



evaluating your song mix

*a guide for listening critically
to your music
when it has been mixed*

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If you've invested time & money into writing music and making decent recordings, it can be nerve-racking to hand it over to a professional mix engineer for them to take care of that crucial mixing stage. The fact is that mixing can make or break the song. If it's done well, it will bring all the recorded elements together in a way that maximises the emotional impact of the music. Depending on the genre, here are some things to listen out for (all of which affect each other):

- **Balance** - the volume of each element should sit well with all the others to create a cohesive sound. The lead vocal should be up-front without utterly dominating the music.
- **Clarity** - the different elements of the music should be clearly heard without any sense of muddiness or clashing of the elements. A good song arrangement with instruments complementing each other and serving the vocal is vital to help with this before the mixing stage even begins.
- **Immediacy** or 'punch' - there should be a sense that the music is unfolding right in front of you with elements like drums, rhythm guitars and vocals providing a real impact and 'attitude' rather than feeling limp or lifeless. If the music is more mellow, it should feel engaging and intimate.
- **Height** - The best music mixes sound beautiful across the whole frequency spectrum. The bass feels rich, solid and powerful without being muddy or over-dominating, the mid-range is full and detailed, without 'boxiness', while the top end will feel airy and bright without being harsh

EVALUATING YOUR SONG MIX

- **Width** - although there are times when we will hear music in mono (a single speaker), most contexts like home & car stereo systems and headphones will be stereo (the sound in the left speaker is subtly different from the sound in the right speaker) creating a sense of width. A good mix will feel wide and spacious without losing a clear sense of focus.
- **Depth** - in acoustic music particularly, a skilled mix engineer will create a sense of front-to-back depth where different instruments seem to be emanating from different points in the 'virtual' room as you listen. This is much more engaging than everything feeling flat, and is more natural and lifelike. In other genres there should still be a three dimensional quality to the sound which helps it feel 'alive'.

When mixing we have all these factors in mind, and above all we are trying to help communicate the emotion of the song through the mix - so it's as much art as it is science.

HOW TO LISTEN TO YOUR MIX

When you get a mix back from a mix engineer it will probably take a while to get used to. Hopefully your initial reaction will be 'wow that sounds fantastic', but it may not always be the case. If you're disappointed or immediately hearing things you want changed, let me suggest the following way to handle it:

1. **Take your time.** You may have been used to hearing the song in its rough mix state for the last few weeks, so give yourself time to adjust to the new sound that a 'proper' mix will have. Don't be too quick jump on revisions for the mix engineer - listen to the mix several times over at least a day or two. You may find that it grows on you and things you initially weren't happy about you end up loving!
2. **Listen in different environments.** A good mix should translate well on different speakers and in different places, but don't just rely on

EVALUATING YOUR SONG MIX

one system to evaluate. In particular, laptop and phone speakers are not full-range playback systems and will give you a very limited perspective. It should sound reasonable even on a phone speaker, but check it on the best speakers you have. Check it in the car. Check it on headphones. Check it on the smart speaker in the kitchen. Try it at different volumes. Get the reactions of a trusted friend. That way you will have a better overall sense of whether the mix is working.

3. **Compare the mix to other commercial songs in the same genre.**

Comparison is a useful tool when evaluating a song mix. If there is a similar sounding song from another artist, listen to that on your different playback systems, then compare with your song. Are the drums similarly punchy? Is the vocal as 'present'? Is the mix much duller or brighter? These comparisons will just be a rough guide because every mix is unique, so don't expect it to be exactly the same. The commercial song you're comparing with may also be louder because of the mastering process. Louder tracks will tend to sound 'better' at first, so if there's a discrepancy, adjust so that you're comparing at similar volumes.

WHAT IF YOU'RE NOT HAPPY WITH THE MIX?

If having taken the above advice you are still unhappy about aspects of the mix, then get back in touch with the mix engineer. Try to use this approach:

1. **Be specific.** It's much easier for a mix engineer to deal with a request like 'the vocals are too quiet in the second verse' or 'there's too much reverb on the guitar' than 'I don't like the way it sounds in the chorus'. Music is subjective and has an emotional response, so it can be hard to articulate exactly what's troubling us, but the more precise you can be in your communication, the easier it will be to correct it. If your feeling is more of a general dissatisfaction, then probably listening to the mix with the

EVALUATING YOUR SONG MIX

engineer and discussing it together will be the best approach.

2. **Get all your requests together in one clear list which can be emailed.** If it's a band recording, then all members of the band can hammer out together an agreed list of revision requests which one person then communicates to the engineer. This is far better than loads of separate messages from different sources. It's another reason why taking time to gather your thoughts before responding to the initial mix is so important.
3. **Be kind.** Mixing engineers are people too and have feelings! They're wanting to please you and create a mix that you love, so remember to be encouraging about what you like as well as highlighting the negatives.
4. **Listen to the mix engineer's rationale.** Mix engineers are doing this kind of work all the time and should be experts in creating engaging, translatable mixes. So if they explain why they took a certain decision, or are making the case for keeping something the way it is, then take that seriously. That doesn't mean that they're always right, and as the client you have final say in everything, but be prepared to listen to another point of view.
5. **Don't worry!** Sometimes a mix can seem way off what you had in mind and cause you to feel disheartened, but with some clear communication and a few tweaks it should hopefully be possible to transform it into something you love. Understand though that if the source material is poorly recorded, arranged or performed, the best mix engineer in the world will only be able to take it so far!

AND IF YOU'RE STILL NOT HAPPY WITH THE MIX?

When 'version 2' of the mix comes back, there would be an expectation that the issues will have been resolved. If not, go through the same sequence as before and again be specific in your communication about any remaining issues. Here at NBR we will allow

EVALUATING YOUR SONG MIX

unlimited mix revisions (within reason) because we want our clients to be happy! However, if the client is still needing more changes after three or four versions of the mix have been done, it would suggest that a conversation is required to make sure everyone is being reasonable and that we're on the same page!

WHAT ABOUT MASTERING?

Mastering is the final stage of audio processing that happens to a finished mix to make it ready for release. The mix is evaluated, and if necessary run through high-end EQ, compression and limiting processors which will add a final sparkle and shine to the mix, correct any tonal unevenness, and raise the volume so that it sounds competitively loud compared to other commercial tracks. (Just how loud that should be has been the source of much consternation and contention in the audio industry because very loud audio usually comes at the cost of losing some of the musicality of the track.)

Here at NBR we often do mastering as an integral part of the mix process, so that the mix you have to evaluate is representative of how the finished master would sound. If you're working on several tracks for an EP or album, it makes sense to master them together when the mixes have all been completed so they sound cohesive. We can supply 'naked' mixes without the extra processing for mastering later. Bear in mind that this will sound less 'finished' and quieter than mastered material, so take that into account when listening.

HOW WE CAN HELP YOU

Here at NBR we are passionate about creating great music through recording and mixing, and have many happy clients who have benefited from our services over the years. We have high quality equipment and software to do the job with the best tools available, and more importantly the experience to pull together great mixes - particularly in the acoustic and alternative/rock genres. If you have

EVALUATING YOUR SONG MIX

material that you have recorded yourself or at another studio, we'd be delighted to help get it mixed to a high standard. Call or email us today at info@northbrightonrecording.co.uk to discuss your requirements and we promise to be friendly, attentive and provide a reasonably priced quote.

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