

WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO MY ART?

Part 6

I love audio, I really do. I go to many demonstrations of new equipment and stuff since I really try to keep up with the rapid changes in the technology. I attend so many 'shoot-outs' that I feel like I live in the O.K. Corral.

Lately, though, I leave these demonstrations and 'shoot-outs' with feelings of emptiness, frustration, irritation and annoyance. WHAT IS GOING ON?

For example, I attended a demonstration of a new digital console. Miraculous! With a very sophisticated computer program, you could twist, turn, edit, scramble and toast with fries on the side, the signal in ways that the old razor blade school of editing could never even conceive of. Toward the end of the demonstration, I naively asked if they would play something recorded using the console. ZAAAAP! Game over. On my way to the exit, I politely asked the demonstrator why it sounded the way it did. In spite of impressive specifications, it sounded god-awful. I didn't need measuring instruments to hear overload, IM and every other kind of distortion known to man/woman. The reply floored me as I was told, "I don't know anything about that. I'm a computer engineer and I don't know anything about music."

On and undaunted, I went to various lectures about DVD and sampling rates of one hundred scillion. Wait a minute. I was yelling at all of the AES meetings, together with Bob Fine and Russ Hamm, that 44.1k sampling rates were too low and that was maybe 15 years ago. We were told to shut up. CDs are 'perfection' and that we should dump all of that old analog stuff into the nearest land fill. The manufacturers were happy. All of those turntables, all of that hi-fi equipment, all of that studio equipment that had been sold in the past was now junk.

The record labels were equally happy. Throw out those old fashioned LPs. Buy the same materials taken out of the vaults of yesteryear and buy them again on the new digitally mastered CDs. What a gold mine! No live musicians! No recording studios! Almost no expenses at all. The big record labels ate up the smaller and indy labels for their libraries and it was re-release time for a decade.

Ear pollution set in, big time. With cheaper and cheaper digital equipment available, the home studio became the big market for manufacturers. After all, if you believe the extensive advertising, you too can achieve CD quality

on your home equipment. If CDs have become the norm as far as the quality of sound, then the ads were not telling lies. After all, why spend all of that money on studios or to hire experienced engineers when you can futz around in your home studio and get 'CD quality sound'? To paraphrase Gresham's law of economics, bad sound will drive out good. (Bad money, for example our present day quarters, will drive out good, the old silver content quarters).

It reminds me of the time many years ago when Russ Hamm was showing a half-million dollar Neumann disc cutting lathe at an AES show. A young wanderer came up to Russ, looked over this magnificent machine and asked "What does this thing do?" Russ patiently explained what it was used for. The wanderer then said, "Show me how to work it". Russ replied, "What are you doing for the next 10 years?"

In this new digital age, selling equipment is like selling soap. The ultimate consumer too often has no aural reference to what recorded music, let alone live music should and could sound like. It's shooting fish in a barrel. I attended a demonstration recently of a rather expensive 24 track digital hard disc recorder. The main attribute was that it looked like and behaved like an analog recorder. It was implied that the software was not yet quite up to speed but not to worry! It would be obsolete in a year anyway. Another minor point - the system was incompatible with any other system. If as it happens in real life, a client wants to track at SEAR SOUND, mix at X sound and master at Y sound, tough! Incompatible! You'll have to stay with us for the whole project.

Because of the rising discontent of the public to the poor music delivery system as illustrated by a decrease in CD purchases, it was decided that digital was too 'pure' and that it could be warmed up by adding a little vacuum tube 'distortion.' Prices on old tube mics and studio equipment soared. (I was fortunate. I bought up everything that I could afford 25 years ago when it was being dumped as obsolete). It was unfortunate that this was happening at a time when equipment manufacturers such as Avalon, Martinsound and Prism were making superb transistor equipment. ISN'T ANYBODY LISTENING?

But now, the technology monster has raised its head again and it is threatening to attack those who most nurtured it. Audio quality levels have now sunk so low that the newest threat has become the Internet. Record stores are now seeing their sales slip away to the music providers on the Internet who are selling CDs directly to the public. You can also get home delivery of "near CD Quality" music on MP3 that you can hear on your

computer speakers. (Is there no lowest depth?). That there is 90% 'compression' which means that 90% of the digits are eliminated, should have no effect on the quality (Oh Yeah!). We do not yet know what the economic consequences of this will be for recording studios, record labels, publishers, MTV and the various other entities related to the 'music business', but I think that the new millenium will be an interesting one for all of us.

But, don't get me wrong, I LOVE AUDIO.

Walter Sear