



# Dubmatix Production Tips

## Intro

I've been recording music for 35 years. Starting with a Dorkordor reel-to-reel 4-track that had S.O.S. (Sound on Sound) & Echo, the ability to bounce tracks (record on 3 channels and bounce them to one channel so you could keep layering).

In the early 80s my father had an AKAI MG1212 - one of the early Beta-tape styled analog/digital hybrid all-in-ones. The tapes were expensive and held 10 minutes on 30ips (inches per second). I eventually learned how to hand-spool high end VHS tape onto the cartridges to save money and have a better sound quality.

Since then technology has exploded and made it possible for anyone to make and record music. "Dubmatix" began in 2003 recording what would become "Champion Sound Clash", released in 2004. My goal was to try and capture the vibe and sound of King Tubby and his style. Not a reproduction of his dub, but his sound and the way he approached dubbing. The use of reverb, echo and the melodic way in which he'd bring in and out various instruments and vocals. His productions become entirely fresh new tracks.

No samples were used on the first recording. I played everything except horns & vocals and had a couple guest musicians join me. And it was all done on a simple 4 in / 4 out breakout box and ACID Pro.

Over these past years I've discovered & learned a few things that I go back to time and time again. Here's a few listed below.

Enjoy

Dubmatix

## 01 Starting Fresh

- Anytime you begin a new project or if you find you're getting into a rut, have writers block or feel that you're not hitting that next level vibe - then try unplugging any outboard gear, pedals, etc and move them around, swap them out for other pedals and/or keys, synths etc..
- Try recording your own playing then chop it up, mangle it, and put it back into your DAW>

Each time I record an album I tend to unplug and re-wire most of my studio set up. I patch in outboard gear I might not normally use, swap out delays, etc..

You'll find that some creative and new ideas can happen

## 02 EQing

This is a long conversation but a couple basic ways to use EQ include

- Remove all unnecessary EQ (Roll off low end and top end) on all instruments. Only the kick drum and bass tend to be in the 40Hz - 150Hz frequency range. For piano, guitars, synths, etc remove add in an EQ and remove these frequencies either using a shelf or cut curve
- Kick & Bass are crucial in reggae. The two main ways to have them work together is Big wide bass sound and tight punchy kick or Big fat kick and pointy bass
- Guitar Skank - I tend to push the mid-range EQ up (boost of 3-6dB around 2 - 4k depending on the guitar sound) to grab that sharp, percussive attack heard on a lot of classic tracks.
- I'll also record a 2nd guitar skank and pan them left and right and add a slow moving phaser also altering the EQ so they both stand out but work together. Try boosting the 2-4K range on the 2nd and move it around until it sounds like it fits the first guitar skank



(This is a guitar EQ where I add a low-cut shelf)

## 03 Layers

The joys of layering are many. Think of Phil Spector and his “Wall Of Sound”. This is layering at its most complex and finest of what can be achieved. Layering produces a denser, more weighty sound in any song.

To add weight or density to a track I’ll record 2 or 3 guitar skanks, double up on piano skanks etc.. then pan them into various positions. A classic technique is to spread skanks Hard Left and Hard Right to fill the sonic sound spectrum.

Layer your kick drum, snare drum, drop in another hihat pattern but pan it left/right and bring the volume down so it helps propel the main hihat line.

Basically you can layer anything. A great way to bring a track to life is percussion and loads of it. Congas, Bongos, Shakers, tamborine, Triangle, Afuche, etc... whatever you have sitting around. Pots and pans still work as well.

Phil Spector & The Wrecking Crew <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhtQ4Fx9HU0>

## 04 Panning

Panning gives your music dimension and breathing room for your instrumentation. The ear hears about 180 degrees. That means half your head essentially. So when you’re working with various instruments a good place to start is picturing a stage and how bands are set up. If you are standing in front

center of the stage where would the drums sit, the guitar, bass, and on. Then move your Pan pots to those positions and see how it sounds.

