

SPINNUP SPINNUP

A guide to recording - from songwriting to mastering

A start to finish guide that will go over some basics and share some helpful tips and resources for you to get the most out of the recording process.

**Making music as
an independent artist
can be challenging
when you don't have a
support team around you
to help you lay
down tracks.**

**But if you're reading this,
it's likely that you've got at
least some experience of
recording on your own or
with others.**

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Songwriting

Getting started

Sitting down and getting a new track going can sometimes be the hardest part of the process, but it's also usually the most enjoyable when it works out.

It's important to be in the right frame of mind when you need to be at your most creative. If you're an independent musician, then it's quite likely you're fitting your music-making around a job (or maybe two or three jobs!) or [studies](#).

That can put a lot of pressure on the time you've put aside to make music, and it can be seriously stressful if nothing comes out when you sit down at your designated time to lay something down.

Try and have a breather before you get started. Don't feel that you have to pick up your instrument or get to it the moment you walk through the door. Reset and relax and ease yourself in. It's also proven that [having some pre-music-making rituals can help your brain get into that creative gear](#), so try and work out a routine.



**“Prince taught us perfection
is in spontaneity.
You just do it, and whatever it
is, it’s perfect!
Create, and don’t ponder
what you’ve created.”**

**- Terry Lewis of Jam & Lewis,
producers for the likes of
Michael Jackson and Usher.**

Inspiration and capturing that creative spark

Of course, if inspiration does strike at a time other than your allocated slot, make sure you capture it. Whether you're in bed falling asleep, on a train or at a party, find a way to record your idea.

A lot of musicians use voice notes on their phone to record them humming a melody or singing a phrase, or write down lyrics in their notes section or in an email to themselves. If you're near your computer or instrument and a recording device, even better. Lay something down as quickly as you can or it may slip through your fingers. Or better still, check out [Abbey Road's Topline app](#)—built for this exact purpose. It lets you sing over imported tracks, add lyrics and images and extra info like tags, share files and sync your sketches to your favourite cloud service.

Prince supposedly had speakers and recording facilities in most rooms in his Paisley Park mansion so he could capture something any time it came to him, with as little delay as possible.

You may also find that while working on one project, you'll suddenly come up with an idea or riff or melody or beat that takes you in a different direction and doesn't fit with what you're working on. Lay it down quickly in a new project or recording and save it to come back to later. And if it makes you want to ditch what you were working on, that's also fine. Go with the flow.

Also, don't just look to other musicians for creative inspiration. You can draw it from anywhere— from other artistic disciplines particularly. Read books and articles, listen to podcasts and be interested and hungry for new ways of thinking. Some of the most interesting musicians found huge inspiration from different artforms. David Bowie, for example, was hugely influenced by theatre, dance and other stage performance, and all this fed both into his visual and sonic identity... or identities, as we should say!

Tips and tricks to help write songs

OK, so you're feeling creative. But sometimes it's hard to know where to start. Other times, you may find yourself stuck in the middle of a track, not knowing which way to go or what lyrics to pair with your music—or vice versa. Here are a few of ideas that can help get you back on track.

- **The gibberish technique.** Used by everyone from JAY Z to Mick Jagger over the years, this is a way of getting a feel for the rhythm, shape, cadence and feel of your lyrics without having to actually write them. Use it when you've got some music laid down but you're not sure what to write to it. Mumble or sing non-words or gibberish over the music until you get something that feels like words without necessarily being words. Then once you're happy with the flow and vibe, you can start replacing these sounds with words and phrases.

Using this technique doesn't mean you're not a natural songwriter; it just means you may just be better suited to this different route to get to the end result. A more musically-led one. It's an incredibly commonly-used technique.

- **Sampling.** First of all, just a reminder that using someone else's work without their permission is copyright infringement and therefore is illegal. But it can be a very useful creative tool in the privacy of your own recording setup. Lots of producers and musicians use a sample as a jumping off point to spark creative inspiration, start building a track around it and then eventually drop the sample out once the whole thing has come together. It could give you an idea for a chord progression, a rhythm, a lyric or a general feel. It should also be noted, though, that you should be careful to ensure that you are not copying someone else's work too closely after you have dropped out the sample.

As [Robin Thicke and Pharrell found out at a cost of \\$7.4m](#), if an artist or their lawyer believes you have used musical motifs or lyrics from their track without using any of the recording itself, they may decide to sue you. Of course, it is possible to license a sample, but that will either cost you a fee or a percentage of your royalties — if the artist and/or their publisher gives you permission to use it.

