

Our Audio/Video Industry Versus Live Music

Greed ruins it for everybody. We all agree. For example, we talk about rebuilders who do less than advertised, or tuners who pretend to be rebuilders, or the parts manufacturers of piano actions who in some cases are getting so sloppy that over half the action parts they make new are unusable right off the assembly line. In all of these cases, the cure is very simple: Get an iron-clad guarantee in writing. It's very simple. You have no recourse against bad craftsmanship or even hit and miss repairing. There's nothing you can do about it. He was your man and your choice. You bet on that horse and it didn't show. But now if the racing form guaranteed both workmanship AND performance, well now-- that's different, isn't it? But then, it would take all the fun out of the race and you could take those kinds of horses for granted. So it just depends on what you're after, I guess. If you're a gambler, you wouldn't like my style of doing business. If you're a high roller, used to paying only the highest amounts of money for good work, you won't like my shop either.

There is incompetence, stupidity, and greed all the way down the line, though, from live music (top of the line) to canned music (bottom of the line). Some people like all of their music canned, and don't have a very wide range of appreciation, at that. So let's cite a great example of greed and stupidity for their suppliers--both for the music, as well as the equipment to play it.

Audio and video equipment manufacturers have been shooting themselves in both feet for decades, now. That's fine. If they don't want to sell good equipment, that's their business. But while the Japanese have been recording video on CDs in personal camcorders now for maybe 20 years or more, Americans are just now (year 2000) believing that CD video camcorders may be on the horizon soon. The same thing applies to the DVD, and of course the far east has been recording digital video too.

You may ask, *"Well then, what has this state of the art home equipment done to their own recording industry? If individuals can make recordings of the same quality that they buy in the store, then their own purchases will be divided between their own audio/video equipment and new DVDs, which means that they will not buy nearly as much professionally recorded entertainment."*

True? False. Enthusiasm is what sells both. When your own attempts to record result in watery, fuzzy images and the audio is clamped at the same loudness range without realism, then why invest in it? And you won't buy as many prerecorded shows either because your enthusiasm for that media is dampened and discouraged by the inability to participate. Granted, this is not how our own present entertainment industry views it, but then, they are apparently blind to good sense. They have their own standards and their own special situation, they feel. They have never accepted the fact that Japan's resale audio/video industry is a major segment of their national economy, simply because it does represent the finest equipment in the world, and every consumer wants to be a part of that superiority. They also refuse to see that it is not the quality of home audio/video equipment that drops sales of CDs and DVDs, but rather increases the sales of the latest home entertainment on disk.

Instead, the American “A/V industry” (which is also responsible for the record stores across the country) keep coming out with the same outmoded equipment, year after year by “nickel-dime-ing us to death” with a new readout screen, a new minor feature, a switch, or (more often) just a poorly built machine that lasted a total of 50 operable hours before costing us half as much to repair it as it cost us new (I speak from many experiences)! In other words, most of the average-priced consumer equipment is just junk, and seems designed to fail. So, given any particular price range recorder or camcorder, do you see another output or input jack? No. Do you see a switch capable of disconnecting the audio clamping circuits? No. Do you see a sound on sound capability added? Not even with outmoded tape recording is this feature available on most camcorders and tape recorders. Instead, they darken the tape carrier so you can’t even see it running. I rest my case.

Many years ago when McIntosh was the big amplifier and Klipsch and Hartley made some of the best speakers, the audio market belonged to America. Americans were able to own better audio systems than they found in their own local theaters. Some homes, usually the property of middle-aged Americans-- had absolutely awesome sound systems. So what happened? It was on the promise of this equipment and the enthusiasm which naturally followed that the record industry became the giant industry we have today. Sales were at an all-time high because enthusiasm for their top of the world industry and its achievements was so strong. Trouble was, home equipment was so good that customers began noticing quality differences, and critics began writing about poorly recorded records and tape in audio magazines. This, the audio moguls decided, was not good. They also got jealous that much home equipment was just as good or better than theater equipment or even professional recording studio equipment. So instead of using quality as a springboard for enthusiasm and sales, upgrade their own stuff, and really *shake out* their share of the market, the industry decided to bring the American consumer’s grade of equipment down to the level of the product that industry wished to provide at their record stores and in effect, *shake down* the American consumer. They had the power to dictate what Americans could buy. Why not do it? So, they did. Sure enough, Americans had to have the latest. We had been conditioned.