- Panning percussion mid-side to hard-left &/or hard-right will allow them to stand out and at the same time provide that extra bit of syncopation as they interact with the snare/rim
- A great effect using FX (Delay, Reverb) is to hard pan the effect to the opposite side of the instrument I.e Guitar Skank on the Left - pan the reverb to the right. Creates interest and dimension

## 05 Bus Comp

Generally on the master bus I'll include a variety of plugins to help bring out the main mix before moving over to mastering

EQ is always included on the master bus as it allows an overview / snapshot of the song and helps you identify any problem areas. Too much top end, or "muddiness" and not enough bass. It's at this point you can either go back into the mix and make changes if it's severe or make subtle adjustments to a couple areas.

If I'm looking for an analog tape feel I'll add the UAD Studer 800 into the mix. Sometimes I'll leave it on the default setting which is neutral, running the track through it to get that "vibe" and fatness.



## 06 DAWs

There are quite a few good options out there. I use Reaper for editing and main, Logic and Ableton

### **Reaper (by Cuckos)** <https://www.reaper.fm/>

I tend to use REAPER as my main DAW. It's a compact, portable and an excellent DAW for recording and editing. I have not found another program that is faster for editing and keeping a recording session moving quickly. Bonus - it's inexpensive.

**Apple Logic** - This is a rock solid program that comes with 80GB+ of sounds, synths and plugins. Highly flexible and excellent sound quality. Well worth the very fair price.

I tend to use Logic for Horns (they have great horns, rhodes and piano), starting ideas, using Alchemy

### **Ableton**

One of the best programs for executing ideas quickly. Drag and drop, quick editing and recording. This has so many possibilities for writing and experimenting. Also one of the best DAWs for live performances. Rock solid.

## 07 Outboard Gear

Having a few key pieces of outboard gear can help your brain think in different ways when recording or mixing. Routing a track from your DAW into an Echo pedal or rack will dramatically change how you use the FX. What ever you have - use it. If you're using a synth, guitar, mic for vocals, etc.. try experimenting with various combinations of pedals/ rack gear or just one. It will always enhance and create fresh ideas.

## 08 Don't over quantize

Leaving room for a more natural feel will give your song flow and diversity. You've heard classic songs in the past that have little moments where the drums or guitar, piano drifts out of time a touch and then comes back. Our ears hear all of these nuances and when it goes from drift back into time - it's satisfying. Our ears are always looking for interesting aspects so try and include some natural feel in your songs. If you are using MIDI - play free style and only correct those notes that are really out of time.

## 09 Tuning and pitching

Pitch shifting / tuning is available in every DAW and can really be used to great effect. Taking a drum track and pitch shifting it down will give you a darker, more fat sound and change the overall feel of the song.

Recording just and FX on a channel (echo or reverb) then pitch shifting it up or down (try to keep it in key by using increments of 3rd, 4th, 5th, 12 - Octave) will do the same

On the other side of that coin is "Tuning" tuning your drum & percussion sounds to the song Key is fairly common these days - especially within Trap music where the kick tends an integral part of the bass

sound and line. Most times you'll be tuning your kick drum. For percussion it'll be any instrument with a "skin" on it - Tabla, Conga, Bongos, Djembe.

## 10 Fake Harmonies

Early on I didn't have the budget to hire vocalists/vocals so what I'd do is take vocal phrases, duplicate the part on a new track and then pitch shift them to a 3rd or 4th (depending on the song key being Minor or Major or combo of both) and then another duplicate and pitch shift down a 3rd or 4th giving you a sense of "real" harmonies. I'll still use this today if I feel a spot is missing in the track

### **Example**

- Track One - Main Vocals
- Track Two - copy of main vocals, only keeping the chorus, then pitching them up up a 3rd or 4th or 5th.
- Track Three - copy of Main Vocals, only keeping the chorus, then pitching them down a 3rd, 4th or 5th

## 11 Tempo

Sometimes it's the simple things. If your DAW is able to change tempo without changing the pitch, experiment by moving up or down the tempo. Sometimes bumping 1, 2 or 3 BPM makes a big difference. Sometimes a 10-20BPM tempo change is what works best.

## 12 Recording live instruments when possible

I've tended to use natural instruments when it makes sense but as you grow and experiment sometimes this becomes limiting. Softsynths open up wide doors of possibilities and sounds if you're able to, try blending both when and if you're able. (or drop a nice classic guitar, horn, drum samples in the mix).

The more you can merge both, the more dynamic and natural your productions will sound. There are always exceptions such as classic digital Dancehall.

