Love it or hate it, MP3 is here to stay

Derided for its quality issues and ostracized for its damage to music sales potential, MP3 never went away. It just kept knocking on doors until someone let it in. DAN DALEY proposes a future scenario in which it becomes as important as your mono mix compatibility check.

FOR THE LONGEST TIME, the professional audio community sneered at the notion of the MP3 download as a music carrier. It was compressed, it was distorted, it was a loose canon that could be neither monetised nor sonically refined. Another roll of analogue tape over here, please. (And that was a relatively warm reception compared to the one that the record industry gave it when it came in the form of Napster, Gnutella, and other online file-sharing services.)

Well, best get used to MP3, because consumers certainly have. Apple Computer seems to have hit on the magic formula for a viable music business model in the Internet age with its iTunes online service. It offers availability of titles from all major label groups, a consistent and reasonable price (about 70p) per song, few strings or catches regarding subsequent use of the file, and a marketing alliance using a Gibson ES335 guitar as the icon, which proclaims the message that the multinational major labels managed to obscure — it's about music.

Little wonder it sold 1m downloads in its first week. What's more, it uses the Advanced Audio Codec (AAC), which offers higher resolution and sampling rates in even smaller file sizes than MP3. Other similarly evolved codecs, such as Windows Media Audio (WMA) and Real Audio, are also making the compressed file format more palatable to those who need to distribute music via the Internet.

It's where the singles went. The British Phonographic Industry (BPI) trade group notes that overall music sales were down UK£1.19bn last year, but that singles took the largest hit, with single sales spiraling 11% lower, to UK£97.2m or 52.5 million units in 2002 — levels last seen 10 years ago.

But as a piece in the Manchester Guardian points out, singles haven't disappeared; rather, they've migrated to the Internet, the ideal outlet for distributing small, discrete nuggets of content. This has, in turn, led to a discourse on the possible death of the album as a configuration for music packages.

The album has been with us for nearly 50 years — many cite Frank Sinatra's 1954 In The Wee Small Hours Of The Night as the first long-playing collection of songs by the same artist and with some thematic sense to it. (In this case, the title says it all.) The LP was more marketing concept — 'More Songs, Same Low Price!' — than artistic conceit until The Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, which suddenly elevated the LP status.

Aside from the occasional onanistic drum solo *(and bass solo. Ed)*, the LP was a good thing: it created an entirely new and long-lived foundation for the music industry, a pretext for huge budgets often far out of proportion to the amount of talent involved. No wonder it lasted half a century.

If the LP is toast and the downloaded single is the new way, how does that affect those who produce and engineer music recordings? Significantly, I think. If McLuhan was right about the medium being the message — and he was — music productions — specifically mixing and mastering — have to be adapted to the distribution technology. Mastering engineer Dave Kutch, whose discography is heavily weighted with alt rock, punky pop (like Pink) and hip-hop — all solid singles genres — had an MP3 epiphany of sorts recently. He heard a track he had mastered played back, but was unaware that it was an MP3 file. 'I listened and it sounded OK but there was something that wasn't right,' he recalls. 'Then I realised the stereo image was narrow and shallow. There was no depth to the track. It was fine in terms of frequency response being there. There was bottom on the track. But the image was skewed.'

MP3 remains the most widely used format for distribution, thanks to the momentum provided initially by Napster. Its lack of copy protection makes it unattractive to major and even most mid-sized record labels. But among thousands of indie recording artists, it remains the lingua franca of online music. 'With indie artists, the number of downloads, not how much a track earns, is the attraction,' says Robert 'Void' Caprio, an engineer who works mostly with emerging artists such as Hot Action Cop and Audra & The Antidote. 'When it comes to getting your music out there, MP3 is the most widely used,' he says.

