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Live Mixing Tips

I owe all of my audio mix training and talent development to a local church and a caring tech leader. They took a risk with this 11-year old and gave me an opportunity to learn, ask questions and discover my audio mix talents. At age 15, I mixed my first thirty-two channel mix for a local TV station. The producer of that TV show remembered my name and helped me start my career. I went on to mix broadcast audio for nationwide talk shows, entertainment events that featured popular musical artists and news broadcasts that had me rubbing elbows with major politicians from every party. Broadcast mixing wasn't my only talent. I continued to mix for live events and eventually grew my resume and mixed for artists in front of thousands of people. When I reflect on all of those experiences, I realize I made a ton of mistakes and no one ever really sat me down and said, "hey, before you make these mistakes, here are some mixing tips that will help you avoid them." The good news is that I learned from my mistakes. My desire and hope, is that what I learned over the years will help you become a better sound engineer.

I have been doing this for 31 years, long before digital mixers came on the scene. Digital mixers are amazing but they have spoiled us. When you get spoiled, you get lazy. Most mistakes new engineers make today is due to lack of old school knowledge, being able to mix without digital help. If you start there, you will be much better at your craft when you start adding in the modern day advances. Here is what I mean:

Tip 1:
Secure a good mix without plug ins. Plug ins should be an assist to your mix, not the main part of it. If someone removed all of your plug ins, could you build a solid mix? If the answer is no, then you need to go back and practice the craft of mixing. Don't get me wrong, plug ins are valuable and should be used but when they become a crutch, they will burn your mix more than they will help it. Relying on plug ins as the main part of your mix will not let you take your mix to the next level. Next level mixing is attained by training your ear on frequencies, how standard EQ works, what is dynamics, how to respond quick to issues by building an easy board layout and most importantly, understanding tip 2.

Tip 2:
It's all about the vocals! I was recently talking to Ken "Pooch" Van Druten who has mixed live Alanis Morissette, Jay-Z, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Linkin Park, Stone Temple Pilots, Motley Crue, Smashing Pumpkins, Korn… I could keep going, but you get the point. This eight-time tour link Top Dog, two time Parnelli and platinum album recording award winning engineer has mixed very high level talent. He says the number one item to focus on is "Vocals. NO ONE cares about how cool your snare drum sounds. When building a mix from scratch, I spend 95% of my focus on vocals. Intelligibility, Intelligibility, Intelligibility. Your average person who attends your concert, or event, wants to hear every nuance of the vocals INCLUDING in between songs when the singers are speaking. The band is important, the vocals are MORE IMPORTANT. Shift your focus from that amazing kick drum, to capturing every nuance of the vocalists performance." [Ken "Pooch" Van Druten] Mic Drop! I see audio engineers spending so much time on the band and then the vocal gets up to sing and you can't hear or understand them. We are not saying the band is not important, we are saying that the vocals must be able to be heard and understood, especially when they talk over the music and transition to the next song.

Tip 3:
Learn to first mix without Snapshots. While Snapshots are amazing, if you never learn to transition to another song without them, you will make more mistakes with them. Faders moving that you don't want to move. When the band skips a song, you won't know how to get there without massive mix problems. Learning transitions without Snapshots will help you get your mix fixed fast. It will help you understand how to build a snapshot for potential issues and you will better understand what channels, eq, compression, etc. a snapshot should not be touching. Also learning how to mix without Snapshots will help you when Snapshots fails or you encounter a console that you are not familiar with. Although we like to think we can call the shots on the console we use, or that the digital console will act perfectly without any issues, that is not always the case.

Tip 4:
EQ your instruments so they work together. Don't EQ each instrument so that it sounds good on its own. Many new engineers will get that bass sounding amazing, but when they mix in the kick and the rest of the band, it doesn't sound good at all. Using this example, the kick and the bass complement each other. The EQ on them should too. Often I will pull out or cut frequencies to allow my bass guitar high end to pop in the mix, allowing the kick to fill in the low end. Putting them together, they sound great. But in this scenario, the bass may sound a little thin by itself. That's ok. The goal is that all the instruments play together to sound full while allowing your ear to still pick out each instrument.

Tip 5:
This is several tips rolled into one. Music lessons are important. Understanding how to read music and what vocal parts are will help you. Train yourself on how to blend parts so they chorus. If you are able to take drum and piano lessons, you will extensively help your mix by understanding multi-tasking, rhythm, the key of a song, pitch and tune. As you train musically, you will improve as a sound engineer.

Tip 6:
While we want it to sound good to us, understand your audience and what the management wants to hear. You can't mix an 80's rock feel like a modern EDM or RAP feel. Many church engineers try to manufacture "their" mix, making it sound good only to "them" instead of understanding what the organization wants to hear. While you are the sound engineer and the final call is yours, know your audience and the atmosphere you are in charge of creating.

Finally, remember the sound console is an instrument of worship. It's no different than a keyboard. You are taking multiple instruments and mixing them together to create a sound that helps set an atmosphere of worship. A sound that leads people in worship. Yes, as an audio engineer you are a key part of the worship team. You are not behind the scenes, you are the scene!

For more resources or to secure help for your team.
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