

Wedding Music Planning Checklist

Your Complete Guide to Creating the Perfect Soundtrack

By Tony Winyard | Wedding DJ & Host | 2,500+ Weddings

The Spotify Spiral at Midnight

It's 11:47 PM. You're three hours deep into a Spotify rabbit hole.

You've got 47 tabs open. Four different "First Dance Songs 2026" playlists. A Notes app list that somehow has 73 songs and zero decisions. Your partner fell asleep an hour ago. And you still can't answer the simple question:

What's our song?

Sound familiar?

Here's what couples tell me at every consultation: "We don't even know where to start." "Every time we try to pick, we end up more confused." "There are just too many options."

I've helped plan music for 2,500+ weddings. The couples who stress about this for months? And the couples who have it sorted in one evening? The difference isn't musical taste.

It's having a system.

This guide gives you that system. A framework for every music decision—from the moment you walk down the aisle to the last song of the night. Worksheets you can fill out and hand to your DJ. A process that turns "we have no idea" into "we're sorted."

Let's end the Spotify spiral.

Part 1: The Essential Songs

Every wedding has moments that need their own music. These are non-negotiable. Get these right, and the rest follows.

Ceremony Music

Processional (Walking Down the Aisle) This is the song playing as you walk towards your future. No wrong answers here, only what feels right to you.

Questions to consider:

- One song for everyone, or different tracks for bridesmaids and bride?
- Tempo: stately and slow, or more upbeat?
- Lyrics: meaningful words you'll hear, or instrumental?
- Modern or classical?

Popular choices: Canon in D, A Thousand Years, Songbird, Here Comes the Sun

Register/Certificate Signing A moment of paperwork that deserves beautiful background music. Usually 2-3 songs while you sign.

Think about:

- Quieter, more intimate tracks
- Songs with meaning but not requiring spotlight attention
- Something your guests will enjoy listening to

Recessional (Walking Out as a Married Couple) The victory lap. Usually more upbeat, celebratory, joyful.

The vibe:

- You're married! Time to celebrate
- Energy shifts from emotional to excited
- Something that makes people smile

Popular choices: Signed, Sealed, Delivered, Happy, Walking on Sunshine, All You Need Is Love

First Dance

The big one. The song everyone remembers.

Choosing Your Song

Ask yourselves:

- Is there a song that's "ours"? (First date, proposal, inside joke)
- Do we want meaningful lyrics or just a great tune?
- Can we actually dance to this for 3-4 minutes?
- How do we feel about dancing in front of everyone?

Practical Considerations

- **Length:** Most first dances last 2-3 minutes. Songs can be faded or edited if needed. Don't commit to a 6-minute epic unless you're confident.

- **Tempo:** Slow songs are easier to "shuffle dance" to. Upbeat songs require more movement. Be honest about your skill level.
- **Version:** Same song, different versions. Check your DJ has the exact one you want. Radio edit vs album version. Acoustic vs original. Live vs studio.

First Dance Alternatives

Not everyone wants the traditional spotlight. Options:

- Invite bridal party to join after 30 seconds
- Invite everyone from the start
- Skip it entirely (yes, you can)
- Have a "group first dance" with no couple spotlight

Parent Dances

Father-Daughter Dance A beautiful tradition, but completely optional.

Tips:

- Keep it shorter (1.5-2 minutes is plenty)
- Choose something meaningful but not too slow
- Dad doesn't need to be a dancer; it's the moment that matters
- Can combine with mother-son at the same time

Mother-Son Dance Same principles apply. Equal importance, equal planning.

Modern Variations

- Both parents with both partners simultaneously
- Include step-parents
- Honour absent parents with a moment of reflection
- Skip entirely if relationships are complicated

Other Key Moments

Cake Cutting Usually a short, fun song. 30-60 seconds while you cut and pose.

Popular choices: Sugar Sugar, How Sweet It Is, Pour Some Sugar on Me

Bouquet/Garter Toss (if having) Upbeat, fun, slightly cheeky.

Popular choices: Single Ladies, Girls Just Wanna Have Fun, Get Lucky

Last Dance The song that says "thank you and goodnight." Often a sentimental closer or a big singalong.

Popular choices: Time of My Life, Don't Stop Believin', New York New York, Angels

Part 2: Creating Your Playlist

The Three Lists System

This is how most professional DJs work. Simple, effective, and gives you control while letting them do their job.

1. **Must-Play List** Songs that **MUST** be played. No exceptions.

Include:

- First dance
- Parent dances
- Any songs with special meaning that you'll be disappointed not to hear
- Requests from close family if important

Important: Keep this list short (10-15 songs max). If everything's a must-play, nothing is. Your DJ needs room to read the room.

2. **Would-Like List** Songs you'd love to hear but won't be heartbroken if missed.