## 13 Workflow

When I started recording in a DAW, there was no work flow. No template. Nothing. Just randomly recording and mixing. Overtime I developed a fairly consistent workflow so anytime I start recording or mixing I can quickly access what's needed without losing inspiration.

When setting up a track - try to create your own workflow.

Track Grouping Order (i.e. Drums, Bass, Keys, Guitars, etc.)

My own workflow is set up as

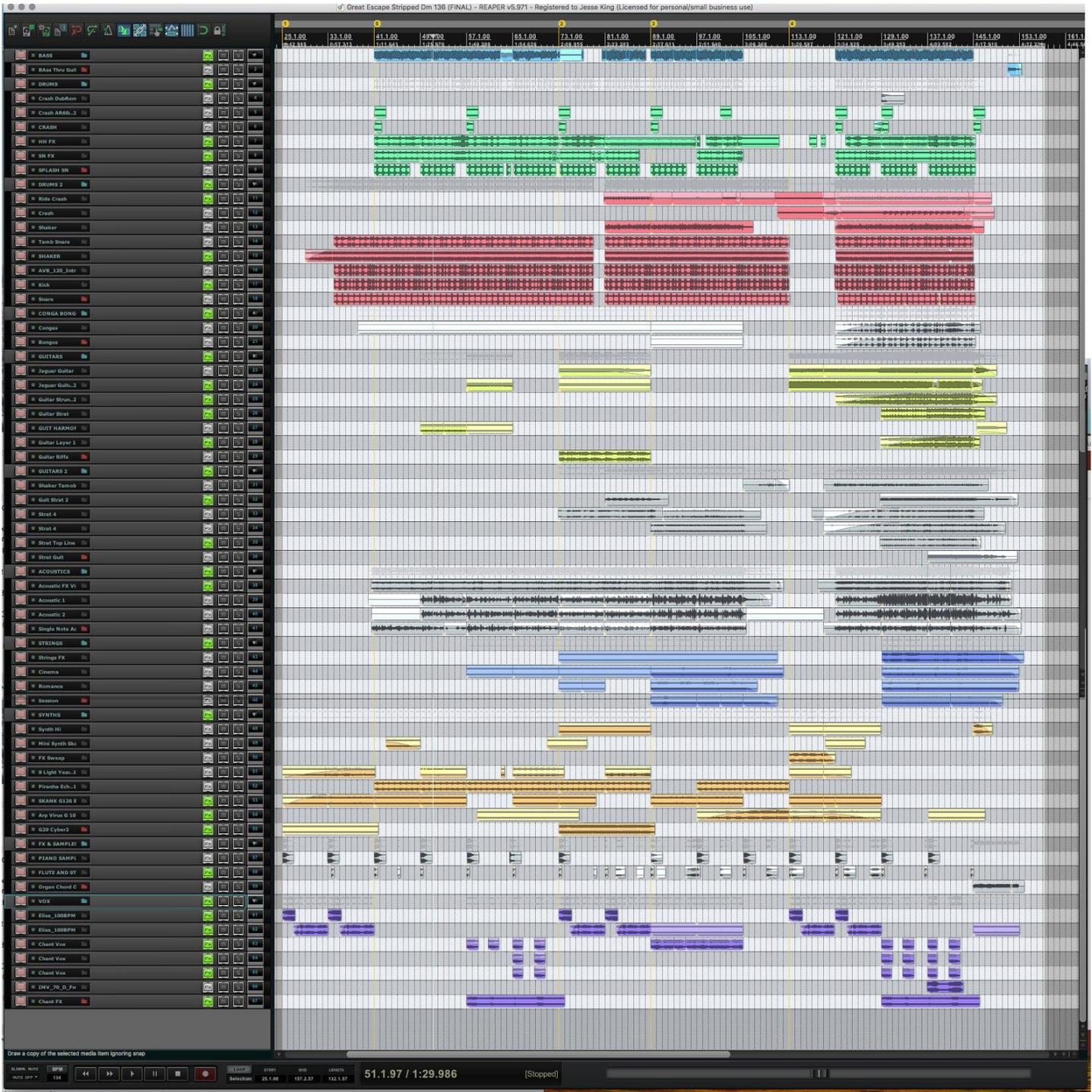
Drums, Percussion, Bass, Guitars, Keys, Organs, Synths, Pads, Riffs/Melodies, FX & Vocals

Within drums I'll have the order as (Kick, Snare, Snare/ Rim 2, HH, Open HH, Overheads and then Toms within a Subgroup so I can EQ or Compress them on separately

I colour code each group so I can quickly see and know where I am on the screen at all times.

