

Many people have said that when you're just starting out as an artist, the most important thing isn't your own style, the most important thing is the fundamentals and making as much art as possible, and your own style will naturally come out in time. This is true, but that shouldn't stop you from exploring the styles of your influences, and relate them to the kind of work you yourself would like to do.

Artist Anthony Jones recently posted this on his twitter feed: "If your style is influenced by one source, it's recognizable. If it's influenced by many, it becomes unrecognizable."

At about the same time, artist Ben Mauro had the good idea of creating these collages of the work of specific artists or art movements. It really lets you see a person's style at a glance.

This got me thinking of a fun little thing to try. I picked a number of my favorite artists, created groups of some of my favorite images of theirs, and then wrote down the 5 things the images had in common. In other words, analyzing the style of my influences. What are the 5 elements an artist has that really define their work compared to other artists? What 5 things say "ah yes, this work is made by artist X".

Analyzing The Artistic Style Of Your Influences

- By Neil Blevins

I believe this same artistic “style” concept can be applied to musicians & sound engineers/recording artists in much the same capacity. Part of our work relies on the craft, but the particular character that comes across in the creative choices we make even in the “craft” portion of our work can be drawn upon our influences that weigh most heavily on us.

In songwriting - as a composer or being a guitarist, vocalist, or any type of performer, we will have some very profound influences that could be very diverse or very focused and narrow; even in the craft of recording arts, mixing, and mastering (the more subtle crafts imparted on contemporary music). Those influences could easily arise from our collective listening experiences throughout our childhood and even then will continue through to our adult life, but some of the most profound influences will also be “revelatory” moments. Whether it’s a particular song that turned you on to progressive rock, or Jazz, or maybe inspired you to start discovering concert orchestra and classical music.

Whatever the case, this particular exercise can be looked at as a self-discovery experiment. The original lesson was developed by Neil Blevins and catered to visual arts.

Exercise 1 – From the perspective of Engineering

Analyze your sonic influences. For this, I've picked 5 of my favorite albums, not necessarily my most important influences, but 5 I felt would be good examples to analyze. Whether an artist or an album, they'll tend to have a philosophy behind their sound, pick out the most important features that really stood out to you about the particular sonic qualities in the albums you chose.

Sevendust - Animosity

- Drums have punch, but not overbearing on the rest of the music
- Guitars sit high-end but not too scooped or harsh (must be choices in amp & fx setups) (Praise)
- Vocals are the most powerful element.
- Guitar sounds – design, space, & presence.
- Space & depth in mixes – pleasing.
- Bass and low-end feel tight but still comfortably under the musical content.
- “Airy”, clear and open top, even with cymbals splashing.

Nine Inch Nails - The Fragile

- Distortion everywhere – creative use of distortion
- Big dynamics – moments felt like sound design broke beyond the container of the music. (Listen to “We’re In This Together”)
- Panning choices
- Big bottom end, but still clear.
- Guitar sound design – variety of sounds, creative processing & Lots of layering.

Korn - Issues

- Bombastic, loud, aggressive; DARK sound! (Do not confuse with dull sounding)
- Spacious, can literally feel myself surrounded by mix.
- Guitars – dark heavy rhythm – choice of amps, pedals & microphone technique
- Sound Design – All fronts – drums, vocals, guitars, bass, FX and post), notably thuddy kick, meshes well with bass, cohesive mix that ties elements together just sounds impactful.

Linkin Park - Meteora

- LOUD, FULL sound!
- Subby layered elements (Lying From You)
- Guitars very dense.
- Dense
- Tight drumkit, controlled sound.

Nero – Welcome Reality

- Kick focus, always sonically clear. Compression of the drum samples to creative effect.
- Bottom end = huge!
- Controlled pumping, integrity of mix not compromised.
- Wide, spacious synths but still mono friendly!
- Dense when full arrangement is playing, balanced mixes for how loud album is mixed.
- Creative effects, creative automation with spatial and time effects.

Now try it with 5 or more of your own influences.