Include:

- Favourite artists and songs
- Songs from your relationship
- Guest requests you want to honour
- Decade or genre preferences

The deal: Your DJ will work these in where they fit. No guarantees on every track, but strong direction.

3. **Do-Not-Play List** The banned list. Songs you absolutely cannot stand.

Common entries:

- Songs associated with exes
- Anything that makes you cringe
- Overplayed wedding songs you're tired of
- Songs with inappropriate memories

Be specific: "No Ed Sheeran" is clear. "No cheesy songs" needs defining.

Genre Guidelines

Help your DJ understand the overall vibe. Not just what songs, but what kind of night.

Questions to Answer:

1. What decade(s) should dominate? 60s/70s 80s 90s 00s 2010s Current
2. What genres feel right? Pop Rock Indie R&B/Soul Hip-Hop Dance/Electronic Country Jazz Classical Motown Disco
3. Energy level? Background/lounge vibe Building to party High energy from the start Mix of both
4. "Cheesy" wedding songs? Yes please, bring them on A few classics are fine Absolutely not Only if heavily requested

Part 3: Working With Your DJ

What to Communicate

Before the wedding:

- Your three lists (or at least the must-plays and do-not-plays)
- Genre and decade preferences
- Energy expectations
- Cultural music requirements
- Any songs with tricky versions to clarify

Helpful context:

- Guest demographics (ages, music tastes if known)
- How well guest groups know each other
- Your comfort level with the spotlight
- Whether you want guest requests taken on the night

Questions to Ask Your DJ

1. "How do you handle guest requests during the night?"
2. "What happens if a must-play doesn't fit the energy?"
3. "Can you mix different versions or edit song lengths?"
4. "How will you handle transitions between generations?"

5. "What's your approach if the dancefloor empties?"

What a Good DJ Will Do

- Respect your lists completely
- Read the room and adapt
- Build energy thoughtfully through the night
- Mix between generations and genres smoothly
- Never play your banned songs, even if requested
- Check with you before any major deviation

Part 4: First Dance Deep Dive

Because this one matters most.

The Timing Decision

Too Early Risk: If you do the first dance right after speeches (say, 6pm) when guests aren't in "party mode" yet, you might get:

- Polite applause
- A few songs of dancing
- Then everyone sits down
- A lull period before the "real" dancing starts

Better Timing: Wait until evening guests have arrived and the energy is building naturally. Usually 8-8:30pm. Your first dance then launches a dancefloor that stays full.

Making It Less Scary

If the idea of everyone watching makes you anxious:

Option 1: Keep it short Ask your DJ to fade the song after 60-90 seconds and invite everyone to join.

Option 2: Invite the bridal party After 30 seconds, the DJ invites bridesmaids and groomsmen to join. Then everyone.

Option 3: Start with everyone Announce it as "our first dance WITH our favourite people" and invite everyone from the start.

Option 4: The fake-out Start with a slow romantic song, then 30 seconds in, switch to something upbeat and surprise everyone. (Requires rehearsal and DJ coordination.)

Song Length Reality Check

Song Length	Reality
Under 3 mins	Perfect for most couples
3-4 mins	Fine if you're comfortable
4-5 mins	Consider an edit
Over 5 mins	Definitely edit unless choreographed

Choreographed First Dances

Thinking about a dance routine?

Pros:

- Impressive and memorable
- Gives you something to focus on (not the watching)
- Makes for great photos/video

Cons:

- Requires lessons and practice
- More pressure on the night
- Can feel performative rather than romantic

Middle ground: Learn a few simple moves that work with your song. Not a full routine, just enough to feel confident.

Part 5: Multi-Generational Music

Most weddings have guests from their 20s to their 80s. Here's how to keep everyone happy.

The Generational Sweet Spot

60s/70s: Satisfies older guests, and 60s Motown/70s disco is having a revival with younger crowds too. Win-win.

80s: Almost universally loved. Even people born in the 90s have nostalgia for 80s hits. Safe territory.

90s/00s: Core memories for millennials. Good energy tracks. Older guests often know these too.

2010s-now: Important for current hits, but balance with classics.

The Set-Building Approach

Good DJs don't just shuffle between decades randomly. They build sets:

Example flow:

1. Start mellow (background music, conversation-friendly)
2. Build with familiar classics (70s/80s crowd-pleasers)
3. Mix in eras (90s hit into 80s anthem into modern banger)
4. Peak energy mid-evening (everyone's dancing)
5. Slower moment for breathers
6. Big finish with singalong classics

Request Handling

Guest requests can be great (they know what they want to dance to) or terrible (your uncle requesting that one song that clears every dancefloor).

Smart approach: Let your DJ be the gatekeeper. They'll play requests that fit and quietly ignore those that don't. No blame falls on you.

