



Interview: Brad Holder

How Click Tracks Helps Your Worship

John Finkelde: *Hey everybody, it's great to have you here today. I'm here with Brad Holder. Brad is the Worship Pastor and tech guru at C3 Church Port Hedland, a regional church in north west Western Australia.*

It's a church of a couple of hundred people and it's a church that I've been visiting, well actually I've been visiting there for nearly 35 years on and off over those decades. One of the things I really like about the church, especially in the last 10-15 years has just been my experience of the worship in the church.

It's a regional, country church so it's a kind of boom and bust regional town so the church fluctuates in numbers but for many years now the church has had a great presence in worship and a great worship experience and skills and so on.

I've got Brad on today because I want to talk about using backing tracks in worship and the benefits they can bring and how to set them up.

So Brad, it's great to have you in the hub, thanks for joining us!

Brad Holder: Hello John, thank you so much for having me. It's such an honour to be on this. Thank you!

John Finkelde: *It's our pleasure. I think this is going to be really helpful because I've seen what you've achieved up there in the church, in a regional church, it's not a huge mega church or anything like that but you've achieved so many good things.*

Brad Holder: Maybe one day John!

John Finkelde: *Well you never know! I'm not going to limit the Lord that's for sure!*

Brad, I always like with my guests to have a 60 second lightning round, just to give us a little taste of your life so what's your favourite food?

Brad Holder: Burgers. I'm a burger fan definitely.

John Finkelde: *Nice choice! Best book or podcast you've read or listened to in recent times?*



Brad Holder: It would probably have to be the Craig Groeschel leadership podcasts. I'm really loving that at the moment.

John Finkelde: *Your dream holiday destination?*

Brad Holder: Probably Canada. And that's just given that there are some amazing bands over there and some amazing music so I'd love to check it out one day.

John Finkelde: *So not so much the scenery, it's the music you want to see!*

Brad Holder: Yep, the music. Absolutely.

John Finkelde: *Who's your favourite person in the Bible? And we always leave out Jesus, just so people don't feel pressured to pick Jesus.*

Brad Holder: I've been delving in a little bit through Bible College through Daniel and I've really been enjoying unpacking his life at the moment so I'm going to say Daniel at the moment.

John Finkelde: *I like it, he's one of my favourites. What's your favourite down time activity?*

Brad Holder: Probably just playing guitar. I love it.

John Finkelde: *How long have you been playing guitar?*

Brad Holder: I think I started playing guitar when I was about 11 or 12 years old so quite a while.

John Finkelde: *And how old are you now?*

Brad Holder: 29 so it's been a while.

John Finkelde: *Coffee or tea?*

Brad Holder: Neither. I'm not a fan of coffee or tea. Probably hot chocolate if I was to choose a warm drink. That would be it.

John Finkelde: *Book or podcast?*



Brad Holder: Podcast, hands down.

John Finkelde: *Beach or mountains?*

Brad Holder: Probably the beach.

John Finkelde: *Jog or bike?*

Brad Holder: Probably bike, I think.

John Finkelde: *So, tell us why did your church get into backing tracks? Give us a bit of a background on why you got into using backing tracks.*

Brad Holder: I guess there was a few main reasons but the first one was that we had a limited band. So obviously being in a regional church, in a regional location, not everyone is always available to be on stage.

And also being a transient place we found that we were having musicians coming into town and play for a little while and then leave so in terms of consistency we were lacking a little bit of it. And that also filtered through to our technical team as well.

So, the main reason we got into it was to give us that full band sound every Sunday.

Also, with the technical side, there are so many things you can add on to backing tracks as well. You can control your lyrics and automate your lighting through it which really helped out our technical department when we were short staffed there to.

John Finkelde: *One of the things I've noticed over the last few years is that automating of the lyrics. I visit so many different churches and one of my frustration points is the lyrics coming up to slow when it's a song I don't know. So to go to your church, it doesn't matter whether I know the song or not, the lyrics are just there when you need them which is slightly just ahead of time really I guess.*

Brad Holder: That's right, I absolutely agree with that. One of the other things that we learnt as well from watching those mega churches and the bigger bands like the ones we look up to like Planet Shakers, Hillsong and Elevation, they're all using backing tracks every Sunday as well. They're doing a lot of this automation themselves to using the same methods that we're using.

