

## Column by Renzo van Riemsdijk (Masterenzo): Remasters, curse or blessing?

Please allow me to plunge in: Why do remasters exist?

You could say that an older recording or master should sound better using modern techniques. That's definitely true, but what exactly is the meaning of better? More bits? Higher sample rates? Better sounding converters? In short: better gear?

There is a reason that certain recordings were made in a certain era. It turns them into timeless pieces, because of their unique sound, and because of their imperfections. A remaster is a re-release of older material using modern techniques to make it sound better. In practice this generally means a louder (and often more brighter) sounding remaster. But why? Does that fresh remaster sound genuinely better? Or is there more to it?

To reveal the only legitimate reason for a remaster we need to go back in time. Back at the roots of popular music (the sixties and seventies) until the eighties, the job of the mastering engineer was to transfer the mix from tape to a playback medium. During those analogue decades those were vinyl, music cassette and reel-to-reel tape machines for domestic use.

So, the mastering engineer was merely a transfer engineer. In the course of the years the function of mastering has shifted slowly towards that what artists, producers and mix engineers tend to do: Build a sound. Exactly that caused the remaster to become more popular. Hence: How wonderful would it be if an existing recording was to sound even better and fatter than the original! This is not a bad thought, but allow me to rephrase what I said earlier: *There is a reason that certain recordings were made in a certain era.*

Many remasters were done in a time where digital techniques were newly invented (and thus not sounding at their best). This resulted in hotter remasters that also suffered from what we call "digititus": an overly cold sounding remaster. I leave the decision if this is better than the original to the listeners ears but I wouldn't bet my money on it. And besides: the ongoing *loudness war*\* played an important role in the many issued remasters by letting them sound much louder than the original recording.

And something else was going on: Because a lot of money could be earned by issuing remasters, those re-releases had to sound fresh and modern to boost sales figures. All of this had very little to do with music and quality, which leads us to the following question: Does a remaster have a right to exist? That's not an easy to answer question.

The only reason I can think of to do a remaster is that certain transfers done in the early ages of digital could benefit sound wise from a remaster done with more modern techniques. We're on thin ice here; a remaster should never affect the artistic message of the original recording. And if the artist is no longer among us, the situation becomes even more complicated. Who's to determine if a remaster is to be done and who's in charge of quality control?

A nice example of a successful remaster is the album "Brothers In Arms" by Dire Straits. Released in 1985 this album became the standard bearer of the compact disc. The album was recorded digitally, mixed on analogue equipment but edited and mastered digitally (DDD, remember?). It sounded cold and near harsh but sold millions of copies worldwide. Renowned mastering engineer Bob Ludwig decided to do a remaster of the album a little over ten years later because he realised the album could sound better.

My suggestion is to delete the word *remaster*. Let's invest our energy in great sounding recordings, old or new and on whatever playback medium, and without putting a commercial label on them. A good mastering engineer knows what it takes to deliver a great sounding, integer and timeless master.

Renzo

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

*\*The loudness war began in the mid-nineties. Influenced by decreasing cd sales and ongoing digital techniques major record companies released progressively louder sounding cd's. Digital limiters were pushed beyond their limits causing many of the records released at the end of the nineties and the years after to sound distorted. Since the introduction of loudness normalization by music streaming services the need for loud sounding masters has decreased immensely. By using loudness normalization all songs in a playlist are played at globally the same perceived loudness level.*