

Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo):

The mix and the stereo bus

It sounds like an episode of Willy and Wanda but “The mix and the stereo bus” is about processing that takes place on the stereo bus of your mix project, be it digital with plug-ins or analogue with outboard gear.

I’m not a mix engineer but having heard stories from people that are, quite a few things are happening on that final station towards mastering. In fact, stereo bus processing can be seen as some type of premastering. A chain of equalising and compression (or other fancy tools) to glue the mix. The famous SSL-type compressor is a good example of such processing.

The goal of both mix and mastering engineer is mutual: it has to sound great. The road towards perfection is different though. A mix engineer brings all the instruments and sounds together using the channels and busses of the mix with effects like compression, equalising, reverb, panning etc. A mastering engineer only works in stereo to translate the vision of the artist into a wonderful sounding end result.

Something I noticed during the last couple of years is that more processing seems to be taking place on the stereo bus. I use the word *seems* on purpose, as I’m not a mixing engineer. I only listen to the mixes that come in the studio. More processing tends to lead to more dense mixes. Mixes with more compression, less dynamics and in many cases less transients*. This doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. As long as it sounds good, we’re okay.

However, there is some danger when (too much) processing is applied on the stereo bus. An effect like compression is irreversible. As soon as a mix becomes too dense, the mastering engineer can try to tackle this by using equalising or some kind of upward expansion. However, eliminating compression effects and restoring the original dynamics is virtually impossible.

The music industry is a market of supply and demand. Listeners ask for great sounding music and the artists do exactly that: they indulge us with beautiful music. During the past few decades music has slowly become less dynamic. On the other hand, the listeners have gotten used to listening to dense sounding music: compact songs with a lot of energy and impact and often mastered at higher volume levels.

Have a listen (at equal volume) to a song by Billie Eilish and compare that to a song from the sixties, Jimi Hendrix for example. Pay attention to the openness, the energy and impact, the softer sounding passages versus the loud parts. You’ll be amazed by the differences. Both songs have their own particular qualities but the difference in dynamic range is remarkable.

Let’s be honest: if Jimi Hendrix was still alive he would undoubtedly be making pretty modern sounding music. Recording techniques are a continuously evolving thing, not to mention mr. Hendrix himself.

Back to the stereo bus. The only thing I’d like to give to mix engineers is to be careful about your dynamics and transients. By using slower attack times on your compressor you’ll notice that those snare hits seem to be getting more punch and impact and that the overall energy of your track is actually getting higher. Who wouldn’t want that?

Just my two cents, use it to your advantage.

Renzo

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More info about mastering and about Masterenzo can be found on [the web](#).*

*Transients: short pulses of energy. You can compare it with the moment when a drummer hits a tom or cymbal. That very first snappy attack translates into more vividly sounding music with more energy. Fast attack times on a (digital) compressor/limiter are pretty destructive for transients.