

I'm Late, I'm Behind, *and I'm Sorry*

A candid reflection on the pressures of an overflowing workload, the rise of Atmos mixing, and the delicate balance of keeping artists happy.

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BY · **JOHN HANES**

SUBJECT · **CAREER · WORKLOAD**

It has been an incredibly busy three months after an unusually busy year. I've fallen behind on delivering mixes, on making deadlines, and on everything else.

I can't complain because too much work is a good problem to have, until it begins to erode trust with artists, labels, and producers. So far that has not happened so the backlog persists and I'm slowly catching up and crawling my way out of it.

A big part of this has been the rapid acceleration of Atmos mixes. Suddenly everyone wants current songs mixed for Atmos and back catalogs as well, and they want them rapidly.

I've been doing Atmos mixes for almost the entire back catalog for The Weeknd and

Ariana Grande; two albums by P!nk, "Beautiful Trauma" and "Hurts 2B Human", an upcoming Maroon 5 album, an upcoming Julia Michaels album, Taylor Swift's "Lover" album, and there's been a handful of singles in there as well.

I've also been doing mixing for some mixing projects on my own. I've said "yes I'll do it" and then questioned myself on how I will find the time. I did manage to do another mix for Korean band TxT "Magic" and a Zara Larsson song "Morning". I've been working with artist Kat Cunning on mixing songs for their EP, mixing an album for Donny Osmond, and several songs for artist Dotan.

How do I cope with it? I try very hard to give everyone what they need, but maybe not what they want. If an artist is doing a performance on SNL, or Ellen, and needs a special TV track or stems done, I'll jump on it. If a label wants to collect all of the mixes, stems, and deliverables so they can sign off the project, that just might have to wait.

Meanwhile, in Studio A, Serban has been mixing Imagine Dragons, Halsey, Silk Sonic, Anthony Ramos, BTS, Coldplay, Doja Cat, etc. Everyone has deadlines, many other need a favor to get this or that done quickly.

One thing that we will not do is compromise on quality, that is never a question. The songs take just as long to be mixed as they need. Clients get just as much attention as before. Where we are falling behind is in delivery of all of the extra stuff; alternate mix passes, stems. We've also had to tell some artist, some big artists, that they will just have to wait, and see if they are willing to do so.

So I'll do some name dropping, some bragging, and some apologizing to hope to stay in everyone's good graces.

"The same but better."

TAYLOR SWIFT'S MANDATE

The astonishing amount of work that we've been doing has included:

Taylor Swift's "Fearless" (Taylor's Version) album.

This complete re-recording of one of her earliest albums and giving it a more modern, and more "pop" oriented mix treatment, while working hard to retain the youthfulness and intention of the original songs is both challenging and rewarding. Taylor's engineer, Chris Rowe, and her band did an amazing job in recreating the music, and Taylor an amazing job in singing and emoting her matured voice into her youthful songs.

Taylor's mandate of 'the same but better' while working on mixing songs that were not originally his mixes, had Serban really studying the original mixes, matching that sameness element, and then finding improvements while not losing the original mix intentions.

Coldplay's "Higher Power"

The pressure was on to work with a new client that happens to be one of the world's biggest selling artists of all time. It takes some extra time and effort to learn the language and develop a working rapport with new clients. Reputation can get you so far, but you need to be able to understand each artist's working methods, their unique descriptive language, their likes and dislikes. Having Max Martin, a longtime client of ours, as the producer helps to buffer the relationship, but there is still some extra pressure to prove yourself and also to live up to the recommendation from such a prestigious producer. Sometimes it is not only your own reputation on the line.

Silk Sonic's "Leave The Door Open"

How do you follow up one of the most award winning albums ever? Bruno Mars with Anderson .Paak became Silk Sonic and

re-imagined everything. Getting that right balance of Motown rhythm, Philly Soul, smooth, sultry, and sexy all together takes a lot of back and forth with the artists and producers.

I've described Bruno's approach before as embracing "micro-excellence"; a description that I lifted from this article <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/23/how-to-be-mentally-tough-use-the-1-percent-marginal-gains-rule-says-performance-expert.html> by Kumar Mehta.

So in the mix and song production, this micro-excellence approach means trying lots of options until the artist knows, above all others, which is the perfect one. It is a lot of work but also often very rewarding if the art matches the ambition. We have a few clients who have this "micro-excellence" approach; Beck and Bruno Mars are two and both have won Best Engineered Album Grammy awards for us.

Lil Nas X "Montero"

Some songs come in that you just know are going to blow up, go viral, top the charts. These are hard to pass up, especially when you have a relationship with the label and are asked to make some room for it.

Some things you just have to make room for, and this was one of those instances. It can be the unexpected client, the outside of your traditional genre, and the momentum of a viral sensation that can keep you relevant in the music game.

"Micro-excellence: trying lots of options until the artist knows, above all others, which is the perfect one."

BRUNO MARS'S APPROACH

So how to deal with all of this? First, I understand that we have a bottleneck, and

it is our time. I'm letting through what is most important, time sensitive, and critical.

I'm putting in the extra hours, working 7 days a week for a while to overcome the immediate needs, but we are also anticipating that this might be a new level reached and it might be time to hire help. The Atmos mixing does seem to be becoming a standard delivery requirement, so much more of my time will be spend doing Atmos mixes.

Taking on the extra work, even when I'm questioning should I do it, has also forced me to become better at my job. I can see in myself that I am more confident about my abilities and more confident about my mixing.

I'm sorry that you have to wait a bit. I'm sorry that I've not met your deadline for everything, but I'm confident that you'll come back because I'm better than ever and you know that I'll give you what you need.