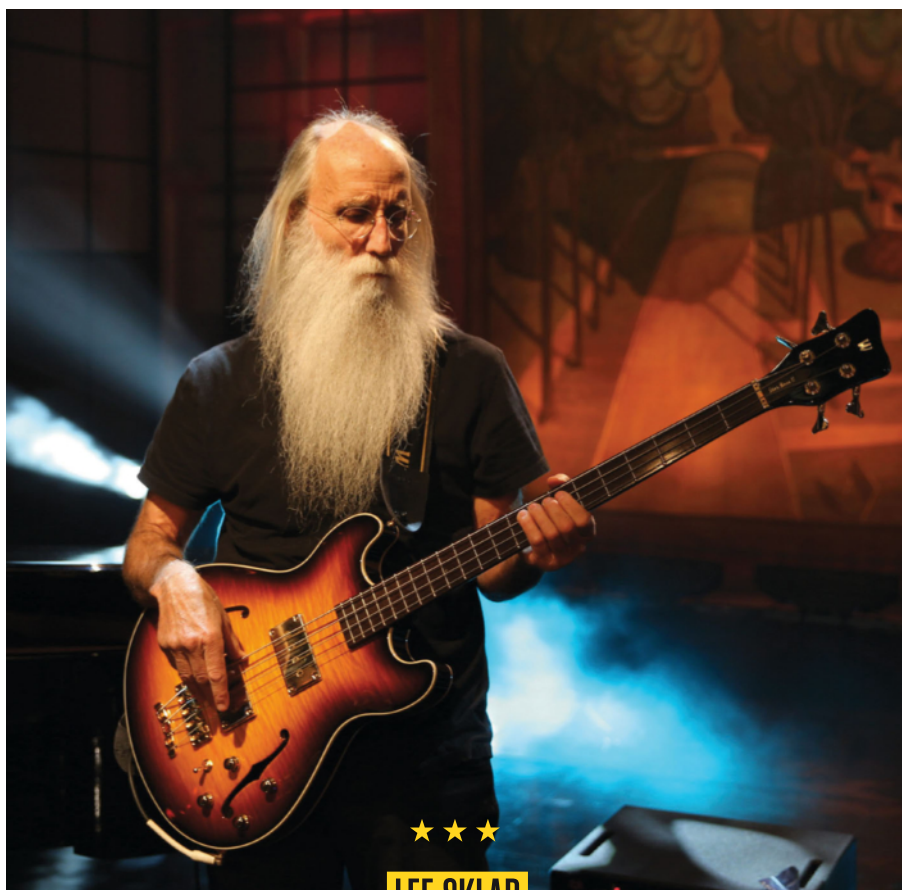
Info: [www.themute gods.com](http://www.themute gods.com).







Pic by Tina K



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**LEE SKLAR**

**SESSIONS:** James Taylor, Barbra Streisand, Phil Collins, Billy Cobham, over 2500 (!) others

**You've recorded thousands of sessions, Lee. Do you ever listen back to the stuff you've done?**

The best time is when you hear something that you recorded as a basic track and you never heard as a finished song. I'll be in a supermarket and hear a song and think, 'That's really cool' and then you sit for a second and you think 'Wait a second, I know that tune!' and it was you.

**What is your best-known session?**

Probably one of the songs I played with James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt or Jackson Browne. Barbra Streisand is still going strong: I played on some of her early stuff too. All the studio guys I know ask me to play something off [epoch-shaping 1973 album] *Spectrum* with Billy Cobham. Plus I've done hundreds of country records with people like Reba McEntire. I'm really proud of those things, but I'm also really proud of having played on 'It's Raining Men' by the Weather Girls and 'I Am Woman' by Helen Reddy. That's the sign of a working musician: it's not just about the big, attention-getting hits.

**How picky are you about the songs you're asked to play on?**

I play what I'm called to go play. It doesn't matter if I'm working with Il Divo or Veronique Sanson. I've even been called in to put bass on hip-hop projects, and it's not one of my favourite genres, but I've worked on some cool stuff within that genre. I'm really open: I'm not one of those people who shuts anything out. Whatever sound and style I've created for myself over the years, it seems to fit with a lot of genres. It's not like being a one-trick pony who gets called to do one thing, and you get called to do something else and you're really out of your league.

