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Interview with Craig Anderton

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We had the honour to do a little interview with Craig Anderton - musician, producer, author (e.g. Cuabse SX/SL - Mixing & Mastering) and more - about the different aspects, pros & cons of mastering at home.

Hello Mr Anderton, most musicians claim that the mastering of a project should be done by a mastering engineer. There's certainly some truth to this, but for people who don't have record companies to pay for the mastering, or just don't have that much money, a mastering suite of audioplugins seems to be very tempting. What do you think of this trend?

A lot of the reason for using a mastering engineer is also to have an extra set of ears that can be objective. It's very difficult for someone who engineers and produces themselves to provide that function. Also, just having plug-ins isn't really enough, you have to know how to apply them. It's true that I master my own material, but that's only because I have worked with some really great mastering engineers and understand how the process works.

However, it's also true that the greatest mastering engineers weren't born that way; at one point in their lives they knew nothing about mastering and they learned how to do it. The best way to learn is by working with others, and trying to do it yourself. Compare what you've done with commercially-available CDs and see if you can come close.

If by "mastering" you mean coming up with something that sounds as good as the best recordings, that's very difficult to do if you are just getting started and have a few plug-ins. But if you mean "something that sounds better than the mixes by themselves," it is definitely possible to improve the sound by mastering yourself. A lot of that concept is covered in my books "Cubase SX/SL Mixing and Mastering" and "Sonar 3 Mixing and Mastering."

Do you have some secret plugin weapons that you consider to be very helpful during the mastering process?

I try to use the minimum amount of processing, because especially with digital gear, I think each processor degrades the sound a little bit. Right now most of my mastering is done first by optimizing EQ with the HarBal program. After the EQ is right, I use the Waves L1 UltraMaximizer to maximize the level. I used to use multiband compression a lot, but found that with the right EQ and maximization, I can get the same effect but the dynamics sound much better.

The only real "secret weapon" is that sometimes I'll use the QuadraFuzz *(you can find the plug-in here)* plug-in to clip the very highest peaks of the signal for certain types of material. You can't hear that it's distorted, there are just more harmonics and the sound has more "presence." It's sort of like the way engineers used to hit analog tape really hard to get distortion many years ago. Also, I sometimes use Ozone 2's harmonic exciter section. It's very subtle, maybe just 2% on the highest band, but it's enough to give some "air" to the sound.

Which problems will people be facing while mastering "at home"?

Acoustics! Very few home studio rooms are treated acoustically, so you don't really have any guarantees that you are hearing things accurately. Monitor speakers are also an issue. If you can't hear the sound accurately, you will not be able to master properly. By that I mean create master recordings that are "transportable" over a variety of systems. You may be able to create something that sounds great when played back over your speakers in your room, but it probably won't sound right when played elsewhere.

Is there something special to consider during the mixing process?

Yes. Many times when people use samples, they are already "mastered" by the manufacturer to sound brighter and louder. So then if they're combined with normal tracks, and then the entire combination is made brighter and louder, the samples sound WAY brighter and louder. As you mix, try for a consistent sound. For example, in this case it might be a good idea to reduce the brightness on the samples. Then if brightness is added to the entire track, the samples will not sound out of place.

Remember also that your mix may change when it's mastered, so you will need to go back and make changes in the mix then re-master. I think it's sometimes a good idea to mix with a loudness maximizer in the master bus set for a light amount of maximization, but DO NOT record the track with the effect, use it only for monitoring. That way you'll have a better idea of what the track will sound like if maximization is added later on.

I really am disappointed with lots of CDs today as so many are overcompressed, and it makes them less fun to listen to for a long time...the ear gets tired very fast hearing something with no dynamics. I'm also hearing a lot of distortion on many CDs. People may think it's cool, but 10 years from now, they'll be sorry they did it because once the distortion is there, you really can't take it out.

Do you have any tricks ? Well let me put it this way, which tricks would you like to reveal?

I don't believe in having "secret tricks," I'm more than happy to talk about what I do. Life is short, and if I can give ideas to people that helps make their music better, then I'm glad to do that.

I truly believe that what makes a good master is not the plug-ins, but the ears of the mastering engineer. The only "trick" I have is to listen really carefully to the EQ. I think EQ is the key to successful mastering, not dynamics control. Once you get the EQ right, it doesn't matter how much or little compression you add to make the music a little "louder," the sound will still be right.

Thanks for the interview Mr. Anderton.