

10 Common Newbie mistakes in Ableton

Here are some common newbie mistakes people make when writing in Ableton. This isn't all Ableton specific as some tips apply to music production in general.

It also isn't in any specific order and doesn't necessarily assume to be the Top 10 of newbie mistakes. These are just some mistakes I've seen people make over the years and are certainly some mistakes I have made as well.

If you are new to Ableton or computer music production, these should be of some assistance.

1. Ableton's Warping

Assuming Ableton's auto-warping will warp your songs perfectly : This is a fairly common but huge mistake when working with Ableton.

Although Ableton is excellent at warping loops without much trouble (as long as the loop is already seamless), a full song is a different animal altogether.

I suppose it can be pretty misleading to see an option called "Auto-warp" and wonder why your songs aren't syncing up to tempo perfectly. While the auto-warp function does do a lot of the work for you, it's your job to fine tune it so that every thing is 100% on.

Learning this process is the single most important thing you need to master if you want to unleash 95% of Ableton's true capabilities.

Here's some videos to get you started.

Warping Basics

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNC29iw5jZo>

Extra Tips

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCqEY2r_d_A

2. Recording in both arrange and session window

A common mistake for people who are new to Ableton is assuming that the session window (the window with all the boxes for clips and scenes. Also home to the mixer) and the arrangement window (the window the most resembles other audio recording software) are separate entities.

For example you will have a clip on audio 1 in your session window but audio 1 in your arrangement window is empty. If you are new to Ableton it is easy to assume that it's fine to record on that track in the arrange window but that would be a big mistake.

You will quickly find that one of your parts is no longer playing. This is simply because you have put 2 parts on the same track at the same time. Once you understand how the session and arrange windows are intertwined, it will make complete sense what is happening.

The simple rule to follow is:

Since everything has to end up in the Arrangement window to be mixed down, you're better off not using the session window at all if you don't need to.

If you are using a controller like the Push, you are kinda forced to create in the session window. So my advice is to get all your work to the arrangement window as soon as possible & delete all your clips from the Session window to avoid any confusion.

Trust me on this, it'll make your life MUCH easier.

3. Too many parts fighting for the same frequency

If you are building your songs with loops and samples, a common mistake is to think that the more loops you add, the more full and complex your song will sound.

You are only half right though. It's true that more layers can give your song more complexity and depth, but the downside is it can easily make your composition sound muddy, off pitch or just plain not right.

Keep an eye on your fighting frequencies when choosing your loops. A good way to finding these conflicting frequencies is to use Ableton's Spectrum effect or EQ8. These will show you the dominant frequencies in each sound.

If, for example you have 2 sounds fighting for the mid frequencies, try cutting out some lower mids on 1 sound & upper mids on the other. This will create some space for both.

Panning can also be used to handle some of the conflict as well.

4. Not removing needless frequencies

Keeping on the subject of your EQ's and frequencies, it's really important to keep in mind what is the most important part of an instrument and cut out the frequencies that aren't needed.

You won't want 2 or 3 parts all playing a deep, heavy kick drum. You'll need to choose which one has the best lows, and remove the low end from the other loops. Same with your hi frequencies. You'll want to make sure your hi hats are coming through clean by removing the highs from your other tracks.

For snare and percussion in your mid frequencies, you may need to attenuate certain frequencies so that each part has its own space and doesn't sound muddy. In most cases, you'll find that popular music doesn't have too much going on in any given frequency. Everything is balanced and that is what you want.

The goal of this blog isn't to tell you exactly how to dial in all of your EQ's but rather to point you to where you should look if your songs aren't sounding as good as you had hoped.

This video might give you the basic idea:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AGFzYh_C7to

5. Not arranging your songs in multiples of 4

Now I know that there are many other time signatures than 4/4 time but I just want to give some basic tips here for people struggling with producing songs.

If you are struggling, it's probably best that you learn to write in 4/4 timing before getting into complex time signatures. That said, it's very important in popular music and club music that you create your parts on multiple of 4 bars.

For example, if you have a verse that goes 7 bars instead of 8 and then you jump into a chorus, it's most likely going to sound all wrong. This multiple of 4 predictability in music seems very natural.

Don't try to get too tricky until you've successfully got this down. Once you know how things are "supposed" to sound, you can tweak the timing to create more tension successfully.

6. Doing your songwriting and sound design in the same session

I've written a whole blog on this subject if you want to get deeper into this, but basically, you don't want to be fumbling around trying to get THAT sound when you have a melody or bassline in your head.

