

WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO MY ART?

Part 2

During the first two weeks of December 1996, the New York Times discovered the recording industry. In a front page article, an editorial page article, and the whole front page of the Sunday Times Arts and Entertainment section, the Times reported doom and gloom about our industry.

I certainly cannot dispute their reportage. They discuss a drop in the growth rate of the industry, various Chapter 11 bankruptcies of record store chains, the practical cessation of classical recording in this country and of falling revenues in the industry. After a growth rate of 10% a year, we have dropped back to 2%, and the curve is falling rapidly.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? The golden goose has stopped laying. Perhaps it is time to take an overview and to try to evaluate what is going wrong. In a complex industry, there is no simple causation of our problems. Some of the problems are caused by those of us who are not far-sighted about where we are going. Some of the problems are external due to general economic conditions and there 'ain't' much that we can do about that.

THE MUSIC: Some of us have forgotten what should be a self-evident fact; we are selling music and if the music isn't there, no one will buy the record. Now, to define 'music'. Of course, this is the hardest part of all. Music is a form of human communicative expression which is based on two elements, the song and the dance. The human voice is the most powerful device and the perfect instrument to which all others are compared. The more that we distort it and make it inhuman, the less communicative it becomes. Words are a plus. Good poetry has always sold and great words (as in the Bible and Shakespeare) are timeless. We haven't turned up many good poets lately.

The dance, the physiological response of the body to regular repetitive beats, seems basic to many animals. There are two variations to the beat emphasis: breathing rate while awake, a two-beat, and the basic breathing pattern while we are asleep, the three-beat. This gives us the march and the waltz, to reduce it to the commonest forms in western music. In modern commercial music (other than a little country), we have eliminated 50% of the possibilities by eliminating anything with three beats to the bar. I won't even mention non-western music which uses complex combinations

of two-beat and three-beat to render five, seven and eleven beats to the bar. Especially in rock 'n roll, we have settled on a rigid march tempo of 120 beats per minute, unrelentingly, unvaryingly and mechanically 'click track.' The subtle tempo changes which emphasize the musicality of the phrase have long been abandoned, or perhaps they were never there in the first place.

Demographics, age distribution of the record buying public, and disposable income should be re-evaluated. Especially with rock 'n roll, which is now quite old, not much new has happened in the past 25 years. The chords haven't changed and the instruments haven't changed and it becomes endlessly repetitive. Perhaps this is why my contemporaries who are ready to collect Social Security are back out on the road - they still have something to say, besides re-creating "wonders of the past."

There is too much product and too much bad product which is being released. With the advent of the home studio, albums can be produced cheaply. The record labels have taken advantage of this and have released a lot of material that should have never seen the light of day. They have been unwilling to put in the time and money to produce a few good projects and then to invest enough to get them off the ground. The buying public sees too much unknown product in the stores and becomes confused.

Some pressure from the listening public is needed to get the endless top 40 radio stations to play something that isn't on the charts yet. This vast wasteland needs some serious overhaul since the stations are clearly not fulfilling their Federal mandate. How they get their licenses renewed will remain an eternal mystery to me.

The delivery medium of CDs and of digital reproduction has greatly reduced the amount of musical satisfaction that the public can derive. I continually hear from both professional audio people and lay people too, that the old LPs had a 'sound' that was, if I may translate, warm and musical. All the vacuum tubes in the world will never restore to digital in its present form the warm and musical sound of analog recording. I could discuss technically why this is so, but that is a matter for a different time. While occasionally the music gets through on a digital recording, it happens far too seldomly.

So, let's see why the New York Times is so upset. We have allowed the music that has driven the industry for 40 years to go stale. CD prices are high enough so that the usual buyer, the 11 to 15 year old girl, have to cut back on the number of records purchased since her dollar doesn't go as

far. Perhaps the industry should reevaluate its pricing structure to make list prices a little more realistic in terms of the actual costs of manufacturing. Heresy! The videocassette industry discovered this 20 years ago and dropped list prices from \$59.95 to \$19.95-volume increased to make up the profit difference.

Musically, not much new has happened. The music that our industry sells provides little song and very little dance, which used to be a very important form of social intercourse. When there was danceable music, girls would buy the records and get together to practice the newest steps. There were also dances, often done to recordings, which were important social events in the life of a teenager.

The A & R people are also remiss. Rather than take chances on something new or different, they have imitated what the latest hit group has done, rather than using imagination and spunk to try something off the beaten track. The rock groups get their education from listening to the latest hit group and they usually end up doing a poor imitation. Multitrack recording has also greatly diminished the spontaneity and musicality that is possible to convey in a recording. The advent of multitrack recording became necessary when the quality of musicians went from top grade professionals to abjectly musically untutored amateurs. Multitracking allowed the amateur musician the luxury of infinite retakes until it seemed to be correct. Albums which used to be recorded by professionals in two days now became two month or two year projects. The costs mounted up. To the equally unsophisticated teen-age girls, the energy of the new groups was appealing, especially that these new musicians could be seen on television and at live shows. The listening public was exposed to the abomination of TV sound. TV sound did not have to be as horrible as it is but the television manufacturers, in their infinite wisdom, put in the cheapest possible audio circuits into their product, destroying the potential of good FM reception. This badly reproduced sound, together with the badly amplified sound at concerts has become, in the listener's ears, what the music should sound like. "Louder" has replaced "better."

