



Mixing & Mastering
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Preparing your project for Mixing and Mastering

Thank you for considering Redsecta Mixing and Mastering. Having been involved in working on rap projects since 1990, I understand the hard work you have put into your music, as well as the importance of the sound quality. These days, the recording industry requires artists to have completely finished material; long gone are the days when record labels would spend money developing artists which included covering studio time and mastering, so artists these days are faced with having to produce, record, mix and master their music on their own, at their cost.

Our clients are artists who have probably already tried to mix and master their own material with less-than "industry-quality" results, who know that in order to get further in the game, they have to be on the grind 24/7, making tracks and/or writing lyrics, doing shows, booking shows and acting as their own management team. Our clients may not have the time to focus on setting up the best mixing and mastering environment, and instead of spending thousands of dollars on setting up a proper mixing and mastering studio, they might spend that money on production and recording gear, promotional materials, or plane tickets to make the next show, and would rather hire a professional to make their music sound just as good, if not better, than the rest of the material out there on the market.

Our rates are structured to be the most economical for artists looking for that industry sound. The tradeoff of course, is that clients can't sit in on the sessions at these rates, so if you're ready to let a professional who knows what your music should sound like make it happen and want to save some money that can be used to promote your project, I'm definitely someone you should check for. I've put together this document that will help you prepare your project prior to sending it in for mixing and mastering; I hope you find it informative. Thanks again for considering Redsecta to take your project to that next sonic level.



a.k.a. L. Franco
Redsecta Mixing & Mastering Los Angeles

This document was designed to help you get your project ready for Mixing and Mastering with us. The rates and procedures outlined here are specific to our services, but all of these guidelines should apply to any high-quality mixing and mastering service, and are a good overall reference that will save you time and money wherever you decide to have your project mixed and mastered. This document will also explain what our services cover, as well as any additional costs you should expect should your project require additional editing while in the mixing and mastering phase.

Complete Recordings

The most important part of it all is to get the best recorded tracks. Assuming that you are working in the digital domain, this means that you should not have clipped your converters while tracking. Tracks abundant with low frequencies will eat up the digital headroom very quickly (like Kicks and 808 subs) and those tracks will generally sound lower in volume after you've recorded them, which is fine; during mixing, we will make sure they are "polished" and sit well with the rest of the elements in your tracks. The most important thing is to not have distorted tracks, having them puts us in a position where we will have to try different ways of dealing with the problem of distortion, as opposed to having tracks with plenty of headroom to work with, and bring out the best in those tracks.

Working in the digital domain is not at all like working with analog tape with regards to pushing levels in the red while recording. With tape, you get a more "musical" saturation when going in the red (dependant of course, on what kind of tape and recorder you are using). With digital, the trick is to stay away from the Odbfs ceiling since digital saturation or distortion does not sound pleasing at all, and while the benefit of doing so may not be obvious when you hear a recorded track that peaks at -2db or lower, crank up your monitors; if the sound is "clean" then that's where you want to be!

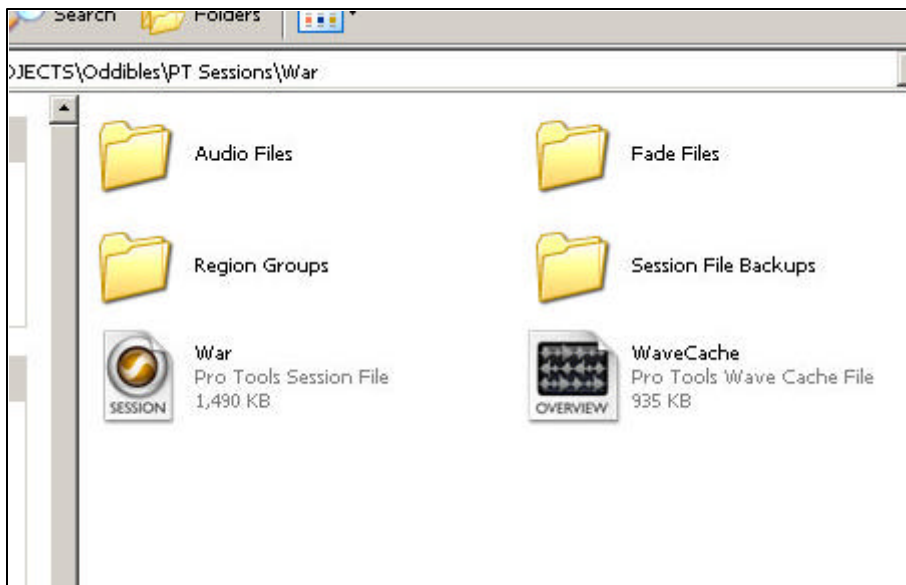
Never use MP3 tracks in your recordings if you can help it. This is something that is commonly seen today with various people working on projects from different locations; shuffling tracks back and forth thru the web. If any of the MCs or DJs you are working with send you MP3s of the verses or cuts they've done for your songs, ask for uncompressed .wav or .aiff tracks (simply converting MP3 tracks to either .wav or .aiff won't cut it). The lack of definition on MP3s definitely comes out more when a song is mastered, this is typically noticed around the mid/high frequencies where they tend to splatter on the mix. If this is unavoidable for your