So, the first area to address is to present yourself to clients as file format-savvy. It's not an easy environment to work in; especially if you were brought up to regard anything less than pristine audio as anathema. Unlike, say, 5.1 music, there has been little development of guidelines or standards by which to measure how to adapt mixes to compressed formats. For instance, the imaging issue can be addressed by exaggerating the stereo
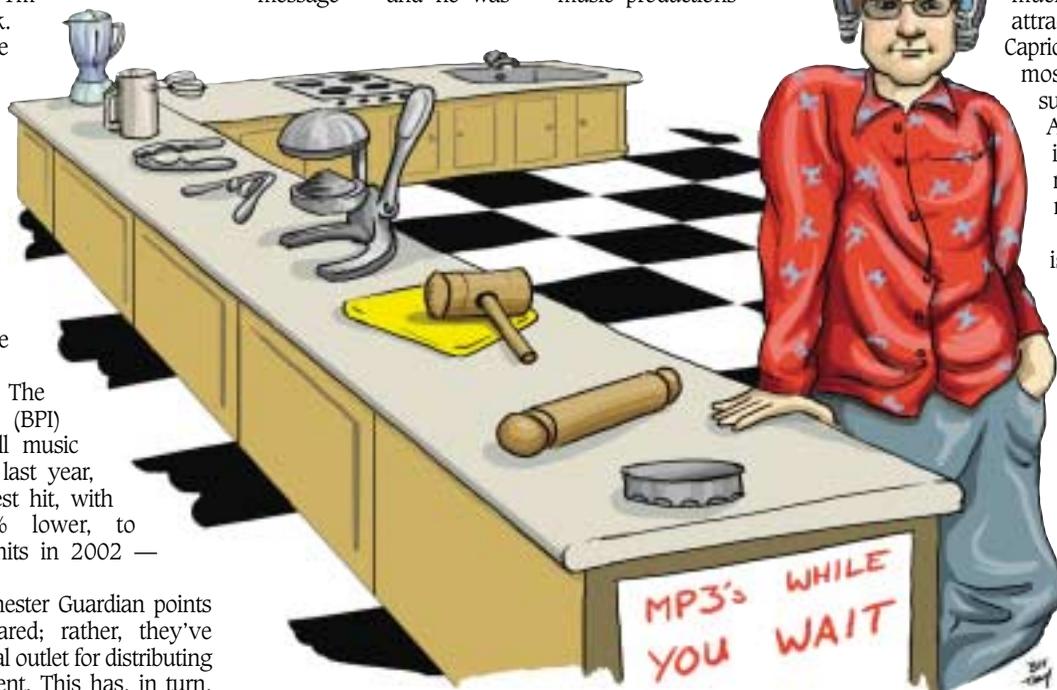
image in the mix more broadly than one would normally for conventional stereo. But by exactly how much? Trial and error.

'I've found that adding more reverb to everything helps,' says Caprio. 'Most reverbs are stereo and won't come across in mono unless you boost them. That seems to apply to all ambience processing for compressed file formats, as well. But it's really all a matter of listening to the music in a few download formats, then experimenting.' Low frequencies pose a particular challenge for the compression/computer combination. One unique response has been to use pitch shifting to create an octave-higher clone of the bass track and 'ghost' it in with the original.

But if MP3s are a fact of creative life now, then they are also a fact of business. In fact, file formatting for online distribution might become the adjunct that 5.1 has yet to become. As advisable as it is, many production clients are still reluctant to routinely authorise surround music mixes in addition to a conventional stereo one, for financial, practical or ideological reasons. But online distribution is here and now, and the Apple online store could well act as a catalyst for making monitoring of MP3-type a routine part of the track-finishing process.

As vague as the creative aspects of dealing with compressed formats are, monetising them is no less murky. There are no gear rentals, no extra speakers (one less than usual would often do, actually), and no real services to offer. The key is to offer expertise and awareness, and don't ever discount the value of those.

There is another fundamental change that online distribution will likely bring to music production. If it indeed does undermine the concept of the LP album, then instead of artists going into the studio to create a 12-song record every 18 months or so, it would make more sense to go in every three or four months with two or three songs at a time. Those will be distributed on line. A physical media package, with disc and artwork and other tangibles, could be released more or less as a compilation, perhaps every two or three years. Value-added features, such as 5.1 audio (multichannel music over the web is still less than feasible due to the much larger size of such files), would become incentives to buy the music in a physical format.

This represents a significant change in the workflow, and thus in the way producers are remunerated. What happens to the producer's fee? Is it stretched over a long period, or simply paid on a per-track basis? The latter seems the most likely, but this aspect of negotiation will also probably become taken more on a case-by-case basis. This also raises the issue of royalty payments. I may draw some ire for this, but I do believe that since online distribution will make accurate tracking of sales exponentially more difficult, that we're headed into an environment in which projects are monetised up front rather than after the fact. We're already seeing this effect as more indie music gets tapped for advertising commercial uses. For the vast majority of independent recording artists, the buy-out is a better deal than hoping for Sony Records to notice them.

There's yet another way that online distribution can affect music creators. Music libraries are beginning to move more deeply into the virtual marketplace, which offers library creators and compilers as well as their clients an alternative to a disc. Online is still a small part of this market; it's still much faster to pull a track from a CD than to access it immediately through a phone line or even broadband. But as the delivery pipes get faster and more ubiquitous, it'll transition to online delivery.

This sets up a scenario that is remarkably similar to what happened with project studios: lots of people able to make snippets of music and distribute them easily, competing with established music libraries. 'It's already happening,' says Aaron Gant, chief engineer at 615 Music, a Nashville library company. 'You've got a whole bunch of composers and producers from music houses and agencies out there who have lost gigs and have turned to selling their music online.'

As always when technology confronts the established order, things change. Fortunately, every change brings with it a new opportunity. Never thought you'd be sharing a bed with an MP3? Think again. ■

- Listen to MP3.
- Really listen to MP3.
- Hear what it does to your mix.
- Consider how your production decisions translate into the format.
- Experiment with ways to make it sound better.
- Remember that you don't have to love it but a bad mix on any delivery format still reflects on you.