John Finkelde: *So is that right, even large churches with lots of band members, they're still using support backing stuff.*



Brad Holder: Absolutely. At the very least they're still using the same software and they're still playing to a Click Track or Metronome.

John Finkelde: *I think because Pt Hedland is a regional area, and as you say it has quite a transient population, but most smaller or medium churches in the city have fairly transient populations so I think they are really good reasons and a lot of pastors relate to the fact that we don't have enough musicians or enough people to help out on the tech side as well. So good reasons to get into backing tracks for your Sunday service.*

What sort of technology have you used to maximise those benefits?

Brad Holder: There's a few different pieces of software that you can get to play the backing tracks back. We opted to go for the top one straight away which is Ableton Live which is the same software that basically all of those mega churches are using and basically any touring worship band, DJ's or any kind of big band, this is what they're using these days.

You can also use things like MultiTracks.com make a piece of software called Playback and Loop Community also make one called Prime. They're kind of a bit more basic and a bit more iPad based software whereas Ableton is the pro level kind of thing. It's almost like using a piece of recording software.

MultiTracks.com is the website where we purchase all of our backing tracks from. They have a relationship with a lot of the high-end studios so they deliver the original studio multitracks from the studio recordings of the artist into the web guide. I think they're about \$40 each and then you can load them into your software and manipulate them however you need them to be for your service on Sunday.

John Finkelde: *Ableton – is that free or purchase software or subscription.*

Brad Holder: There is a basic version of it which I think you can get a free trial and then I think there's the intro version but the intro version limits you to only playing back a certain amount of channels or instruments at one time. We started there and then very quickly within a couple of weeks moved straight to purchasing the bigger pack so we can play back the tracks.

So every Sunday we have between 12 to maybe 20 backing tracks playing into our soundboard at once. We might not use all of those, they might not go live to the audience or come out to the congregation but they are playing into the desk and can be released.



John Finkelde: Then you can choose what you bring out into the public arena.

Brad Holder: That's right, exactly. But you obviously need a piece of hardware to go with that as well. So there are various ways of doing that. If you want to go a little bit basic you can use the good old headphone connector. Your headphone connector has two outputs, a left and a right so you could send out your tracks just through two channels there or you can get a bigger interface and run multi.

We opted for a system in our sound desk itself that takes up to 40 channels at once which can individually be sent into the desk, and we use about 16 of those every week.

John Finkelde: I didn't realise the level of technology behind it to be honest with you. It's not my area of expertise!

So Brad what other technology would you use besides Ableton for the backing tracks?

Brad Holder: Well you've got your different interfaces and that's the core of it. You need to be able to have that connection between your sound desk and your computer for Ableton.

But there's also some other great integration that you can do with it as well so a lot of churches will probably be using a piece of software called Pro Presenter which is your visual software that you can use to recall slides or lyrics and all that kind of stuff. It usually connects to a projector or however it might be and Ableton has the ability to sync directly with that as we spoke about with the automating of lyrics.

So what you do is send out something called a mini note and the mini note will send over the wifi network from Ableton into your Pro Presenter computer and Pro Presenter will receive a mini note and you can assign each different mini note a different slide.

Once you've keyed that in once, it does take maybe an hour to do the first time you set up a song but once it's done, it's done forever. So that's sensational.

And you can also use different lighting software to do the exact same thing. So we use a piece of software called Lightkey which can then automate all your lighting by doing exactly the same method where you assign a mini note in Ableton to fire off over the network to your lighting computer and you can automate all your lighting as well so you can almost go through a full Sunday, if you've only got one tech guy who's trying to struggle to do everything, then this is going to be their favourite thing in the world!



John Finkelde: Wow, so you could really automate the lighting in connection with the lyrics, the words and the music. The whole thing kind of really synchronised together and you're right, if you're a bit skinny on the crew down there in the production area, you really can automate a lot.

