

# Fills and Transitions

v1.1  
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When I hear songs from new artists, one of the things that usually strikes me is that many times the song has a hard time building anticipation and flow. It sounds more like a rough collection of loops, and not a polished piece I want to listen to over and over again. While it can have a lot of energy, at the same time it can lack much of anything else to make you want to re-listen to it. One of the key things missing from the song are transitions and fills. Small but critical parts of the song that help it build drama and release tension. Teasers and other parts that help pull the listener along with the song, giving them a connection to it as an emotional piece of music that ebbs and flows as it plays.

To me, it's these little nuances that really showcase how well a musician understands the craft of building a song. While I've already covered the basics of turning loops into a basic song structure in my Arranging Guide, I think it's time to turn our attention to adding these transitional elements to our songs.

So to start with, what exactly are transitions and fills, and what purpose do they serve in a song?

Like all things in the art of writing music, there's no simple answer, and a lot of people will have different ideas on the subject. For me however, these vital elements typically serve the following purposes:

- To help introduce a major change in the song, to build anticipation in the listener.
  - To help break up a strong, but possibly static section of a song.
  - To introduce or prolong tension.
  - To foretell and smooth out an abrupt change in the direction or feel of a song.
  - To add "ear candy", little flourishes that happen so fast that the listener might have to listen multiple times to pick up on all the subtleties in the song.
  - To let other musicians know you have no friends and enjoy spending hours moving little bits of audio around in just a single measure of music.
- Just a few ideas on what transitions and fills can be used for, and why they are so important in getting a track from point A (the beginning) to point B (the end). So, what's the difference between fills and transitions? Where do we use transitions, and how do we create them? What are some ideas for making your own transitions?

To start with, I tend to think of fills are shorter in nature, typically less than a bar (measure) long. Sort of like mini-transitions used to add interest and variety to normally repeating sounds

and patterns. Where as transitions are almost major sections of the song themselves. Longer and more dramatic, the long build ups in most club music for example. But transitions don't have to be so in the forefront and obvious by any means, they can just as easily be snuck under the rest of the parts in a song adding slightly to the feel and mood without being obtrusive at all. In this guide I'll use the terms fill and transition interchangeably, so don't get too hung up on the semantics.

Where do you put transitions though, and how many do you need? It's certainly something that's going to vary from producer to producer, some might use a lot, others might use only a couple without really realizing it. Let's take a look at a song though and I'll explain how I personally go about the process.



This is a zoomed out view of one of my songs. Some of you will no doubt be able to already spot a lot of fills and edits in this screenshot, but let's ignore those for now and just look at a broad overview of the song structure. Typically I try and write fills and transitions for major parts of the song first, the important changes and highlights of the track if you will. In the example above, this means going into the drop at measure 73, coming out of it at bar 89, coming out of the mini drop at measure 129, and probably when the bassline and main synth come in at bar 41.

In this song, those are major transitional stages, where I introduce a new instrument that's crucial to the song, or drastically build up and breakdown the energy of the song. So I'll focus on those areas first, and really spend the time to make sure that moving from one section of the song to another is not only smooth and flowing, but exciting too.

Once I've done those areas, I'll re-listen to things and see what areas I should address next. These might not be major structural parts of the song anymore, but they are still equally important. In this case, I might try and make the introduction of the main drums at bar 17 less abrupt, by creating a small conga fill to lead into the BD and Snare coming in. Or at measure 105 where the solo synth and arp synth are introduced, I'll likely add a transition there to make the introduction of those elements more natural sounding.