- **Learn from the best.** There are some excellent podcasts out there about the songwriting process. These are two of the most popular that attract some of the biggest artists and songwriters in the world.

[Song Exploder](#) focuses on a single track each episode, with the artist in question taking it apart step-by-step to reveal how it came into existence. They take you from the genesis of the seed of the idea that formed the song through to the finished product, and along the way you'll hear demo versions, voice notes and soloed stems from the track and different versions of it, giving you a unique insight into how a track is built step-by-step.

Not only will you learn some interesting tips and tricks, but you'll also learn about how happy accidents are sometimes the thing needed to complete a track and how sometimes the best thing to do is scrap everything you've been working on and return to the simplicity of your original idea.

It's also very comforting and reassuring to hear the disarming way that even huge stars like U2 have self-doubt about their own work, and that they're willing to be open and honest about it in a public forum. Its single track focus means that the episodes are short and easy to digest, and with everyone from Björk to Metallica having featured on previous episodes, there's a huge amount you can learn from it.

[Sodajerker](#) is the podcast from the English songwriting duo of the same name and is an interview format style show where they talk to a different songwriter each episode. It offers an in-depth look into the mind of some of the world's most successful songwriters, from Noel Gallagher to Alicia Keys, Guy Chambers and Paul Simon. Contrasting with the single-track dissection of Song Exploder, it gives more of an overview into the different methods used to approach songwriting.

While some common methods frequently come up, it's also refreshing to hear that there are so many different approaches and that there's no wrong or right way to write a song.



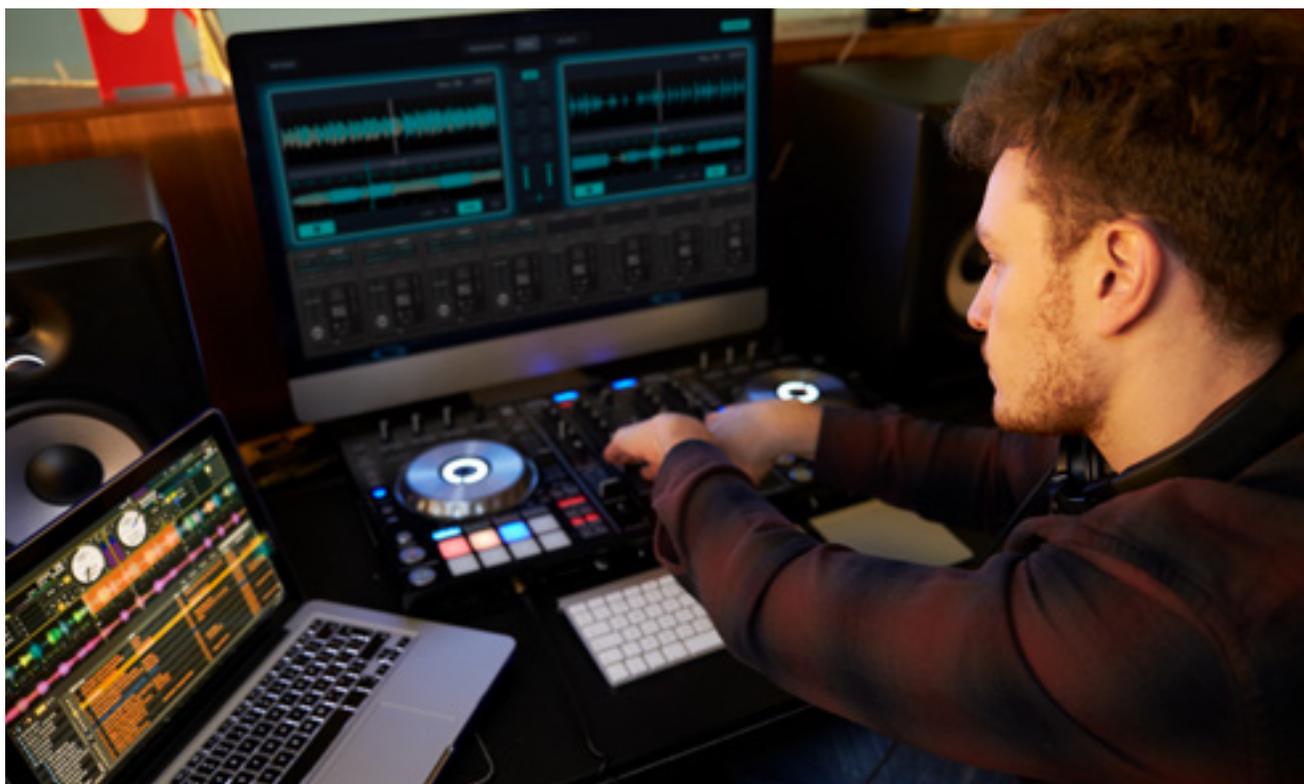
**“I’m extremely
dependent on creative
sparks, and they can only
happen if you loosen up,
without an assignment,
without a deadline... just
creating and not worrying
about where it’s going.”**

