

Tips on Selecting Wedding Reception Music

Written by Frank Whyte

He's a little bit country; she's a little bit rock 'n roll.

Mom's big on Sinatra, but she married the original doo-wop daddy.

The aunts and uncles prefer polkas, chicken dances and similarly embarrassing spectacles.

And then there are the friends from college...

How do you select reception music that fits everybody? It's an intimidating question, since the entertainment plays no small role in the success of a wedding reception. Years from now, your wedding reception guests will remember few details of your reception, but they'll certainly recall whether they danced, laughed and enjoyed themselves. The entertainment is the make-or-break factor in producing a memorable special occasion. After twenty years of producing wedding receptions, I've found that there are very few rules that apply to all wedding receptions. Each assembly of guests takes on a distinct personality. Forecasting a group's hot buttons is more art than science, but we can offer some time-tested guidelines.

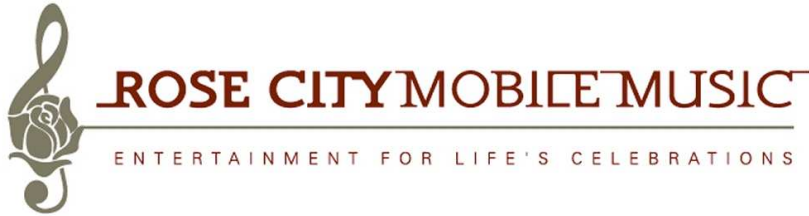
The Art of The Slow Transition

Is it possible to satisfy the disparate audience we described at the beginning of this article?

Sure. In fact, we do it at least a few times each weekend, using a simple and effective technique we call the "slow transition."

After dinner music (good choices: soft rock, jazz or classical), we'll begin the dancing portion of the reception with a mix of more romantic songs, leaning more toward the big band and 50's crooners. As the evening progresses and people get more enthusiastic, we build toward a more uptempo, contemporary mix. That's not to say that there's no variety of fast/slow, old/new during the transition, but to say that the mood of the music matches that of the crowd; subtly evolving from mellow to more exciting.

With a smooth transition, you'll be surprised at how well "the old folks" adapt to the new stuff (I once saw an 85-year-old man doin' Da Butt in his walker).



Artfully staged, nobody really notices the evolution in progress. Each guest, however, will recall that they "played my type of music."

The Special Songs in the Mix

There are some song titles that you'll specify by name to your entertainment provider. These "special songs" include your bride & groom first dance, father/bride dance, mother/groom dance, bridal party dance, cake cutting, departure dance, and others, depending upon which traditional agenda items you include in your reception.

We've posted a list of the most popular special songs on the Internet for your review. While these songs are popular, no such list is all-inclusive.

Often, what makes a song special is the memory associated with it. A great first-dance song might be the one playing on the car radio during the couple's first date. The father/bride dance could be performed to the song dad sang when he tucked in a five-year-old future bride. Even if the meaning is lost on the rest of the group, a special moment forms on the dance floor. And that is apparent to the guests.

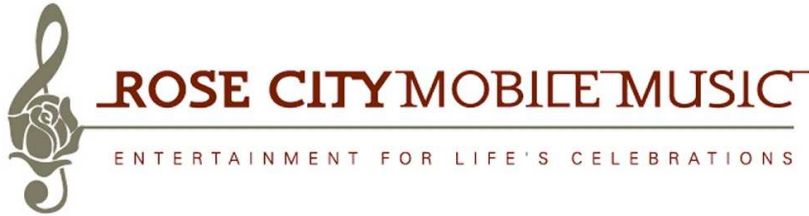
For true sentimentality, there are several songs intended specifically for such events as father/bride and mother/groom dance songs. Currently, Bob Carlisle's Butterfly Kisses holds the popular lead among father/bride selections, but specialty artists Mikki and Renee Nalbandian have both composed wonderfully sentimental ballads for such occasions.