As you say, there's that initial work to get it up and with every song you've got to do a bit more work but gee it saves an awful lot of hassle on a Sunday.

So in terms of set up costs, what's sort of set up costs would a church be looking for to buy tracks and then get things like Ableton, even some of these Pro Presenter and Lightkey sort of stuff going.

Is there a stage 1, 2, 3 to it or do you just jump into the deep end?

Brad Holder: Look it really depends on what your budget is and how you really want to go about it. For us, when we first started it, I had my personal MacBook already so I just downloaded Ableton onto there. I had an old interface lying around that I think was an 8 channel output so we just started with that and straight away gave it a go.

We didn't go straight away to automated lyrics or any of that stuff, we just started out with the tracks because I think there is quite a level of learning to be done by the band as well when you're playing the tracks because you're essentially syncing to a metronome and you're playing along to the metronome.

You also have something that is called a guide track that is inside it as well which we named Barbara for no real reason! And Barbara basically tells us "intro", "verse", "chorus" and sort of says those words into our inner ears to tell us where we're going.

We generally set that up prior as well. It gives a bit of clarity for where we're going to go in a set as well which I think is really great and we've had some really great feedback from our congregation on that as well in terms of it's a bit more predictable and they're not kind of singing the bridge 50 thousand times over, which we all have a tendency to do in the moment sometimes!

John Finkelde: Yeah musicians and singers have a passion for worship that's not always shared by every member of the congregation. I have seen muso's before getting so stuck into everything that they're lost, they're gone and everyone in the congregation is staring at the ceiling wondering when it's going to end so to have a bit of consistency there can be really quite helpful.



Brad Holder: Exactly! You really can start with something quite basic in terms of getting going but probably the more essential thing is, what you definitely need is inner ear monitoring. You can't really get by with playing with a floor monitor wedge or anything like that because you're just going to hear a metronome on stage and that's going to be quite annoying for your congregation.

So the first thing you really, really, really need is inner ear monitoring when you're getting started with this stuff. There are ways you can do that cheaply. Behringer make a unit called P1 or P2 units which is like a wired inner ear unit which take a battery in it and then you've obviously got your more high end stuff like your Sennheiser or wireless inner ear MAX as well which is definitely the end goal, that's what we use.

John Finkelde: *Ok, so you can actually get inner ears without breaking the bank. You can get rolling at a level anyway.*

Brad Holder: I think your wireless kits are around about, probably for a really good one, around the \$1500 mark per kit whereas your wired ones, you can pick up the Behringer ones for about \$100 so that would certainly get you going and at least give you the opportunity to try it out and see if it works for you and your church.

John Finkelde: *I think the benefits of this are so well worth churches budgeting and buying into this and also gradually upgrading. You don't have to go into the automated lyrics and lighting straight away, you can kind of go staged into this over a process of a period of time as well.*

How did you find people handling, or how did you handle, and your pastor David Hooper, people objecting to the "canned music" sort of feel? People go oh it's all a bit to kind of canned, it's all to programmatic. How did you handle those sort of objections, if you got them at all.

Brad Holder: There was definitely a couple of people. One particular person on our team I remember who was a little bit kind of had the mentality at that point where they felt they didn't have the freedom to go where the Holy Spirit was ushering them to. It took us a little time to learn it but you can definitely still go where you need to go within the confines of the tracks. That is still 100% possible.

And there is now some really great hardware you can buy. I think the Loop Community make a pedal called the Looptimus which lets you have a foot controller where you can actually click verse or chorus or anything like that on the fly. You can go back and redo parts or stop the track or do whatever you want to do on the fly which I think is a really great way of making sure you still deliver those spontaneous moments and go with where the Spirit is calling you to go.



John Finkelde: *I love the fact that as the whole use of this technology evolves and develops that they're looking at ways to improve it so that you do have that sense of that spontaneous worship can flow, that sense of we don't just want to stick with the metronome all the way through we want to have a bit of a free time of worship or praise or prayer or reflection or whatever so I love the fact that there's that development going around this as well.*

Brad Holder: And I think John it really comes back to the question of excellence. Do you want to have excellence in your church's band. If you had the opportunity to have a studio musician who's played on lets say Hillsong's last album in your church playing live, you'd take that opportunity right?