- Christopher Niemann, illustrator

How overcome the creative block

Everyone suffers from creative block from time to time. It's only natural that you won't feel creative 100% of the time. Try not to stress out about it; It will only make things worse. The more you make music, the better you'll understand how, when and why your creativity works, and the faster you'll spot the signs that you're not in a creative mindset.

“The more you make music, the better you'll understand how, when and why your creativity works”



All is not lost if you're feeling like this, though. You could still use this time productively so that it's not wasted with frustration. Some ideas for when you're not feeling inspired:

- Listen through to unfinished projects and think about where you might take them and if you still like them.
- Listen to some of your old completed tracks and think about what you like or dislike about them.
- Just listen to some of your favourite music or hunt for new music to get your brain in the mindset. You could also examine the production and songwriting of tracks you like and see what you could learn from it. Write down anything that comes to mind that you like in a notebook or in a note on your phone and go back to it next time you're feeling stuck.
- Find new samples or organise your sample library
- Fiddle about with a plugin or instrument on your production software or your pedals effects units if you have them, and explore and create new sounds and effects chains for future use
- Read, watch or listen to interviews, documentaries or live performances by or about your favourite musicians
- Record a live version of one of your tracks for uploading
- Collaborate or jam with a friend with no end goal in sight
- Go for a walk! Talk for a break, clear your head and give your track a bit of breathing space.
- Watch some songwriting or production tutorials on YouTube
- The point is to not feel like you have wasted time, but not to restrict yourself to the pressure of finishing something or having a goal. There is no wasted time when it comes to absorbing ideas and inspiration.

Collaborating

Some people prefer to work on their own, while others feed off the collaborative process. Whichever you think you are, it's always worth trying the other method from time to time to see if it yields different or better results, or simply to mix things up a bit. If you're getting stuck on how to finish one of your tracks or how to develop an initial idea, getting some external input—either as opinion or direct involvement—can be just what you need.

Chemistry is vital when collaborating. There needs to be a creative spark between you and your collaborator, and it's important to listen to and respect each others' opinions. It's best to establish what the working dynamic is before you get started.

- Is it your track that they are featuring on?
- Is it a completely 50-50 collaboration where either person should be allowed
- a veto over any element?
- Or do you both prefer just to go with the flow and see where you take things?

While it's important to be respectful to each other's opinions and input, it's also vital to be honest about what you're thinking. Don't be afraid to speak your mind, as long as you do it in a polite and transparent way. That can be tricky, but it's best for everyone to be upfront about things.

“Chemistry is vital when collaborating”

Sometimes just having a loose jam together is the best way to begin a collaboration. Take away the pressure of needing an end result or having to write 'the one' and just spend some time messing around and exploring ideas organically. If you hear something you like, hone in on it and try and develop it.

And remember to record as you go—you never know when that spark might appear and you need to capture it when it does!

For a more in-depth look at this side of things, check out our guide on [how to collaborate with other musicians](#).

Limitations

It's often said the limitation breeds creativity, and that can certainly be true—especially in today's age of limitless choice and ease of access to music-making equipment. At the very least, it can be a useful exercise to occasionally limit the tools you have available to make a track with, or set yourself a specific stylistic challenge.

“Limitation breeds creativity”

A few examples of projects made with creative limitations include:

- [Bon Iver's 'For Emma, Forever Ago'](#), famously mostly made by himself in a remote hunting cabin with a guitar and layers of his own vocals.
- [Beethoven's Symphony No. 5](#) (commonly known as his 5th Symphony). Its commanding main motif is comprised of just four notes, with the rest of the symphony written using it as a springboard. Perhaps one of the first 'riffs' in music history!
- [Daft Punk's 'Human After All'](#) album, was, according to the 2015 'Daft Punk Unchained' documentary, recorded in 12 days. It might have received a mixed reception but it contained a few gems and certainly had a cohesive feel. “The concept of the record... is looking back at those rock or garage records” said Thomas Bangalter, one half of the duo, on their intention for the rushed recording process.
- Ed Sheeran commanding huge festivals and arenas with nothing more than his guitar, his voice and a loop pedal.