It takes a few minutes to set up but become your goto  
Achieving a sound style - ska, roots, dubstep

You can set up Templates within your DAW so each time you dive in - it's ready. I lean more towards using the same process without the template as each session will be a little different. Developing your own Grouping, Colour Coding and Templates will always save time.



## 14 Find new inspiration

One of the easiest ways to breathe new life into a boring sound or recording is to try one the following

- Add reverb
- Add saturation (Saturation by Soft Tube - a free plugin see end of tips)
- Echo / Delay
- Phaser

Set up all 4 a track and try turning on and off various combinations. You can amp it up from there by adding Flangers, Chorus, Stereo Imaging, Filters, etc

## 15 When is your song done?

If you can listen to the entire track and nothing bothers you. You're probably done.

This was something I learned over time. If I'm able to listen to my entire track and the groove is there, it keeps my interest, (I want to listen to it over and over again), each instrument choice, each drum sound, the FX used, the delays, crash cymbals, how the level of the hihat it, are the vocals too loud, does the bass need to come up more, is there a cool breakdown in the middle? All of these things are processed by your brain all at once as you listen. If everything sounds good and all you do is nod your head and feel excited about your new track - then you're probably done.

## 16 Recycle everything

A great way to utilize ideas and demo's you won't be using or have come to a dead end with is to save each part or instrument, riff, melody and line into a folder of loops and hits.

Go through your drums and isolate just the kick - create an 8 bar loop. (if your kick has various changes throughout the song - create more loops), create a snare loop, then a kick and snare loop, hihat loop, snare and hihat loop without kick, and on.

Over time this folder builds up and as you work on new tracks, you can dive back into this folder and see what works. You might be surprised how much good stuff you have. I've got probably 10GB of unused loops and hits that I will go back to layer into new tracks.

## 17 Opportunity

Never walk away from an opportunity. They'll be times when an opportunity comes up and you might not be sure if you know how to do it, or feel confident in your abilities, but always say yes. You can learn anything quite easily (or at least enough to get you going) using Youtube or various websites that offer tutorials.

The international music company Native Instruments had an opportunity for me to develop a Reggae Expansion Loop Pack for Maschine (Black Arc). I'd not used Maschine, but said I did, and then got to work learning. To date the pack has sold over 15,000 copies and I've gone on to create more Maschine Kit Packs.

Work with like-minded artists. Swap remixes, collaborate, work with vocalists, with percussionists - with anyone. The more you work with others the quicker your skills will develop in many areas including songwriting, sound/instrument selection, learning your gear, mixing and what your strengths are. Even from my first album in 2004 I was good at editing. Editing recording, song arrangements, pitching, etc.. this has come to

be an important skill for me. As you go you'll find your strengths and develop them which will lead to opportunities you may not have considered.

## 18 It's In The Details

The details make a track

- Adding extra hihat beats, extra kicks, little motifs, riffs, sounds in and out without repeating during the song keep it interesting
- Transitioning into the chorus, coming out of the chorus, going into the bridge of the song. Each one of these areas need special treatment. Be it a crash (at the very least), reverse crash that signifies something cool is coming - like the chorus, or sweeps, FX, etc.. it can be dropping out the instruments and leaving in just the kick drum and vocals for a bar or two. There are many ways to create a dynamic and interesting transition.
- Where you use and how you use Delay. I'll record an entire track of delay (manually changing the delay speed and decay/feedback) then go through it and edit out anything that doesn't make that part (or track) better.
- Changing up your instruments halfway through or for the final chorus. Adding in new instruments or sounds in various parts but not repeating them, is always a great way to elevate your song. Example: A roots reggae track hits the final chorus and more percussion comes in, a sustained synth or piano chord is held, more reverb is added to the horns, a sax solo starts after the singing ends and takes the song out. Small additions make the difference

## 19 Reverse Engineering

Music to fit the singer, after it's been recorded.

