

# Working With Other Musicians

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One of the great things about the music-making tools we have at our disposal today, is that they let us work on music anytime, anywhere, and completely by ourselves if we want. No longer do we have to deal with the politics of a band situation, or make compromises in our art. We can work at our own pace when the mood strikes us.

Of course the flip side of this, is that many musicians today have only ever made music by themselves. They've never had the opportunity to experience what it's like to collaborate with others, or feel the power of having a group of people performing so in tune with each other that the result is better than any one of them could achieve on their own. So for many, the prospect of working with another person on music can be intimidating to say the least.

I've organized some tips I think will help people when it comes to working on a project with other musicians or producers for the first time, organized here by a few of the different scenarios this could happen in. Some of these are more technical in nature, and some of them deal more with the human interactions that come when two creative people work together. As usual, these are just a few things I found have worked well myself, some may be more useful than others to you.

## 1. Working side by side in the same studio on a song.

- Have a rough plan before you get together so that you don't sit there staring at each other wondering "now what?". Discuss with the other person what both of your strengths are, and who will be filling what role in the process.
- Create some ideas and rough sketches before you meet, so you're both not sitting there looking at a blank page wondering how to start a song. You don't need to use your sketches, but it's a good starting point to discuss what you both like and dislike about the pieces.
- Don't be too rigid in your planning however, be open to change and each other's opinions, even if you differ. Collaborations are often very much about working out how compromises on opinions can be made to shape a track for the better. Respect each other's viewpoints, even if you don't always agree with them.
- Set a time limit, give yourself a goal to reach by the end of the session. Often times a little bit of time pressure will force both artists to set aside any small differences and just keep working to get as much done in the time allotted as possible.
- Know some basic music theory, especially if you're going to be working with a player of a more traditional instrument like guitar or piano. Being even marginally versed in the language of music will give you both a better means of communicating an idea you have.

- Discuss ahead of time which DAW you will be using, and which tools. Can you both open the projects later at your own studios if need be? It can often be a good idea to stick with the built in plug-ins if you both use the DAW, or render everything to audio in case one of you doesn't have the same plug-ins as the other.

## 2. Collaborations across internet.

Most of the time you'll have the same considerations as the example above when it comes to internet collaborations, however there are some unique aspects you need to address:

- Are you in different time zones or across the world from each other? Set up a time each day (or every few days) to discuss the project, and figure out your next plan of attack. Skype and iMessage work great for real-time discussions, otherwise emails work fine and will always be waiting for the other party in the morning.
- How will you share the files create with the other person? Something like Dropbox works well if you both have it, otherwise there's lots of free file-sharing options if you need to send larger files back and forth. My own favorite is WeTransfer.com, which lets you send up to 2GB of files for free, and without annoying ads and pop ups or "wait to download" time limits. Email confirmations when the other person downloads the files you sent too. Settle on a method you're both comfortable with.
- If you're trading the song back and forth, let the other producer know what you did, and what areas you think they might be able to address next. As always, be open to their ideas and thoughts if they differ, but at the very least let them know what you worked on while it was your turn with the song.
- Set a time limit. Yes, I mentioned this before, but I've found that it's much more likely for internet collaborations to linger on and on compared to in-person collaborations. Set up a schedule where you each have maybe 2 days, 3 days, or a week before the song has to be sent back to the other person. Things happen in life where you can't always stick to this, but be respectful of the other person's time and do your best.

## 3. Remixes.

For the dance producers especially, often times the first time they get to work with another musician is when they are going to have a song remixed (or are doing the remixing). This can often bring about some unique considerations, for instance:

- Most importantly, discuss with the remixer (or original artist if YOU are the remixer) what kind of files will be shared. Will you be sending only a few stems, the stereo mixdown, or each and every part of the song individually?
- If you're sending stems or the individual parts, be sure to label everything so the other person knows what each file is i.e. bassline.wav, lead vocals.wav, etc. Also, be sure to

render all of your stems and tracks for the entire length of the song so that they will line up properly again when the other person gets them.

- Let the remixer know the original tempo of the song. This is useful if they want to match your delay times, or slice the files into nicely trimmed loops.
- Is the original track and remix going to be mastered by the label before release? If so, let the remixer know so they don't self-master it themselves.
- Let the remixer know exactly what format you expect in return. If it's a wav file, be sure to tell them the sample rate and bit depth you prefer.
- Finally, the remix might come back sounding vastly different from the original, so be open and try and understand how the remixer approached your project before asking for a new version or changes.

#### **4. Post-production (mixing, mastering, etc.)**

For many musicians, the first time someone other than their friends or family will hear a track is when they submit it for mastering, or possibly even a mixdown. Aside from being one of the final steps before a track is released, it's also something you're going to be paying good money for, so it's worth following a few simple steps to make sure it all goes easier:

- Check with the person working on your track to see exactly how they want the files delivered. Make sure you know what bit-depth and sample rate to submit the tracks as again, and see if they have any specifics about track labeling you should follow.
- Be sure that what you send them is accurate and complete. Double-check that there's no errors in the mixdown, and that all of the files rendered and line up correctly (if submitting for a mixdown). Time is money to an audio professional, so take your time and double-check everything to save yourself some money if you need to redo something later due to an error on your part.
- Discuss the pricing and turnaround times. Know when the songs are due, when you'll likely get them back, and exactly how much you are going to be paying. Make sure you understand what exactly you are getting for your money too. Is there an extra charge for acapella, dub, or MP3 versions? Will it cost you if you want a revision after you hear the end result? Most of this information will probably be on the studio's website, but talk to them beforehand if you have any concerns not addressed there.
- Be timely. Professional producers offering studio services often work with more than one musician at a time, so if you agree to a time for delivery, stick to it or communicate any delays as soon as you know about them. This allows the studio to ensure that they can

meet the needs of all their clients as well you. And after all, you don't want an annoyed producer to be the one working on your track!

As you can see most of these are fairly common sense, and there's a lot of overlap between all the scenarios. However, in the heat of the moment, or when nervousness sets in, it's easy to forget even the simplest of preparations, so it's worth a quick reminder. In a nutshell, I think there's three basic rules of thumb you need to follow in all cases:

- Communicate. Set goals, time limits, and discuss exactly what the process will be and what all expectations are. Talk about any concerns or issues as they arise, don't wait until it's a much larger issue than it might have been.
- Be open-minded. If you want everything to be only your way, then there's no sense working with other people in the first place. Listen to what they have to say, and know that they care about the project as much as you do.
- Be respectful. Every single person undertakes the music-making process a little differently, there is no 'right' way to do it. The person you're working with gained their experience through as much hardwork and dedication as you did, so be respectful when (or if) you disagree.

Hope this was useful to people, and comes in handy the next time (or the first time!) you decide to work with another musician.

On a more personal note, if this guide (or any of my other guides) has helped you in your music making, please consider a small \$1 donation via pay pal to the email address below. Even a dollar here and there really helps me and my family out more than you can realize. Thanks, and I hope you find this guide useful.

Peace and beats,

**Erik M.**

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*I'm the owner of Inner Portal Studio a Seattle-based facility with over 15 years experience providing quality mastering and mixdowns of electronic music for producers around the world. I have been writing, releasing, performing and DJing electronic music of all genres for over 20 years. You can find my blog, original music and DJ mixes, as well numerous audio production related tutorials available for free at <http://tarekith.com>.*

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