

<https://splice.com/blog/mike-shinoda-interview-meteora-20th-anniversary/>

FEATURES

## Mike Shinoda on crafting Meteora, songwriting, and the art of vocal production



## Mike Shinoda is a musician who has bridged genres and generations like nobody else.

A prolific vocalist, producer, songwriter, instrumentalist, and visual artist, Mike Shinoda has been releasing a wide range of music under his own name in recent years, working alongside everyone from Chino Moreno to iAan Dior. That said, many may know him best for his role as the co-founder, co-lead vocalist, and producer of Linkin Park, the band behind some of the most impactful records in modern music.

*Meteora* is, without doubt, one of these records. Not only is it among the top ten best-selling albums of the 21st century, but its genre-defying sound has influenced—and continues to influence—countless bands and artists. Tracks like “Faint” and “Numb” have also made a mark on the larger music zeitgeist in a way that few songs have, and played a particularly key role in exposing rock listeners to hip hop and vice versa in an era that was still dominated by charts and labels that pushed rigid genre categories.



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Below, we had the privilege of sitting down with Mike Shinoda to discuss the creative process behind the record, how it informs his trajectory for the music he's releasing today, his advice for budding music creators, and more.



### Pushing beyond expectations

'Nu metal' has always been a seemingly inescapable label associated with Linkin Park, but it was particularly emphasized around the release of *Meteora*. "That used to be a real challenge for us, because everything was so genre-based, from the shows to the radio, and eventually playlists," Mike tells us. "Things were very scene-based at a certain point, too, and we didn't want to belong to any of that, even from the beginning. We came out with *Hybrid Theory* at a time when nu metal was a thing, and every single chance I got, I told people, 'Don't put that flag in my hand—because I'm not going to hold it.'"



While *Meteora* is often paired with *Hybrid Theory*, the two records are more distinct from one another than many give them credit for. In many ways, *Hybrid Theory* serves as a powerful introduction for what Linkin Park was founded upon—combining an array of different styles and influences into a bold, cohesive sound. Meanwhile, *Meteora* iterates upon and evolves beyond the sound that *Hybrid Theory* establishes, venturing into new sonic territories for exploration.

“Nobody’s Listening’ is a rap song over a Japanese Shakuhachi flute,” Mike says. “A song like ‘Session’ is a glitchy, almost electronic song that draws more from the likes of Aphex Twin than anything else anyone would have expected from us.”

