Twelve EDM production tips for producing massive and original dance music
[April 2015 / Michael Gallant]

Francis Preve gives you 12 tips to help you produce thumping bass drums, crisp mixes, and original electronic dance music with a classic sound

Anybody can open up GarageBand, drag a few drum and synth loops on top of each other, and in just a few minutes, create some something that, more or less, resembles electronic dance music. But according to EDM producer Francis Preve, there's a world of difference between electronic music that is simply "constructed" and that which is created with thought, love, expertise, and inspiration.

Preve is the author of The Remixer's Bible and a longtime contributor to Keyboard magazine and other publications. He's also a prolific sound designer for synthesizer manufacturers and teaches electronic music production in his home city of Austin, Texas. Here are some tips from the man on to how to make your own electronic dance music sound less like a tossed together sandwich of sounds — and more like the floor-shaking hit tracks heard and felt on dance floors around the world.

1. Get to know classic electronic music sounds

Though there are countless sample libraries out there that contain even more electronic drum sounds and variations thereof that you can use to build your tracks, Preve recommends spending time getting intimately acquainted with the original source material. "Familiarize yourself with the classic drum machines," he says. "Take the time to know what a TR-808, TR-909, TR-606, and LinnDrum all sound like — and learn what the TB-303 Bassline sounds like, too. These are the classic, legendary instruments of electronic music."

The more time you spend getting to know the textures and idiosyncrasies of each different vintage machine, the easier you'll likely find it to choose the right drum sounds for any given moment in your own production.

2. Look to your favorite EDM tracks for arrangement inspiration

"The way a song evolves or progresses is not copyrightable, or even all that identifiable," says Preve. "If you're new to arranging or would like to use a guide or template as you're putting your track together, take somebody else's track and use it to build your own framework."

Preve is in no way suggesting that you steal anybody's notes, chord progression, or music — simply that you use tracks you love as a roadmap for your own creations. "Put someone else's arrangement in one track in your DAW [digital audio workstation] and structure your song the same way that that one is structured," he says. "If the original track has a sixteen-bar drum intro, then sixteen bars of bass, and then the first melody comes in followed by a sixteen-bar breakdown, follow the same pattern with your own track and see what happens."

As long as you simply follow the structure of your source material — and again, don't copy the melodies or music — chances are that your own track will come together sounding like you, but with the in-song evolution that you already know and love.

3. Mix up your sound sources

Especially if you're using a DAW like Logic or Live, it may be easy to simply rely on built-in sound and loop libraries to sculpt your EDM tracks — but if you want something that sounds original, Preve recommends against this approach.

"Keep in mind that, when you use a loop library, you risk using sounds that someone else is using in a track already," he says. "A huge portion of EDM tracks, whether it's progressive house or big room, are using content from loop libraries straight out of the can and having hits. They basically get these libraries the day they come out and make a track using loops. I'm not sure how much integrity there is to their art, but it's what's happening. If you want your tracks to have the exact same sounds as those hits, that's fine — but that's not the direction I would go in."

Instead of having to worry about such things, Preve recommends choosing loops and sounds from a wide variety of sources for your track, and mixing them all together. "Your material is going to sound inherently more original than somebody who just uses a single construction kit," he says.

4. Always be on the lookout for new sounds

There are a good number of companies that specialize in releasing new batches of EDM-friendly sounds on a regular basis, so always keep an eye out, if you feel you need new sonic inspiration.

"Sample Magic is by far my favorite loop company, and Vengeance is extremely popular," says Preve. "There are also lots of newer companies like CR2 that have been gaining popularity. I'm also launching my own soundware company, Academik Software, later this year."

If you're interested in new – and often free and legal – sounds to use, keep an eye on the Create Digital Music blog, as they often post new offerings that range from classic drum kits to space sounds offered by NASA.

5. Choose sounds that gel from the start

In some of my own early electronic music production experiments, I would find myself repeatedly facing the same challenge: The arrangement and energy of my track would be what I wanted, but I couldn't seem to get the track to sound as crisp, clean, and big as I wanted it. What could be done?

Rather than spending hours tweaking EQ and compression, or spending thousands of dollars hiring a top-notch mixing engineer to do the final sculpt and polish, Preve recommends rebuilding from the ground up.

"Honestly, the best thing you can do is take the time to select the right parts and sounds in the beginning, rather than crafting your mix later on," he says. "One huge thing I've learned as I've grown into being a producer is that it's far better, and you get a far more polished mix, if you take the time to select the right instruments from the get-go, rather than learning how to EQ something after the fact."

In practical terms, this means taking the time and focus to choose drum and bass sounds that seem to gel right away when played together, and also taking advantage of the sound editing capabilities that exist on many of your sound sources themselves. "If you're using a synth for a lead line, for example, you already have a lot of sound sculpting possibilities just in that instrument's interface," he says. "By selecting different filters and wave forms, you can create sound with harmonic spectra that will play better with the rest of your track."