Whether it's choosing a specific instrument, songwriting technique, timeframe or style, it can be both helpful and enjoyable to impose some sort of restrictions occasionally. It could just be a useful jumping off point at the very least, or it could really help you focus in on essentials like melody and song structure without overdoing things with too many frills.

Recording

It's never been easier to make a decent sounding recording of your music yourself, but you should generally be aiming to be recording in proper studios with professional recording engineers if you want the best sound possible.

Every musician needs to have a home setup to capture demos and ideas at the very least, so we'll look at that first before moving on to the pro option.

What to have in your home studio

The setup you need will, of course, vary depending on what kind of music you make. The general principles are the same, though. The basics you'll need are:

- A microphone or multiple microphones if you sing or use instruments
- Some good headphones so you can hear how you're coming through as you perform
- Monitor speakers for mixing and comparing how your recording sounds to when it's played back on headphones
- A recording device, such as a laptop with software and external soundcard or mixer, or a portable recording device

The laptop aside, you could get a decent recording setup with all of the above for under 500USD. Don't forget that most music equipment stores offer 0% credit deals where you pay back in monthly instalments—but only do this if you're sure you'll have the money to pay it back on time every month.

Microphones

Invest in a good all-round diaphragm condenser mic to capture both vocals and instruments with all their nuances and subtleties. Small diaphragm mics are good for capturing the most neutral, uncoloured sound possible, while large diaphragm mics give a more vibrant, upfront, slightly exaggerated sound—great for making your recordings pop.

Headphones

Find a pair of headphones that feel comfortable to wear for extended periods of time and which give you a reasonably neutral response. Headphones with unnaturally

Monitors

In the same way that you need your headphones to give you good transparency, you need your monitor speakers to as well. You don't need to break the bank on your monitors; as we'll discuss more in the mixing and mastering section, it's more important that you know how they make music sound compared to other speakers.

Once you get used to their sound and how your recordings and mixes translate from them to other speakers, you'll be in a good place.

Recording device

If you've already got a laptop or computer, a USB sound interface with recording inputs is a good investment. Buy one with multiple inputs so you can record vocals and instruments or multiple instruments at the same time.

You'll then need software to manage the recording onto your hard drive.

[Audacity](#) is a versatile free recording software which gives you the basics, but can be a little fiddly and not so user-friendly. For Mac users, the free [GarageBand](#) software has become very sophisticated and has everything you need to put a track together. Popular paid music making software includes [Logic](#), [Ableton](#) and the more professionally focused [ProTools](#).

Whichever software you use, make sure you take advantage of its free tutorials. They'll help you get going a lot quicker than if you just try and figure things out yourself.

You can also get portable recording devices like handheld recorders or portable multi-track recorders which let you lay down ideas anywhere.

Bonus purchase: preamp

A preamp can be a great investment too. Plugging in between your mic or instrument and recording device, it can add warmth, presence and volume to your signal and give a fuller-sounding result. It's sort of like supercharging your recordings before it hits your recording interface, where it's then amplified further.

Acoustics

Ideally, you'll be able to treat the acoustics of your recording space a little. Generally speaking, you don't want to be able to hear the sound of the room too much when you record—that is to say, the reverb in it. The emptier a room is, the more noticeable it will be, so try not to record in a barren, echoey room.

If you're looking for the full works, then you can buy a variety of foam sound panels to deaden the acoustic reflections in your room, but it's advisable to seek professional advice from a company that specialises in the field as it's a very complicated science.

N.b. if you like the sound of your room when you record then that's fine, and if you're just looking to lay down some ideas or a demo, you shouldn't labour over the acoustics too much. That's what a professional studio is for.

But if you want the most control over your home recordings, at least a little acoustic treatment is advisable

Recording studios

Although there are some notable albums which were recorded on rudimentary home setups, nothing beats recording in a proper studio with a recording engineer who knows what they're doing and what you're trying to achieve. It's a great investment if you're looking to have a professional-quality track to send to people and put online.

