

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a DJ performing at a club. The DJ is seen from the side, wearing a dark shirt and a headband, with their hands on the turntables. The background is filled with the silhouettes of a crowd of people dancing. The overall mood is energetic and vibrant.

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How To: Get Your Demo Heard

## How To: Get Your Demo Heard

**In a digital world the unsolicited demo still remains a popular way to discover new musical talent. But what makes a good demo and how do you decide which labels to send it to? David Felton takes us through the dos and don'ts.**



## How To: Get Your Demo Heard

Getting a demo into the hands of the right person has been the most consistently effective way of being discovered in the music industry for as long as recorded music has been around. Back in the day it was tapes; lovingly art-worked and recorded on crunchy four tracks before being handed to A&Rs in sweaty clubs. Then it was CDs, often by post and with the obligatory band name and contact number scrawled onto the surface (with the occasional bribe thrown into the envelope for good measure). Nowadays it is usually an mp3; either emailed direct to the label or uploaded to their Soundcloud dropbox in the hope of garnering a listen from their head honchos.

Though the medium has changed, the goal – and the prize – has remained the same: To impress the label and subsequently find a place on their artist roster.

Of course, it's not an easy ask. Labels – particularly the more established ones – receive scores, sometimes hundreds, of demos each week. That means you need to do everything you can to make yours stand out, in terms of the music, the production, and the way it's presented.

How then do you ensure that your own demo has the best chance of being heard – and responded to?

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- **Not Before You're Ready**
  - It may seem blindingly obvious, but avoid submitting demos that aren't finished. One of the key complaints among labels is that many of the demos they receive are works in progress: tracks that are at best incomplete, unmixed and at worst just ideas – eight bar sections that a producer thinks could make a great track.
  - Although the intentions behind sending these ideas may be good, it's easy to see why labels get frustrated: they want to sign a track (and potentially an artist); not an idea. You owe it to yourself, your songs, and the label, to finish the tracks you send in: if you can't be bothered to finish the track, why should the label be bothered to take any further interest in you? And when a label says 'finished', they mean finished; as in, fully mixed and with a proper ending.
  - The label may – occasionally – decide to re-record your demo, or give it a subtle touch-up, but the days of labels remaking tracks, particularly in the dance music world, are long gone. If you make indie, pop or rock then chances are that an 80% complete track will be enough to catch a label's interest. Not so for electronic music: labels want to buy into a producer as much as a track. And a quality producer won't send a half-finished demo.
  - Mastering the demo tracks you send, incidentally, is not essential. If you're confident doing so, by all means do a bit of pre-mastering – some gentle multiband compression and limiting – but don't bother spending cash on a pro job. A label understands that demo tracks are, ultimately, still demos and they will usually have a favorite mastering engineer they use across their output anyway.

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- **Where?**
  - Your first question when submitting demos will be which labels to send it to. There is no point in adopting a scatter-gun approach, firing off your demo to as many labels as you can in the hope that one of your musical seeds falls on fertile ground. One of the drawbacks of email and Soundcloud demo submission options has been that it requires little effort to upload demos to a host of labels in next to no time. But this kind of method rarely yields results and can have the inverse effect of alienating labels (some labels will require that any demos sent to them are only sent to them, their thinking being that there's no point in listening to tracks that may get signed to another label).
  - It's much better to take a focused approach; identifying the labels that release the kind of music you make and who will therefore be more likely to like – and therefore sign – your tracks.
  - If you are immersed in a specific music scene it should be easy to make a short list of labels: you'll already have a natural affinity with many of them – you'll probably buy from them and may have been to some of their club nights. If you are more isolationist in your music making then it's time to start researching: head to [www.beatport.com](http://www.beatport.com) and listen to the top 100 tracks in the genre your tracks most fittingly inhabit. Then follow links to the 30 or so labels that you think will be most interested in your demo. Read about each label; see what kind of artists they have signed and ask yourself how you would fit into their roster. Whittle down your list of chosen labels to around 20: this final list will be your hit list.