One caution that can be offered regarding special songs is to consider the true lyrical content of the song before committing to it. For years, Olivia Newton-John's "I Honestly Love You" was a favorite choice, despite the fact that its subject matter involves the conclusion of an extramarital affair. Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" is also a break-up song, as is Garth Brooks' The Dance. They're all heart-touching ballads, but just don't offer themselves to the true spirit of a first dance as husband and wife.

How Much Music Do I Need to Select?

Aside from your special songs, it's important for you to work with your entertainment provider to set a tone for the event. There are likely to be songs that you definitely do or don't want to have included in your reception.

A reputable DJ or bandleader will work with you to produce a music program that reflects your preferences, rather than working off of a standard playlist that works most of the time.



Obviously, planning is essential. You should work closely with an entertainment provider whose insights you trust. Together, you can produce an entertainment program that balances your taste and the desires of your audience.

Some flexibility is essential in the planning process. Let's take an extreme (but true) example to illustrate the point.

Maggie was a 24-year-old bride-to-be with a strong musical interest. Her tastes ran toward alternative rock, and she was considered an expert on the format. Her wedding reception, she decided, would be pre-planned, song-by-song, to reflect her tastes.

We worked with Maggie to gently soften her intractable position regarding the music list, but Maggie was the customer, and she invariably rejected each of our suggestions.

Only while setting-up for the reception did we realize something truly bothersome: The reception was being staged far from Maggie's home and friends, and was attended almost exclusively by the groom's family. It was a large gathering of a conservative, old-world family, none of whom was vaguely familiar with alternative rock.

Our DJ was almost continuously verbally assaulted by members of the audience for (his) poor musical selections. Guests began filtering out of the reception a few minutes after dessert was served. Even Maggie recognized that the Fugees' "Killing Me Softly with His Song" would've been more appropriately named Killing My Party with This Song.

With a scant few close family members left in attendance, Maggie reluctantly allowed our DJ to take requests. A few people finally brushed the top layer of dust from the dance floor, just as the clean-up crew began removing tablecloths.

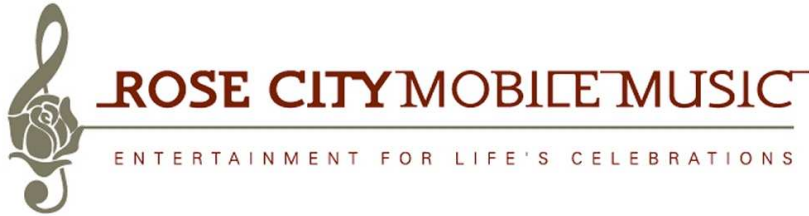
Agreed, the above is an extreme example of how a wedding reception can be "over-produced." But in lesser forms, it's a common challenge for us as we work with brides to consider both their own preferences and their guests' desires in the entertainment program.

Let's go back to the original question: How much music do I need to select?

From a purely logistical standpoint, somewhere between 50 and 60 songs will fit into a four-hour wedding reception.

But that pragmatic answer fails to consider the most important issue you face as a special event planner:

How much of the reception belongs to you, and how much belongs to your guests?



Frequently... very frequently, in fact... we're told not to play "The Electric Slide", "The Macarena", or the "Chicken Dance".

That exclusion is quite understandable, since those songs are so overplayed that they audibly illustrate the word "trite."

It's also understandable that many guests will want to dance to those songs. They expect them. And you can prohibit them. It's important for you to decide how much of the reception you're willing to trust in the hands of your guests.

An associated issue is how much you trust your entertainment provider to gauge the crowd reaction and adapt the program to their tastes. A skilled DJ will be able to select music that motivates the crowd without turning a classy affair into a truck pull.

For that reason, you need to work closely with your entertainment provider to share a common vision... building upon your preferences, your guests' expectations and your entertainment provider's insights to produce an entertainment program that makes your reception a memorable event.

Choose wisely, and best wishes.