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Exercise 2

Now, if you're just starting out, and you feel you don't have a strongly defined style, try this exercise:

First do exercise 1. Next, note that some things may show up again and again. Like all of your influences may have amazing, huge sounding drums. Or 3 of your influences put guitars above the vocals or mix them really scooped and harsh, etc.

Identify the top engineers of these albums and take note of reoccurring things that appear in your influences, and work on referencing their discography. Take notes as to which other albums they've worked on that you recognize, and pick out 5 things you can derive from their body of work. This might take a bit of research online, but this is also a good practice especially as it can give you the insight into how these people were involved in crafting the sound.

My examples are below based on my answers in Exercise 1.

Andy Wallace (Linkin Park)

- HUGE “wall of sound” approach – especially with guitars.
- Crisp, open and clear in most mixes (too many to list)
- Subtle, effective panning
- WIDE guitars – but doesn't break the image of of the music and throw it out of balance.
- Big, tight bottom end – especially with drums & bass but still under guitar and vocals.

Brendan O'Brien (Korn – Issues)

- Space & panning guitars
- Kick!
- Panning creatively (R.A.T.M. – Battle for LA, Korn – Issues)
- Live drum feel (R.A.T.M. – Battle for LA, Korn – Issues, Limp Bizkit – Significant Other, Audioslave - Revelations)
- Punchy overall mixes – (Limp Bizkit – Significant Other, Audioslave - Revelations)

Trent Reznor, Alan Moulder (NIN - The Fragile)

- Super controlled, clever sound design with mixing.
- Cinematic presentation with dynamics – sound design elements.
- Interesting presentation of elements = EQ and balance of instruments & vocals.
- Impact – dynamics & punch to sonics – especially drums or percussive layers.

Ben Grosse (Sevendust – Animosity)

- Guitar sound design (Sevendust – Animosity, Dark New Day – Twelve Year Silence)
- Crisp vocals
- Bass cab mic'd (there's a live/performance feel to the bass).
- Spatial (panning) depth. (Dark New Day – Twelve Year Silence)
- Tight, dry drums (Filter – The Amalgamut, Sevendust – Animosity)

Now try it with 5 or more of your own influences.

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Exercise 3

If you're an established artist who has a recognizable style, as well as doing exercise 1, do the same thing with your own body of work, or have a close friend do it for you if you want a more unbiased opinion. I'll do the exercise with my own:

- Guitar sound design - layers
- Distortion – creative sound design
- Bottom-end focus
- Wide panning (guitars especially)
- Crisp, up-front vocals.
- Dense mix when full arrangement in.
- Tend to lean either aggressive, edgy presence or dark sounding mixes.

Once done, choose 10 reoccurring things that appear in your influences, but remove from the list any things you're already exploring in your own work, and then make that highlight the remaining items on the list.

For example, several of my influences all have punchy, live sounding drums; or have great control of depth and space, and I don't do that as much in my own work. So in future projects, I'm going to explore focusing on exploring reverbs, delays, and spatially situating all the elements into a “space” to invite the listener in to; and also explore more drum recording & mixing for punch and impact.

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Conclusion

Remember, this sort of analysis is a guide. You shouldn't feel trapped by the results. If you notice you have extremely thumpy kick in all your works, this doesn't mean that you need to put extremely thumpy kick in all your works or they won't sound like your style. An engineer's work is constantly changing and evolving especially as it's a collaborative process with the artist, and going with your gut is the most important thing.

Always remember especially as you climb into the commercial areas of recording mixing and producing, that these crafts and creative aspects are meant to serve the artists' creative vision, enhance and capitalize on their strengths. A big part of what makes an engineered album sound as good as it does is the fact that they had a close, working relationship with the music and understood the artist's vision. Some of the top engineers and mixers' best works are on projects that challenged them to work outside of their comfort zones!

Hopefully these 3 exercises not only help you analyze your influences, but suggest areas of new exploration for your own work. Don't be afraid to experiment and try new things.

A big thanks to Neil Blevins for the original lesson designs that these are inspired by. You can check out his [website here](#) and the [original lesson article here](#).

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