Or if you could have their entire band playing with you every Sunday, then you'd take that opportunity. So in that case why wouldn't we then have them playing on a track. I think it's essential. I think it's fantastic and I think it's a really great way that you can increase the excellence in your church and still deliver a really powerful worship experience.

John Finkelde: *I think it comes down ultimately to leadership leads the way and as you said if you want the excellence in the music and also in the lighting and lyrics and all that. I think appropriate lyric movement is so either wonderful to help worship or so frustrating when it's done badly that I think it's worth the investment for that alone, to be honest! For me anyway!*

Brad Holder: I think the biggest part of that as well is that if someone is doing it manually you can only really fire off maybe a line of lyric at a time whereas when it's automated like this you can fire off one word at a time and still have it perfectly in sync.

For a praise song or something that needs high energy you can really make it look impactful and bring people into the moment a bit more by using technology.

John Finkelde: *I've seen that in your church and your church does that, my goodness some of the best I've ever seen to be honest. Even in larger churches I haven't seen as much as what you guys do.*

Brad Holder: That's very kind.

John Finkelde: *Three benefits. If I was to ask what three benefits you think for the church and the worship environment, what would you say they would be for C3 Pt Hedland?*

Brad Holder: I think definitely, as we spoke about before, the automation for having a limited crew is fantastic and I think also for the band as well. There are occasional times when there's only a few band members available and we can still have a full worship experience with the full band sound on it.



I also think it's important to note that we can watch back a video of a really great praise moment of a mega church for example or any worship team for that matter and you can really feel the Holy Spirit through it and I think that's still prevalent in these recordings because the backing tracks are from the original studio recordings with these artists so I think that flows through to our church in a way as well.

And obviously with the Holy Spirit being live as well it can change different things every time it's played back. I think that's really phenomenal to be able to have that in a small church regionally, it's amazing.

I think the last one is probably the fact that it really gives clarity. If all of your band members are locking in playing to a metronome or to the click it means you're going to be really really tight together and with the guide track as well it also means that you're going to have clarity of where you're going and where you're moving to in each moment.

John Finkelde: I think that clarity for especially younger musicians coming into a church band, that sense of security of ok I know my instrument, I know how to play in time, ok I'm going to be able to follow this track, especially in their first few months of playing in a church band which can be a bit scary for a young musician.

I love that thought of the Holy Spirit on a recording that if you think about these songs when they were originally recorded, there would have been prayer going into all of that, there would have been people really believing the Lord to use those songs so there's a lot of faith and prayer gone into those recordings. There not just kind of people rocking up to put something in the can and send it out and sell it, there are actually people who have put a lot of Holy Spirit emphasis and focus on it so I think you're absolutely right, definitely the Holy Spirit can travel on a recording. I love that thought.

When we put this up into the Hub, what I'm going to do is also put it into the Facebook group and encourage people to just pile on with any questions and thoughts they've got and I'm sure people are going to connect with you out of the Hub because of this.

If a church is saying, alright we're doing nothing at the moment but we want to get started out with backing tracks, where would you start them out if they're just launching into it?

Brad Holder: The first thing is inner ear monitoring. You've got to have your inner ears, that's absolutely a no brainer. Definitely start with that.



Following that I would say if you're sold on it and it's something you want to do then go straight to Ableton Live, get the software and start using that. If you're not so sure yet, you could possibly either grab a trial version of Ableton or you could go and grab the Playback ap or Loop Community ap on your iPad and try those out as well and see how you go with them.

I think you definitely need to get you head around the track playback and rehearse with your band first and then from that you can move to your lyrics and your lighting automation and all those add on's.

John Finkelde: I like the fact that churches who are already using this can start thinking about the lyrics and the lighting application to take it to that next level that you guys have taken it to.

Finishing up, main problems you have to overcome. The main obstacles to backing tracks working well in a church. What would you say those are and what are some solutions to those.

