



BUSTING

The 9

Mastering Myths

And How That Will Help Your Mixes

BOBBY OWSINSKI



BobbyOwsinski.com
Courses - Books - Blogs - Podcast

Welcome To Busting The 9 Mastering Myths

I've spent a lot of time over the years working with mastering engineers, and things have definitely changed. What was once true about both mixing and master has evolved as most of us now mix exclusively "in the box."

That said, some of the beliefs about mastering that were once a matter of course are no longer true. Certainly not everything about the subject is covered in this ebook, and even some of the following advice can be contradicted by a particular situation, but I think you'll find that your mixes will be better for it if you follow my advice.

Nothing replaces experience, of course, and it's totally true that the more you mix the better you'll get at it. It also helps to know the fundamentals and techniques that go beyond what you'll find in these pages (Hopefully you're learning these already at BobbyOwsinskiCourses.com or one of my webinars or workshops).

Either way, follow along and see how mastering works today, take what works for you, and leave the rest.

Keep your ears open, listen to everything you can, and try every trick you learn in a live mix.

Do this and your journey to excellent mixes may be a lot shorter than you expect.



Bobby Owsinski



Myth #1

Mastering Is About Adding EQ And Compression

BUSTED! Mastering is:

. . .the process of fine-tuning the level, frequency balance, and metadata of a track in preparation for distribution.

This is what professional mastering engineers do, adding a surprising small amount of processing to get big results. The trick, of course, is when and where to apply those amounts.

The unsung jobs of the mastering engineer include:

- **Transferring the master to a different medium.** Mastering engineers were originally called “transfer engineers” because they transferred the songs on tape to vinyl. That’s no different today when a mastering engineer transfers a digital file to vinyl or CD, or even to the Apple Digital Masters format (something only a certified facility can do).
- **Making your mix competitive with other releases.** You want your mix to at least sound like it’s in the ballpark with other mixes in your music genre.
- **Making all the songs in an album sound like they belong together.** Even the best mixers find that some songs sound a little different after mixing an album. One of the jobs of the mastering engineer is to make sure that they sound similar in relative level and tone so they fit together for a better listener experience.
- **Catch the things that you missed.** It’s easy to miss things as an engineer that an experienced mastering engineer will catch. This includes distortion, frequency response problems, and mix level problems.



Myth #2

I Absolutely Have To Master Everything

BUSTED! You don't need to master if your mix sound great

Remember that many A-list mixers won't let a mastering engineer touch their masters (except for the transfer part) since they like the way it sounds and don't believe it can be improved.

When Not To Master:

- If your mix already sounds great
- If your mix is already at a competitive level
- If you love the sound and don't want it touched.

When To Master:

- If your not sure of the frequency balance of the mix
- If your mix isn't at a competitive level
- If you need a special master for vinyl or Apple Digital Masters.



Myth #3

All Mastering Is Created Equally

BUSTED! Mastering can be way different depending on the engineer or service

And it's all different even with the best engineers!

- **Every mastering engineer has a different technique!**
They have different gear, they have different tastes, and they hear things differently.
- **Every online mastering process has a different process.**
The algorithms are different and the processing is different. Plus, there are a lot of variables that you can dial in yourself.
- **Some mastering is gentle; some is aggressive.**
Understand that many mastering engineers are known for their aggressive masters. *Listen to the engineer's work before you make a decision to work with him or her.*
- **Some is better than others.** Like everything else, that's usually reflected in the price you'll pay. That said, price is everything, deals can be had, and even great mastering engineers will have bargain prices sometimes.
- **Some mastering works better on certain genres of music.** Once again, aggressive mastering that works well on metal or hip hop might not work for acoustic based music.



Myth #4

Mastering Will Automatically Make It Sound Better

BUSTED! Don't Believe The Hype!

It's not a panacea. Mastering (especially mediocre mastering) will not automatically give you a "major label" sound.

- **It's just as likely to screw up your mix as it is to help it.** If you're in the business long enough you'll be surprised at just how often mastering will go the opposite of what you think.
- **Don't expect miracles.** They happen every once in a while, but not often. Mastering alone cannot compensate for a bad mix.
- **It can be like putting lipstick on a pig.** You can dress it up but it's still a pig. Same with a bad mix. You can master it but it will still be a bad mix.
- **Mastering engineers often send mixes back.** If they feel they can't do a good job because the mix balance or frequency response is off, they'll ask the mixer for a better mix.



Myth #5

I Need My Master To Be As Loud As Possible

BUSTED! Competitively loud masters are important, but you don't want the extreme

- **They need to be loud enough to be competitive with other releases.** It's unfortunate but true - when people hear something that's louder, they think it sounds better. Even professionals that should know better suffer from this!
- **But not at the sake of dynamic range.** A mix with limited dynamic range (like around 4-5dB) is not going to sound better on any platform or media. When people go to an audio show and test out speakers, what they always say sounds the "best" are songs with wide dynamic range (above 10dB)!
- **Don't over-compress.** Studies show that listeners grow fatigued and change to something else. The National Association of Broadcasters have been doing studies on this for years, and the conclusion is always the same.



Myth #6

My Mix Has To Be A Certain LUFS Level For Streaming

BUSTED! No, your mix level has nothing to do with the streaming level.

Streaming networks don't care what level your mix is at!

Remember that:

- The streaming networks will encode your mixes anyway, even if you send it at their level.
- The streaming mix plugins just allow you to hear what it will sound like through the streaming network's codec, but you don't have to output your mix for it.
- **Mix for a CD master**, since that's what the streaming platforms (like Spotify, Deezer) and distributors (CD Baby, Tunecore) require (at least for now).



