



Is MP3 Killing The Audiophile?

By CHRISTOPHER WALSH

May 29, 2004

NEW YORK - It is an often-cited irony that the introduction of formats offering significantly higher resolution than two-channel, 16-bit/44.1kHz CD audio has been accompanied by the expanding popularity of MP3 and digital media players offering sub-CD-quality sound.

In a sometimes contentious debate with an invited audience, a group of professionals examined the growing gap between sound and quality May 12 at a meeting of the New York branch of the Audio Engineering Society.

The session "Does Quality Matter, Or Has the iPod Defeated the Listening Room?" was led by a panel comprising producer Elliot Mazer; engineer David Baker; BMG Music senior director of new technology Kevin Clement; GM Chris Brown, the co-founder of speaker manufacturer NHT; Elliot Fishkin of specialty retailer Innovative Audio; and Adam Sohmer of public relations firm Sohmer Associates.

Sohmer noted the continued obscurity of DVD-Audio and Super Audio CD titles at retail.

Mazer agreed. "As long as it's in the special section or predominantly available on the Web [neither format] is going to be a mass format."

Many said efforts to promote the formats at retail have fallen short.

Byrne said that consumer electronics manufacturers "are not promoting it and not demoing it, in most cases. Some specialty retailers have gotten into it, but in the mass market, they are not addressing it."

Trying to evaluate DVD-A or SACD on a crowded Best Buy floor, Baker added, is impossible. "You have to go to a real high-end audio store to make a fair comparison," he said.

The persistence of illegal file sharing, on the other hand, implies that audio quality is unimportant to music consumers, some attendees said.

But one audience member countered that the tendency to over-compress music in the mastering process—which has been prevalent during the past several years—is obscuring the qualitative difference between CD and data-compressed formats.

TEACHING THE NEWCOMERS

The purpose of the discussion, Mazer said, was to impress upon audio professionals—especially newcomers—the importance of maintaining high standards regardless of format or means of delivery.

"We have to reach out to the broader communities and connect the majority of people that make records using Pro Tools to the AES," Mazer said. "It gives the younger kids a chance to meet some of the pros that can show them microphone technique and how to use stuff if they want to learn."

"In one sense, you can say, 'It doesn't matter how people listen to music, it matters that people buy music,' " he said. "How they acquire music is not in our control. But no matter how people hear music, it [must] sound good. If it was recorded badly, it's going to sound like hell."