

THE ART OF MASTERING: PART II

A few years ago I wrote an article about the art of mastering and how it was evolving. No longer are we there just to make sure that the technical restrictions of the record era are in check; we are now an important part of the creative chain.

Lately however, I have been seeing an alarming trend: people who, thinking that they can bypass any formal training in engineering, are buying the software and instantly calling themselves a “mastering engineer”.

This is a dangerous trend.

Firstly, the mastering engineer brings a fresh pair of ears to a project that probably feels like it took an eternity to make. Having that unbiased perspective is priceless to your project.

Secondly, the mastering engineer is not only the last of what seems to be an interminable parade of engineers. He or she is also a skilled technician/editor/musician who has spent many hours listening to music and understands what and how people want to hear their music. They understand why a Latin mix should be bright and why a Hip Hop track needs to be bassy.

Mastering is understanding every item in your toolbox and knowing when to use it, how to use it, and even whether to use it. If one doesn't understand the principles of compression, how can one possibly use a compressor properly? If one doesn't truly understand “Q”, also known as bandwidth, can one properly equalise a mix without phase cancellation? Music is sounding over-compressed, out of phase, with too many highs and too many lows... and distorted.

This distortion is my biggest concern.

Because music is so terribly over-compressed -thanks to plug-ins like the Ultramaximizer and others similar to it- one gets tired after just a few songs because of ear fatigue; without peaks or valleys in a song, the ear becomes physically tired and listening to the music become tedious. In addition, when one crosses the line with that software trying to make it louder and LOUDER there simply isn't any more room for the sound file to go, and it begins to distort. It is at that point, that it just isn't musical anymore. It's noise.

I am not against all the software that is now generally and affordably available to all. It is a wonderful tool for writers, musicians and engineer.

When one spends the time learning about how to use these tools properly, as does a mastering engineer, it is amazing how wonderfully clear and professional sounding music can be. After such a long process, wouldn't you want your project to sound as best as possible?

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