**Do you ever find a session too technically challenging?**

There have been times where I've been called to play on things that I think another bassist would be better at, so I suggest that person instead. I remember when John Patitucci lived in LA, I'd say to people, 'Call John. He's the guy for this'. I like to share, I'm not possessive about things. It's about whatever's best for the project. For example, I'm not a good slapper at all, and I don't play with a pick. I remember Quincy Jones called me to play with him and he said, 'You do play with a pick, don't you?' and I said no, so we decided we weren't going to work together, because on the stuff he was doing at the time he really wanted a pick player. I can bullshit my way through it: I keep one of my fingernails long so I can play like that - but my facility isn't there, probably out of laziness. As for slapping, I've had a lot of wrist injuries over the years and I don't have a lot of dexterity with it. Once again, I have friends who live and breathe that bass style, so I recommend them when slap is needed. ■





## MO FOSTER

**SESSIONS:** Phil Collins, Jeff Beck, Ringo Starr among 350 others — and counting

### If you get asked to do a session, what preparation do you need to put in?

First of all, you've got to do your homework. Play live with a lot of other people. If you're a studio player, you're going to be called upon to play in any imaginable style, and do it very well, so unless you've done several years slogging around, you'll have problems. You'll need to play music that you don't like, and be good at it. As well as coming up with ideas, you have to have great time. It's hopeless if one of you is racing or behind the beat. When everyone is together it starts to feel strangely effortless: there's no struggle. And you have to be comfortable with a click-track.

### What other skills do you need?

A good session player has a nice supply of jokes, because being in the studio is a social thing. You need to enter a zen-like state of meditation when the red light goes on, and focus on the bass part, and then the light goes off and you start laughing again. The two states are vital because they let off steam for the other.

### How much did you get paid per session when you started out?

In the 1970s, the Musicians' Union rate was £9 for a three-hour session when I started. Later it went up to £12! That may not sound like much, but it was 10 times more than I was earning as a touring musician – I remember earning £20 per week on the road. You could get extra money on a session by doubling, in other words playing a second instrument or track, or portage, which was a fee for transporting your gear. In the 80s, you could ask for double scale if you were really good. Sometimes you just thought of a number. I remember being asked to go to a Japanese studio to record an album, and when they asked me what I charged per day, I just made up a number. They said yes, and I thought 'Damn! I should have asked for more!' Nowadays it's a world of barter: for example, I did some bass parts for a guy who taught me how to use Logic Audio. That goes on a lot. XXXX

[www.mofoster.com](http://www.mofoster.com)





Pic by Joseph Branton

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**SANDY BEALES**

**BAND:** One Direction

### Seize your opportunities

Okay, let's begin; top tip, day one, book one, page one, is saying 'Yes!' to every opportunity. Throw yourself into everything: gigs, recording, jam nights, attending masterclasses, practice. Anything that means you're picking up and playing your bass is a positive thing. Sure, this sounds simple, but you never know where the most random connection may lead: perhaps it'll bring you the most amazing opportunity.

### Become a chameleon

The story above also ties in nicely to another important tip: be multi-skilled. Get your synth bass playing to a good standard; make yourself comfortable on a fretless; venture into upright playing. This way you have more strings (literally) to your bow, and no matter what is called for on a session or a gig, you're ready to go, with all the tools and skills you need. If an MD wants a certain sound and you can provide it quickly and with minimal hassle, everyone is going to be happy. Trust me on that.