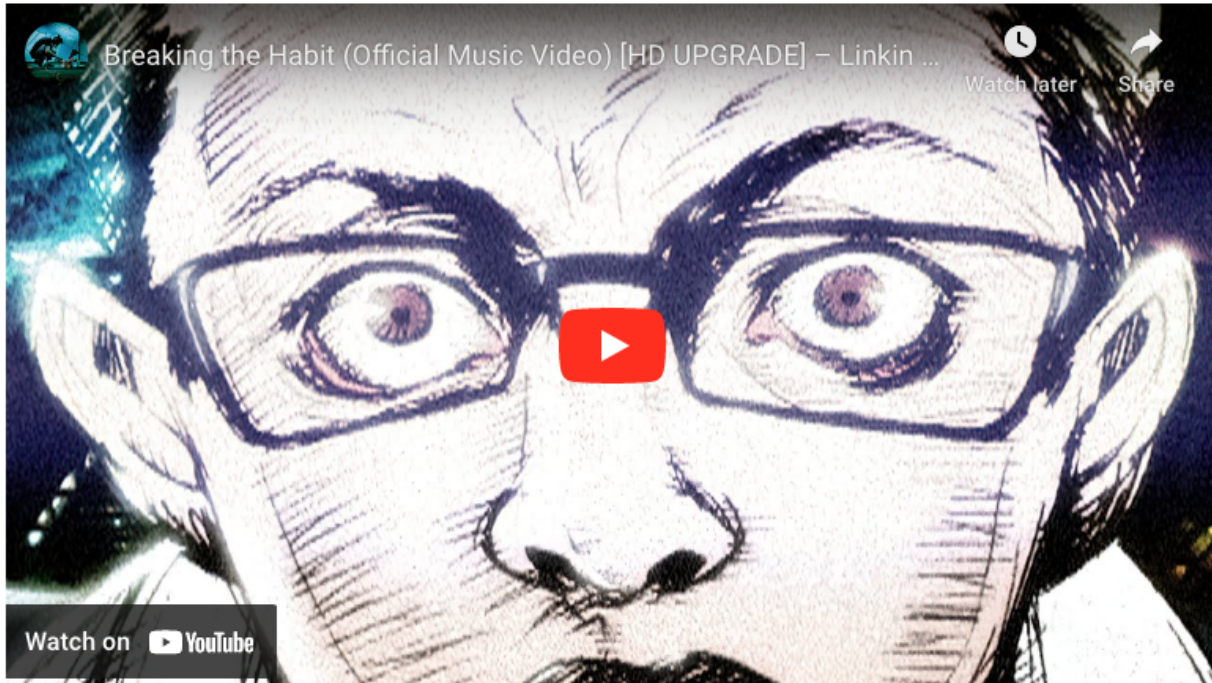


### Breaking down “Breaking the Habit”

And then there’s “Breaking the Habit,” a track that feels like a timeless yet defining moment in Linkin Park history. Within the context of *Meteora*, the song stands out as an exception, perhaps even more so than “Nobody’s Listening” or “Session”—the distorted guitars, rap hooks, and screaming that marked many of the band’s tracks in some combination up to this point are nowhere to be found.

“It’s mostly a piano loop, strings, programmed drums, and vocals,” Mike tells us. “That’s the core of the song.”





While it may have felt like a deviation at the time, taking a step back and looking at Linkin Park's discography as a whole today, it becomes clear that "Breaking the Habit" is anything but an exception. Rather, it speaks powerfully to the core creative identity of Linkin Park, which is centered around continuously and rigorously breaking down their sound to expand and reimagine it with every new record.

"'Breaking the Habit' was the first song to break that open for the band," Mike says. "Once we had it, we knew it was great—we had the opportunity to do some things that people really didn't expect. And in the big picture, what that does is it opens us up to the possibility of having more options later."

And Linkin Park certainly went on to explore those options they created for themselves. With their following record *Minutes to Midnight*, the band constructed an entirely new sound from the ground up, which parted with nu metal entirely while still indescribably and unmistakably sounding like Linkin Park. And then, with *A Thousand Suns*, they went through the whole process again, and then they did it once more with *LIVING THINGS*... all the way up to their most recent record, *One More Light*.

"When we talked with the label about how to present the album to the world, we told them it was our priority to make 'Breaking the Habit' a single," Mike reflects. "It didn't have to be the first single; it just had to be a single at some point so that people knew in terms of an artistic statement that the band wasn't going to *just* be about screaming and loud guitars."

*“Breaking the Habit” had to be a single at some point so that people knew in terms of an artistic statement that the band wasn’t going to just be about screaming and loud guitars.”*

—Mike Shinoda

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## Revisiting *Meteora* 20 years later

One of the most rewarding aspects of *Meteora 20th Anniversary Edition* is being able to hear demos at various stages of the creation of the original record—some that eventually developed into the songs that made the final track listing, and others like “Lost” that ultimately didn’t make the cut for various reasons.

Bringing things back to “Breaking the Habit,” there are two demos that we get to hear on the *20th Anniversary Edition*: one that’s completely instrumental (“Drawing”), and another that features early vocal toplines from Mike himself (“Breaking the Habit – Original Mike 2002 Demo”).



The image shows two Spotify preview cards stacked vertically. Each card features the album cover for Linkin Park's *Meteora* on the left. The top card is titled "Drawing - Breaking The Habit Demo 2002" and the bottom card is titled "Breaking the Habit - Original Mike 2002 Demo". Both cards include the artist name "Linkin Park", a "PREVIEW" button, a three-dot menu icon, and a play button icon.

