

Mixing & Mastering Decision Playbook

Choose the right approach for each release—without guessing, overspending, or overthinking.

This playbook is not about how to mix or master.

It's about deciding when to DIY and when to pay, based on the role each song plays in your career.

Use this *before* you release anything.

How to Use This Playbook

Go through each section honestly.

Do not skip questions.

Do not answer based on ego or budget anxiety.

By the end, you'll know:

- Whether to DIY or hire help
 - What level of quality the song actually needs
 - How to communicate clearly if you pay an engineer
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Step 1: Define the Role of the Song

Answer first. No technical thinking yet.

This song is primarily for:

- Practice / learning
- Catalog building
- Audience growth
- Pitching (playlists, blogs, collaborators)
- Major release / brand statement

If this song sounds slightly unfinished, the consequence is:

- None

- Minor (only core listeners hear it)
- High (first impressions matter)

*If consequences are **high**, DIY carries more risk.*

Step 2: Check the Recording Quality (Non-Negotiable)

Mixing cannot save poor recordings.

Before deciding anything, confirm:

- Vocals are clean (no distortion, clipping, room echo)
- Levels are consistent across takes
- Beat is high-quality (not ripped, not overly compressed)

*If any box is unchecked, **do not** pay for mixing yet.*

Fix the recording first.

Step 3: Mix Health Self-Assessment

Listen on headphones, phone speaker, and car.

Check what applies:

- Vocals feel buried or disconnected
- Hook hits softer than verse
- High frequencies feel harsh or tiring
- Low end feels muddy or unclear
- Balance changes every time you listen

0-1 checked: DIY is reasonable

2-3 checked: DIY only if stakes are low

4+ checked: Paying an engineer is likely smarter

Step 4: DIY Readiness Test

DIY only works if *you* are ready.

Answer honestly:

- I can balance vocals and beat without constant second-guessing
- I understand basic gain staging
- I can walk away and return with fresh ears
- I'm okay with "good enough" for this release

If you checked fewer than 3, DIY will likely stall the release.

Step 5: Payment Decision Filter

Paying makes sense if:

- This is a high-stakes release
- The song already works emotionally
- I'm stuck and unsure what's wrong
- I value speed and objectivity

If these apply, hiring help is not weakness—it's strategy.

Step 6: Engineer Red-Flag Checklist

Avoid services that:

- Guarantee "industry standard" results
- Don't ask for references or context
- Can't show work similar to your sound
- Rely heavily on presets
- Rush turnaround without discussion

If more than one box is checked—walk away.

Step 7: Engineer Communication Template

Use this to avoid wasted money:

Reference Tracks (2–3):

What matters most:

(eg. vocals upfront, raw feel, space, warmth)

Release type:

(single / EP / demo / major drop)

Revision agreement:

Clear direction = better results.

Final Decision Summary

For *this* release, I will:

- DIY mix
- Pay for mixing only
- Pay for mixing + mastering

Reason:

Final Reminder

Not every song deserves paid mastering.

Not every song should be DIY.

Strong artists don't guess.

They decide with intention.

Protect the work.

Protect the release.