Brad Holder: I think the biggest one is just making sure, I mean the backing tracks are phenomenal but at the same time you've got to make sure it doesn't just become Christian karaoke! For example, if we've only got a couple of musicians, I think we would prefer to do an acoustic set than to use all of the tracks, if that makes sense.

We will still play with the click and sync all of our lyrics with that but we would just leave all of the backing tracks turned off in the front of house and in the monitors as well.

John Finkelde: True, that could look a bit weird if you've got two people up there and you sound like a 20 piece band or something!

Brad Holder: Exactly! I don't think that's the goal of it at all.

The other thing is that we don't use all of the tracks every week. If we've got a live guitarist, we'll generally turn the guitar off or we might use only one of the guitars from the backing tracks with the bits that our guitarist isn't playing. The same with all of the other instruments. If we've got a live bass, we'll turn the bass off.

So it's really about filling in those holes and complimenting your band. It's not about it being the band and you follow it. I think that's the biggest one.



The second thing is just keeping in mind that there's weekly prep involved. It does take a bit of time, especially at first. Initially it was taking us two or three hours to put together a worship set for the week. We've got that down to about 15-20 minutes now so it's not too bad at all but it does still take the prep time. You can't just expect to turn up to rehearsal and be ready to go you've got to put in a few minutes of prep time prior.

We generally do that straight after the previous service. We'll sit down as a team with our worship leaders and work out who's leading what the next week and then put together the set.

The other thing as well is there's a difference with your inner ears and what you need to hear in your monitor feed. I think there's a real difference between that – being live musician's vs the backing tracks because a live musician you can generally see them and see what they're playing and you've got that kind of added sense whereas knowing what you need to hear in your inner ears and monitors when there's tracks, you can be tempted to stick everything in your inner ears and then you can't hear a single thing because all you can hear is everyone.

So it's just learning and realising that less is more and only adding the parts you need to hear into your own inner ears feed is really important otherwise you'll end up hearing more of the track than your own live musicians and you'll end up playing in isolation which is certainly not the goal.

The very last thing is the setup of Pro Presenter and Lightkey. It's not essential and it definitely does take a bit of time, but once you've done it, it makes a big difference to the worship experience and you can start to really give each song a different look and feel which is amazing and I think it's a really great tool that we can use to help people worship better because you can also tie in your lights and visual to look similar and have the same colours and theming and it can really look great and really help immerse people inside the worship.

John Finkelde: I think it's really added to the worship experience at your church and what I've been very excited about is the fact that, and I know your background and your business is in the production area so you have the expertise but it's exciting for me that regional churches can actually do things that even show larger city churches, look here's a way you could go that really does amplify and add to the worship experience.

Well done Brad, I think you've done a brilliant job in setting that up and I actually love coming into your church and worshipping in your church because the whole worshipful atmosphere is brilliant but also you utilising the production elements to heighten the experience and make it easier for people to worship. Which is what we're endeavouring to do, we want people to connect with Jesus through that singing on the Sunday morning.



I always like to finish off my interviews for the Hub with one question. You get to invite four guests from any time in history, again I'm going to leave Jesus out of this, to a dinner party. We'll get someone to look after all the food, the drinks and everything and all you've got to do is sit down and enjoy the four guests from any time in history.

Who would you choose?

Brad Holder: You know John, I struggled with this one. I'm not actually sure I could nail down my four.

I definitely think Steven Furtick, I would love to meet him, that would be phenomenal. Just being the creative leader that he is I would just love to get into his head for a night and unpack some of that and some of his worship team as well – Chris Brown and the guys who are leading industry with this kind of stuff. I just love that.

I'd love a date with Elevation – I think that would be the night!

John Finkelde: Four guys from Elevation who are cranking hot in this whole area of worship and creativity. I think that would be a great dinner party. I could see some instruments coming out before the end of the night

Brad Holder: A bit of song writing!

John Finkelde: You could have everything set up there ready to hit record!

Brad it's so good that you've joined us in the Hub. This is going to help an awful lot of pastors and leaders and I love what you're doing up there in the north west. Well done.

Brad Holder: Thanks John, thanks for your time.