Myth #7

I Can Do Everything A Mastering Engineer Can Do

BUSTED! You only have some of the tools

- **You only have some of the tools they have.** Most mastering engineers have specialty (and expensive) plugins, analog and digital outboard gear, and real tape machines.
- **They're playback environment is waaay better.** They can hear a change of a tenth of a dB. Can you?
- **They have lots of experience.** They listen to good and bad songs in every genre of music all day, every day. They know what works and what doesn't.
- **It's difficult to master on the same speakers that you mixed on.** Every speaker has deficiencies, and you just compound them when you master on the same ones.



Myth #8

Isn't Buss Process Just Like Mastering?

Plausible! It Sure Is!

- **It all started when mixing engineers tried to simulate that mastered sound during rough mixes.** Both artists and label execs wanted to hear what it might sound like after mastering or on the radio.
- **That's how the SSL buss compressor came about (boy, do we love that sound).** It was built into the console so you didn't have to use one of your outboard hardware compressors on the mix buss.
- **If you like the mix or the client signed off on it, don't touch it.** The buss processing affects your mix balance. Changing something might change that balance (you don't want to do a remix, do you?)
- **Every mix doesn't necessarily need mix buss processing.** If something is recorded really well, or you use enough channel processing, you may not need any mix buss processing to achieve the sound you're looking for.



Myth #9

My Mix Needs A Lot Of Headroom For Mastering

Busted! Not anymore it doesn't.

- **Back in the analog days that was true.** Only mastering engineers had the best processors and the ability to make it sound “finished.” That’s not the case today where every mixer has plenty of high-powered processing at his or her fingertips.
- **Ask your mastering engineer what he or she wants from you before you send the mix.** Follow the mastering engineer’s suggestions regarding buss processing and level first.
- **If asked to take the limiter off, be prepared to put it back on.** Bypassing the limiter will change the sound and the balance of the mix. There’s no guarantee that the mastering engineer will duplicate what you did or make it better.
- **A-list mixers send their mixes cranked.** The artist and label signs off on their mixes and the mastering engineer just deals with it. Will it sound better with a mix that’s not squashed? Yes, probably, but that’s not the audio world we live in right now.



The Mastering Signal Chain Can Be Used For Mix Buss Processing

A Typical Mastering Signal Chain

(Compressor and EQ might be
reversed)



First In The Signal Path



Last In The Signal Path

Limiter Ceiling Control Set To -0.1dB

Classic Mastering

Used on the mix buss as well as mastering

- **Use 3 processors - compressor, EQ, limiter.** Others can be added, but the majority of the processing is handled with these 3.
- **Choose the cleanest processors possible.** Leave the color for your individual channels.
- **Set the limiter *Ceiling* control to -0.1dB** You need a modern digital limiter with a “look-ahead” function for this to work properly. An emulation of an analog limiter (like an 1176) won't do the job. The aim is to prevent any overloads from occurring.
- **You don't need much processing to make a difference.** A dB or 2 from each processor is all that's required. If you feel you need more (especially EQ) you need to go back and check your mix.



To Summarize

- **Mastering is more than just EQ and compression.**
- **The mastering engineer has better tools and a much more precise listening environment than you do.**
- **There's no rule that says you have to master if it sounds good already.**
- **Mastering can vary wildly from engineer to engineer, or from online process to online process.**
- **Mastering won't do miracles.** Don't expect it to save a bad mix.
- **Your mix and master needs to be competitive with other releases in your genre.** It doesn't have to be the loudest mix out there though.
- **Mix for CD levels** (as of now - this might change in the future)
- **Ask your mastering engineer what they need from you mix-wise**
- **But be prepared to change it back if you don't like the results.** It's okay to want to change something.
- **Don't change anything if you like the way it sounds or the client has signed off.** Keep your mix buss exactly as is. Your balance and sound might be affected if you bypass a compressor or limiter.



Before You Go

We're not done yet. . .



Please know that my goal is to deliver exceptionally good value that you can't find anywhere else.

You can find even more great recording, mixing and music business [resources here](#).

Check out my courses and offerings at BobbyOwsinskiCourses.com, or watch the free training workshops that I give from time to time.

An especially good deal is to [join the Diamond Tier](#) of my Hit Makers Club where you'll get access to 9 of my courses immediately.

Find out more about [Hit Makers Club](#) here.

And you also might like my [Inner Circle podcast](#) for up-to-date music industry news and interviews with music movers and shakers.



Busting The 9 Mastering Myths
And How That Will Help Your Mix
by Bobby Owsinski

Published by:
Bobby Owsinski Media Group
4109 West Burbank, Blvd.
Burbank, CA 91505

© Bobby Owsinski 2021

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced, transmitted, stored, or used in any form and by any means graphic, electronic or mechanical, including but not limited to photocopying, scanning, digitizing, taping, Web distribution, information networks or information storage and retrieval systems, except as permitted in Sections 107 or 108 of the 1976 Copyright Act, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use text or information from this product, submit requests to requests@bobbyowsinski.com.

Please note that much of this publication is based on personal experience and anecdotal evidence. Although the author and publisher have made every reasonable attempt to achieve complete accuracy of the content in this eBook, they assume no responsibility for errors or omissions. Also, you should use this information as you see fit, and at your own risk. Your particular situation may not be exactly suited to the examples illustrated herein; in fact, it's likely that they won't be the same, and you should adjust your use of the information and recommendations accordingly.

Any trademarks, service marks, product names or named features are assumed to be the property of their respective owners, and are used only for reference. There is no implied endorsement if we use one of these terms.

Finally, nothing in this eBook is intended to replace common sense, legal, medical or other professional advice, and is meant to inform and entertain the reader.

To buy books in quantity for corporate use or incentives, call 818.588.6606 or email office@bobbyowsinski.com.