Do your research and find out which recording studios are near you, and see what their rates are. Smaller studios can be surprisingly affordable if you're just looking to lay down a few takes of something simple. It gets more complicated, of course, if you're in a band and there are lots of instruments to mic up. Some studios have live rooms for acts that want to capture the sound of them all playing together, whereas in others you may have to record different parts separately.

Some studios will offer every stage of the service, including mixdowns and mastering (more on that later), but the basic rate should just include a recording engineer's time and you leaving with the separate stems and takes of your recordings. The recording engineer's job is simply to set up the equipment and mics and to capture what you want to lay down in as good quality as possible. It's not their job to put the finished track together for you, edit your parts or provide mixing and production services. So

How to find producers & musicians to work with

If you're a singer or a performer, you might not have the skills to create anything other than simple demos. It's a producer's job to take your song and turn it from an idea to reality. They can help you get your best recording down, and then create a full composition from it using their range of tools, and by adding additional instrumentation and percussion and effects to gel the whole thing together.

If you're looking for producers to work with who release music themselves, SoundCloud, YouTube and Bandcamp are great places to find people to collaborate with. If you're looking for a more 'neutral' producer to work with who isn't known for their own material, it might be better to find people in your area via Google who have a professional website offering production services.

Websites like [Gumtree](#), [BandMix](#) and [JoinMyBand](#) can be great for finding other musicians to collaborate with or to play on your tracks. With both professionals and amateurs using these services, you should be able to find someone to suit your needs. If there are any jam nights or open-mic sessions in your area, they could also be a great place to find fellow amateur musicians to work with.

Producer, writer and performer agreements

If you're collaborating with anyone else, make sure the terms of engagement are clear from the start. The main thing you need to discuss and decide is: has the person I've collaborated with contributed to the song in a way that they should be credited as a writer?

Traditionally, the writers are the people who write the lyrics and/or melodies in a song. These days, things are a little more complicated, with modern electronic production often meaning that producers play a part in writing songs too. We go into this topic more in-depth in our guide to publishing, but try to agree any writer contributions once the song is finished and before you release it or send it to a label.

Creating a finished product

So you've laid down your recording or sequenced your track. Now comes the part where you add that all-important polish and shine to it with the final stages of the production process.

It's important to remember that these are two separate but closely linked and consecutive processes. Some people offer both mixing and mastering services, but the biggest artists will tend to have separate people working on each stage.

We aren't going to go into the technical ins and outs of these processes here, but more give you an overview of each of them and advice of what you're looking out for generally.

And if you're looking to go the professional route, it's good to know that Spinnup offers its members a discount on online mixing and mastering from the world-famous [Abbey Road Studios](#). Just login to your account and to go the Offers page.

“It's important to remember that mixing and mastering are two separate processes”



Mixing

This is the process of taking the individual channels of audio that have been recorded or generated and tweaking them individually and collectively to achieve the desired sound.

This is done using tools such as EQs to boost or cut certain frequencies, reverbs, delays and echoes to give sounds and the overall track a sense of space, and compressors to smooth out the changes in the dynamic ('loudness') range on individual tracks.

This was traditionally done using large, expensive mixing boards and hardware equipment. These days, it can all be done 'in the box'—that is, inside a computer—using powerful software that can yield brilliant results. The biggest artists usually use a mixture of the two, although there has definitely been a resurgence in recent years of people wanting to mix purely using the old analog methods.

Some artists—particularly electronic music producers—tend to do this process themselves, but if you're recording with a producer or mix engineer, they will be able to take care of this stage for you. What you're looking to achieve at this stage is to create a balanced, vibrant version of your track that sounds like what you're aspiring to inside your own head.

Ideally, a good mixdown should create a synergy where the finished product somehow amounts to more than the sum of its parts.

Balance

When we talk about balance, we're talking about a few areas.

There should be balance in the frequency range to avoid leaving 'holes' that can make the track sound too thin or muddy.

There should be balance in the stereo field so it doesn't sound unduly lopsided.

And there should be a balance in the dynamic range, where there's a nice contrast between the loud and quiet parts but without the volume ever suddenly spiking harshly (the mastering process also plays into this)..

Mixing it yourself

If you're learning to mix down tracks yourself, the most useful exercise to do is to listen to tracks that you think sound great that are similar to what you're going for. Your goal should be to create something that aspires to the same qualities that your example track does. Questions to ask yourself include:

- Can I hear all the elements of the track that I want to stand out clearly?
- Is the balance between the volume of the different parts right?
- Are any frequency ranges undesirably over- or under-represented?
- Does my track have the sense of spaciousness and atmosphere I want it to?

