

Mixing Basics for the *Advanced Mixer*

Guidance for those ready to level up from making music to being hired to mix music — mindset, technique, and the art of serving the artist's vision.

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SUBJECT · **CAREER DEVELOPMENT · MIXING PHILOSOPHY**

There is already a lot of good information out there on how to mix. How to use a compressor, how to use an EQ, Gate, how or when to pan, balancing levels, what is gain structure, etc. So let's assume you've gone through that, you know what the tools are, you are mixing music. How do you begin to level up? Where do you begin to change from someone that makes music to someone that can be hired to mix music?

I'll attempt here to offer some suggestions that will guide you towards being a mixing specialist, or at least a better mixer.

First I need to describe my situation; I only mix music, I don't record it, I don't write it, I don't produce it. I'm not working directly with any artist or producer, I am totally freelance and also work totally remotely.

I've distilled down the whole career of music engineer to one very specific task; gain the trust of the artist / producer that when they send me a song to mix, I'll send it back better.

I'll be using the terms artist / producer a lot here; these are my targeted clients. Whichever one has the last say on when the song and mix is as close to perfect as we can get it; that is my client. Now, sometimes, that last say may be a label executive, an A&R person, or the artist's trusted allies and engineers. Whomever is the one giving you feedback on the mix that has the final authority, that is your client. So your first step, identify that person. For me that is usually the artist or the producer of the song, so I'm using those terms throughout this article.

In my situation, working remotely, I don't have the artist / producer sitting by my side guiding my mixing choices. For me, their guidance is first and foremost their last, best rough mix. So first, I need to make sure that my basic mix of the multitrack files sounds exactly like their rough mix, as close as humanly possible. Match it in every way; loudness overall, loudness of each instrument, timbre of sounds, balances of sounds, amount of backing vocals, amount and types of effects, panning of sounds, etc.

Now, how do I say this? I might be working with a higher level of production and artistic quality most of the time. I'm assuming that the artist and producer, having been vetted by an A&R, signed to a deal, and have a budget behind them, have some minimum level of quality. Someone out there believes that this artist, song and rough mix is good enough to put a budget behind and want it to be competitive in release.

Remember we're talking about becoming a specialist now, so you are no longer taking your cousin's Garageband recording here. We're semi-professional at the least and

hopefully a full-time, money earning musician.

A tangent here; to help to train you to be able to match a rough mix exactly. If you have a chance to get hold of multitrack files for a 'famous' song, practice mixing it. But don't practice by making "your" mix of the song! Don't try to make it a better mix, a different mix, your modernized version of a classic mix.

NO! practice by making it sound EXACTLY like the released mix. This is where you train yourself to hear every nuance. Is that a quarter delay feeding a reverb, or a reverb feeding a quarter delay? A hall reverb or a chamber? Is there reverb on the cowbell, how much, where is it panned, what type? In the end, you should be able to flip back and forth between the mixes, A/B them, and hopefully not hear any significant difference.

Hopefully, and usually, mostly those things are either baked into the exported files they've sent or they have sent the exact session and files that created the rough mix so you are starting exactly where they left off.

Back to mixing. So now that you've matched their rough mix, you listen to it and begin to notice things that stick out, that you don't like. Start with overall balances, levels, clean it up, get rid of problems, etc. Because the artist / producer isn't sitting by your side, you have time to listen through each track, learn the song parts, find the problems.

I think that the reason that a rough mix usually doesn't make it all the way to release is because it doesn't get that new set of ears to really take it down to the basics and hear the problems. With the artist / producer in the room, you are less likely to take thirty minutes to play with really subtle changes to a snare sound, or remove clicks from every high hat sample, or try out a crazy compression distortion on the bass or drums. Take the time alone, without influence to really hear the song and all of the parts.

Go ahead and add your magic to it; add width, add depth, make the vocals present, pleasant, and full of life. Keep comparing it to the rough mix, is it the same but better? If you blindly compare them, do you pick

your mix for drums, for bass, for width, for depth, for vocals?

Do experiment and be creative, but do be ready to be asked to get rid of those things. Maybe they will like your flange effect on the vocals in the bridge. Make those finger plucks on the bass really pop out if you like! You might reveal things that were recorded but forgotten about or covered up during their production. Your taste does matter, your opinion not so much. Subtle things that almost can't be heard are often the most successful mix enhancements overall. Those are the things that make it the same but better.

"Your taste does matter, your opinion not so much."

ON THE MIXER'S ROLE

Receiving feedback on your mix is hard, it feels like criticism. I know I did my best to make it sound good, and all I'm hearing is "the vocal sounds hollow and low, the bass is too loud, adlibs are too high, whatever effect you put on the guitar sounds wrong, and take another listen to the rough mix."

Ok, so now you take the ego out of it. A comment I came up with in response to questions about criticism of mixes was "We really mix for the artist / producer; what you or I like isn't necessarily a part of the equation." Take a breath, open up the song, A/B your mix again to the rough mix and you'll begin to hear what the mix notes are talking about. Trust the artist / producer as a trusted second set of ears for your mix, not as an adversary. You are mixing for what they want to hear, become an accessory to their vision. Most often, when I get in this mindset, all of the mix notes are right. At the end of those tweaks, the mix is better.

This is the point where you begin to be a mixing specialist. Because this is the point where you begin to realize and understand that your opinion of the sound, of the mix, of the artistic choices really doesn't matter. You see, you have to lose your ego, understand that you are not an artist or a producer now, you are just their hands and ears. You are a tele-operated intelligent machine (but not a robot) that understands what the goal of the artist / producer is, what they want the song to become, and

have the tools, techniques, and ability to facilitate that.

"You are a tele-operated intelligent machine (but not a robot) that understands what the goal of the artist / producer is."

ON LOSING YOUR EGO

So now just some general principles that have helped me.

Be super organized. Beyond making great sounding mixes, artist / producer as well as their managers and label execs will love you so much when you can save their butt! Have the ability to pull up any song you've mixed and run a one-off TV track, make a special edit for a performance, or get them an instrumental NOW for a license opportunity.

You don't need to make every mix and every song a revolutionary statement. Just make it sound good. Think more like a janitor than an artist; they will paint the walls and choose the colors, you just need to clean the paint off of the floors and get the lighting right.

Don't rely on settings or a plugin to fix everything. For example, Instead of putting a leveler on an inconsistent snare drum, get in there and listen to each sound, ride volume on each snare hit if necessary to get it to sound right, but first understand if that is the drummer's art and style. Maybe it isn't wrong, maybe it should be celebrated. Work in collaboration, not creating the sound, but finding their sound and enhancing it.

Approach each sound in each song and mix as a unique part of the art. You can't just say this is what I apply to acoustic guitars, this is what I apply to Moog synthesizers, this is what I apply to 808 kick drums. Don't look at the sounds in mix as pile of parts to be fixed and conformed to a standard

definition or sound; look at the whole song as an artistic collection of sounds that compliment, interweave, and work together to make a song. There are no quick fixes to making a good mix, no set of tools that, when applied, makes it all work right. I approach each song as a custom piece of work, each mix a bespoke creation.

When you've shared your mix with the artist, producer, A&R; you have to stop working on it until you get their comments back. If you continue to make changes that they have not heard, you may be going in a completely different direction than their notes will be directing you.

Hopefully some of these mindsets and techniques will get you a bit further along.