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- **Who?**

- So you've identified the labels you're going to submit your demo to. Now it's time to do some research, and find out who at the label to send to, what format they like demos in, and what email / Soundcloud / postal addresses to mail the demo to. This often tiresome research stage will see you scour the net, trawling label websites and myspace pages in search of the golden contact details. But it's time well spent.
- To make your job easier, start a spreadsheet and on each row put the label name, website address, list the styles they concentrate on releasing and then record any contact details you may have – like email addresses or postal addresses. Your aim at this stage is to build up a simple database of label contacts to whom you will send your demo.
- Many of the bigger labels offer clear demo submission policies, with specific instructions on where to send them, or with email addresses of the A&R representative: look out for 'Demo' areas on label websites – usually on the Contact Us or About Us pages. If you find one then your life's been made much easier: just whack all the info into your spreadsheet and save it. Many of the bigger labels have clear demo pages – like Toolroom Records or CR2.
- For the labels that don't offer demo submission info as easily (probably the majority), you'll need to do some research. So get your hands dirty and fire off an email to the site contact, or the A&R person (if there is one), or fill in the label's online contact form.
- Keep emails short and sweet; polite and undemanding (bear in mind your recipient will be busy – probably a lot busier than you). Let them answer your email in one line. A suggested email might be: "Hi, I'm interested in submitting a demo to you. Can I confirm where to send it please?". It's also worth saying that if you can get a name of the A&R contact (often these are listed on the contacts page of the label's website) then it's worth noting down: getting a personalized email is more likely to win you favors from the receiver than just a blanket "Hi, Here's my demo": it shows, at the very least, that you've spent some time on research, which a label will appreciate.

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- **How**
  - As important as 'Who?' is 'How?'
  - Does your target label want demos dumped into their Soundcloud dropbox, or emailed direct or even (shock of all shocks!) sent by post? Find out exactly how the label likes demos to be submitted and then follow their guidelines to the letter. In a Sounds To Sample survey of over 1,000 dance music labels, the majority asked for mp3s to be uploaded (via wetransfer or similar) and then the link sent to the label's A&R by email. The next biggest group asked for demos to be uploaded either to the label's Soundcloud dropbox or using an online form on their website. The smallest group asked for CD-Rs. None of the labels welcomed mp3s attached to emails – and unsurprisingly: the amount of space that even the most compressed mp3 takes up in the recipient's inbox, when multiplied by 20 or 30 a week, makes such a method a logistical headache.
  - Labels may ask for all kinds of other things. They may specify the bitrate of the mp3 (192 and 320kbps are favorites) and many will ask that the mp3 is labelled sensibly to indicate the name of the artist and the track name. If you're not doing that then it's worth doing anyway as a matter of industry good practice: using the format ArtistName\_TrackTitle.mp3 will make life easy for the label.

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- **To Artwork Or Not To Artwork?**
  - A perennial question that has taxed demo submitters from day one has been to what extent demo artwork matters. In the old days it *did* matter: the A&R assistant trawling through a thousand tapes / CDs would gravitate towards the ones with striking or quality artwork. Musicians were advised to send their demo in with good artwork and a well considered press release telling the recipient a little about the band / artist. It was all about making a good initial impression which would lead in turn to that ever-important demo listen.
  - Today, things have changed. If you're sending an email with demo attached, or uploading to SoundCloud, there's not much you can do with artwork, although it is worth writing a few carefully worded sentences about yourself as an artist, detailing any tracks you've had released, any radio support the track has received, any live work (DJing or touring) that you do and why you've sent the tracks to the label in question. Keep it brief, spell check before pressing send and, as ever, keep what you say polite, positive and friendly.

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- **Patience**
  - When you've submitted your demo be prepared to wait. The sheer volume of material received by label A&Rs means that there's a perennial backlog of tracks to listen to, and the truth is, most labels will put aside just an hour or so a week, when they're not crazy busy, to listen to the music of new hopefuls. The kinder labels often offer a few paragraphs on their demo submission pages saying how long you might expect to wait for a response, but while you twiddle your thumbs bear in mind that:
    - You may not get a response at all (even if it is a no)
    - If you do get a response, then it could take as long as a month to arrive
    - There's no point in moping while you wait. Instead get busy making your next track, and make it even stronger

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- **Follow-up / Feedback**
  - After you've waited for as long as your patience allows (a fortnight at least), it's time to return to your spreadsheet and do a few follow-up calls or emails. This step is as much about keeping your name in the A&R person's consciousness as about pushing them to listen to your track, but – as long as you avoid becoming a stalking e-pest – it's a step worth taking.
  - All you need to do is email your original A&R contact and ask them if they've received the demo and whether they've managed to find time to listen to it. They may or may not reply, and they may or may not have listened to it, but your email could, at the least, prompt a response from them, even if it's a no. Of course, much better is a yes. And somewhere between yes and no is a reply that offers some feedback on your song.
  - Although fewer labels do it than in the old days, it is still fairly common practice, particularly among smaller labels, or if a label likes, but doesn't love, your track, for them to write back to you with some feedback and / or suggested amends relating to the demo. The label may not like the beats or they may suggest cutting a verse. Whatever they tell you is gold-dust. In the endless learning curve of music making and production the feedback received from a label should be treated seriously. Take time to thank the label for sending it through. And if you admire the label take what they've said on board.