The standard way to mix down is to use speakers as the primary listening source, and to switch between them and headphones or listen on headphones once you're happy with how they sound on the speakers. Some people prefer to mix entirely in headphones, or entirely on speakers. However you do it, what you're trying to achieve is a mix that 'translates' well on to other systems. So if you're making a vocal track, you need to listen on a range of different devices and systems to make sure that it's audible however you're listening to it. Obviously sub bass isn't going to come through on a smartphone speaker, but it can still be a useful exercise to listen to your mixdown on it and see if it sounds roughly as good as a similar track played through it.

Equipment

In terms of what speakers you and headphones you use, most mix engineers will advise you to go for something that gives you a transparent, uncoloured sound. That means no boosted or cut frequencies as you would hear when playing your track through an amplifier or most headphones. You're looking for a flat, neutral playback so you can hear exactly what your source material sounds like without it being coloured by the equipment you're listening to. More importantly than that, though, is knowing how your mixes translate from your setup to other ones. So if you know that your system overcompensates on the low end compared to most other setups, you'll need to bear that in mind when mixing and adjust accordingly.

The [Yamaha NS-10s](#) are a legendary set of cheap monitors that you'll see in many of the world's most expensive recording studios. They are famed for how well mixes translate that are produced using them. If you can get your mix sounding good on this relatively poor speakers, they'll sound good anywhere—is the rationale.

Your finished mixdown should make for a good listen, but don't expect it to sound quite as punchy, loud or dynamically consistent as finished, released tracks. That's where mastering comes in.

Mastering

Mastering is the final stage of the production process. It's where you take your finished, mixed track, and get it sounding as big as possible. This is the stage where you get your track to really jump out the speakers, to achieve that radio-friendly gloss or to get it punching through on a club soundsystem. As we've said, comparing your home mixdown to a mastered track is always going to leave you feeling like you've come up a little short, but it can still help you get to the optimal point.

Mastering and mixing require different skill sets and different equipment. Seek out a professional mastering engineer to get your track to 100%. If you have other music-making friends, ask them who they use, or do some online research to find someone affordable but well-rated. It's best to choose someone who already deals with a lot of music in your field and understands the nuances of the sound you're trying to achieve. They'll listen to your finished mixdown on a number of different speakers and headphones, and generally use a combination of hardware and software to apply different process to it to improve its energy and cohesiveness.

The loudness wars

The loudness wars

“Find a mastering engineer who doesn't simply turn everything up to 10”

One of the main general principles of mastering is that you are trying to limit the dynamic range of the track—the difference between the loudest and quietest points—in order to increase the average volume of the track, so that the track is louder overall. It's about achieving a consistency and smoothing out the spikes and rough edges. There is a real art to it though, and particularly in recent times the trend has been to forgo the pleasing natural dynamics of a track in order to create a sound that's simply louder or loudness' sake.

People refer to this as the loudness wars, which refers to the knock-on effect of one person making their track louder than the everyone else's. When this starts happening, everyone else tries to keep up, and the end result is that everyone is trying to make their tracks as loud as possible and are losing a lot of breathing space in the tracks as a result. It's also tiring to listen to. The more compressed sound is, the more fatiguing your ears find it to listen to.

So it's advisable to find a mastering engineer who doesn't simply turn everything up to 10 and has an appreciation for the nuances in your music. Your track needs to be loud to be consistent with the times, but it should never be to the detriment of the sonic range and depth of the composition.

Don't be afraid to ask for changes after you receive your mastered track back. The mastering engineer may have misconstrued something you did that sounded like a mistake but was actually intentional, or they may have overdone something. Only you know how the track is supposed to sound, so make sure you raise any concerns you have about what you get back.

There are also automated mastering service websites where you can upload your track and receive an algorithmically-created master with no human input. While this is a cheap and quick method, the results it gives you will never be as good as what a pro mastering engineer can achieve. It's much better to do some research, get some recommendations and build a reputation with a reliable mastering engineer who understands your music and the sound you're trying to achieve.

*

As with anything, practice makes perfect when it comes to writing and recording music. Keep researching and learning about techniques, keep seeking inspiration from other artists, and don't beat yourself up if things aren't working out. You never know when or where your next great track is going to come from, and you need to foster the circumstances for those creative juices to flow as much as possible.

Now that you've read all this, go forth and record!



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