Pre-Mastering Checklist

- **Leave plenty of headroom.** You should aim for peaks of about –6 db on your mix bus meters and/or rendered (or summed) pre-master files. Whether you are mixing ITB (in-the-box) or through a mixing desk, avoid using any limiters or heavy bus compression on the master buss channel insert to artificially increase loudness. Compressing the hell out of a mix audio file, then reducing the file's gain does not equal headroom. Watch your meters when you mix. Tape machine effects on DAW's are a form of compression, so again, please watch the meters, you will find that by not slamming the tape machine inputs, the sound will open up as the dynamic range increases.

- **Level does not equal loudness.** Never normalize your digital pre-master files. Don't worry your mix is not sounding loud (or as loud as your favorite record). Focus instead on the attributes within the track that make a mix sound truly loud: pitch, tempo, frequency balance, tonality, transient response & dynamic range. In other words: focus on making your mix sound good. Loudness is entirely perceptual and does not equate to a good or balanced mix. I'll work on the final levels during the mastering session.

- **Take a look at your signal chain- within your DAW or otherwise - and see if there's any clipping.** LED meters in any part of your signal chain should never go red: if they are red, it means it's clipping. When things that are not meant to clip do, it sounds terrible and we cannot fix it; once it clips, it's irreversible.

- **Check your phase relationships and pay attention to any phase problems in your mix.** If your DAW or mixing board has a "mono" button, always listen to your mix in mono to crosscheck compatibility. See if anything thins out, any sounds disappear, the mix collapses (worst case scenario) or it just sounds "off." If yes, it would mean there are

phase problems in your mix. Luckily, there are some really great freeware VST stereometers out there. Voxengo's SPAN for example is fantastic. Anything below "0," i.e. crossing into the minus realm is out-of-phase. If there's anything out-of-phase, try correcting the problematic tracks.

- **Be aware of any mastering tools while mixing.** M/S Equalizers and Stereo Expanders, are great tools, but can also cause incredible damage. It's extremely hard to accurately hear the balance between the Mid & Sides sections of the stereo field whenever you are not working with speakers in a professionally treated room. This means you may end up with unwanted phasing issues. Another common pitfall is over-compression. If you must use a master bus compressor, a limiter or tape machine emulation on the whole mix for tonal purposes, please keep an eye for how much gain reduction you have on the overall mix.

- **Any noises, digital glitches, clicks, pops, or hiss in the original recordings will become very audible after the tracks are mastered.** Listen to your mixes a few times and be on the lookout for any unwanted errors or mistakes. Brian Eno once said: "Honor thy error as a hidden intention." Make some notes for us, for example, "this noise/distortion on Track X at 1:01 is intentional, please leave it there."

- **Please send .wav or .aiff files using my upload form.** Please include any reference tracks (i.e. tracks you think sounds amazing) and any notes (.text doc) along with your pre-master files. It always helps to hear what inspires you, just to get a feel for your taste and aesthetics.

- **Labeling tracks and projects:** Please make sure your files and folders are properly labeled. Please include the artist name & album title on the folder itself, spelled out exactly how you want it to read on your final masters.

My preferred format for audio files is:

"POSITION - TRACK NAME"

Bonus tracks and other non-album material should be labeled the same way too:

"BONUS 01 – TRACK NAME" for example.

Sending the Files

- Send a copy of the songs, clearly labeled by their final names, along with a written album playlist order & any relevant notes (such as settings and mix changing between songs).
- Make sure to provide stereo bounces of the tracks at whichever bit depth and sample rate they were mixed at. I will take stems, but they will incur an extra charge.
- Always provide lossless audio files in an uncompressed format.
- Provide the artist name, album name, and song titles with their correct grammar, spelling and punctuation. Be sure to include any specific requests for crossfades between songs. Provide ISRCs if applicable.

Upload Form

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