If you've got a basic song (could be a beat or full track) to have voiced always try to use a standard song structure (Intro, Verse, Chorus, Verse, Chorus, Bridge, Chorus, Outro). This will give the singer the right overall vibe. When you get the vocals back, listen to them and see what might be improved to help match the style and delivery of the vocal line. Maybe a new bass line would help, new drums, etc.. Sometimes an entirely new music track can be built around that was.

I'd say that for about 85% of the vocals I've gotten back from artists I've re-built the music track. I do this simply because I'm trying to make the music fit with the singer's delivery, his/her cadance, style, and tempo. In some cases the original track the singer recorded to is completely unrecognizable.

(Special note: Don't be afraid to edit a vocal track by removing parts. Very often I'll receive a vocal track that starts at the beginning of the song and only ends when the song ends. No breaks. Songs need room to breathe. Vocals need to stand out. To do this, I'll edit a vocal track (sometimes removing an entire verse but never deleting the flow of the words and what is being said), then shifting it around until it has the proper space. Sometimes all that is needed is 2 or 4 bars after a chorus. Add a key riff or horn line and then back into the vocals.)

## 20 Working with Echo / Delay

Echo/Delay is one of the most diverse FX that exist to my mind. The ability to have various speeds and decay lengths, filtering really can alter a song dramatically - helping create space, dynamics and texture.

One of the key features in all of my productions delay. Using on hihats, snares, instruments, vocals, guitars, keys. As mentioned above, I'll run each instrument through 2-3 echos/delays at the same time using my mixing board to toggle between each one with my left hand while my right hand manually alters the various parameters on those same pedals/rack gear.

Then I'll go through the "echo track" and edit out everything but the parts that sound cool and make the song better.

Having at least one delay pedal is a great way to make everything sound bigger and more dynamic.

## 21 Try creating different versions

Trying various ideas can be a great way to stumble upon a fresh version or remix or final new sound.

- Mute your drums and bass, put a new set of drums (loop is cool for inspiration) and bassline and work from there. In reggae, depending on the style and tempo, there are always a few stylistic options
- If a track is in a Roots style around 70BPM - I know you can double that to 140 and do a Steppers version, Dubstep, Trap etc..
- A Rub-A-Dub song can go to a 160BPM Jungle. You can even slow it down to 75BPM and do a one-drop version.

You can take it further by doing a reggaeton, funk, etc...

## 22 Moving on from being stuck

This is a common and frequent occurrence to most artists and producers. You get a song or beat idea, quickly get down, add some more parts and then get stuck. You return to the track and each time you do - you draw a blank. For me I'll render all the parts into loops, grab each sound and create one shots (kick, snare, rim, etc) and store it all in a folder and move on.

Be sure to include the BPM and Key.

Example: Kick\_100BPM\_Am - this will make it really easy to drag and drop into future project

## A Word on Mastering

Since 2006 I've been mastering all of my productions and albums. Why? It came down to a few things

- 1) Cost to hire a professional Mastering Engineer
- 2) The limited time (6 hour block) to master an entire album and not be sure if it was right
- 3) I know how I want my songs to sound
- 4) I knew I could learn

To date I've mastered probably 500 songs / EPs & albums. I still don't consider myself a Mastering Engineer but am always looking to keep improving.

Hop onto Youtube and you'll find thousands of tutorials on mastering.

### **What is Mastering?**

Mastering is that final polish on your track before it's released. Depending on what you plan to do with your music there are a few options you can look at to give your song professional sound.

- Do it yourself - basic mastering tools in today's world are readily available. Most times EQ, Compressor, Imaging and Limiting tend to be mainstays. You can go much deeper but for a hobbyist this would be a good start (check youtube tutorials)
- Use service: There's a myriad of quick and easy services utilizing the latest technology to add polish to your track. One such is LANDR. Cost effective and easy to use. You won't have much say or options but sometimes this will be all you need.
- Lastly you can hire a professional Mastering Engineer. These are the people who Master all the albums you hear on radio. They have the experience, knowledge and equipment to bring out the very best in your song. Recommended when possible.

[www.dubmatix.com](http://www.dubmatix.com) | [www.reggae-loops.com](http://www.reggae-loops.com)