Don't worry, I'll get into some audio examples later on, but here's a link to the complete song shown above if you want to hear what these changes sound like now:

<https://tarekith.com/mp3s/Tarekith-02-Coil.mp3>

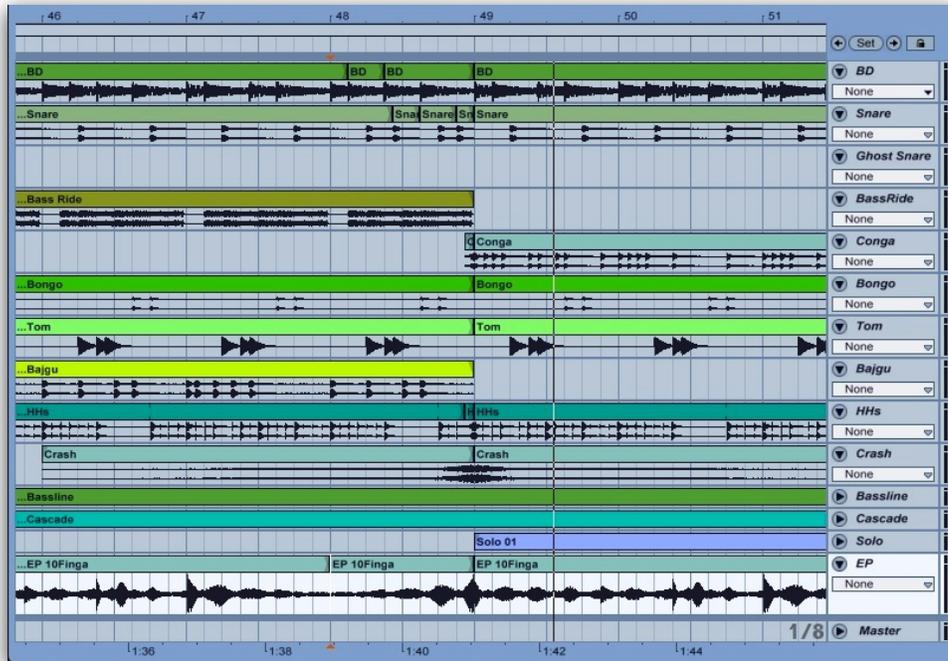
Just as important as introducing new parts in the song though, is releasing parts. Taking them away from the mix without it sounding like you just muted everything right on the downbeat. So places like bar 121 where the mini drop starts and 145 where the main drums leave are also areas I'd focus on. And of course sometimes I like to just go completely over the top and put some sort of fill almost every 8 bars like in this song. I've done it every 4 bars too, but life's too short for that kind of a production habit!

So when it comes to the question of where to put fills and transitions, I recommend focusing on the important parts of the song first. Some people will start at the beginning and just work their way through from start to finish adding fills, but I find that can get a little monotonous after awhile. And sometimes when you focus on the important parts first, you get those done and realize the song doesn't need anything else. It sounds fine like it is, and doing more work on it really is not going to add anything, so why waste the time?

And of course, now we get to the juicy part, how do we create fills and transitions?

As we dive in, I just want to point out once more than these are just some of the ideas I use, by all means explore and create your own methods, there's literally millions and millions of ways to do this. I'm just going to show different examples of how I've created transitions in my own songs, so let's start with the one shown above.

