

Finding the Right Mastering Facility & Engineer



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*Originally published by Performer Magazine, July 2005
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Picture this: You're in the studio and you've just finished mixing your latest release. You ask about mastering and your mix engineer says there's someone there who can "make it louder" for you. That seems a bit simplistic, but you go along with your engineer since you've come this far, and mastering seems so confusing anyway. Your "master" is louder, but somehow still lacks the polish of commercial CDs you thought mastering was supposed to provide. Confused, you carry on and make the best of it.

This has happened to many musicians who look back and wish things could have been different. Take a moment to think about all the time, effort, and money you've poured into your music. After all of that, do you really want to make an uninformed decision regarding the mastering step? But how do you find value in mastering? What should you look for when considering the many available options in the mastering environment?

The following are a few suggestions from the front line:

Attitude and Communication

Look for someone with a positive attitude. Working with a difficult engineer or mastering facility – regardless of his or her reputation or experience - can make for an unpleasant experience and unpleasant results. Of course the friendliest person isn't necessarily the best mastering engineer, but who knows your music better than you do? Why not work with a mastering engineer who will listen to what you have to say without being difficult. You have plenty of options with so many mastering facilities available. Talk to your prospective mastering engineer. Ask questions. Watch and listen to the answers. Mastering is a service industry; engineers who are attentive to you and your project will provide you with better service, and ultimately a better product.

Availability

Is your mastering engineer available? You will need to have access to your engineer. Does your prospective mastering engineer offer a free consultation? Will he or she meet with you to discuss your project goals, either on the phone or in person? Will the engineer listen to your concerns and answer your questions? Is this someone who will ask you questions and demonstrate a desire to know you and your project?

Dedicated Facility

A facility dedicated to mastering is better than an "all-in-one" shop. True mastering facilities are different and better because they offer dedicated listening environments tuned for proper full-range audio playback that's almost always not the configuration of a mixing or recording studio control room. A dedicated mastering facility with a mastering engineer will give you "new ears". A mastering engineer who is not your recording engineer will have a fresh perspective on your tracks. The combination of your mastering engineer's fresh perspective and access to a true full-range audio playback listening environment will allow you to hear things you didn't hear in the control room, which will enable you to create the best master.

Facilities that are broad in services (i.e., they offer tracking, mixing, mastering, duplicating, and/or graphics) are usually narrow in knowledge in some or all of those areas.

Dedicated Tools

A mastering engineer's tools are usually not the same as those used for tracking and mixing. It can get confusing. You'll hear about lots of options: analog or digital: turn-key DAW or custom platform solution: Mac or PC? What's the best? Yes, you need to consider a level of tool sophistication for professional mastering (i.e., a SoundBlaster card and a pair of nearfield monitors with some plug0-ins won't give you a quality product), but after that, it is really the engineer's ability to use his or her tools effectively.

Audible Results

A mastering engineer's goal is to help your music reach its fullest sonic potential. Audible results from a dedicated mastering engineer are much more than increasing loudness; audible results include:

- Increasing or adjusting the stereo image
- "Sweetening" the program material with harmonic enhancement
- Adjusting equalization subtly or not-so-subtly
- Adjusting dynamics
- Adjusting the balance of track-to-track play for consistency
- Handling fades and track order for the most musical program flow
- And YES, increasing the loudness of the program material

Dedication Matters (Quality In = Quality Out)

A little-mentioned, yet very important, part of mastering is quality control. A dedicated mastering engineer will perform quality control and error-checking on your material from load-in, during your session, and right up until creation and verification of your final deliverable media. A dedicated mastering facility can deliver your masters in more stable formats than a Red Book CD-R, such as the digital disc protocol (DDP) data format.

Post-Process

A professional mastering engineer's attention to quality will not stop when you leave the facility. He or she will give you answers regarding questions you may have about your next move. A mastering engineer will be able to tell you what the differences are between replication and duplication, and what the pros and cons of each are. He or she will be able to give you recommendations and things to watch out for (both good and bad) in choosing a plant. A professional mastering engineer will make himself or herself available to you after your session for any questions about the manufacturing process of your release and help you along the way.

Now, picture this: you've just finished mixing your latest release. You've inquired about mastering facilities and made your choice. You arrive at the session fully prepared and you're even somewhat educated on the process because of the time your mastering engineer took with you on the phone explaining various options and processes. You arrive at the mastering facility and are met with a friendly and knowledgeable engineer who leads you through a day of enhancing your music's sonic richness. He or she has delivered a set of masters to you that are ready for the plant. When you leave you are happy, confident, and fully educated on your next steps, and you know your mastering engineer is available to you if you have any questions. That is what making records is all about.

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