



Preparing music for your wedding reception

Planning the music for your Wedding reception is an important ingredient to its success. We talk with DJs of Distinction's Glen McBride who lends us the benefit of his 22+ years of experience in the DJ area and gives us some advice in relation to your music requirements for your important day

Firstly, give us a broad outline of what people should be doing about preparing music for their forthcoming reception.

The two important things I like to communicate to everyone I meet or speak with about their reception is, firstly is that their reception is unique, different from the last one we've done and different to the next, and secondly that they need to think about their reception in terms of outcomes, that is to say, picture in your mind how you would like to reflect upon your reception when you think about it in future years. How do you want your guests to remember your reception?

These are both excellent points. Why do you work from the "After" backwards?

We find that if we focus on outcomes as I outline above, everything else falls into place. In my experience if you work the other way around, a lot of people tend to over-engineer or over-produce their reception. While there is a place for highly-produced events, we find that everything tends to flow a lot better when there is less emphasis on the theatrical side of things and there is a more natural feel to everything.

Of course you're referring to "Typical" Wedding receptions here?

Naturally there's always a place for receptions that need high degrees of production and theatre, and I'd prefer to deal with those outside the scope of this discussion and one-on-one with the clients.

So give us some examples of things we should be doing?

Firstly I ask everyone to do this irrespective of ideas they may already have. Get a sheet of blank paper. Now attach it to your fridge. Write down songs, types of songs, and ideas on their sheet. Do it whenever inspiration hits. Have friends and family add to this list. This isn't a test and it won't be graded! Write down as few or as many as you like. The idea here is not to produce a play list but to get a *general feel* for what you like.

You also need to choose your Bridal Dance, and any other special dances such as Father-Daughter dance and any dedication tracks.

About a month before your reception contact your DJ and get the discussion going regarding the reception.

When you have the discussion with your DJ don't forget the ideas you've been collecting by way of the sheet of paper of the fridge..

Remember the objective of the list you compiled is to give you broad ideas, not to necessarily be a play list for the reception.

You and your DJ will go through the list and distil it down to a manageable size. Depending on your reception and DJ, you may simply hand over the list you've compiled and the DJ will take it from there using this as a guide, in other circumstances you'll need to prune the list of tracks and artists that don't work well at parties.

Personally I like to subject any song that is on a list to a two-point test being:

- 1) Can you and your guests actually dance to this song? (Honest answers please) and
- 2) Would you dance to this song SOBER?

If you can answer both of these as YES then great! Have it on the music list. If not then perhaps your song should remain as strictly one that you play in your car or on your Ipad.

I saw a DJ's T-shirt once that said "*You can't dance to Stairway to heaven*" – Its absolutely true! There are just some songs that don't translate well to the dance floor.

Anything else we need to do?

Yes, besides the list you produce above think about things you'd rather not hear at your reception.

I discourage people from giving me long lists of "Banned" songs especially if they contain party favourites. All this does is set your DJ at odds with most of the people attending the reception; after all they're called "Party favourites" for a reason!

Instead I'd prefer people to list out songs they'd rather I didn't play unless requested. That way we can have a happy medium, the DJ isn't spending all night telling people he cannot play their party favourite track and you the host aren't spending valuable time during the reception fielding requests from guests (Or the DJ) to over-ride the banned songs list.

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But surely there are valid circumstances for outright banning of songs?

Yes there are, the most important of these is to consider music that may have been recently played at someone's funeral. There's nothing that will turn a happy occasion into a sad one faster than the DJ bringing back all the emotions involved by innocently playing a track associated with the passing of a loved one.

There are other occasions where certain songs are definite no-nos. But I stress these songs and circumstances are best discussed with your DJ well ahead of your reception date.

Any "Gotcha's" when preparing music suggestions for the function?

One of the most common oversights is to omit, by accident or by intent, a whole category of guests. When reviewing the music for their reception, I like to draw a pie chart with the client, then I ask them what percentage of people in attendance will be "Their parents age or older". Lets say the answer to that question is 40%. Then I respond with a suggestion that the music played for the reception needs to represent this division between the age groups, 40% old-time favourites, that is 60's, rock 'n' roll etc and 60% current hits, party favourites etc. This isn't a scientific thing, the spilt may fall either side of the percentages but in practice I find this is a good place to start

So give us a view of the ideal sure-fire hit reception

The most successful receptions are ones where beforehand the client gives us a list, any size list of suggested songs. They allow the DJ a flexibility to change the music should the crowd not be responding. They allow the DJ to program music from all eras to work with the different ages in attendance. They allow requests from the guests. After all the DJ has experience with playing music to people and should be able to understand the party mood of the people!