While both are incredible listens in their own right, what makes the latter fascinating is how despite some differences in lyrics and melodies, we can hear that so many elements ultimately delivered by Chester’s vocals were already drafted by Mike at this stage.

“Basically, it was just whatever the preamp was on my MACKIE mixer into Pro Tools,” Mike recounts in respect to how he recorded the vocal demo. “It was just me getting down my ideas, sketching them out so that I could remember them, and then playing them for Chester to say, ‘Okay, here’s the song I wrote. Where do we go from there?’ Then, we changed some notes, changed some lyrics, and started crafting the song.”

## An unmatched commitment to sharing the creative process

It goes without saying that few artists ever release something that's at this unique stage in the creation process. "I had to really think to myself," Mike says. "Do I want this super raw, unpolished, unfinished version of this song out there in the world?' It's really unrepresentable—I was going to say 'in my opinion,' but it's just objectively unrepresentable. The reason I put it out there is for the people like the folks who visit Splice—if you're a music maker, I think being able to hear a song in that form and know where it ended up going can be informative in terms of the process."

The vulnerability and courage this takes—especially with an audience that's at the scale of Linkin Park's—is admirable; many of us music creators would instinctively feel resistance to the idea of sharing a track or mix far before we felt it was ready. And even if it *were* effectively complete, we'd likely downplay it, saying things like we're "still working on the mix."

"I'm lucky because while I don't do it often, I can just turn off my critical brain when I'm listening to our stuff and just enjoy it," Mike shares. "If I'm planning my next song, I can also listen to it and go, 'Okay, what could I have done better?' And I've done that on different records. As we've been making our albums, it doesn't hurt to go back and say, 'Okay, what do the fans already know? What has their experience been like?' And if I consider that like the first book of a series, where did I leave them off, and where do we pick up the story? How can I play with their expectations?"

## Dissecting the distinctive sound of "Massive"

Another track that features Mike's early singing on it from the *20th Anniversary Edition* is "Massive." Unlike the "Breaking the Habit" demo, this is a completely recorded but never-released track, revealed alongside others like "Lost," "Fighting Myself," "More the Victim," and "Healing Foot." The song stands out with its unique melodies and larger-than-life atmosphere, particularly in comparison to other Linkin Park tracks that were written around *Meteora*.



"We started writing the album while we were touring for *Hybrid Theory*," Mike recounts. "So I think the vibes of some of the demos were inspired by being out on the road and playing in different places. When you're on stage a lot and playing in front of people, you kind of intuit the ways a song could be effective. And I think that 'Massive' is a song that felt very 'live show' to me. It's just *big*—hence the name."



“I think part of it is also the guitars; they’re just really loud in the mix. So loud. But yeah, my singing on that was, again, where I was at at that time—very unpolished and squeaky. Chester always liked that one though. I remember he was one of the guys in the band that was in that song’s corner, but it didn’t make the cut.”

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## Developing vocals from a producer’s perspective

While Mike is perhaps his own harshest critic when it comes to his old vocals, an interesting point surfaces from the “Breaking the Habit” demo as well as “Massive,” which is just how much Mike Shinoda has evolved as a singer in particular. While Mike’s singing plays an increasingly large role in subsequent Linkin Park albums, it’s safe to say that at the point of *Meteora*’s release, he was strictly considered ‘the rapper’ of the band.

Perhaps as a byproduct of this, there’s a hint of reservation in his performance for tracks like the “Breaking the Habit” demo, which is in stark contrast with his unapologetic vocals on the choruses of “In My Head,” his latest solo track that also makes an appearance on the *Scream VI* soundtrack.



“I’ve worked on my singing a lot over the last few years,” Mike shares. “It struck me at one point that I’ve spent so many years singing as a function of writing, not singing as a function of being a singer. So, my intention whenever I would sing for nearly 20 years would usually be to express an idea that I wanted somebody else to sing. Something like, ‘Hey, I have an idea for this vocal part; it should go like this,’ or, ‘Hey, your vocal sounds really good—let me augment it with this harmony.’ And so I’d sing the backup harmony, but I was never in the front.”