## FILL 01



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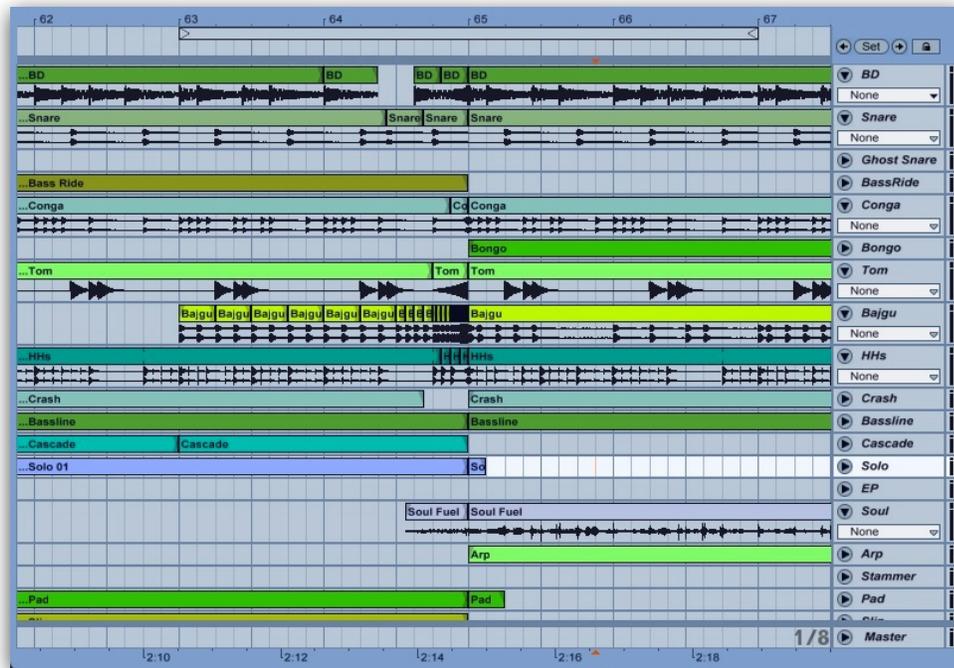
As you can see and hear, at measure 49 I introduce a synth part called Solo 01, which is a fairly important part of the song. In the measure leading up to this, I do a few things to make the transition more pronounced and anticipated. I change the BD (bass drum) and snare patterns, chopping up and rearranging those loops to make a new drum fill leading to the change. There's so many ways to do this while even sticking to a 1/16th note grid, that I couldn't possibly list them all. Suffice to say that even after all these years of making music, a lot of times when creating fills this way it just comes down to randomly moving the audio bits around until it sounds good. And when I say audio, and while most of my screenshots are of audio files, the same technique works with MIDI files too.

So, I have a new BD and Snare part for that measure leading to the change. These are main elements of the song, so changes like this are more pronounced and dramatic. I also did some smaller changes though, like adding a reverse Conga hit before that part is introduced, and the same with the HH's. Just a small little bit of audio reversed for that last second "whoosh" that pushes in the new song section.

More obviously, I've also used the fairly common trick of reversing crash cymbal and using that to lead into the change as well. Used sparingly it's a great way to build up energy to a new section of your song. This is a great way to really slowly add a build up element, as you can see the reversed cymbal is 3 measures long, and sort of comes on so smoothly you don't notice it until the end.



## FILL 03



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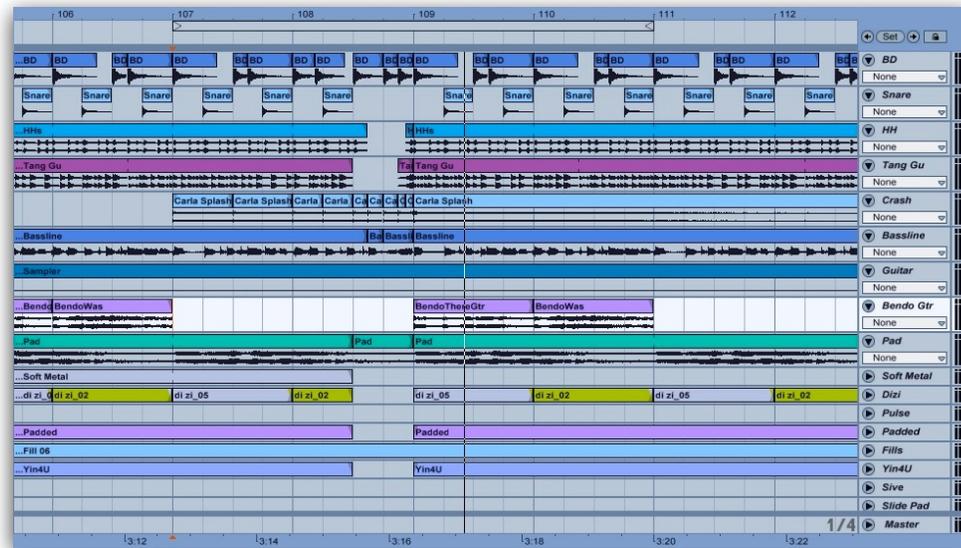
Ok, last transition we'll look at for this song. In this case, I've once again changed the BD, Snare, and HH patterns in the last bar before the new section of the song at measure 65. Added a reversed BD too, so I get that 'sucking up' sound leading to the first BD hit. The Conga and Tom parts also have reversed hits here, adding to the obviousness of the effect. The Bajgu has a stutter edit part starting at measure 63, and using progressively smaller and smaller slices leading up to bar 65.