project, we will do our best to work with it, but keep in mind that it's not the best recipe for having the best-sounding mixes and eventually, masters.

Lastly, make sure all the tracks in your songs are in your session, ready to be sent in for mixing and mastering, and that there are no missing files.

Submitting the project

If you work with Pro Tools, you can simply make a copy of the session and burn it on a CD-R or DVD-R and send it in. Pro Tools makes a folder for each of your sessions, and within that folder, you will find two folders - an "audio" folder and a "fades" folder, as well as the Pro Tools session executable file, as well as a few other files (depending on the Pro Tools version you are working with). You can simply drag the entire folder for your session on your disc burning program, but please make sure that the audio and fades folders are there, as well as the session executable file.



We are able to work with any Pro Tools sessions from any version, Mac or PC, PT HD or LE, 48 stereo or mono tracks up to 24/96 resolution. We use a Pro Tools LE system with the added Toolkit expansion which lets us work with up to 48 stereo or mono tracks. We have chosen LE over HD simply because 48 tracks is more than plenty for the majority of the rap projects we work on, and since we don't run a recording studio, we don't need the advantages that an HD system has over LE for tracking. We have decided instead, to make our outboard and conversion

more high end (mastering grade) than any of the converters Pro Tools offers at any level.

If you don't work with Pro Tools, you will have to bounce each individual track, consolidated. This means that any gaps between the first verse and second verse, for example, must be there so that when we import all of the files into a Pro Tools session, everything will play in sync. In short, if your song is 3 ½ minutes long, every audio track (kick, snare, hat, open hat, bassline, verses, etc.) should also be 3 ½ minutes in duration. Consult with your DAW's manual for instructions on how to output consolidated audio tracks. Once you have rendered all of the tracks that make up your song, create a folder on your computer using the song name, and drop all the audio files in that folder. Burn a disc with all the folders and their corresponding audio files to send to us.

Keep the files at their native resolution. If you recorded your songs at 16-bit/44.1 don't change the bit depth/sample rate to anything higher; you won't improve the quality of your recorded tracks, you will only make your files larger in size. We work in a 24-bit/96kHz environment and upsample anyway, to capture our outboard processors' signals at the higher resolution.

Our rate for mixing and mastering a song includes full mixing and mastering with professional analog and digital tools. We assume that all of the tracks are there, in sync and ready for mixing and mastering. If you send in Pro Tools sessions and there are missing file messages, we will check with you before proceeding to make sure all the files are there. Any edits that need to be made to a session, such as shifting a vocal to its proper timing, inserting tracks that were missing from the original sessions, and other edits will be done at \$35 extra for each edit, so please be sure that the material you submit is complete and ready to be mixed.

Creative Effects

When you go to a studio to mix a song, you tack on a lot of hours fine-tuning the sound of each of the tracks, especially when they require effects that are "trial & error" such as phase effects. These types of effects are harder to nail than your average delay on vocals, so we ask that you treat your tracks with any effects you feel are unconventional. We can add some creative effects that are relatively easy to accomplish, such as a "telephone" effect on your vocals, but any effect that you can't immediately describe should be done prior to sending in your project for mixing.

Back in the day when most effects were out of the reach of the artists coming into the mixing session, you were at the mercy of what the studio had as far as multi-effects boxes, and trying different effects on a track until it sounded as close as to what you were hearing in your head could take hours.

