

What is Mastering?

There have been many views as to what mastering actually is, and there is still a lot of mystery as to what the mastering engineer does and how he does it. It seems in this day of “ software=professional” , there is a concept floating through the music industry consciousness that there is some sort of formula or preset that once known, will work like a magic pill.

Mastering has two components: assembly and interpretation. Assembly is simply putting the songs in order, setting the pacing, and keeping the song levels consistent so the album holds together as a complete entity. But defining the interpretive aspect is a much more abstract exploration. This is where experience and creativity combine to define the individual imprint of the mastering engineer.

What I believe this translates into is the facilitation of the transfer of information. The listener must effortlessly and viscerally comprehend what he or she is hearing without any conscious thought. Any obstruction of this process will impede the listener’ s ability to experience the music. This means that all the important components that make up the music must be clearly presented and working together so the listener instantaneously “ understands” .

For example, if the mix is too heavy in low frequencies, there may be lack of detail in the kick and bass, and what they are actually doing may be indiscernible. Then the perception of the groove is impaired, and the song feels sluggish and lacking in energy. Or perhaps the midrange is overloaded to the point where melodic elements are obscuring one another. This will lead to masking of some of the components and a lack of intelligibility. It could be compared to watching a movie out of focus.

What this boils down to is that the harder it is for people to understand what musical language the artist is speaking, the less chance there is for them to be interested by it. The human attention span has never been shorter than it is today. And there has never been so many entertainment options available. The more an audience has to work to comprehend the music, the less they will be paying attention to it.

Mastering is being able to listen to a piece of music and knowing what is needed to maximize the transfer of information. It doesn't come in a software bundle, or magic box. It comes from years of listening and understanding what is important and what works so that the music reaches and touches other people. And no matter which tools are used to attain this goal, the most vital piece of equipment in the mastering chain (in my opinion) is the listening environment. If you cannot hear what is going on with the music due to inaccurate acoustics, you can only guess at what you are doing.

So the two things I would advise anyone to look for in a mastering facility are: an engineer with a range and wealth of experience and open mind, and an accurate room that he knows well.

Neither of these comes quickly, cheaply, or in a piece of equipment or software bundle.

Listen well.