One nice tip for stutter edits: you don't always have to use the obvious note lengths when creating them. A lot of people will stick with 1/16th, 1/8th, 1/32nd notes for this type of fill. A lot of times when you get smaller than 1/16th note slices, using a triplet or dotted note value instead can create a much smoother sounding "roll". Play around, try different options here, a lot of times it's just trial and error until you get something that sounds good when it comes to micro edits like this.

Finally, the Soul Fuel part has a small section of audio in the fill that leads to its main reintroduction at bar 65. Again, just to build a tiny sense of what's to come next in the song. Also, note that the Pad and Solo 01 tracks don't just end right at bar 65 either. Both of these parts have delay on them, and having them end on the downbeat of the next measure sounds a lot more natural than having those parts stop just at the end of the measure. Transitions are not just about introducing new elements in a song, but also how you remove them too.

Ok, new song, this time The Thin Line.

## Fill 04

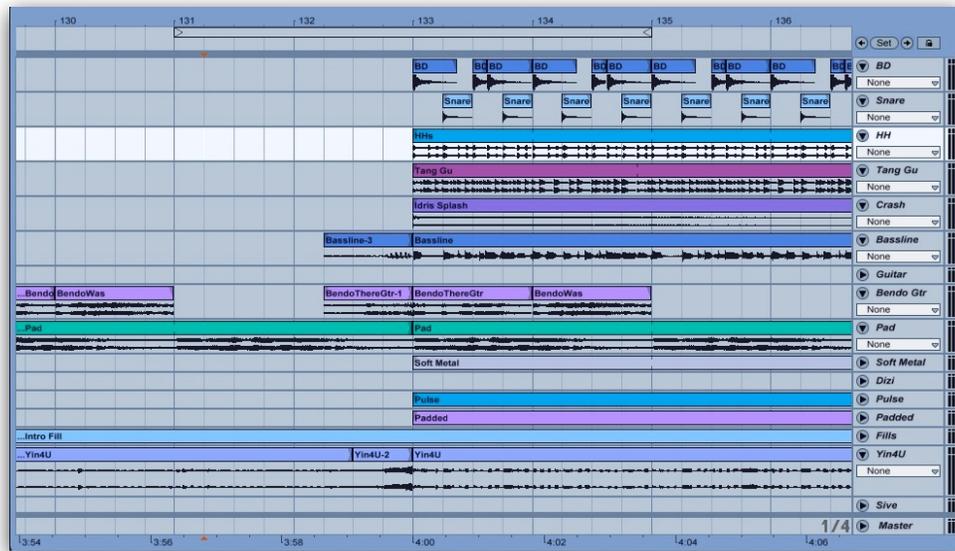


[https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans\\_audio/Fill04.mp3](https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans_audio/Fill04.mp3)

You can see in this example that instead of using loops for some of the individual drum parts, I'm actually using just single audio samples. For genres like glitch, breaks, etc where I know that I'm going to be doing a lot of edits and fills, I find that having direct access to the individual drum sounds GREATLY speeds up the process of making fills. You don't have to slice and dice them out of loops, you can just rearrange and work with them directly. One downside to this method though, you have to be careful you don't have thousands and thousands of individual hits in your DAW project, or it can quickly slow things down a lot. In this case, having the BD and Snare as individual samples is all I needed.

This fill is also less about introducing new elements, than it is breaking up an otherwise repetitive sounding section of the song. Just a small bit of variation to keep it interesting is all it takes sometimes. In this case, I drop one of the snares, reorder the BD's, reverse a HH and Tang Gu hit, and do a simple build up with the Splash cymbal. I've also dropped out some of the synth parts for this last half measure, which not only gives the ear a break from them, but also gives more space for the drum fills to be heard. It makes no sense to create a fill for a part if it's so buried under other sounds you can't hear it.

