

MIX PREP: TRACK ANALYSIS

OBJECTIVITY & SEPARATION OF MIX PHASES

The first time we listen to a track will be the most objective time we will ever hear it. This is when we are going to make subconscious decisions, (hopefully) without any bias towards the track.

It helps if we haven't had any input into the production or composition of the track. By being too involved with a track pre mix-down, we will have heard the track so many times that we will either, already be frustrated with the track, or will be too attached to certain aspects or techniques that we employed in the composition of it.

A combination of all of these different reasons will equate to us no longer having an objective ear, like that of a label A&R or a consumer. Likewise the modern producer has had to adapt to being able to multi-task and fill a number of roles in the studio.

To that end its important that we treat the production and mix-down as two completely separate phases. Once we enter the mix-down phase, we shouldn't be revisiting the production phase. All the tracks that are needed should be there, ready to be mixed.

No further tracks should be added, and likewise we shouldn't be making any further adjustments. Adding more parts at this stage will lead into a spiralling circle of time wastage & tweaking, only to increase the onset of ear fatigue and frustration with the track.

Another reason why the first listen is so important, is because this is one of the only opportunities we're going to get to fully immerse ourselves in the perspective of the listener.

We have absolutely no idea how consumers will hear our track, it could be on anything from a set of headphones, to walking past a kitchen window with music on inside. Because there are so many variables with how consumers will hear our tracks, its important that we really put that first listen to good use with a fresh mind.

Due to the reasons above, we need to make an educated decision whether we should try mixing our own track, or whether its for the greater good that we pass our track on to a professional mix engineer to achieve a better result.

Whilst most mix engineers will very easily be able to see which direction we want to go with the track, and how we want it mixed down, every mix engineer works differently. Look into some different mix engineers, and listen to what artists producing similar music are saying.

There are no issues with using a professional mix engineer, they are paid to do what they do best, and usually have many years of experience. Second to this they are also only focusing on one specific task, which is mixing our creation down into one stereo file, whereas taking the task on ourselves is just another task out of many, which may not get the full time and attention it deserves.

Most mix engineers are going to have access to professional studio equipment, which can be utilized to get better audio quality, whether that's loudness, or a more crisp/warmer sound. Finally our last point, the mix engineer has never heard our track before.

We will assume that we are going to take the bull by the horns and attempt to mix our own track down, but we will firstly mention mixing other peoples tracks.

MIXING SOMEONE ELSE'S TRACK

If we are mixing someone else's track, then the producer will usually send us a DIY mix-down that they have done, to help us better understand the direction in which they wish to go with the track, as well as some notes on what they want us to do. (Or not to do as the case may be.)

We are going to use this DIY mix-down for the first listen. The first listen shouldn't be too analytical. The objective here is simply to get a feel for the track and see what subconscious emotions it invokes.

Have a listen to the way it has been mixed so far, and how the instruments gel together as a whole. At this point we may notice things that need to be rectified straight away, try not to hone in on them too much for now. Just listen to the track and make a note of any gut instincts.

The second time we hear this track, we should be looking at it from an analytical perspective. At this point we should be in the studio with a notepad, ready to write down bullet points as we listen through the track.

Things to take note of:

- Timing
- Pitch
- Arrangement
- Dynamics
- Textures
- Relative levels of specific parts
- Tonal balance
- Panning
- Stereo field & Width
- Separation of parts occupying similar frequency ranges

We should do this process a few times over, switching between different speaker setups, such as our nearfields, the radio style speaker and also some headphones.

This not only allows us to analyse the mix from a few a consumers perspective, but it will also reveals flaws with the mix-down, and how it translates to different sound systems.

Remember that the mix-down wants to create a nice balance between parts, and can sound very different dependent on the speaker setup.

MIXING OUR OWN TRACK

Mixing our own track is going to prove a slightly more laborious task. First and foremost, we need to treat the production and mix phases separately.

When we are mixing our track we need to remember that we are no longer the producer that composed the track, and therefore sometimes we need to remove effects and plugins and take a few steps back, so we can then rebuild the desired vibe from the ground up, and take that leap forward to a better quality track.

We no longer have the advantage of the first listen of our track, so we need to take steps to try and give ourselves a second opportunity of the first listen. Unfortunately the only real factor that will help us in this case is time. Once we have finished the production of the track, put it away in a folder, ready for mixing and try to work on another project. (this is why we recommend working on a few projects simultaneously)

Over a few weeks we can distance ourselves from the track, enough that we can make better judgment calls when we decide its time for the mix-down. This is evident on a smaller scale when we are producing late into the night and get some sleep, the next day we can make quick decisions on the production, that our fatigued brain couldn't make the night before.

MIX CHECKLIST

We can quickly work through this mix checklist to ensure any major mix preparation tasks have been carried out:

- All production decisions should now have been finalized
- DAW blank mixing template loaded
- No further instrumentation or FX should be added to the mix
- All tracks should be printed to audio files to free up CPU
- Ensure all timing and tuning is correct, especially vocals
- Reduce the amount of tracks by bouncing them to stems
- Load reference tracks into DAW
- Set up mix bus compressor if used
- Track structure channel loaded
- Set up locator markers
- Set up any macros/smart controls
- Tracks grouped
- Set up side-chain trigger
- Check that the correct bit-depth & sample rate is set
- Colour code tracks
- Rename tracks

TRACK ANALYSIS SUMMARY & KEY POINTS

- The first time we hear a track is when we will hear it most objectively
- The composition, mix and master phases should all be kept separate
- Being too involved with a track can lead to us making biased mix decisions
- We must keep in mind how different listeners will hear our track
- We should be analyzing the timing, pitch, arrangement, dynamics, texture, balance, panning, width and separation of parts when we are listening to the mix for a second time
- Switch between different speakers when analyzing a mix
- Distance ourselves from the track, by working on other tracks simultaneously or by leaving the track alone for a few weeks prior to mix-down
- Before we start the track, ensure that the mix-prep checklist has been completed