As the costs mounted, the record companies put more and more pressure on the A & R people to produce more 'hits'. For the most part, they failed because the bean counters wanted to go the conservative and safe route-copy what was currently successful. By the time the new, duplicate album was finished and released (a year down the road?), the trend had already changed. Often, they would copy a hit group who could not come up with a second hit record.

The blame got passed down the line - the producer was no good - the engineer was no good - the studio had the wrong 'vibe', and so on ad finitum. Rather than hiring good A & R people who had musical knowledge and who could select musical groups with some certainty, the labels hired good PR people who listened to a lot of records and who could get along with the groups and prevent personality disasters.

This lack of desirable musical qualifications in the A & R people reflected down the line. Incompetence breeds incompetence. Incompetent producers were hired (many times, I think, because they had the right hair style) who in turn, hired incompetent engineers (who had the same hair style) who ended up in incompetent studios. The project was doomed from the start.

Especially rock, which had a vigorous anti-establishment beginning during the baby boom era, has lost a great deal of its meaning during the very conservative times that we now live in. The enemy at that time were parents, school and government. Today, all three have abdicated much of their authority and no longer pose a threat. The success of urban music, hip-hop, etc. is because the enemies are still perceived by that segment of the population who is still in conflict with authority.

Are we trapped forever in this downward spiralling mediocrity? Perhaps not. I am not alone in my analysis of 'what's wrong?' Martin Polon, writing in the venerable British studio magazine 'Studio Sound,' leads his article on the mediocrity that has invaded our industry with "When the CD rolled in, the 'professional margin' rolled out, and took with it the quality assurance long offered by the audio pros". Perhaps, broadly extended, this is the malaise which is affecting sales.

In a letter to the "New York Times" in response to their article on the demise of classical music, the writer says that the modern orchestral recordings sound like they are performed "like automatons playing synthesizers." I can only agree. The music has been lost.

How do we get it back? First, the 'youth culture' is fine for the buyers of music but it should not be transmitted to the professional selection of groups, their production and recording. This is an area for only the best professionally trained people. Secondly, the technology which is available to us is not the music. The technology is only the means for expressing and recording the music. A good computer operator is not necessarily a good music editor (or film editor, for that matter). Thirdly, we must get away from the prevailing slobism of 'let's get by' and 'it's good enough'.

I over-use the word 'professional'. What I mean is, for example, a person who is very skilled and very talented at carving the Christmas turkey is not necessarily the person who I would choose to do brain surgery. Rather, I would like to know that the brain surgeon has had 4 years of college, 4 years of medical school, two years of internship and 3 years of specialty in surgery. The professional musician has been trained almost as rigorously. So has the professional recording engineer. Talent isn't enough!

CRITICAL EVALUATION. The lack of critical evaluation is pathetic. This is the type of criticism we hear around our studio and it is expressed by everyone about everything - from the 2nd assistant to the head of A&R - "it blew me away," "these are the best tracks I ever heard," "the mastering house never heard anything like this before," "amazing!" "awesome" (my favorite word). How can everything be the best? There must be some demarcation in quality and the people responsible for the product should know enough to be able to say "that sucks." Better yet, they should have known enough not to have signed inferior groups to the label. The criteria for determining the aesthetics of a good composition and a good performance has been established many centuries ago. No mystery here.

The levels of incompetence often start at the top and seep down through the various levels of the recording chain. Too often, the recording engineers are ill trained. There has been a long 'guild' tradition in the training of engineers which is rapidly being lost. As an apprentice, you would learn the basics, built on a previous technical and musical knowledge. You would move up through the ranks to assistant engineer where you could watch and learn from master engineers. Only then could you sit behind the console as full charge engineer. Through the years of training, you developed recording knowledge and with a little luck, taste.

Today, there are too few studios that still maintain this system of training. Now, many of the people who apply for work have started at the top - they have a home studio and they have done their engineering in their basement. It doesn't give us much to work with.

We hear too much 'music' which is synthesized. Having an active part myself in creating this monster, I am well aware of its shortcomings. No matter how good the violin sample is, there is no way that you can create a line the way a violinist would play it. The subtle nuances that a good violinist adds by playing non-tempered tuning, the subtle changes in the tonal quality from note to note and the dynamic changes from note to note would take an eternity to recreate on a synthesizer. Unfortunately, it is in

these subtle elements that the music lies.

WHAT'S THE UPSIDE? It is not too late to add a little professionalism to the entire scale of the music industry. Select A & R people who have enough musical knowledge, through musical training and performance, to be able to better select a group who can convey some musical feeling. Aside of the 'show biz' aspects of the group, is there any MUSIC in their music? Do they elicit the musical excitement that a good musical group can generate?

Studios and engineering should be judged by how often they have been able to capture the musicality of a group, rather than whether they have the latest XYZ console. It takes musicians to judge musicians and the level of musicality is not arbitrary. When good engineers come to my studio to listen to the quality of different microphones, there is almost no disagreement about which sounds better. It is not a matter of style or personal taste. WE KNOW. WE HAVE BEEN TRAINED. WE LISTEN!

I hope that the shock treatment of the marketplace will help to bring on a reevaluation of the standards which have brought about this depression. Perhaps it is time to put an end to amateurism. It has tried. It has 'gotten by.' It has failed. The age of 'make it cheaper and to hell with the quality' will only work in the short run. Like murder, 'quality will out.'

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