Atmos Listening Guidelines - Andrew Scheps

If we haven't had a conversation before the Atmos mix then here are general guidelines for what to expect.

The first thing is level. Atmos mixes must be delivered at a level of -18dB LUFS. What the number means is irrelevant, except that it is approximately 10-12dB quieter than most stereo mixes out there (especially mine). So if you want to compare the Atmos mix to the original stereo mix you HAVE to adjust the stereo mix down by at least 10dB. I have found that 11.5dB is a pretty safe bet to level match things. If you don't do this it will be very hard to judge anything as the level difference will be extreme.

Next is that the ADM wav is the master file. It is the actual mix as I completed it on speakers (checking in headphones along the way). The MP4 and Binaural files are generated from the ADM. As time goes on, the encoding for Binaural and MP4s is constantly being improved, so what you hear now is the current state-of-the-art, but as with any relatively new technology, it is improving all the time (for example Apple spatial encoding got an upgrade in iOS15.1 compared to iOS 15).

That said, if you can't book an Atmos equipped studio to listen in, the MP4 and Binaural waves will be your only way to hear the mixes and will give you a decent idea of what's going on.

My goal when mixing catalog in Atmos is to do two things.

1)

Be as faithful to the basic sound and feel of the original mix as I can.

2)

Take advantage of as much of the opportunity that spatial audio gives me for creative ways to re-interpret the arrangement and give the listener a new but familiar experience.

To that end please keep in mind that it is impossible to do a version of the stereo mix in a new format and have it sound identical to the original version. And what would be the point of that anyway! Hopefully you'll experience it as a more immersive version of the original stereo mix.

There are three files for every song, here is a description of how and why to listen to each one.

ADM wav

What
: A multichannel wav file with all of the metadataneeded to play the original Atmos mix..

Why
: This is the master file for listening on speakers as well as creating the other files.

How
: If you have a Dolby Production Suite or Mastering Suite setup, you can load this file in the renderer and play it back to hear the Atmos mix on speakers. If you don't know what this means just skip to the next file.

Binaural wav

What
: This is the stereo file of the Dolby binaural encoded mix.

Why
: This is what listeners will hear when they stream from Amazon Music or Tidal.

How
: Just load this file into any music player, but make sure to listen in headphones! Binaural is a headphone-only playback format and will not sound good on speakers.

MP4

What
: This is the atmos mix encoded into an MP4 movie format.

Why
: This is how you can audition Apple's spatial audio.

How
: To listen to this file in Atmos you must load it onto an iPhone running iOS 15 or later. An easy way to do this is to either AirDrop it onto the phone, or message or email it to yourself and then save it from there to the FIles App. To hear the spatial version of the mix you must play it from the files app and listen in one of two ways.

1)

The first is to use AirPod Pro or AirPod Max listening through Bluetooth (not wired)

2)

The second is to Airplay it from the movie window that opens when you play it from the files app. Select a Dolby Atmos capable AppleTV and that will stream it in Atmos towhatever playback system you have set up for the Apple TV. This is a great way to hear it if you have an Atmos capable sound system for watching TV.