

GEAR



MIX EMOTIONS

Getting the right mix involves technology, practice and careful listening

Everything's in place—the songs have been written, the studio has been booked, the musicians are playing perfectly. You're well on your way to making a masterpiece.

But even if you lay down the greatest tracks ever recorded, it's entirely possible to screw it up at the last minute. The right mix can make or break even the most brilliantly recorded projects.

Many musicians, songwriters and even producers are about as prepared to tweak EQ and compression controls as they are to perform complex brain surgery. But crafting the perfect mix doesn't require a medical school diploma—just dedication, practice and guidance from folks who know what they're doing.

Two of those are recording engineers Larry Crane and Jason Powers. Crane has

worked with acts including Death Cab For Cutie and Elliott Smith, while Powers has hit the studio with artists like the Decemberists and Estranged. They spoke to us about a few of the techniques, tips and approaches involved in constructing a masterful mix.

What's the biggest mixing mistake musicians make?

POWERS: Not being able to hear what's really going on when they're mixing. The most important thing is having a monitoring situation that works. It doesn't have to be amazing, but it does have to be something you're familiar with so you know how things should sound. Having nice gear is important, but not as important as hearing what you're working on in a way you're comfortable with. It's the connection among your equipment,

your ears, the song and world.

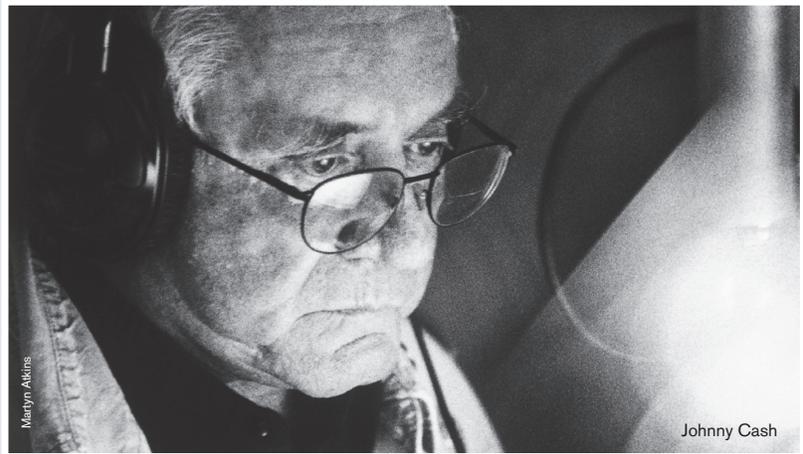
CRANE: The biggest mistake people make is mixing it themselves! When people bring stuff in that they've tracked themselves and they've done rough mixes, the quality that I can instill in the first 10 minutes usually has their jaws on the floor. Most people haven't researched phase relationships with multi-mic instruments. Everyone outputs way too many plug-ins on every channel. Gain structuring, use of plug-ins where you're not destroying the actual sound—there are quite a few important topics that many people just aren't aware of.

POWERS: There is a whole wealth of knowledge that engineers have that's really valuable—but I've also heard a lot of recordings that people do themselves that are great. And even if they're not great, they

work for what they are. Some of my favorite recordings are not recorded *well*, but they work. There's a band from Portland called the Slaves, for example. They're a dark, atmospheric band. They just gave me their album that they recorded themselves on a four-track cassette. Those are some pretty limited tools, but it sounds great and it totally works for what they do.

How can you mix virtual instruments to sound more real?

POWERS: You are using canned sounds, but one suggestion is re-amping them. You can run them out through speakers in a room and use the tone of the amp going through a mic to give them some flavor other than just the sampled sound. Or, you can mic the room itself and use those acoustics to give it some space. That's a lot of what's missing in those sorts of sounds. They're just very dry and direct. It also depends on the type of music. Some call for a lot of dry, synthetic



guitars are really quiet, just a buzz in the back. And it works.

POWERS: Less really is more. One mistake I see people make is that if they want to do an overdub of an instrument, they'll lay down that instrument over the entire song.

'Some think a mix is a democracy among instruments. It isn't.'

—Recording engineer Larry Crane

sounds like that. But for an authentic guitar sound, go into a guitar amp, even if you're using a sample for the original sound.

CRANE: I would look at ways of adding really short delays or reverbs to put the sounds into a small room setting, so you're trying to give things a sense of depth. If something isn't the most important element, try moving it back in the depth of field. When I use drum machines, I'll pipe them out into a live room and record it with mics—and sometimes just use the ambience track. In general, put digital sounds through the analog world and run them through stompboxes or, like Jason said, amps. Techniques like that really separate cookie-cutter work from inspired work.

What about making really dense mixes work?

CRANE: One of the biggest things is arrangement. If you listen to a record like AC/DC's *Back In Black*, there's really not a whole lot going on. There's lots of space for drums and bass guitar. It's a powerful sounding record, but it's not full-on, all the time. That's the arrangement. Take a song, strip it down, keep the most important parts—and you've got the stronger track. People have a hard time with this: They think a mix is a democracy among instruments. It isn't. Listen to a Ramones record. Most of the

They'll put, say, piano over the whole tune and suddenly, the song doesn't have any ebb and flow or dynamic build. Try being strategic about how you want to build the feeling of the song. Obviously layering stuff if you want a big, thick sound is good, but make sure that's actually what you want.

How do you make vocals pop?

CRANE: It's all about picking the right mic for the singer. Find a mic that's a great starting point and do the full album with it. For most of the records, I don't EQ vocals at all along the signal chain, because the mic does it for me. Regardless of the studio, sing through

every mic they have—good condensers, or even oddball dynamics—and see what works. That's where you should start.

POWERS: One thing you could do is duck out competing frequencies in competing instruments. Not so much that they sound flaccid, but enough so they don't compete. The midrange of the piano and midrange of the vocals can compete, for example, so futz with the EQ a little bit and see what works. I almost always compress vocals at least a little bit, since the human vocal dynamic range is pretty vast compared to other instruments. You need to have it be audible, but not jump out at you too much.

What's the most important advice you'd offer a prospective mixer?

CRANE: My number one thing is to try working with someone who's mixed more records than you have. Even if you had a pro mix just one song and paid him or her to answer your questions, you'd learn more than if you sat struggling at your house for years.

POWERS: I'd say really listen to records that you like. Don't just put them on and hear them passively, but really listen to how things are placed in the mix. Sometimes, when I've done that, I've been really surprised. When you're listening casually it all just comes together in your brain unless something is really off. Buy if you're thinking, "How do the drums sit? How's the panning?" it really helps you get in the mind of the mixer, how they did what they did and why it works. Even old Johnny Cash records and old soul records are great to listen to. They sometimes have extreme panning—the drums hard panned to one side in mono. It's extremely different from the way people do things now, but it's fascinating and gives you unique ideas of what to do on your own mixes.

—Michael Gallant

