



Entertainment News

They don't mix music like they used to, and, believe me, that's a good thing

Sunday, January 30, 2005

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The Grand Rapids Press

The first time my rock band recorded a sampler of tunes in the 1980s, the tape hiss made us cringe and the bass track somehow disappeared without a trace. Ouch.

Attempting to record a full-length album a few years later, an entire song got wiped out when we rewound the tape and accidentally recorded over it. Ouch, take two.

Those days are over, and I have a dusty reel-to-reel tape recorder sitting idle in my basement to prove it.

Gone are the days of wrinkled tapes and mixing boards with a zillion knobs and volume sliders. Gone, too, are the multiple, late-night takes of the same darned guitar riff, spoiled by a single missed note, forcing a frazzled rocker to wail away until his fingers curl in agony.

Music's new world order revolves around Pro Tools, a fairly bland-sounding name for a computer program that's revolutionized the way musicians record and mix their music.

Introduced as an audio-editing program by Digidesign in 1991, it's since become the rage -- in pop, rock, hip-hop, you name it. And because it condensed much of what once required bulky, expensive recording gear into a computer, scads of musicians record at home. As a "digital audio production tool," Pro Tools can display and process dozens of individual tracks -- guitars, keyboards, drums, horns, vocals -- with the well-informed click of a mouse. With cut-and-paste ease, it can instantly erase a bad note on the guitar or keyboard and replace it with a perfectly played note snatched from elsewhere in the song. Is it cheating? Who can say? But it sure sounds clean.

While this makes it easier to get a polished sound at home, it hasn't spelled the end of commercial studios. A professional-sounding CD benefits from high-end upfront equipment (microphones, pre-amps, sound compressors), a powerful computer and a savvy engineer with the experience and moxie to make it sound right.

"Pro Tools is great, but it's not going to do anything for your sound," insisted Andrew Mitchell, owner/operator of Audio Bay Studios Inc. in Cannonsburg, which complements its Pro Tools set-up with topnotch microphones and sound gear. "Microphones are a couple of thousand dollars each."

Still, Mitchell is sold on Pro Tools, even if audio snobs say the digital shtick lacks the warmth of traditional, or so-called analog, recordings of the old days.

Frankly, I can't hear the difference, though my ears lack the warmth of the old days, too.

Mitchell insisted Pro Tools has transformed what the music industry does with those heartfelt tunes songwriters keep churning out. For one thing, it's probably cut in half the cost of recording a studio album, with \$3,000 a reasonable starting point for a modest rock band.

So, should I put that ol' reel-to-reel recorder on eBay, or just set it out at the curb on garbage day?