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All Mixed Up
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Attack of the Remixes

Once in a while I detect a trend that scares the heck out of me because it has the potential to wreak havoc on the performance quality of custom home theaters. One of these trends is shaping up as we speak, and I am scrambling onto my soapbox to yell out for attention and help from anyone who will listen!

I am speaking of the new habit of remixing film soundtracks for DVD release. More and more DVDs are coming out with tracks that are different from the original version released in the cinema, and these remixes aren't conducted under the supervision of the original sound designer, mix engineer, and director.

Reasons to Remix

So why on earth would anyone want to spend extra time and money to remix a soundtrack that has already been meticulously and carefully crafted for theatrical release? There are a number of reasons, some which are legitimate, some which are purely hype, and others which are just plain wrong. One argument is that DVDs need soundtracks that are compatible with TV internal speakers, home-theaters-in-a-box (HTIBs), multi-media speakers, and other "little" speakers. All of these suspects benefit from soundtracks with less dynamic range, emphasized dialog and Foley effects, and less bass than the typical theatrical mix. It's a nice idea to have a mixed-for-TV version, but it's not useful at all in a high-end home theater.

Then there is this misconception that home theater sound is radically different from cinema sound, and it is somehow necessary for mixers to go back to stems (the building blocks of a soundtrack) and rebuild a new mix for a small room. Yes, there are some differences between large cinema rooms and small home theater rooms, but they can be resolved rather simplistically through post-processing techniques like the ones Tomlinson Holman developed for THX *over fifteen years ago*. If this new remixing idea consisted of applying these post-processing techniques to theatrical soundtracks, it would be great. People at home who don't have THX components (or some form of post-processing in their equipment) could still listen to soundtracks correctly.

Unfortunately, the remixing process has become much too aggressive, and mix engineers have gone overboard making changes.

The production community also has this long-standing, unspoken rule that everyone has to do what everyone else is doing. So, a great number of remixes are being performed just to keep up with the Joneses.

Of course all this new remixing work certainly puts smiles on the faces of those who operate audio post-production facilities. They have found a way to increase their work load! That's not a bad deal for them.

Let's not forget the mix engineers, too, who want to put their special touch on the soundtracks. They've been mixing for cinemas for a very long time, and there are some things which can't be done in that venue. Or, there are things they wanted to try on a particular movie's theatrical soundtrack, but time or budget limitations didn't allow it. Having some added time or flexibility in a DVD remix gives them the opportunity to try new things – for novelty if nothing else!

Remixed Results

All of this remixing leaves us with something new, but it's not necessarily better than the old. Nor is it by nature the "real thing," meaning it is not what the sound designer and the director heard and approved in the dubbing stage during post-production. In fact, there have been cases where directors were angered by remixing work, claiming that the new soundtracks ruined their artistic intent. Uh-oh.

Remixed soundtracks are usually compressed to achieve the aforementioned compatibility with little speakers. A compressed soundtrack has limited dynamic range, meaning the difference in volume between the loudest sound and the softest sound is reduced. A guy talking in a normal voice could be almost as loud as the White House exploding! That's exactly what you need if you're listening to a TV or an HTIB, right? Unfortunately, that same soundtrack will sound like the smashed radio mixes of pop songs when you play it in a good home theater.

The mix balance is also tweaked during remixing. The new mix may have different dialog-to-music, dialog-to-effects, or effects-to-music ratios that completely change the feel of the acoustic space created by the mix. There may be less bass in the remix, caused by the desire to make the mix less dynamic, or by configuration and calibration errors that frequently pop up in small mix rooms.

The result of prevalent remixing is chaos. The remixes are done by different people in a wide variety of rooms that are calibrated under different standards. This stands in stark contrast to the tightly-regulated dubbing stages used for mixing theatrical releases.

The Impact Comes Home

Since many of the remixes are about making the soundtrack more compatible with a low-end system, quality is sacrificed. I'm talking lowest-common-denominator thinking, here. The inferior quality of such a remix is particularly audible on systems with high resolution. In the worst of all scenarios, there is no longer a reason for high-end, custom-engineered and -installed theaters to exist – they don't make crummy, remixed program material sound good!

In case you're wondering, you *will* be able to hear the inferior quality of most remixes. I know because I've seen it. I received a call from a client several weeks after I had calibrated his system and approved its sound using my favorite program material. He thought something was wrong because his system didn't sound as good as it did when I was there. Come to find out, there was nothing wrong with the system. There were, however, some significant deficiencies in the program material he was using. Most people expect their systems to sound great all the time; they don't want to hear that performance quality depends so drastically on what is fed into the system. Frustration time!

There is no denying that the lowest common denominator accounts for the majority of sales for DVD distribution companies. We must understand the need for soundtracks that are less dynamic and work better on TV speakers. So be it. Let movie studios produce a low-quality soundtrack, but also put the original theatrical soundtrack on the DVD. The storage capacity is already there in most cases. All the industry needs to do is agree to some descriptive language or terminology on the packaging and on the soundtrack selection that says something to the effect "Remixed for Home Viewing" or "Original Theatrical Soundtrack." Disney has already done this on some of their remixed releases. Everyone is happy.

Who knows? Two different sound mixes may spark a revival in the cottage industry for specialty DVD releases like the ones from Image Entertainment. It certainly gives another rationale for them. Of course, the distributors will need to charge a premium for the high-quality version that sells lower volume, but that's a small price to pay to get the director's full original intent for the picture and sound.

Time for Action

There are things you can do to improve the remixing trend. Write a letter to your congressman. (OK, that was a joke.) Do write to movie studios, mix engineers, video release companies, and the Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA). Band together with your peers to discuss the problem, and present joint appeals. A little bit of noise can go a long way if it's directed at the right source. A/V magazines and software publications (movie and music software, not computer) can help, too. Write letters to

the editors! The current remixing trend has serious negative implications for soundtrack quality. Act now before it's too late!

A Bright Spot

Remixing is not inherently of the devil. Like most things, it becomes a problem if it's done wrong. Sadly, it's being done wrong almost exclusively at the present time. Work is ongoing to standardize small mix rooms in the same manner as their large siblings, but a unified front is realistically years (maybe decades) away. Until then, we need to encourage the production community in their efforts to standardize and give us soundtracks that aide in the pursuit of a high-quality entertainment experience. We must also play cops and chide them when they hinder that pursuit.

This article is based on a column published by A. Grimani in Residential Systems magazine August 2005. Chase Walton contributed to this article.