Slow Down The Attack

Fast attack times are deceptive. At first listen, they make compression seem easy. They effectively control even the most unruly drum tracks, yielding a smooth, consistent sound with minimal effort and tweaking.

But are fast attack times as magical as they seem?

Not quite.

You’ve probably heard about transients. People certainly seem to like talking about them. Turns out, they’re pretty important.

Transients are the sharp, percussive onsets of sounds. They add punch and impact to tracks. They help our ears pick out drum sounds in busy arrangements. They make music exciting.

Fast attack times annihilate them.

Overusing fast-attack compression is the quickest way to destroy the punch and impact of your drums. This will make hits harder to hear, decrease clarity and intelligibility, and make your drums sound like they sit several feet behind the speakers (no pun intended).
Sometimes this is what you're looking for. Most of the time, it's not.

**In most situations, medium to slow attack times are a better choice.** Unless you're purposely trying to soften transients, make sure to slow down the attack time enough to preserve them.

**Consider Tempo**

Tempo plays a significant role in determining how much low end is appropriate in a mix. The slower the tempo, the more low end you can typically add to drums. On the other hand, faster tempos often sound best with thinner drum sounds.

For more information, watch this video.

**Check Polarity**

Polarity problems are the silent killer of drums.

They destroy impact and obliterate low end. They make tracks sound thin and lifeless, or cause them to disappear entirely. But most of all, they are seriously frustrating. (If you’ve ever wondered why a kick still sounds wimpy after adding 18 dB at 60 Hz, you know the feeling.)

Follow the steps below whenever you have multiple drum samples that play together:

1. Pick a “master” drum sample that you'll compare the others to. Solo it.
2. Solo the next drum sample as well. Listen to the two together.
3. Flip the polarity on the second sample.
4. Listen to the punch and low end of the combined sound. Flip the polarity in and out, and choose what that sounds best. (Sometimes, there won’t be a clear answer. Make a decision and move on.)
5. Add in another sample, and repeat steps 3 and 4 until all samples are playing together.

**Use Parallel Compression**

Grammy-winning mixers like Andrew Scheps, Michael Brauer, and Manny Marroquin use parallel compression to add punch, weight, and impact to their drums. Wondering how you can do the same?

[Watch this video for details.](#)
Additional Tips and Tricks

- When EQing acoustic drums, be careful when boosting top end on close mic’d tracks. This can accentuate cymbal bleed and make the drums sound harsh. If you’re struggling to achieve brightness without bringing up the cymbals, try using gates to reduce the bleed between hits. You can also layer in drum samples (my first choice) and EQ them for brightness without bringing up the bleed.

- There are two approaches for EQing overheads. You can either:
  1. Filter out all the low end and use them as cymbal mics, or...
  2. Leave them as-is and use them to form the overall sound of the kit

Option #1 will create a separated, sculpted sound that works well in modern genres. Option #2 will lead to a more natural sound that works well for folk and acoustic music.

- Try rolling off everything below 40 Hz on the kick. This can often tighten things up.

- Since acoustic drum tracks have bleed, you should always EQ them while listening to all tracks together.

- You can often filter hi-hat tracks aggressively. Try cutting everything below 500 Hz.

- Acoustic drums will often need lots of EQ. Don’t be afraid to boost or cut by 10 dB or more.

- Listen to a few modern records and notice how bright the kick is. The key to getting your kick to cut isn’t more low end, but more top end.

- If you're mixing a sub-kick with nothing above 200 Hz, a boost at 5 kHz won’t do you much good. Instead, augment the track with a hi-hat sample, or add another kick with a high-pass filter (set so just the click cuts through). This is more effective than trying to boost something that isn't there in the first place.

- The upper-bass region—from 80 to 200 Hz—is crucial. Pay close attention to it while mixing. If you can center the punch of a kick at 80 or 100 Hz instead of 60 Hz, it will often translate much better on small speakers.

- When it comes to drum reverb, timing matters. Reverbs that ring out too long will trample over the rhythm of a track. Set your reverb so it covers the space between hits, but gets out of the way before the next hit.

---

For more mixing tips, visit BehindTheSpeakers.com.
Discover The Keys To Crafting Radio-Ready Mixes That Sound Clear, Punchy, And Professional.

Mix By Design is an online training course that will teach you how to mix like a pro. You’ll discover a simple, step-by-step system you can use to break through overwhelm, sink into the creative flow, and make your best mixes yet.

“I went from having a mix I was constantly needling and nitpicking to a mix that I was like — YES, that’s where I want to be. That mix sounds big...that mix sounds pro.” - Christopher Woudstra

“I just finished a new song that is my best work to date by using Jason’s system.” - Brian Watts

Ready to get on the path to pro mixes?

Click Here To Learn More About Mix By Design