

High Tech, Low Quality Studio Gadgets Cannot Replace Professional Production

Now that we have virtual consoles and virtual studios, we can create virtual music for virtual consumers, then have virtual sex with virtual partners. It might pass, but it ain't the real thing.

As an industry, we have forgotten the prime reason for our existence: combining art and science to capture those rare musical moments that occur when live musicians perform together.

By misusing advancing technology from other areas, we have lost our core strength. We are creating virtual music on virtual instruments, and the public isn't buying it--figuratively and practically.

Members of the recording industry are finally realizing that we have shot ourselves in the foot. We have become so entranced with what the latest computer technology can do that we play with the toys but forget the game.

The causes of the malady are manifold. Each industry subgroup points fingers at the other subgroups:

"The labels are charging too much for albums." "There's no talent out there anymore." "Studio time costs too much."

And on and on.

We forgot what our industry is supposed to do and what services we are supposed to provide. We forgot why many of us even got into business in the first place.

I know that I got into the industry to make music. As a working musician in New York, I felt that capturing those rare moments of real musicality on a recording medium would be as challenging as creating them.

Through 40 years as a studio owner, I watched the introduction of each new "hot" technology and saw those magic moments become increasingly rare.

At one time, "transistor" was the magic word. If it didn't say "solid state" on the equipment, no one was interested.

I listened. I researched. And I avoided transistors. However, many studios forgot their purpose: producing good sound and musical quality for recording.

The next major change was the introduction of multitrack recording. Musicians donned headphones and dispersed into separate rooms.

Besides being completely foreign to the way we learn to perform music, multitracking meant that if we made a mistake, we could go back and fix it. And we knew that. The tension of performance--which is essential to playing music--was destroyed. With mixing time added to "fix it up" time, studio billing spiraled higher.

Then A&R people became incompetent or lazy. They gave a bunch of money to producers and relinquished all artistic and financial responsibility: "Bring me an album. Whatever you save on the production costs are your profit."

Guess what happened.

Back on the technology side, synthesizers appeared and further dehumanized the music.

I opened one of the first commercial electronic music studios in 1964. I was doing commercials, film scores and albums. When John Barry, the composer for "Midnight Cowboy," showed up at my studio, he asked for examples of original sounds I could create on my Moog synthesizer. After a few minutes, he asked for the house phone. He called downstairs to Fine Recording Studio A. "You can send the musicians home," he said.

I knew it was the beginning of the end.

Digital was the great leveler. We pressed the last life out of the music, and the sound was awful.

Still, it was cheaper and more convenient. You could spend days doing corrections--and you often did, because the remaining musicians were so careless, sloppy or unskilled. Digital devices fixed tracks that should have been recorded correctly on the second take. Studio billing went through the roof.

Naturally, people said, "I can buy the same computers and gadgets and do this in my living room." Never mind the creative environment that a professional recording studio provides. (Or did we stop providing it?)

With this combination of factors, the sonic quality of CDs--poor to begin with--became even worse.

After 20 years of bad sound, two things happened: 1) The public stopped buying CDs, and 2) Those who still wanted to listen were quite happy with the even more miserable quality of MP3 files.

Aside from these woes, we brought this dilemma on ourselves. We lost our mission to try to capture the music. We went along with the styles and trends dictated by equipment manufacturers, record labels and sometimes our own customers.

Instead of using our musical judgment, we, too, began to believe the advertisements that said you didn't have to go to a professional recording studio to get professional results.

We even bought that equipment ourselves. We cut our own throats.

I have made it a policy at Sear Sound never to purchase anything intended for a home or "project" studio. If it has RCA jacks on it, I don't buy it. You cannot compete with "free."

No one has succeeded in creating a great painting on a computer, and I think that holds true for music as well.

In a world of virtual recording, virtual music, virtual sex and virtual government, perhaps we should look back to a time when hit songs became classics, government was accountable and the public bought recorded music because it was real.