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- The Bigger Picture

- One can't end an article on demos without noting the wider industry trend away from a 'purely music' approach to a 'music plus fans' approach to signing an act. While the demo could, in the past, be the sole means to a signing, labels are now looking for evidence of your appeal and success as an artist. In a world where your number of friends can be established on Facebook, and your fanbase on Myspace, labels are far more likely to sign the act that has 5,000 plays than a slightly better one that has none.
- In an industry in which cash is at best in short supply, labels want to back the winning horse: not one that has no experience on the racetrack. If you can present them with a list of remix credits that include a few bigger names, and a Facebook page with more than 100,000 followers, then you will have something to interest them – even before they listen to your demo.
- Not everyone is able to provide such an attractive offer to a label, of course, but everyone is able to spend some time refining their online offering – whether it's their website, or their Myspace pages – to show that they're as serious about their identity as about their music. It's the digital equivalent of the nice CD package and could make the difference between being signed or ignored.

# How To: Get Your Demo Heard

## 5 Top Tips For Getting Your Demo Heard

1. Never send your demo as an email attachment. They clog up the inboxes of busy label executives and often end up in the trash (sometimes automatically). The vast majority of labels who welcome demos by email ask that the demos are uploaded somewhere else, like yousendit, Soundcloud, or your own website, and that ONLY THE LINK is embedded in the email. Remember to include contact information, including your telephone number, in the email you send them, as well as a few lines (and ONLY a few) about who you are, any achievements in the industry and the size of your following – if you are lucky enough to have one..
2. Be careful when naming mp3s. Include the artist name and the name of the track. This will help labels identify the tracks alongside the email. It's never a bad idea to go one step further and also tag your mp3s. Tagging is used in the consumer world to make organizing large music collections easy. An mp3's tagged 'metadata' (song title, artist name, genre and so on) is stored in a tiny companion file called an ID3 container, and all details can be edited by you. Tagging demos mean that even if they get divorced from the email you sent with them, the label will be able to identify the artist name – and even your email address.

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3. Encode mp3s at 320kbps. It's good enough to offer a fairly faithful rendition of your track in terms of quality, but is not so big as to make streaming cumbersome.
4. Create some heat. Send your tracks to radio DJs, or try to get some online (or offline) press and PR. Spend some time cultivating your online presence. If you're on Twitter, Soundcloud or Facebook – invest some hours (and maybe a little cash) in a pleasing, accessible design. Offer an incentive for 'fans' to join your Facebook or Youtube fan pages and ramp up your plays. If a label likes a demo, their next step is often to look at your website. If they get there and are greeted with out-of-date tracks, lousy artwork, and little indication of life, then you are damaging their first impression. A little time spent ensuring color schemes work, that any text is spelled correctly, and that you have more than your best mates as followers will all help push you to the top of the A&R pile. Too many musicians are guilty of spending weeks on a mix and only minutes on their web presence. Do yourself a favor: ensure the latter reflects the quality of your music.

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5. Go for quality over quantity every time. Resist the urge to send labels every new track you make. If they don't rate your first few tracks, they'll soon start to ignore your emails. A much better approach is to work hard on one or two tracks and then mail these through – two tracks every three or four months to a single label is reasonable. Timely submissions of quality material will always yield better results than endless bombardments of mediocrity.

Dave Felton is a DJ, producer and Co-founder of [Sample Magic](#). Dave, as Jake Island, is signed to Toolroom Records where he has remixed Mark Knight and been remixed by the likes of Grum, Manuel de la Mare, and Crazy P. He writes production music for Boosey & Hawkes and EMI. His parallel career has been in publishing, with positions at the BBC, TUC, and The Guardian. He is editor of the best-selling Secrets of House Music Production and The Producer's Manual books. Dave is also co-founder of the record label, La Bombe.