## Fill 05

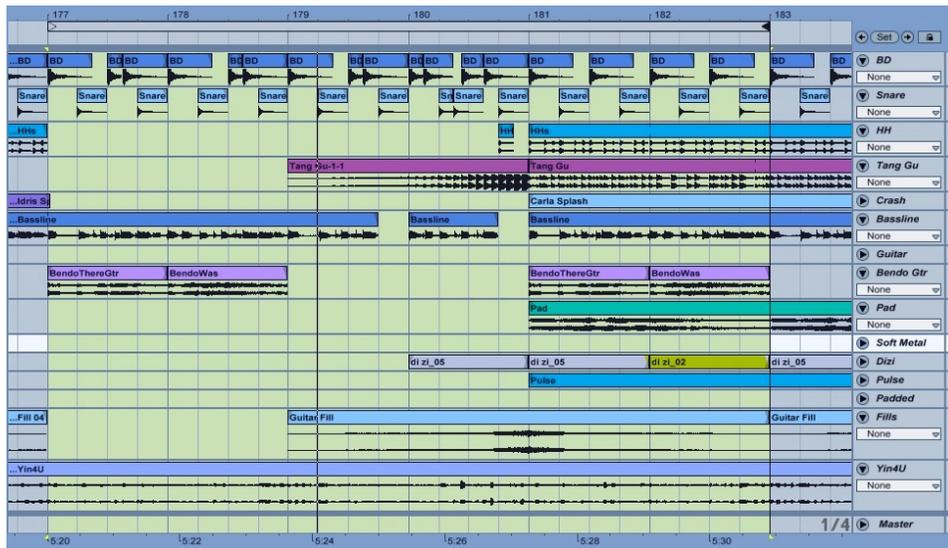


[https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans\\_audio/Fill05.mp3](https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans_audio/Fill05.mp3)

In this transition, I've taken it the other way and tried to make a really dramatic entrance for new sounds. During the drop in this song, almost all the elements have been removed until we're left with two basic sounds, the Pad and the Yin4U sound. In the last measure, I added some reversed and time-stretched bassline and Guitar (BendoThereGtr) parts, and layered those under the Yin4U part as it gets louder. Add a touch of delay to the Yin4u part to smooth things out.

The result is that I've taken 3 parts and combined them as layers in a really simple, yet dramatic sound. It really helps pull you into that moment when the drums and the rest of the parts kick back. Certainly a lot more exciting than just having those parts unmute with no anticipation. I think this part also reiterates the fact that transitional elements don't have to be long in duration. In this case there's a lot going on in just a half measure of the song, and while it serves its purpose to build to the climax, it's also so short that likely people will still get something out of it on a second listen. The song remains interesting (I hope anyway) on multiple listens because there's a lot of little ear candy moments that happen too fast for the brain to register them all in one listen.

## Fill 06



[https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans\\_audio/Fill06.mp3](https://tarekith.com/mp3s/trans_audio/Fill06.mp3)

In this case, I knew there were some sounds I really liked coming in at measure 181, so I wanted to create a longer transitional stage leading into them. So at bar 177 I drop out a lot of the instrumentation and introduce some longer fill elements to lead up to the big reveal at 181. The Tang Gu and Guitar tracks have much longer elements building anticipation up to measure 181, and without other instruments getting in their way sonically, they stand out a lot more. An additional snare hit added in the last measure really highlights that moment before everything kicks off again.



I think you can see by now that there's endless ways to approach a concept like song transitions. I hope I've also demonstrated that you don't have to do something really complex for it to be effective. It might seem like a tedious process, but sometimes a few well-thought transitions can really give a song a lot more impact. Of course it's also important to not get carried away as well. You don't want to spend so much time on fills that the song as a whole no longer flows well. Always think of your transitions in the context of the song as a whole.

Listen to the song front to back a few times, confirm that any fills you made flow well in the song, and work to give the song movement, not stop it dead in its tracks. Make sure that you're not using the same fill so much that it in itself sounds repetitious. And while a lot of the transitions I've used as examples here are only a measure or two long, don't be afraid to do longer fills if need be. Experiment, try new things, and have fun with it.

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