Mono vs. Stereo: How and When to Use Each Track Type

When you add a new track to your DAW session, you'll have to decide between mono vs. stereo.

But what does each term mean? And what are the main differences? When should you use a mono track and when is stereo the better choice?

In this article I'll explain everything you need to know about mono vs. stereo—from tracking to the final master.

Mixing in mono

Even if massive width is your goal, mono still has a place in your mixing workflow.

With so many different elements in a dense mix, it can be difficult to identify the most serious conflicts.

Adding pan position to the list of variables only makes your job harder.

That's why many engineers use mixing in mono as part of their process.

By temporarily flattening all the stereo information, you'll get a clearer picture of how each sound in your mix interacts with the others.

To learn more about how mixing in mono can benefit you, head over to our in-depth guide.

To test your mix in mono, all you have to do is use the mono sum option on your master fader to hear how it sounds.

Mono compatibility

Hearing your mix this way is important for more than just the mono mixing technique.

In fact, you should test your mix in mono even if you only ever mix with both channels active.

The reason? Compatibility.

Mono compatibility means how well your mix performs when it gets summed to mono.

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Summing to mono is when the left and right channels add together to create a mono signal. If there's conflicting information between the two channels, some sounds may cancel each other out.

You might wonder when this problem would ever happen since most playback systems have two stereo speakers.

But the truth is that plenty of stereo listening systems are more mono than they seem.

Any set of speakers where the left and right channels are positioned too close to each other reduce the stereo separation of your mix.

I’m talking about devices like phones, Bluetooth speakers, laptops and most other small speaker systems.

These listening systems have a naturally narrower stereo field with more of the mix prone to overlap.

Make sure to check your mix at least once for mono compatibility before sending it off for mastering.

- The main root causes of poor mono compatibility are:
- Too many stereo tracks
- Artificial stereo widening plugins
- Too much reverb or delay
- Phase issues between microphones

Moving in stereo

Mono and stereo tracks are basic building blocks in your DAW session.

Knowing which to use is important for the best results.

If you’ve made it through this article, you’ll have a solid foundation in the basics of mono vs. stereo.