PREPPING YOUR FILES FOR THE STUDIO

Congrats- you and your band have finished the hard work of writing, arranging, and recording a full-length, having got through all the drama and difficulty of those early leaps and bounds.

You're ready to turn things over to the professionals, but before you go handing over those files, the pros have some advice in turn. Some of the nugget offered here are so basic you might just think, "Duh, everyone knows that". But after talking with many different engineers and being around various studios through the years, I have heard horror stories of engineers having to spend hours sorting through, organizing, cleaning up and labeling projects. We all know that in the studio, time translates directly into money, which is usually paid at an hourly rate. These simple guidelines will help save time (and thus money), cut down on headaches, and ultimately help you and your engineer to start focusing on your mix, instead of your mess.

**File Organization**

Before you even think about exporting your files, get started by organizing the files inside your project and clean up any unnecessary tracks or extra takes that are no longer needed for the final mix. If you want to keep these as part of your project in case you might need them in the future, do a "Save as" and rename your final project that you are going to use to export from.

**Labeling**

After cleaning up, start labeling. Label all of your tracks as clearly as possible, and keep the names simple and precise. Every track should have its own name - imagine communicating to the engineer a specific trumpet part that you want louder in the mix, and they are looking at fourteen different tracks all labeled "horns".

**Effects Considerations**

Once everything is well labeled and organized, next consider any tracks in your project that use effects or plug-ins. Unless it's essential to the actual sound of a particular track, most studios would prefer to do the effects and processing for you. Keep in mind that when you export these tracks, any effects and presets from plug-ins will be applied, and the engineer will not be able to take these back off. The more effects, compression, EQ, etc. that you apply at this stage starts to limit what the engineer can do with those particular tracks. If you want to keep any tracks MIDI, verify with the studio that they have the same plug-in you used to make the track and any notes that pertain to the plug-ins settings or presets.

**Consolidation**

At this point we're ready to consolidate all of the audio tracks within our project. Some DAW's (Digital Audio Workstations) have an actual Consolidate command under the edit menu, but this can be done in any application. In a nutshell, consolidating your audio ensures that all your tracks have the same start point, even if the music on that track doesn't start right away. Any individual clips within a track will become one track from beginning to end. If your DAW does not have a Consolidate command, then consolidating your tracks can usually be done by selecting or highlighting all of your tracks from the very beginning to the end of your longest track.

**Final Run-Through**

You're almost ready to export, but before we make that final jump I would recommend that you give one final listen to your project from start to finish to ensure there are no errors or that you didn't accidentally delete any tracks during the cleaning up process. Once you are satisfied that everything is A-ok, do a final "Save" on your project to lock in all the changes you have made.

**File Formats**

Let's discuss file types for a second. There are too many file types to list the pros and cons of each type here (that could be a whole other article by itself) but the .wav file is pretty much the standard. I will briefly mention the OMF format, or Open Media Format File, as this can be used as a "universal" format that will easily transfer projects across any platform. First, not all DAW's recognize this format, and second, some musical attributes do not transfer using this format, from volume and pan information, to plug-ins and tempo. If you are going to export as an OMF, or any other file type besides .wav, then check with the studio first to make sure it would be compatible with their application. The .wav file is an unspoken "standard" that most studios expect and can work with immediately.

**Export**

Now you're ready to export. Start by making a folder with the project title (and any other relevant information such as artist, song name, B.P.M. etc.) where your project files will be saved. Go to your DAW's file menu and use the Export command and double check all the exporting options of your particular host at this time. Exporting your files as 16 bit, 44.1 sampling rate is the most common. Most studios today can accept a 24 bit file, but it's better to verify this first. Any other bit or sampling rate that you might want to use should be approved ahead of time with the studio. Another consideration at this point would be whether to export as stereo or mono tracks. Unless you have tracks where a stereo effect is used, or any kind of stereo image that is essential to the sound of the track, mono is usually preferred. If you do have one or more tracks that need to remain stereo, then you can export everything as stereo. It's usually all or none when it comes to stereo and mono. Before you close your project, make sure to also export a "reference mix" and include it in your project folder labeled as such.

**Double checking is next to Godliness**

Once everything is exported, close your project and open a new one. Import your exported files into this new project to double check that everything exported properly. All your tracks should be the exact same length from start to finish, and everything should sync up and sound as if you were listening to your original project. If everything is in its right place, then consider how you will be getting your project data to the studio. If using a file sending service such as "YouSendIt" or "Send Space", then it is best to "zip" or "archive" your folder for transfer, before uploading it. If you are mailing a disc or hand delivering it to the studio, you will be making a data disc using the burning software of your choice. If this is the case, it is always good to make a backup while you're at it. Be sure and label the disc clearly and include the project and/or artists name, contact information etc. It never hurts to also describe the file type, bit rate, and B.P.M. info for the project as well. The more detailed and organized you are, the better off you will be in the long run. Following these simple guidelines will hopefully free up more time to concentrate on what's really important... your music.

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