

At the End of the Chain

Mastering is the last stage of making a record. The mix arrives finished, or finished enough. The mastering engineer works on it after every part has been settled, and prepares it to translate everywhere from a car with the windows down, a phone speaker on a kitchen counter, a club rig at midnight, headphones on a late train.

Very few tools, very small moves, with consequences out of all proportion to their size.

I did that work for 15 years. It felt like something I'd done all my life: deep listening, rabid curiosity and aesthetic judgement I could not explain then, and can only partly explain now. I was good at it because it required exactly what I already was.

Years on, I work in education and at SCAR Advantage, helping leadership teams clear the decisions their organisations defend but no longer choose.

Only recently did I realise that I never stopped mastering.

You arrive last, and work on the whole

By the time a record reaches mastering, everything is committed. The song is written, the performances are captured, the mix is balanced. You cannot go back and change the second verse. Your work happens in the space that decides whether the thing travels well.

I work with organisations the same way. The founder's call years ago, the merger, the departure that ended badly: none is open for revision. The history is committed, and the decision now in front of the organisation is not.

My work begins at the end of the chain, with material already there. The constraint is the craft.

The work is judged in the car

A music master is judged in the car.

You prepare something to survive conditions you will be absent for, on systems you do not control, in the ears of people who will give it no special attention. The test is whether it still holds together beyond the monitors on which it sounded beautiful.

A decision is judged by the supervisor who missed the meetings and still has to run it. Much of what looks like decision failure is translation failure. The thinking held together on the monitors and fell apart in the car.

No system is neutral

Every mastering engineer knows their monitoring system is not neutral. Acoustics, speakers and placement all colour what you hear. So you bring in records you know intimately and identify the bias before you touch anything.

Organisations are not neutral either. Neither are their leaders, neither am I. The discipline is identical: use a known reference and notice what the context adds or subtracts.

Putting the studio back

I am putting mastering back into my life, selectively. I miss the music community, the precision of the studio and the tension of art and science. It is the same combination that draws me to the work of advancing the human condition.

In part two, the ear: what deep listening is, and how you hear a thing that does not exist yet.