Part 6: Cultural & Religious Music

Incorporating Cultural Traditions

If you or your partner have cultural music traditions, plan these carefully:

Things to communicate:

- Specific songs required
- When in the timeline they should happen
- Whether you're providing the tracks (some are hard to source)
- Any associated rituals (Hora, Bhangra circle, etc.)
- Pronunciation of song titles for announcements

Blending Styles

Many weddings mix Western pop with cultural music. This works beautifully with planning:

- Designate specific times for cultural moments
- Transition smoothly rather than jarring genre changes
- Brief your DJ on pronunciation and context
- Consider having both throughout rather than one block

Part 7: Printable Worksheets

Worksheet 1: Essential Songs

Moment	Song	Artist	Version/Notes
Processional (bridesmaids)			
Processional (bride)			
Register signing			
Register signing			
Recessional			
First dance			
Father-daughter			
Mother-son			
Cake cutting			
Last dance			

Worksheet 2: Must-Play List

Songs that absolutely must be played

Song	Artist	Notes
1.		

Song	Artist	Notes
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		

Worksheet 3: Would-Like List

Songs to work in if they fit

Song	Artist	Notes
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		
9.		
10.		
(add more as needed)		

Worksheet 4: Do-Not-Play List

Songs that must never be played

Song/Artist/Genre	Reason
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Worksheet 5: Vibe & Preferences

Dominant decade(s): _____

Favourite genres: _____

Energy level: Background Building High from start Mix

Cheesy songs: Yes A few No

Guest demographics:

- Age range: _____ to _____
- Music tastes: _____

Special notes for DJ:

Part 8: Planning Timeline

6+ Months Before

- Start noting songs when you hear them
- Discuss overall vibe with your partner
- Begin first dance song discussions

3-4 Months Before

- Finalise first dance song
- Share initial song preferences with DJ
- Discuss ceremony music with officiant

6-8 Weeks Before

- Complete essential songs list
- Submit must-play and do-not-play lists
- Confirm version details with DJ

2-4 Weeks Before

- Final additions to song lists
- Confirm parent dance songs
- Clarify any timing questions with DJ

1 Week Before

- Review complete list one final time
- Confirm first dance timing
- Relax; the music is sorted

Part 9: Quick Reference

50 First Dance Ideas by Style

Romantic & Classic:

1. At Last - Etta James
2. The Way You Look Tonight - Frank Sinatra
3. Can't Help Falling in Love - Elvis Presley
4. A Thousand Years - Christina Perri
5. Thinking Out Loud - Ed Sheeran
6. Perfect - Ed Sheeran
7. All of Me - John Legend
8. You Are the Best Thing - Ray LaMontagne

9. Make You Feel My Love - Adele

10. Unchained Melody - Righteous Brothers

Upbeat & Fun: 11. I Gotta Feeling - Black Eyed Peas 12. Marry You - Bruno Mars 13. Happy - Pharrell Williams 14. Signed, Sealed, Delivered - Stevie Wonder 15. You Make My Dreams - Hall & Oates

Indie & Alternative: 16. First Day of My Life - Bright Eyes 17. Ho Hey - Lumineers 18. Home - Edward Sharpe 19. Such Great Heights - Postal Service 20. I Will Follow You Into the Dark - Death Cab for Cutie

R&B & Soul: 21. Endless Love - Diana Ross & Lionel Richie 22. Just the Two of Us - Bill Withers 23. My Girl - Temptations 24. The Nearness of You - Norah Jones 25. If I Ain't Got You - Alicia Keys

Parent Dance Suggestions

Father-Daughter:

- My Girl - Temptations
- Isn't She Lovely - Stevie Wonder
- Somewhere Over the Rainbow - Israel Kamakawiwo'ole
- Butterfly Kisses - Bob Carlisle
- I Loved Her First - Heartland
- What a Wonderful World - Louis Armstrong

Mother-Son:

- A Song for Mama - Boyz II Men
- You've Got a Friend - Carole King
- Stand By Me - Ben E. King
- What a Wonderful World - Louis Armstrong
- Have I Told You Lately - Van Morrison

About Tony Winyard

After 2,500+ weddings, I've played every song in this guide at least a dozen times. I've seen what works, what bombs, and what depends entirely on reading the room.

Music planning should be exciting, not stressful. With a system, clear communication, and a DJ who listens, you'll create a soundtrack that feels entirely yours.

Need help planning your music or want someone who treats your dancefloor like it matters? Let's talk.

Book a consultation: <https://www.winyard.com/contact>

Final Checklist

Before you send this to your DJ:

- First dance song confirmed (exact version)
- Parent dance songs decided (or confirmed you're skipping)
- Ceremony music selected
- Must-play list complete (under 15 songs)
- Do-not-play list complete
- General vibe/preferences communicated
- Any cultural music requirements specified
- Guest demographics noted
- First dance timing discussed

You're ready.

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