

The Artist's Vision

What happens when your vision and the artist's vision doesn't match up?

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SUBJECT · **MIXING · CLIENT RELATIONS**

Mixing engineers are generally brought into a song pretty late in the game. The songwriting, recording, and production has all been done. Everyone from the artist, their management, their A&R, and the producers have signed off "this song is done!"

Now they send it to be mixed. Now generally they have chosen a mix engineer for a couple of reasons; First, the mixer may have been involved in the project already. Many mixes are done by the recording engineer who knows the whole vibe of the project from beginning to end. Sometimes, though, they send it to an independent mixer based on reputation, or just to try something new.

Those are the circumstances that I want to address here. What happens if you don't

like the song? What happens if you can't get to where the artist or producer wants you to go?

If you don't like the song, figure out why. What do you think makes the song compelling to the artist? If it is truly a bad song, maybe it should not have made it to the mixing stage, but because all of those other people signed off, there must be something there.

If it is just not your genre, then maybe you need to expand your horizons. Ask yourself why do other people like this, does it make me feel anything, does it make my head bounce? Find something to like in the song and work your way out from there; build on what you like, what makes you feel, what makes you bop, and pretty soon you'll be into it.

Now what happens when you just can't get the mix to where the artist or producer wants you to go.

First identify the issue. I've identified the following; Language barrier, communication barrier, mixing skills, severe demo-itis.

Language Barrier

Language barrier; literally speaking different languages. When I'm working on projects in other languages, I'll try to get very detailed notes. "At 2:30 on track Lead 1, the phrase 'koo-eee-aahh', turn up the 'eee' so that it is clear. This can be very time consuming but is the only way through. I'll also get notes like "at 1:20, make the vocal sound like Ariana Grande 'NASA' at :47 seconds. These kind of notes are very helpful because sometimes descriptive language doesn't translate as easily as technical language.

Communication Barrier

Communication barrier; this is different than Language barrier, but you might have both! Communication barrier comes from trying to put into words the way music makes us feel. We'll get descriptives like "warm" (everybody loves warm!), "breathing", "spacey", "confident", "punchy", "energetic", etc.

These are great descriptions, it makes it easier to follow what they are thinking. Descriptives such as "purple", "hairy", and "virgin" might be harder to figure out.

In these cases, I'll try something that I think sounds like what they are describing and see where it goes.

I had one client that said to reference Billie Eilish "you should see me in a crown" for the mix. I tried it for the whole song but then we backed off of it. They didn't really want that; it was too much of a lo-fi vibe for this song. What they really liked about it was the unique treatments on vocal drops and sound features.

Mixing Skills

Mixing Skills; this is the big one! Hopefully the project is within your skill levels. When you're getting a lot of push back that "it isn't there yet", fall back to basics and build up.

First, make your mix sound as close to their rough mix as possible. I'll sometimes loop playback on one bar at a time and flip back and forth between my mix and their mix. I'll try to make every element in that bar sound like their mix; volume, EQ, effects. Work through the song this way as new elements enter the production. Be sure to level match the whole song so that your mix isn't just louder than theirs, it needs to be better not louder.

Second, when you've re-created the rough mix, listen to it and fix it technically. Clean up stray low bass, clean noise, remove clicks, fix bad edits, insert some de-essers where needed.

Next, compare it to your go-to "good sounding reference mixes". Figure out where you can improve on their rough in relation to the "good mixes". I'll often find the need to try to make the mix just a little

wider, vocals just a little more present, find if the energy drops out of the song and what can be done to fix it. The song generally should build as it goes; chorus bigger than verse, second chorus bigger than first chorus, end chorus bigger again.

Severe Demo-itis

Severe Demo-itis; we've all faced it. When nothing else is working; they don't like your "fall back to basics, rough mix re-creation but better", you can get stuck. If there is really nothing to be done I'll at least try to get my technically fixed version of their rough mix through. If that doesn't work, let them use the rough mix as the final and make sure you are not credited with that mix. You don't need put your name on something that you can't be happy with your contribution to.

These severe demo-itis situations are pretty rare. They are definitely discouraging. The opposite situation is the artist who let's me off the leash and says "try something experimental", or "make this part huge and exaggerated". This is the kind of stuff I love!