

What Is Mixing *Anyway*?

An exploration of the art, craft, and psychology of mixing music — from simple explanations for beginners to the philosophical depths of audio engineering.

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I get this question more often than you would think. It seems obvious to anyone who has dabbled in recorded music, but harder to explain to music technology

novices. I've tried to find easy ways to explain it to family and friends who might be musical but might not be technological.

Basically — The Explanation for Young Nieces and Nephews

The basic explanation I usually give is that each instrument, voice, drum, that you hear on the record is recorded separately and sent to us separately. The mixer gets to pick where each one sits in the mix.

Imagine a whole room full of musicians. A singer, drummer, bass guitar, guitar, back up singers, a triangle player, a tambourine player, a piano, etc. In this scenario, picture that each instrument and singer has their own microphone and each microphone is recorded separately to an audio track.

The mixer gets to control where it sounds like each of these imagined musicians is positioned and how loud they play.

I can spread the singers out across the stage, or group them together. I can have the triangle player come to the front or go way to the back (volume), or go right or left (panning). I can put the piano to one side, like you are watching her on a stage, or make it sound like the piano is in front of you as if you are playing it.

The other thing we can do is add effects; make it sound like someone is in a big room, far away in a hallway, playing in a stairwell (reverb) or in a canyon or cave with echo (delay).

So when you listen to music, each thing you hear is something that we can control.

Technically — The Explanation for Musicians and Producers

For those musicians and producers who are sending us files to be mixed, it is a bit more technical. Their rough mix may already be very good; what are we doing to it?

First is fixing stuff, cleaning up, finding unwanted noise.

We will take a critical listen to each track, and especially on the vocals, to each edit, crossfade, mouth noise, breath. These might not have been a noticeable problem in the rough mix, but as we clean up noises, usually bring the vocal a bit more forward, brighten it a bit, they become more noticeable and might need to be cleaned up or ridden down in volume.

Secondly it is also the time for decision making. People say they will "fix it in the mix." Well this is the time. Working with the artists and producers we might do song edits, or cut an instrument from a section

where it isn't needed, or copy it to where it is needed.

Third, we'll take a critical listen and balance elements in the song. Ride volumes, apply eq or compression, gating, whatever is needed to get the instruments and vocals to sit nicely together and have a pleasing balance.

We'll add effects, just a touch of reverb and delay helps to tie things together, more pronounced effects will help with impact or drama or to highlight something in the mix.

Finally we will make sure levels and balances overall are in a good place. Everyone wants a loud mix, but there are technical things to be done to bring that loud mix impression while trying not to crush, distort, or fall into the trap of streaming services algorithms making a loud track actually play softer.

Philosophically — The Explanation for Audio Engineers

What I see as the mixer's ultimate job is to find a way to translate the vision of the artists and producers into the final product. This might involve trying to figure out what they mean by "lush", "warm", "gritty", or even "purple".

When I listen to a song to be mixed, I'm listening for where it feels like the song wants to go. What is the artist direction and meaning. I listen to the rough mix and try to identify where it can be improved, or where it is amazing and I want to make sure to emulate it.

The mixer also is usually the one who will be pushing these technical details into the artist's vision. We can't get that loud, or it won't sound good on radio, or we need to do something with the guitar here because it is clashing with the vocal.

The main thing that I want to be aware of is the impact and feelings that the song gives me and find ways to help translate that into the final mix technically and artistically.

It has often been said that working with musicians is a game of psychology. It can become negotiation with the artist. The

mixer needs to find the balancing point, generally where everyone is mostly happy, but certainly where no one is unhappy