No longer able to hear differences in recordings, and being fed a continual diet of Rock and Roll, the industry purposely switched the center of the consumer base from quality demanding, educated, knowledgeable, and music-wise consumers to teens and later pre-teens, and their music idols. Finally, quality no longer mattered. Speaker systems were designed with partially deaf teenagers in mind. The music wasn’t coming from acoustic instruments, but were recordings of electronic machinery, so hard plastic speaker cones could take the place of finely crafted ones. Distortion was purposely added. The stuff we used to call “intermodulation distortion,” and “harmonic distortion” is now a large part of a rock group’s repertoire. Record stores, which used to be 50% classics, finally become 5% classical, 90% rock and roll, and 5% everything else. Theaters’ audio systems then began switching to the same kind of equipment that professional rock and roll groups use yet today. Hi Fi? Well-- in name only. But loud? OH, YES! Until you can feel it coming up into you through the soles of your Nikes and the seat of a stadium theater, you aren’t in the right theater. It’s loud audio, but quality, realistic audio? Yawn.

Today, we see just how far a powerful, defensive, and litigious music industry will go to hang on to their business of mediocrity. The Napsters found out that they could be sued for allowing the

downloading of midi files for personal use.

Granted, such a file is copyrighted, and legalistically, some would agree that as personal property, no one has a right to it free and clear (*Great. Hang onto it, thinking you are "protected"*). But financially, it will become a real bomb to everybody except those who control this industry. The reason is simple: Anytime you thwart people's enthusiasm for arrangements, performances, and the tunes they want to hear-- WHEN they want to hear them-- you turn them off. They eventually go elsewhere, and that doesn't mean they will keep coming back to musicdom's moguls.

What, after all, is the purpose of a copyright? To protect the product from everybody who would like to use it, or actually, to protect the owner's right to his rightful profits when that product is used as part of a paid performance? It is one thing to steal a song and perform it for money. It is another to download that which is offered and enjoy it whenever you want to. Does such an activity then destroy the market for that song or its composer or performer? On the contrary, it builds their reputation. But here is the dichotomy: Secretly, this industry is not concerned for the musician or the individual performer who is trying to build their own reputation and business as a free-lancer. They don't want that person competing in their market at all! Definitely, they don't want that person giving away midi files to get listeners hooked. Despite the fact that they may pick him up at some time in the future, he is, until that time, looked upon as the real enemy. They are used to deciding who shall and who shall not become top ten. So this attempt to destroy a private music market is just another example of how American freedoms are taken away by the courts, under the guise of "protecting all the little musicians." What nonsense. They are protecting themselves from all the little musicians—who have the potential of becoming an industry of their own!

When it all comes down to home entertainment, and when you are sick to death of major media spoon-fed, mediocre, painted up, tongue pointing, screaming, panting, deafening, vulgar guitar-posers-- who never play a wrong note because notes are no longer needed-- then you will look for something else. You will ask, "Does anybody play beautifully, artistically, with expression anymore, or is our option just another rock group who don't paint themselves? Is there any heart in our music that is not feigned or painted on with acting hype? Is there any true individualism that we can hear without having to watch it (of course there is)? Where is the very best of the best (there IS some)? And even if we found it, how can we take some home with us? How can we hear it as often as we would like (without an extra users fee)? Can a real musical genius still make a decent living, anymore-- without the need for 2500 watt amplifiers and an audience resembling a mindless, crazed ant colony just before a flood?

Might I suggest at least one extremely good solution? Both the player piano and the reproducing player piano are perfect examples of LIVE acoustic music. No matter how good a recording ever gets, it will never interact with your living room, your furniture, your very body in that room like the actual instrument itself. When you listen to speakers, you listen to the acoustics of some foreign hall, somewhere. We cannot enter into that performance but enjoy it vicariously. It is a virtual performance, only. A recording is an imaginary virtual effect regardless how loud we turn it up. Now there's nothing wrong with that, of and by itself. But what a limited musical lifestyle

most of us live when we can never stretch out and experience-- participate with live music performed in our own home! Player pianos are still around for one main reason-- there is no satisfactory way to duplicate them, so we can play the timeless performances of the greatest artists the world has ever known and do it right on our own reproducing piano, in our own living rooms. That's what you call, "taking it home." Or, we can play the great player rolls of all time, live, on our upright player piano, pumping away and singing, and in general, just making a racket that is so much fun "*dat everybody wants to get inta da act!*"

I have always said, "I hope that only a few people ever really enjoy player pianos, because if people ever start experiencing them again in a major way, the music moguls, big money, and fast profits will ruin it for everybody else." Already, a lot of really mediocre rebuilders have had a hand in ruining even this for many would-be aficionados of live piano music. Let's hope that only a few selected individuals will read this and actually believe it. That's why live player piano music is still the very pinnacle of what is known as "a fantastically good time." Of course, you still have to remember how to have a good time!

Craig Brougher