“And then we had these rare occasions on Linkin Park records where my demo sounded good to everybody, and they said, ‘Yeah, let’s have Mike sing that song.’ Whether that’s the well-known demo called ‘No Roads Left’ all the way to ‘Invisible’ off of *One More Light*, there are these songs that I sang because for one reason or another, we all agreed that I should be the one who sings them.”



“But usually I wasn’t doing that, and I realized around 2019 or 2020 that if I wrote a song with the intention of singing it from the beginning, I might discover something different about my voice. And I totally did.”

Not only has Mike gained confidence in putting his singing front-and-center over the years, but he’s also helped and inspired so many others in the same endeavor. For example, below you can see how he facilitates Kailee Morgue, his featured artist on “In My Head,” push her vocals and take some creative risks in the studio.



“When I was working with Kailee, I had heard her shout and speak loudly before,” Mike says. “But when she sang, she wasn’t ever doing that. So I was like, ‘Well, I’ve heard you do it. I know your voice can do that sound. You just have to shake off the nervousness about doing it and making different shapes with your mouth in the back of your throat and so on.’ And so we did that in order to get the right performance for ‘In My Head.’”

“I love vocal producing—I didn’t even know it was a job until I had done it for ten years,” Mike laughs. “At some point, somebody asked me if we wanted a vocal producer on a track. I was like, ‘What does that mean? That’s specific to just vocals...?’ Chester was like, ‘Why would we hire someone? I just do that with Mike.’”

Even for the records that came years after *Meteora*, Mike and Chester worked closely on shaping each other’s vocals—see this LPTV episode where they work on the vocal delivery for “BURN IT DOWN” off of 2012’s *LIVING THINGS* for one of countless examples.



“Yeah, I did that with Chester our whole career,” Mike shares. “He was such a strong singer who just always had such raw talent—so much so that I wouldn’t have had the perspective to know just how unique he was at the time. Back in 2000, I wouldn’t have known that he was a world-class vocalist of the ages. I just thought he was good, and our effort was trying to figure out, ‘Who are you? How can we pull the most “you” vocal out and make it sound really good on this particular song?’ Because back then, he was singing like all the people who he grew up listening to. And so on one song, he would sound like this person, and on another song, he’d sound like somebody completely different. And I was like, ‘Nah, you have to sound like you on every song.’”

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—Mike Shinoda

## A go-to vocal production tip from Mike Shinoda

Over the years, Mike has picked up a number of techniques when it comes to helping vocalists get into their element when recording. “I’ll give you a really cool trick for the producers on Splice,” Mike says. “You know how musicians will be trying to record a part, and you can see them getting locked up in their brain and having trouble? They know what they want to sing, but they keep making the same exact mistake over and over, and they’re getting flustered.”

“Stop them and say, ‘What’s your phone number?’ And they’ll give you all the numbers. Now say, ‘Okay, do your phone number backwards.’ And then they have to really think, and they have to repeat all the numbers in reverse. Then, have them immediately do the take again. Nine times out of ten, just shuffling the part of their brain that’s active and forcing another part of the brain to be active resets something. And there are dozens of these tricks that you can do with people to get them to shake off that weird block or that weird nervousness that they’ve got that’s frustrating them.”

For those who are eager to learn more from Mike, [he recently hosted \(and archived\) a Twitch stream](#) where he soloed and broke down the vocals for “In My Head.” In the same session, he also shares how he transformed [this bass one-shot from umru](#) to design the main synth sound.

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## Collaboration and calibration

One of the most simultaneously rewarding and challenging aspects of operating in a band is that you have to create a single body of work with others who may be coming from different creative perspectives. “Compared to what some bands have, we had it *really* good,” Mike tells us. “Our guys are emotionally intelligent, intellectually intelligent, and good with each other. And we didn’t have the kind of drama that a lot of bands have. I think we’re lucky that that was the case.”

