

DAW mixing

By Tal Herzberg

This month, let's pay a visit to megamixer Dave Pensado, to discuss the roll of DAW's in his mixing process. Dave's credits include Pink, Christina Aguilera, Brian McKnight, Ice Cube, Destiny's Child, and Justin Timberlake.

EQ: What's "step one" for you when starting a mix?

DAVE PENSADO: The first thing is to know where you're going, so you want to have a game plan. For me, this always means listening to the rough mix first and carefully studying it; the song, the production. If no rough mix was provided, I'll spend a few minutes putting one together, then sit back and listen to the song. Sometimes it can take me hours before I come up with a game plan, but one way or the other, I never start a mix by listening to individual elements, like kick drum or vocal. It's just not musical. In the past, people didn't have the means to come up with good rough mixes. But working with DAW's, almost every producer I work for provides me with a great reference to the way they hear the final product, so I don't want to be arrogant and ignore their original vision. If the snare on the rough mix has lots of reverb on, I'm not just going to use a dry snare sound, even if I feel it calls for one. I'll wait for the opportunity to introduce this element to the producer, but only after starting with a wet snare. As a mixer, you're running a fine line between inflicting your taste upon people, and making sure you've preserved the taste of the producer.

Analog versus digital summing?

In analog summing, once you pass a certain threshold, you start getting a very pleasing distortion. As a result, and depending on the electronics, certain harmonics are becoming more emphasized, and the mix gets a unique "color." In digital summing, once you



Engineer Dave Pensado has used DAWs to mix some of today's hottest artists.

cross a certain threshold, you start getting non-pleasing distortion, so you can only go so far before you need to start limiting the bus.

How "hot" is your stereo bus running?

Hot as hell...I have no self-control when coming to this issue. My rule of thumb is "the redder, the better". Now, of course this is true only for analog summing. You have to do it completely different when dealing with digital summing, since zero is zero, and there's no beyond. You have to learn how to work around this reality. Limiting plug-ins like McDSP's Analog Channel or Waves' L2 would often provide the answer.

Are you using any kind of processing across the stereo bus?

About half the time I put nothing across the stereo bus, especially if I know who's going to master it. There's no need to introduce extra processing like EQ and compression that will be done later in mastering anyway. Sometimes I'm of the opinion that doing that is like admitting defeat; you should be able to get a satisfying mix without it. I'll turn to it as a last resort.

Are you combining analog and digital signal processing?

When I play poker, I want all the cards in the deck to count for me. Same in mixing, I'll use whatever it takes to

get the stuff sounding right, and I don't care if it's all analog, all digital, or a combination of both. Try getting intimately familiar with all your tools, so when duty calls you can quickly choose the right tool. Digital and analog compressors and EQ's can work beautifully together if set correctly. I gravitate toward analog processing when it's coming to kick, snare, and bass. Digital processing works great on vocal and keyboards. Guitars love cheap gear; it somehow works the best in that department....

Automation?

Lots of it. It's important that elements keep modulating in volume throughout the mix, or your brain will turn them off. Every fader in my mix constantly moves. I'll always push every kick on a downbeat of a bar up a few DB's, a snare after a drum fill will also get louder, etc. Certain elements will progressively get louder during the song, sometimes as much as 15 dB! I'll occasionally turn the master fader up and down between sections, or the entire mix will progressively get louder from top to bottom.

What medium are you using to print your mixes?

I'm using both analog and digital mediums, regardless if the mix was analog or digital. I like the sound of analog two-track tape machines running at 30 IPS, either 1/4, 1/2, or 1-inch, because they add a dimension to my mixes that digital doesn't have. However, since I'm also keeping in mind the mastering process, I'll choose which medium to provide to specific mastering engineers, since some of them are dealing with digital sources better than analog, and vice-versa.

Any experience with higher sampling rates?

Yes, and I think it clearly sounds better than lower rates, both for multitracking and two tracks. Sometimes