6. Focus on the kick

Preve has worked on several mixes where he's hit a difficult point: Things just weren't gelling, and he wasn't really sure why. "All my sounds were in the right places, but what really made things snap into place turned out to be changing my kick drum," he says. "Don't be afraid to switch that sound up if a mix isn't coming together for you. Try a variety and see if any of them suddenly give you a new insight."

The kick drum is the single most important aspect of an EDM mix, Preve says — so take the time to make sure that you have the right one for your mix.

7. Experiment with cooking your own drums

Rather than simply choosing a kick drum sound that you like from a pre-existing sound library, Preve recommends alchemizing your own through a very specific technique.

"Layer two different kick sounds," he says. "Say you like the attack, the very beginning transient of one kick drum, but then you like the fat body of another kick drum sound, you can layer them together." Use an envelope, he continues, with a very fast attack and very short decay to grab that powerful attack from the first kick drum. Then, soften the attack from the one that you want to be the body and have it come in at full intensity with maybe a ten or fifteen-millisecond delay. In other words, you're basically creating a super-fast crossfade between the two sounds. The two kick sounds blend together," Preve says. "You can get lots of new sounds by blending pre-existing sounds like that."

8. Experiment with transposition

Whether you're playing with pre-fabricated loops, sampled bass lines, drum sounds, or fresh recordings of live instruments, play with pitch to switch things up. "Especially if you're using loops, experiment with extreme transposition," says Preve. "Pitch them up an octave, or pitch them down an octave or two. Sometimes a lead instrument can turn into a great bass if you transpose it down dramatically."

Whether you're using Ableton Live, Logic, Pro Tools, GarageBand, or nearly any other digital audio workstation to produce your music, a "transpose" utility should be available, so be sure to seek out that function as you begin sculpting you tracks.

9. Play with phase

This is a somewhat tweaky trick, but if your track's low end is feeling clogged and muddy as opposed to punchy and powerful, it's one well worth keeping in mind.

"I learned this from my buddy, producer Matt Lange," says Preve. "If you feel like your kick drum and your bass are competing with each other in the context of your mix, one quick way to pull them together is to isolate both your kick and your bass and then invert the phase of one of them. Immediately, you will hear that one of the two phase settings sounds better. If you change the phase on one of them, it may end up sounding worse, in which case you stick to what you have, but it has definitely happened to me that I've changed the phase of the bass or kick drum and realized that they're suddenly not competing anymore."

As with pitch shifting, changing the phase of a piece of audio is a relatively standard function that any decent DAW should be able to help you with. If you can't find the function easily, be sure to check the instruction manual or online tutorials for help.

10. Pay attention to levels

When you're at the stage where you're mixing together your thumping kick drum, throbbing bass, and ear-catching lead lines, take time early on to pay special attention to the volume of each individual element. Even the smallest adjustments can have huge impacts on the power and cohesiveness of your final mix.

"For a lot of mixes, when it comes to pulling everything together, it's not a matter of EQ-ing and adding compression," Preve says. "If the mix isn't coming together, change the levels of the instruments. It may sound like an oversimplification and rudimentary in its own way, but the fact of the matter is that it works."

Preve recalls working on a recent remix where, despite his best efforts, a few elements were not quite gelling when he played the whole thing back. "To fix it, I went in and did some very, very light rebalancing," he says. "I just added a few decibels here and took a few away in other places and the mix snapped into place."

Don't completely ignore EQ and compression, Preve continues — just see what you can do using volume adjustments alone before you turn to the heavier tools in your mixing arsenal.

11. Master mindfully

As a producer and instructor, Preve has had the chance to study how countless hit EDM tracks are created — and some of his observations have been striking.

"If you look at the audio files for the majority of mainstream dance hits, you'll find that their dynamic range is nonexistent," he says. "The waveforms literally look like

solid bricks of audio when you put them in an audio editor program. The use of multi-band and parallel compression, and limiting when it comes to mastering, are so extreme."

Even though dynamics can be an integral part of musical expression, when it comes to mastering EDM tracks, Preve recommends being aware of the industry standard. "Dynamics are kind of your enemy in this situation," he says, laughing. "If you want that giant, big room sound, extreme mastering is part of the engineering process. Mastering your track like that is often the final process that makes a dance track sound completely real."

12. Connect with the community

You can learn a lot, and even find potential collaborators, by checking out online forums and publications focused on dance music production. "Attack magazine is really good," says Preve. "It's an online blog-style periodical. It has lots of good tips and is really focused." Preve also recommends DJ Tech Tools and, if synths and music production hardware are your area of interest, visit KVR forums as well.

Go to www.francispreve.com to learn more and hear music from Francis Preve.

http://blog.discmakers.com/2015/04/twelve-tips-for-producing-electronic-dance-music/