Through viewing anything from LPTV episodes to how they interact with one another on stage, Mike's comments on the band members' shared qualities and dynamic certainly feels authentic. Even at the point in time of *Meteora*'s release, Linkin Park had already created a massive yet intimate community with their audience, which feels like a feat that was enabled by the unity and closeness they were able to establish among themselves.

That said, that's not to say that there was zero creative conflict. "There were times when we were all really on the same page, and other times when we weren't," Mike says as he reflects on the collaborative process for *Meteora*. "But I think that's just being in a band. There were certainly times when I had a lyric that I liked that somebody else didn't like, and it changed laterally. I wouldn't really let something go on a record if it changed for the worse. Even if all five of the other guys liked it better and I didn't like it better, I'd still continue to work on it until all six of us liked it."

"And I think I tried to do that for other guys, too. Like, if Joe really didn't like something, but everybody else was cool with it, I'd really try to do my best. It's hard to do that with this many people, but I tried to do my best to honor everybody's individual feelings about stuff on the record."

### **Avoiding the 'Coca-Cola Can Song' effect**

Over the years, Mike and the other members also developed new approaches to collaboration as they deepened their understanding of how they engage with each other's creative ideas.

"I was noticing that if I made a demo and I sang words that the guys didn't like that I knew were placeholders—like maybe the line sucked but I only had 30 minutes left, and I wanted to wrap up the song to play it for the guys—then they'd laugh about the bad line, and then they'd call the song by that line," Mike laughs. "Like, if the song was called 'Despair,' but the line had something to do with a Coca-Cola can, they'd call it the 'Coca-Cola Can Song.' And then it fucked up the songs in our little band culture; songs would get *ruined* just because they couldn't stop making fun of the one line. So I was like, 'Okay, I need to stop putting bullshit lines on a song just to finish it. It's better to just sing nothing than it is to put a bad line in.'"



That said, Mike emphasizes that sounds alone aren't everything. "In the beginning, for the first two records, we made tracks, we polished them, and then we forced vocals onto them," he says. "We didn't pitch the songs. We didn't change the tempos. We just put vocals on the songs. And sometimes, songs didn't work because, truth be told, we needed to speed them up, slow them down, or change the key in order for the song to have a good vocal. But we just didn't do that."

"So then, when we got to working with Rick Rubin on our third album *Minutes to Midnight*, he encouraged me in particular to start with the song more often. He asked, 'Have any of your songs started off with just piano and vocals as a demo?' I was like, 'Yeah.' He's like, 'What comes to mind?' I said, "'In the End,'" and maybe "Breaking the Habit.'" He was like, 'Those did pretty well, right? Do you like those songs?' I was like, 'Yeah.' He's like, 'Yeah—that's a good argument for why you would want to do more of that.' I said, 'Yeah, you're right. I'm going to do that, Rick.' And then six months later, I still wasn't doing it!"

"But now, for me it's all about the song. Having really dope sounds is important, but if the song isn't there, it's going to limit the distance that the piece of music can go. I think it's very rare that something is *just* sound design. Obviously, the exception to the rule is if it's an instrumental piece of music and the instrumental is carrying all of the weight. But, if there are vocals on it and you haven't soloed those vocals over one instrument or something, just to get a sense of how the vocals are doing in terms of the words, melody, tempo, and performance—if you don't have those, you don't have anything. So, that's really important."

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—Mike Shinoda

“So I started singing ‘la la la’ and ‘da da da.’ And then we went through a whole period where we had tons of demos where all that was on them was ‘la la la’ and ‘na na na.’ And then the guys were like, ‘Yeah, *that* one’s going to be dope!’ So I knew that they were getting over the lyrical hurdle, and I could put different lyrics on it until it worked. But then we started to have this new problem where we’d just have ‘na na na’ on everything and wouldn’t have real lyrics. And so eventually, like, *five* albums in, I started really finding the right pace, like, ‘Okay, I’m going to make sure the lines are all presentable, and then I’m going to play them for the guys, and I’m going to try and make sure I don’t have any standout bad lyrics in there. Like, everything is *close*.”

