

## How to best prepare mixes intended for mastering?

While we can work with almost any source you provide us, there are certain steps in preparing your mixes that insure best possible outcome. Following these eight easy steps will help everything to run smoothly during the mastering process.

1. **IMPORTANT:** Make sure you have completed our **client intake form** and send us a **label-copy**, if you have one. It contains our “road-map” necessary to start and complete your project. We need to know the running order in advance. We suggest you compile the tracks in sequence before the mastering process and adjust all gaps timed to your liking. Take your time and listen. Once you are happy with the order and flow, you may submit the entire project in sequence for us to use as a template (this may be a single MP3 of the entire project). You may also leave the decision of gaps between tracks to us, and we will assemble tracks in a musical and emotional context that is well timed for an improved flow (we don’t subscribe to any standard length in gaps, since there is no standard). We like people to attend sessions and listen to the gaps to accommodate your individual tastes. (If you attend the mastering session we advise you bring a couple of CDs you know well and you aspire to sound like so you can listen and get used to the sound of this room).
2. **IMPORTANT: LABEL your mixes in correspondence with your client intake form**, or send us additional information if needed to help us easily identify your source mixes.  
If submitting multiple tracks for mastering you should use labels that are easily identifiable, such as:  
01-Title-Artist-“Mix”-“Resolution”  
02-Title-Artist-“Mix”-“Resolution”  
Where “01” describes the position on the album for example, and “Mix” may contain further information about the mix like: full-mix, a cappella, instrumental, TV-track, playback, or vocal up +1dB for clear identification. And “Resolution” may indicate the sample-rate and bit-depth of the file, such as “9624” for 96kHz sample-rate and 24-bit resolution. The latter will help us identify what resolution you intended to submit.  
*(We don’t want to bother you with questions like: “What is the track number and title of your file labelled “mix\_full\_03-final?”!)*
3. **Submit your mixes in production resolution:** It is preferable to submit your mixes at the highest bit-resolution your DAW supports (24-bit and up). Submit your tracks at the song’s sample rate (44.1kHz and up): don’t use any sample-rate conversion, even if sample-rates differ from track to track. There is *no* benefit to be had doing this on your end.
4. **Keep your maximum digital peak levels below or around -3dBfs:** Focus on the music not the meters: peak levels between -12dBfs and -3dBfs are sufficient for us to work from and give us some headroom to work with for more flexibility at the mastering stage! Let us take care about the final loudness your strive for. “Limiting is like the cork on a fine bottle of wine: once a bottle is corked it is destined for consumption, *not* refinement”.

5. **Keep master bus processing to a minimum, or off:** we recommend using little to no dynamics processing across the stereo bus unless you know what you are doing. Limiters, exciters, clippers and enhancers are not recommended across the master bus - EQ is fine, however. If you cannot live without bus processing during mixing it helps if you submit two versions of a mix: one *with* and a second *without* bus processing. Again, this provides more flexibility at the mastering stage, as dynamics processing is irreversible – it cannot be undone. Dynamics are what create impact and excitement.
6. **Leave handles at the heads and tails of your mixes:** This is especially important when having used analog outboard during production: handles (i.e. a second or two of “air” before the track starts and after the track ends) will help us reduce unwanted noise from your tracks such as hum and hiss.
7. **Fades:** Most source tracks we get for mastering are usually pre-faded, and that is fine. Yet, if you supply us non-faded tracks you may reap several benefits that may not be obvious to you:
  - Radio edits, re-releases or following releases on compilations may require different fades. You may later decide to use segues (crossfading from one track into the next): you remain flexible, and we have the best fade tools.
  - Any dynamics processors' thresholds would have to follow the fade in order to respond correctly. Otherwise the fade would cross the threshold changing gain ratio of input to output back to 1:1 causing a level 'stretch' or bump, possibly with a perceived increase in presence: as the fade passes the threshold of the compressor, gain reduction no longer takes place as the ratio has dropped to 1:1. Quieter parts will no longer be compressed and be 'louder'. Granted this will be less noticeable at lower compression ratios like the ones we tend to use in mastering.
  - There will be no risk in you accidentally truncating the fade (cutting off some of the tail end – but you left handles above).
  - In the rare case you'd like us to add some reverb at the mastering stage, this is best done before fading.

It may be best to provide additional fade files to the mastering house (even as low-res MP3s some 30 seconds long for example), so the mastering engineer can recreate those fades to the non-faded mastered files.

8. **UPLOAD** your tracks, bring them to your **attended mastering session** or simply **mail them to us**

Experience has also shown, most mixes that need more than  $\pm 3\text{dB}$  of EQ in mastering may benefit from making additional adjustments in the mix to then re-submit for mastering. You will be surprised how much we can mold the frequency balance of a stereo mix to be well balanced and harmonize with the overall sonics of the entire project. This may, however, be at the expense of some

loss in definition and imaging, some instruments may lose their natural timbre. Most electronic music is better off: synthesized sounds don't really have a natural timbre, generally allowing greater EQ loads and being more "forgiving". In fact, our mastering can provide larger enhancements to your tracks *because* of this. In electronic genres it is often best to supply us with **a cappella and instrumental stems** in addition to the regular stereo full-mix for superior results.