The successful reception is a balancing act between "Must be played" songs, party favourites, old and young peoples music and material that is not played. It's a journey that unfolds in real time rather than pre-ordained.

Ok then what doesn't work?

In my experience there are two things that are guaranteed to fail:

- 1) Trying to educate everyone in attendance to the newest, coolest, hip, in-vogue music that's being played overseas by way of the play list and/or
- 2) "Human Jukebox" mode, that is to say specifying the music list down to the minute, leaving no room for requests, time over-runs or allowing flexibility should the music list not be working with the crowd.

Over the last 22 years I've had many clients try both of these, and they fail almost 100% of the time.

My advice about preparing music requests may help to explain why trying to educate your guests will probably not work.

Experience shows that if you want to educate everyone, your Wedding reception is the last place you should consider doing it. Sure have one or two "New" tunes in the list but don't program the whole night with them, unfortunately we in Australia lag the world in many respects with new music and its very likely that you'll be in the minority of people who have heard of the tracks before. It also gets back to my idea of thinking of your reception in the sense of outcomes – do you want your reception to be remembered for the music no-one knew or for the great time they had?

If you really, truly want the second one – programming the night down to the minute, no requests, no deviating from the provided list then please telephone me for a refund of your booking deposit **NOW**. This approach is guaranteed not to work. Even the most experienced DJs wouldn't try this with their own parties!

Again I ask you to consider the outcome. If your music list bombs and you've specified no changes then people will think your reception was a dud, hardly the memory you want to leave your guests with. Even if you get the list right, can you be sure you've got a handle on other timing variables such as dinner, speeches etc? What do we do with a fixed track list that doesn't fit into the allotted time?

Can't you just send the client a list of songs to tick and they'll give you that on the night? Other DJ companies do this, why wont you?

Well other companies do what they feel works for them. However "Tick-a-box" lists definitely do not work for us; they're impersonal, limited and have the effect of making the DJ a Jukebox. How do you know from a tick list that the DJ has the experience to do the job?, what about music that isn't on the list? Does that mean every DJ from that company has legitimate, first-generation copies of all the music with them or are they using duplicates (And thus infringing copyright law). But ultimately I find that its really not the best approach to personal customer service that I strive for.

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What about M.C.ing? I'd like my DJ to be the M.C. for me.

That's an excellent use of the resources available to you, but please discuss this when booking your DJ for your reception. Some DJs are excellent at the music side and not so hot on the M.C. side, conversely you can encounter M.C.s who are brilliant speakers and fantastic on the microphone but don't know their party music from their elevator music.

Sometimes it makes sense to have one person do both these roles and on other occasions its essential that the roles are handled separately. I really encourage an early discussion on this topic, as individual circumstances will dictate what's right for you.

Also your MC will need to practice names and titles – so make sure you meet with your MC ahead of time so he or she can get all the names correct, best the MC gets them wrong a few times in practice and right at the reception.

Have we covered everything?

There are two other things to consider:

- 1) How do you want your DJ attired? Tux? Business suit? All blacks? Please be sure to communicate this to your DJ well ahead of time and
- 2) Please consider the layout of the room with respect to where you will site the DJ and their equipment. Try to seat the younger people near the speakers and the more senior people away from the speakers.

Too often the last item isn't even given a thought until its too late, then it's a constant struggle between "Turn the music up" and "Turn the music down". Again I go back to the thought of outcomes and if you would really like everyone to tell you the only thing they remember about your reception was how loud (Or quiet) the music was. The right seating plan early on can help head this off..

Any final thoughts?

Your DJ is a resource to use in planning your reception; their experience and music knowledge is at your disposal. I say use it for all its worth!

People choose DJs for their reception for varying reasons, whatever reason yours happens to be make sure its for the right reasons, please don't regret the decision by not utilising the DJ to their full potential. Communicate, communicate and communicate some more with your DJ and you can rest assured you've done as much as you can in planning your big day.

STOP PRESS!

One final thought—If you are going to meet with your DJ prior to your wedding, it's IMPERATIVE that you have the FINAL run sheet from the venue beforehand. Otherwise when you sit down with your DJ you'll be guessing times, and almost always you'll end up adjusting these, sometimes considerably, from the times you set down with your DJ. The differences can be quite stark, often negating a lot of the initial meeting with the DJ.

Seems this is becoming quite common, and I'd rather clients meetings be more meaningful in terms of outcomes, and everyone gets it right the first time, and most importantly there is less risk of timing mistakes on the night of the reception.

I know you're keen to get all the details bedded down, but please, make sure you've got your run sheet finalised BEFORE you meet with the DJ.

Glen McBride is the Proprietor of MFTM Pty Ltd, parent company of DJs of Distinction and has been DJing since 1985 on radio, in clubs and pubs and for private events.

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