Mike drives his point home with a playful anecdote from a [former unexpected collaborator](#). “The song ‘Yesterday’ by The Beatles was originally ‘Scrambled Eggs,’” Mike tells us. “So Paul McCartney sang, ‘Scrambled eggs, scrambled eggs,’ and that was the demo when he sang it to get it down. If Paul McCartney had done that in my band, it would’ve been called ‘Scrambled Eggs,’ and he could have written ‘Yesterday’ and they would’ve still called it ‘Scrambled Eggs.’ And then the song wouldn’t have made the album because everybody was too busy making fun of it. That was the culture in the band.”



## Aligning the sounds with the song

One of the most compelling aspects of *Meteora* is the sheer quality of its sounds. From the pitch-bent opening sample on “Lying from You” and the processed drum samples on “Numb” to the reversed chords on “Somewhere I Belong” and the introspective guitar harmonics on “Easier to Run,” each sound on the record—no matter how central or subtle—is totally unique and demands your attention as a listener, while simultaneously feeling meticulously crafted to fit the greater mix. Even 20 years later, there seems to be an endless supply of new sonic details to discover and enjoy.



## Mike Shinoda's advice to music creators

To conclude our discussion, Mike offers the following advice for today's music creators who are currently trying to arrive to their own "Breaking the Habit" or "Numb." "If you're a young music maker who's writing and producing songs for the first time or early in your development, don't forget to play with tempo and transposition," he shares. "Try to get the rhythm in the pocket and tune everything up and down to get in the right range that suits the vocalist. Because what we learned on our first two records is that too many times, you've got a track where if it was just a little bit higher or a little bit lower, then you could sing some other thing. I would pose that you got to do everything to serve the vocal."

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Revisit timeless favorites and uncover previously-unreleased gems in *Meteora 20th Anniversary Edition*:

### **Additional links:**

#### **Loudwire**

'Numb' Becomes First Linkin Park Music Video to Reach Two Billion YouTube Views

<https://loudwire.com/linkin-park-numb-music-video-two-billion-youtube-views/>

11 Asian American + Pacific Islander Musicians Who've Made Epic Contributions to Rock + Metal

<https://loudwire.com/asian-americans-pacific-islander-americans-epic-contributions-rock-metal/>

10 Best Psychedelic Rock / Metal Albums of the 21st Century as Chosen by Royal Thunder's Josh Weaver

<https://loudwire.com/best-psychedelic-rock-metal-albums-21st-century-chosen-royal-thunder-josh-weaver/>

#### **The Things**

After Losing Chester Bennington, Linkin Park Refuses To Use This Controversial Method

<https://www.thethings.com/after-losing-chester-bennington-linkin-park-refuses-to-use-this-controversial-method/>

#### **Kerrang!**

Avenged Sevenfold: “Just say your message and put the art out there. Artists should do what they want and explore deeper rabbit-holes”

<https://www.kerrang.com/avenged-sevenfold-life-is-but-a-dream-m-shadows-synyster-gates-interview-metal-cover-story>

### **Rock Celebrities**

Mike Shinoda Reveals Jay Z’s Influence On His ‘In My Head’

<https://rockcelebrities.net/mike-shinoda-reveals-jay-zs-influence-on-his-in-my-head/>

### **Distorted Sound**

HEAVY MUSIC HISTORY: Meteora – Linkin Park

<https://distortedmag.com/heavy-music-history-meteora-linkin-park/>

### **Business Wire**

Kaiber Comes Out of Beta to Enable Artist Creativity and Community: The AI Creative Lab Used by Kid Cudi, Linkin Park, and Mike Shinoda Launches New Prompt-to-Prompt Storyboard Tool, User Community, and Affiliate Program

<https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20230523005728/en/Kaiber-Comes-Out-of-Beta-to-Enable-Artist-Creativity-and-Community>

### **Everyday Power**

Linkin Park Quotes From the Legendary Band

<https://everydaypower.com/linkin-park-quotes/>