

RE-TALES BY JULIE MULLINS

THIS ISSUE: An audio engineer sets up a hi-fi showroom in a studio.

Pro audio and hi-fi cross over

Why is there so much separation between the professional audio and audiophile worlds? Is that separation by design, or even necessity? Is it naïve to believe that more crossover could benefit both sides? On the surface, audiophiles and recording engineers appear to have much in common. Both groups have a deep interest in the conveyance of music's core emotional message. Audio engineers are—or should be—expert in creating the sounds that audiophiles want to hear. They—the engineers—probably spend more time listening intently (though differently) than all but the most zealous audiophiles. So why aren't more audio engineers involved in the hi-fi world?

There is, of course, some overlap. A few recording and mastering engineers are well-known as audiophiles and cater to that market, including Tony Faulkner, Steve Hoffman, Bob Katz, Bob Ludwig, George Massenburg, and *Stereophile's* own John Atkinson. Many hardware companies serve both markets: ATC, Benchmark, Bricasti, Dynaudio, Focal, Mytek, and Weiss, to name a few. dCS—whose D/A converters are often found in studios—recently ran a campaign honoring pro-audio luminaries (including some listed above): the Legends Awards.

I spoke, via Zoom, with Cameron Jenkins, a recording engineer who has worked with Lana Del Rey, the Verve, John Cale, and many others. Jenkins is also the founder and owner of indie label Stranger Records. Also on the call was David Denyer, an audio consultant and PR professional. Denyer is an audiophile but says that over the past 5–10 years, he has developed “decidedly studio-type leanings.”

“I do find it interesting that the two worlds so often clash rather than collaborate,” Denyer wrote in an email. “I think both worlds can learn from each other, but it is extremely rare for someone to actually straddle the divide and genuinely advance the art of sound recording and reproduction.”

There are some big differences between the two worlds. One is attitudes toward value. Josh Thomas, general manager of Rupert Neve Designs, the company that makes recording consoles used in many of the world's best studios and which recently launched the Fidelice line of hi-fi components, noted that audiophiles are often proud of how much their systems cost; pro-

audio people, in contrast, are likely to brag about how cheaply they got their gear. There *is* overlap: mastering engineers with six-figure monitoring systems; audiophiles who harshly criticize high-end prices and insist that their inexpensive systems are just as good or better.

Here's a more important distinction: Pro audio requires accuracy in sound reproduction; hi-fi doesn't. “Accuracy is paramount for the recording and mastering engineer,” Thomas said. Recording and mastering engineers “need to know with absolute confidence that what they are passing on from the mix engineer to the mastering engineer, then to the pressing house or streaming service, is correct,” Thomas said. “If a mastering engineer sends a track with too much or out-of-phase material, the vinyl will not be cut properly, and ultimately the artist's vision of what it should be won't be delivered to the audience. And yes, that happens.”

Accuracy is not essential in an audiophile's system, although many audiophiles *are* concerned about accuracy. “I've heard [audiophile] systems that rival or exceed what I've heard in world-class recording studios,” Thomas said. “I've also heard systems with pronounced low end, or high end, or unbalanced mids compared to what I know to be the reference.”

To Jenkins—the recording engineer and label head—studio monitors and other equipment are tools you get familiar with and learn to use as well as possible, like an artist's brush or a surgeon's scalpel. “You have to know how what you're listening to in that room is going to translate into the real world,” he told me. But Jenkins's interests cross

over: In 2020, he started Stranger High Fidelity, a bespoke high-end audio retail business in his space at Real World Studios in Wiltshire, England. There, Jenkins sells MBL, Bricasti, DS Audio, and Trinnov, among other brands.

Audio engineers must produce recordings that sound good on a range of systems, yet many have never experienced true audiophile speakers, especially those utilizing atypical technologies. Jenkins described the first time he heard MBL's Radialstrahler speakers. “It was like, ‘Wow!’ From spending my whole life listening to boxes, it's suddenly this entirely different concept,” he said. “It's listening in a different way. ‘Hey, it's enjoyable!’”

An omnidirectional speaker like the MBL might seem a curious choice as a studio monitor, considering the pains studios often taken in studios to eliminate sidewall reflections, but other audio pros, Jenkins told me, were similarly impressed. “You would have thought a professional sound engineer and professional group of producers would have heard more different speakers,” he said. “No. This was new to them.” Some asked, rhetorically: Why couldn't they mix on speakers like the MBLs? Jenkins told me he couldn't give a reason.

Whether in the studio or at home, Jenkins enjoys hearing *composition*, how the parts are put together. “Like you could make of a piece of art. Mixing is absolutely painting a picture. ... I have a slight bit of synesthesia.” Hearing composition—not to mention creating it—requires an accurate system. But it doesn't necessarily require a classic studio monitor.

Jenkins approaches his retail customers' needs in essentially the same way he approaches his own: by bridging the gap between the recording and playback at home.

“I was trying to make it so that you can go from the initial process of making the record to how you're hearing it in this space now, and that's what it's all ultimately about,” Jenkins said. “It's all about music, in the end.” ■