With today's good abundance of digital plugins (many bundled in nearly all DAWs and available through many 3rd party developers online for free), you have the luxury of getting creative before you hit the hourly rate experience of a mix studio. Since our service is a flat rate, we ask that you sort out all those nice, strange effects you want on your tracks on your own, unless of course you can be very specific about what you need, then we will most likely be able to make it happen. If you tell us for example, that on a hook, you want the MC's lines to sound like he's in a phone booth, we will do our best to make him sound that way, that's being very specific. But if you say something like "I want him to sound like he's trapped in the 5th dimension under a sea of mercury", we'll have to ask you to try to make that effect on your own! We do like to hear what direction you want the track to go in, so if you have any notes or rough mixes you'd like to send in with your project, please do so.

The mixing stage can also be part of the production phase of your project, but our approach is a bit more post-production, and consider out-of-the-ordinary effects part of the production process. The effects we specialize in are high-end analog summing, compression, equalization (not necessarily in that order), high-quality reverbs and delays. Our goal is to make your mixes sound as good as they would sound running them through a nice console at a studio that uses high-end analog EQs and Compressors and the best DSP-based effects for a fraction of what it would cost to pay an hourly rate at a mix studio.

Drum Sample Replacement

Sometimes the need may arise to replace or layer drum samples over an existing drum track to make the drums in your sessions sound better. If the drum tracks are simply not strong enough, we may suggest a drum track replacement or layer. If you require us to do this, we will do it for an extra fee of \$50 (per song). In this scenario, we do our best to match the drum sounds to match the existing ones, and you can audition the new sounds when you get your reference mixes. We would rather you use drums you think are great for your tracks, and would advise you to send in additional drum tracks to replace or layer over the existing ones, but if you can't for any reason, and need us to do so, we could use sounds from our own

drum sound library. Did we already say we would rather you send us nice, punchy drums to begin with and not have us do this?

Reference Mixes

Since you are not present during the mix process, we will provide reference mixes before mastering for you to “sign off” on before we begin mastering. These can be sent to you on an audio or data CD via snail mail (First Class mail) or via the web, more than likely uploaded in a directory on our website made specifically for your project, and is the fastest way of delivering the mixes, since you can access them from anywhere in the world at any time for download. Files will be kept online for a reasonable amount of time, and will be taken down after we know you’ve downloaded the files.

If you have never had a song professionally-mixed and don’t know what to expect, here’s a little background on how it typically works and what you can expect from us:

Mixing will find the right balance of all the elements in your song. Your drums will be made to be punchy and dominant, your bassline will blend well with the drums, which will create your rhythm section, and the other instruments will be placed in the soundscape to compliment one another. Sometimes a particular instrument (or groups of instruments) will demand the focus of the mix, which is what some describe as “the groove” and a good mix will make that groove the focus, without making one thing or other sound overwhelming. Vocals are instruments also, they should share the track, or be the main focus without completely overpowering everything else; if you have dubs (adlibs), these should compliment the verses and not fight the main vocal for space. Once you have all the elements in a mix working together, you have what is called an “in-the-pocket” mix. What you want to focus on when listening to your mixes is the balance of the elements in your song. Is anything in the mix grabbing your attention more than the rest of the elements in the song, or is the overall mix creating a feel of cohesion?

You probably have heard that it’s not a good idea to have the same person who mixed the song master it, and like every theory out there, there’s always a flip side. For starters, most Mastering Engineers have years of experience mixing records, and it makes sense, since at the mastering stage, one of the tasks is to spot problems in a mix and be able to know what frequencies to work with to make the mix translate best into a good master. It’s not a good idea to mix and master in the same environment, that is true, since a typical nearfield monitoring

environment is not going to reveal all the sonic detail that a mastering setup will, which is usually made up of an audiophile-grade speaker system and a room that is treated for sound to not add or take away from what is coming out of the speakers. We mix and master in different environments, and when we mix, we mix for the purpose of mastering and have greater control over your project, as opposed to dealing with mixes that have been done without any consideration to the mastering phase.

