

# Guide To Great Music Mixes

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## Guide to Great Music Mixes

The final 2-track stereo mix is the last and most important step in the recording process (major releases add a "mastering" session to all the 2-track stereo mixes before pressing CDs). Creating great mixes is a skill that takes time to develop. For myself, I have discovered the best approach to getting a great mix is to hire a great mixing engineer. Even then, it is advisable to have an overall knowledge of mixing in order to achieve your goals.

This guide was written to help achieve great mixes, whether you are embarking on a career as a top mixing engineer, choosing a mixing engineer for your projects, or evaluating a final mix. This guide does not address EQ, compression, or effects settings (there has been plenty written about this subject already). Instead, this guide focuses on the overall picture — the final mix — and provides tips and overlooked "tools" which can greatly enhance your final mixes.

- **Keep Your Eye on the Big Picture:** Don't get hung up on individual tracks when starting your mix. Start with the flat (no effects or EQ) tracks and do your best to bring them together in a mix using only volume. This will expose which tracks need some EQ, compression, reverb, etc. and which do not. Best of all, it will keep your eye on your goal, a great final mix.
- **Keep Some Source Material Handy:** It is always a good idea to have a CD on hand while mixing that has great mixes in the style you are working on. During the mixing process you will hear the music over and over and over. The ear can easily begin to accept whatever it is hearing as "correct". Every once in awhile, compare what you have to your source material as a reality check and to avoid any aural illusions.
- **Beware Runaway Bottom End:** This is the most common problem I hear in mixes. There is way too much bottom end. Too much bottom end will muddy up your mix, and as an added bonus, will also eat up your headroom. A wise man (don't tell him I said that) once gave me a great tip. Take the bottom end instruments (like bass and bass drum) down to zero on the fader. Then, slowly raise their level until you begin to hear them. That will be just about right (then check it against your source material).
- **Use Cut in EQ, not Boost:** The ear accepts the lowering of frequencies as natural far more than it does boosting. Whenever possible it is always better to cut frequencies than to boost them. Boosting can often times sound forced, especially when several tracks that have been boosted are combined into a final mix. For example, let's say your guitar track sounds like it could use more high end. Instead of boosting the highs, try lowering the mids and lows, then raise the volume a bit. Presto, your track now has more highs and it will sound much more natural than it would have had you just boosted the highs.
- **The Mute Button is a Valid Mixing Tool:** Just because you recorded 15 fantastic guitar parts doesn't necessarily mean you want to use all of them in the final mix. Your goal is a clean professional mix. When mixing, sometimes you need to let go of "how cool" a part is in order to achieve your final goal.

- **Don't Get Hung Up on Equipment Lists:** When evaluating a mixing engineer, or assembling equipment for your own career as a mixing engineer, never allow yourself to get caught up in a list of equipment. All that matters is the final product, the sound of the 2-track stereo mix. It should not matter to you whether that final mix was created by someone who has racks of red lights, dancing sliders, and every plugin known to man, or is sitting in front of a laptop mixing with a mouse using a program you never heard of. All that really matters is, what does this engineer's final mixes sound like?
- **Easy on the Effects Please:** Nothing can ruin an otherwise good mix quicker than piling on too many effects. Everything awash in different reverbs, over compressed, and radically EQ'd makes for a messy wishy washy mix that lacks definition. Effects are for enhancement. Use them sparingly, and don't be afraid to leave some tracks dry.
- **Engineers Perform Mixes, Not Miracles:** The hands down best way to get the right "sound" happens when it is recorded. Try to record your instruments without EQ, flat as possible, into your multi-track recorder. This can include simple things such as mic placement for example. Don't expect your engineer to perform miracles. No matter how much EQ is used, you will never get a flute to sound like a bass guitar. An engineer can only make what he/she has to work with sound as good as possible. For example: If the bass guitar was recorded with no frequencies below 150kHz, no engineer can bring out frequencies that are not there (unless they use some plugin that adds frequencies, which most likely will not sound very good).
- **Record in Tune:** While slight alterations in tuning is possible with single line voice and instruments, if the guitar chords are recorded out of tune, you're basically stuck with it. Always take the time to get everybody in tune during the recording phase. Better to spend an hour of studio time tuning (as if that were possible) than spend a lifetime with an out-of-tune final mix.
- **Remove Any Unwanted Noise:** Remove any unwanted noise that appear in your individual tracks. This can be done using gates or by deleted portions of audio files where the instrument is not playing a part.
- **Check Your Mix in Mono:** There are still cases where your wonderful 2-track stereo mix will end up being heard as mono. This is often out of your control, so it is always advisable to check your mix summed as mono. Most recording software have an option built in for this. Listen for any problems like phase cancellation that were not audible in the 2-track stereo mix.
- **Center Your Bass & Bass Drum:** These low frequency instruments should be panned to center. Bass frequencies do not benefit from panning as they tend to be omnidirectional. Today's mixes, unless seeking some odd special effect, center these low frequency instruments in the mix.

- **Mix at Different Volume Levels:** During the mixing phase, always check your mix at different volume levels, especially after making obvious changes. Your ears can get "used" to a volume level which can mask any problems that may have arisen. Mixing at a high volume can wear the ears out to a point that everything sounds balanced when in reality it is not. Simply turning your mix down very low from time to time will bring any of these problems right to the surface.
- **Walk Around the Room:** While your mix is playing, walk around the room or go out in the hall, don't just limit yourself to listening in the "sweet" spot of your monitors. Same as mentioned before, the ears need change to make judgments and comparisons. Should you hear something that doesn't quite sound right while doing this, pop on that source material CD again and see if it too sounds odd in the same location in the room. If not, an adjustment to the mix is most likely in order.
- **Listen to Your Mix in Headphones:** Often times unnoticed pops, clicks, noises and runaway bottom end show up big time when you listen to your mix in a good full range set of studio headphones. Always listen in headphones with the studio monitors off to get a true sound in the headphones.
- **Don't Overdue the Mid Range:** Typically a topic for arranging and musicianship, keep in mind the full audio spectrum when putting your music together. If you have four guitars and a keyboard all playing in their mid-range, along with a male vocalist, your mix is going to be cluttered and most likely some of the instruments will need to be taken out to make way for a clean sounding mix. Spread the parts out over the full audio spectrum. Example: If you have an electric and acoustic guitar strumming open chords or bar chords, have the keyboards play their part in a higher register. Spreading your parts out over the full audio spectrum will allow your engineer to make use of all your instrument recordings, and will sound much more professional in the end.

These are just a few techniques and tips to keep in mind when mixing or having your music mixed by a professional mixing engineer. They are not designed to be an end all, be all to mixing, but are some of the most overlooked common sense things you can do to propel your mix from mediocrity to greatness.

**The Final Word:** Unless you are embarking on a career as a professional mixing engineer, I would like to reiterate once again my feelings about hiring a great mixing engineer to get a great mix. If you are a songwriter, vocalist or instrumentalist, you spend the majority of your time perfecting your craft. While you are working on your craft, the professional engineer is working on theirs. Your engineer probably is not the best person to ask to write a song for you or the person to lay down that funky drum groove, but is the best person to do your mix. Keep that in mind when deciding who will mix your tracks.

***Shameless Plug:** We would like to thank you for downloading this guide and hope you find it useful. If you would like to consider us for your next mix, please visit us online at:*

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