In the time it takes to create this amazing sound in your head, you will likely have lost the original idea that inspired you. It's best to work fast with a template of sounds or presets that you have found to work for you and touch things up after the rough idea is saved.

For me, I try to get the melody or bass idea down with any sound available so I don't lose the original idea & timing.

From there I can work on the sound without fear of losing my original idea.

It's best to set aside a separate day to do your sound design so you have these great sounds prepared when you hit songwriting mode.

7. Adding parts to compensate for bad sounding parts

Each part in your song should be able to stand on it's own. It shouldn't sound crappy when you solo it.

Of course, I know that sometimes it takes a couple layers to get that certain Bass or synth sound. It's totally ok and even encouraged to layer your sounds, but at the end of the day those sounds need to all stand together as 1 Bass or 1 Stab sound or whatever.

If you find yourself adding melody on top of melody in an attempt to make something sound "right", you might be better off redoing your melody.

Make sure your drums, bass, pads, melodies and vocals all sound great on their own. You aren't going to make good tracks by burying so-so parts deep in your mix. If you can break your song down to 6-8 elements, it will keep you focused on if you are adding too much stuff.

You may end up with 40+ tracks in your song, but you definitely don't want all those elements playing at the same time. If you have 3 different melodies, you should only have one out front at any given time. Even complex songs should come across sounding fairly simple and there should be empty space between the parts.

Put on Spotify and listen to how many elements are going on at any given time. Notice how each sound has its space to come across clearly. The less you have going on in your song, the bigger each sound is able to be. That's why with a 3 piece band like Nirvana, each instrument can sound so big.

Regardless of the style of music, we are all limited to a certain frequency range. When you have parts fighting for the same frequency, both parts are bound to have to sacrifice something in order to fit into the mix.

Another way to look at building a song is to ask "What frequency am I going to fill in now?", then you want to use a spectrum or EQ8 to find what works in that range. If you have 2 parts you like but they are taking up the same frequencies, perhaps you can take one up or down an octave so it has its own range.

Once you have filled up your full spectrum you can see how strong each element is before adding any extra layers.

8. Too many options

Having too many choices with instruments and plugin's without having made yourself a "go to" collection can become a huge time and energy waster.

It's far better to have a few "go to" plugin's and instruments that you know really well than it is to have 100's that you aren't familiar with.

Using unfamiliar software can really slow you down and give you below par results. Find 4 or 5 synths (or even less), 2 compressors, 2 or 3 reverbs, a couple delays etc.. Then take some time to find out what each one is really good at and build some "go to" presets.

This will make things much easy and you'll be getting the sound you are looking for much more quickly. It's fine to have lots of plugins in your arsenal but it's best to find out what each one does before you start your songwriting process. Believe me when I say that I am writing this for myself as much as for you!

Before the days of free plugin's and fast computers, we pretty much had to make due with whatever equipment we had. Given those limitations, it's easiest to get to the process of making music instead of trying to fiddle with every toy in the toy store. Another thing that you'll find is that when you get comfortable using certain equipment, those limitations become your sound and gives you some consistency. Get your "go to" collection started asap.

9. Not making a template

Templates are a saving grace when it comes to songwriting. When you have a setup that works for you, with your favorite effects settings, drumkits, synths etc, take the time to save it as a template songfile or to drag it to your presets for later use.

This will save you loads of time trying to figure out how to get that certain sound you had before. Fumbling through presets and setup takes time and can easily distract you from your goal of getting your ideas down while you are inspired.

Templates give you a basic setup with all your "go to" stuff included. You can even make different templates for different styles of music. Having several options will allow you to be ready to go regardless of what creative mood you are in.

10. Using low quality samples

Using low quality samples with the intention to "fix it in the mix" is another big mistake.

Now I'm all for lo-fi and I've been known to use less than optimal quality sounds to great effect, but you need to make sure it works for your track and that you aren't building your track off a bunch of low quality sounds.

If you have to doctor it up with tons of effects and eq to make it sound decent, you should probably use a higher quality sound that already has most of the tone you are looking for.

For example, a kick drum that doesn't have good low end from the start is never going to sound deep, punchy and professional. Using a lower quality sound might not seem like it will make a noticeable difference, but just wait until you have a whole song full of these sounds and the overall quality will become pretty apparent to you.

If you want an interesting lo-fi sound, try layering a low quality sound on top of a high quality sound. This keeps your fidelity up, while adding a bit of dirt. You just want to avoid a song that is all "dirt".

Avoid these simple pitfalls & you should have a whole lot more success in Ableton live!

Happy music making!

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