Recently, something that is very typical of mix engineers to do for their clients is inserting a limiter at the master bus to make the overall levels in a mix louder. This is done to please the clients as they drive off the mix studio and put the CD in the player – most mix engineers know that their clients are used to listening to mastered material on a daily basis and will immediately compare their mixes to mastered material they hear on the radio. The problem with this scenario is that the mix engineer, at the sake of making their clients' mix sound more close to being "mastered", has eaten up most if not all of the headroom necessary for mastering.

With this in mind, we don't insert limiters or maximizers in our mixes. Your mixes will be considerably lower in volume as opposed to mastered material you're used to hearing on the radio and other CDs. Keep that in mind when listening to your mixes, we will handle the loudness part of it at mastering. Raise the volume and listen for cohesion in your mixes. At the mastering stage, your mix will be "polished" and made to sound loud and punchy and will translate well over all systems. Don't compare your mixdowns to other mastered songs from the radio or other CDs you might own just yet. You'll want to do that with your mastered tracks.

At the end of the project, you also will receive the 24-bit/96kHz mixes, unmastered. These are useful in case you ever place any of the tracks in your project on a compilation or other project where the need for an unmastered mix will come up.

Copies of Mix Sessions

A lot of our clients want copies of the Pro Tools sessions along with the mixdowns. Providing copies of the Pro Tools sessions we use to mix your songs will be of little use to our clients for a couple of key reasons:

- We don't use the internal summing of Pro Tools. We send out stems to an analog console, and outboard processors are used as inserts on the analog console to process the stems before coming back into Pro Tools (analog summing)
- We use DSP-based effects that most of our clients don't own, such as the entire suite of plugins from Universal Audio as well as SSL's Duende. Opening up sessions where some of these plugins are used in systems that don't have the effects will simply cause Pro Tools to bypass the effects, and you will not hear the processed sound, but rather the unprocessed signal.

We do realize however, that having at least the stems as they are processed may be useful down the line, in case you may want to remix the song, and we can produce a Pro Tools session with the stems as they were processed for you, or give you the stems in .wav or .aiff formats to use in any DAW for an additional cost of \$350 (covers all of the songs in your project). If you were to have other MCs on your tracks, you most likely would not have to mix the instrumental again if you work with a session with the mixed stems and only worry about making the vocals sit well in the mix. If you don't know what stems are, here's is an explanation on how we structure our stems:

A "stem" in short is a stereo bus that gets sent from our Pro Tools interface to two independent channels on our console. The amount of stems that can be produced depends on the system at hand. For us, 4 sets of stems work well for most rap projects. They are:

- 1) Drums & Bass
- 2) Vocals
- 3) Instruments
- 4) Miscellaneous Instruments (can include cuts, percussion, vocal samples, etc.
– basically anything we want separated from the other stems)

Digital Mastering

We master audio for the digital format. When we say we do Digital Mastering, we don't mean that we are using only digital effects for mastering, but rather that your audio will be mastered for digital distribution, more specifically, for the CD format.

Once we have mixed your songs, and you have listened and approved the mixes, we move on to Digital Mastering. On a processing level, this includes analog as well as digital processes, but once the masters are digitized, we then focus on producing a PMCD (Pre Master CD) for you, that can be used to send to any replicator to mass produce your Compact Discs.

There is no customer evaluation phase at the mastering level, since we will master your songs so that they translate well over not just the listening environment you're used to hearing music on, but all others as well. The PMCD will be done on a high-quality disc and a series of error-detection tests will be performed on the disc(s) to make sure that the PMCD meets the strictest of Red Book audio and professional CD Replication Plant requirements.

Materials

Flat rate prices for mixing & mastering include the following materials that you should expect to receive from us once your project is finished:

- 1 mixdown reference CD (or upload of mixdowns on our server). If changes are required for the mixdowns, revisions will be uploads to the server only.
- 2 high-quality PMCDs (one to send to your CD replicator/duplicator, the other for a backup)
- 2 CD-Rs (perfect copies of your PMCD, except burned on cheaper media and not put through our error-detection process)
- 1 DVD containing your 24-bit mixdowns, masters in data form, as well as the PMCD file that can be used to reproduce your premaster CD, as well as the error-detection reports for your PMCDs
- Priority Mail delivery

If you have any questions, contact us any time at 323-574-5008 or email: mastering@redsecta.com. We also have a ton of information on what we do on our website: www.redsecta.com.