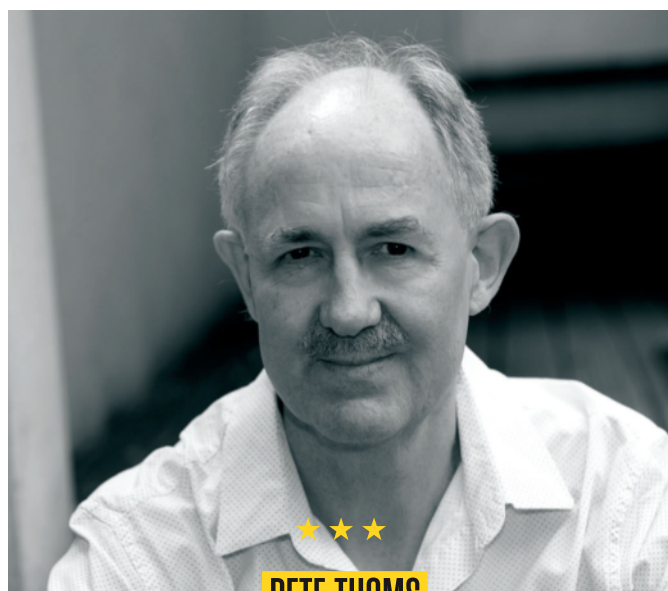
### Remember your etiquette with fellow musicians

Be kind to people and good things will happen. Your connections are key. Get tight with drummers, as a strong rhythm section is a valuable commodity. Treat your bass tech and the rest of the crew with respect when you tour. It's important to remember that by the time you walk on stage, other people have already been working for hours getting the production and your gear ready. They're your safety net, so being friendly and having a positive relationship with them gives you security and comfort on stage.

### Master technique

I can't stress enough how important timing, feel and the understanding of various musical genres is. Expand your knowledge of musical genres and the techniques involved to create an authentic sound for those genres, such as palm muting or pick playing. You will become versatile and a useful commodity if you can adapt your technique and your sound to any genre. This is especially important during recording sessions. If your playing complements the song and fits the genre, you'll earn your session fee. ■

Excerpted from Sandy's much longer sessions feature in *The Musician's Handbook: Bass Guitar*, out now. Info: [www.sandybeales.com](http://www.sandybeales.com).



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**PETE THOMS**

**Musicians' Union Session Officer**

Most employment out there for bass players is in film scores, game music and library music sessions. There aren't so many record sessions anymore, even though they used to be the bread and butter of the job, along with jingles.

Reading music is an advantage. Not everybody who records sessions is a sight-reader, but it'll be to your advantage if you can read something pretty much at sight. The top bass players – the Andy Pasks and Steve Pearces of this world, who get a lot of that sort of work – sight-read, and also play double bass. That takes their employability to a different level. You also need to be able to make something up on the spot if someone hands you the chords. There's a whole spectrum of circumstances where that applies, from being given a note-for-note chart to being sent an audio file with no bass part and being asked to contribute one. If you can only do one of those things, it'll limit you when it comes to working. If you say 'I only play heavy metal' then there'll be fewer opportunities than if you play in multiple genres. Be flexible – you don't know what you'll be asked to do. You may be asked to play like Ray Brown or Larry Graham or Flea on different sessions. People will expect you to cover as much territory as possible, so limit that flexibility and you'll limit your employability.

Turn up on time, with the right equipment. Have a good sound and intonation if you're playing fretless or double bass. Show an interest in what you're doing: a lot of session players get criticised for turning up and being blasé. The best session players are those who are motivated. For a new artist the music they're recording is everything to them – you need to show some desire to make their music the best it can be.

Most recording studios are in London, with some in big cities like Manchester and Liverpool, but there are now a plethora of online opportunities. You can play for anyone in the world with a good online presence. A lot of UK session musicians sign up to American session agencies: that's a good way to get into it, although it's no longer enough to send a CV and a Soundcloud sample to a producer and say 'employ me'. Make your playing known to a fixer and as many musicians as possible. You can then start to build a reputation for reliability, flexibility and skill.

We have agreements with the record labels, as well as the BBC and the other TV companies, which lay out certain minimum rates – and musicians and producers should abide by those and not undercut them. The minimum record session is £120 for three hours, although in-demand players will often charge more than that. The main thing is to sign the MU documentation when you get a session, because that's vital: there's nothing worse than doing a session and finding out later that you have no paperwork to support the fact that you played on a track. ■

[www.musiciansunion.org.uk](http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk)