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Punch In

RANT: What The F&*$% Happened To My Mix?

Based On A True Story

It's been six months since you've heard the final mixes, which the artist took off with afterwards, since he/she has been told that it's better to have someone — anyone — other that the mixing engineer handle the mastering. The budget has almost run out and, almost miraculously, the artist has been given a "recommendation" on a "mastering engineer" who can handle the project for super cheap. So here you sit, with someone else playing a sick, mis-aimed game of Russian Roulette with a reputation you've spent years building, but are lucky to have maintained given how many times the end of the chain has made decisions that should have already ruined your career.

Then the moment of truth arrives. The packaging is ugly, and your name misspelled, but at least you're in the credits. You tear off the wrapper, pop the disc in your player and. . . .

Congratulations! You're on the winning end of an unlucky chamber! The recording that sounded so good before mastering now has no high end, no dimension and no depth.

It sounds bad everywhere except on your laptop. Okay, it was a small label with questionable manufacturing practices, and the artist had to pay for mastering out of the recording budget (which never used to happen in the days of vinyl, but there's no use lamenting that).

There are mastering plug-ins that equalize, maximize, desensitize and straight flush your mixes right down the toilet. It's audio on the Internet, baby, who cares? Is it any wonder why the music industry is going down the tubes? I don't want to pay for this crap either and, by proxy, I'm responsible for some of it! This is the day and age that record companies, particularly indies, encourage artists to take the easy route, to save as much money as possible. So why not take the cheap way out in mastering as well?

Lesson learned. Per your experience, the next contract will explicitly state that you have final approval on to what "mastering house" handles your mix or, at the least, you get to be present for the mastering, even if it is sans pay. Because, face it, there comes a point when getting the money isn't as important as the passion that got you into this business in the first place. And you're never going too far in avoiding a tarnished reputation. And no money is compensation for the pain you will feel if, God unwilling, you have to hide your head for the next six months every time you pass a radio. In this day and age, you have to aspire, if not fight, for a great sound.

So what can you do to help avoid a repeat of this unfortunate situation? This is what I've learned in my years of being proactive in "sonic harm reduction." As a mixing engineer, you can take the following steps to avert disaster when working with less-than-seasoned mastering engineers:

1. Understand the intention of the recording, both yours and the artist's; and understand how the wrong move with the EQ or the compressor can destroy, or improve, your ability to convey that intent to the listener. Take the time to run the final mixes through some simple EQ, level adjustment, and compression to see how it affects this overall intention. Write down as much information as you can and bring it to the session. If you can be at the session, type the notes in a form the mastering engineer suggests, so that he/she can achieve the desired results.

2. Choose a group of your favorite recordings that you feel convey an intent similar to your own for comparison purposes. Listen to these recordings along with your final mixes on several different systems — from hi-fi stereo systems to your computer, from your car to your headphones. Bring those CDs to the mastering session, and request a quick listen to "tune" your ears to the room. These examples will make the mastering engineer's job much easier than simply saying, "I want it to sound good."

3. Understand that you probably won't be able to make sound sonic judgments in a facility you're not used to. If you've prepped for the session with steps one and two, then let the mastering engineer take over. But always make sure that in your contract that you are allowed to take the mastered version home and listen to it before giving any approval for sending it to manufacturing.

4. Repeat step two: Listen to the mastered version over several systems.

5. Make clear notes regarding changes that you would like. Contact the mastering engineer to make versions 2.0, 2.1, 3.9 . . . however many you need.

6. Request a CD ref of the approved PMCD that will be sent to manufacturing. Keep this copy on hand to compare with the manufactured product. Check that the CD ref plays well on several machines without glitches, and if the CD glitches on one machine, request a new CD ref. If that new one glitches, request a new PMCD be made as well.

That's all for now, gang. I have to go make sure a well-mixed record isn't destroyed in the mastering process. If you have any questions, please contact me at cookie@otrstudios.com.

Signing off,

Cookie Marenco: Producer/Engineer/Survivor