

## Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo): What makes mastering so special?

My first time was very special. The first time I delivered a master felt like a musical defloration. It was the year 2003; masters were delivered on cd, a shiny disc you can put into a machine. Press play and music starts to play.

Delivering a master, at the time it was quite a technical challenge. The physical disc had to be burned at slow speed (2x) and had to be listened completely to ensure perfect audio quality (no clicks or ticks). After a software error check, the disc was then sealed to be sent to the duplicating company. After another check at the duplicating company the glassmaster was made. The glassmaster (a disc made of real glass) is the mother disc, used to manufacture plastic cd's.

Well, before the masterdisc could be burned the actual master had to be made through mastering. But what is mastering exactly and why is it still considered some sort of black art?

Important questions around which you could easily write a book. Bob Katz, an American mastering engineer thought the same and wrote a brilliant book about mastering: *Mastering Audio: The Art And The Science*<sup>1</sup>. A very useful and educational book, discussing many of the relevant subjects regarding the process of uplifting a mix towards a higher level of quality and impact and thus making it ready for release in the outside world.

It's a great skill: Mastering. Being a Rotterdam based masterer my journey started in my bedroom. A silent pc, software to edit audio, a soundcard, two pieces of outboard gear (a compressor and an equalizer) and a set of custom built monitors were the main ingredients of which the speakers were (and still are) by far the most important pieces.

The monitoring (speakers and the listening environment) can very well be considered the most important and influential weapon of choice of the mastering engineer. It's the eyes and ears of the engineer. Decisions are made upon it. If certain details are there in the music, the monitoring will tell you.

If, for instance, your monitoring tells you the music contains not enough low end, you decide to use an equalizer to dial in the extra lows. You take your freshly mastered track to a friend to check it out on his stereo set. It's a good thing the neighbours aren't home at that time. The added lows cause a serious outburst of seismic energy generating some good vibrations in the room and beyond.

If the monitoring was of good quality this outburst of energy would still have taken place but without the major vibrations. Good monitoring lets you dial in extra energy instead of just extra lows.

Well, this was it. My very first column for the Popunie (Dutch music platform).

My intention was –of course- to reveal all secrets of mastering in one single column. I only succeeded partly at this but fortunately I'll be telling you all about my great job in the months coming.

Fortunately a story with a happy ending.

Renzo

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<sup>1</sup> Katz, Bob, *Mastering Audio: The Art And The Science*. ISBN-13: 9780240818962

*Renzo (Masterenzo) is a Rotterdam based mastering engineer. He has worked for artists like Gery Mendes (GMB), Charlie Dée and Phil Bee's Freedom. More info about mastering can be found on his [website](#).*