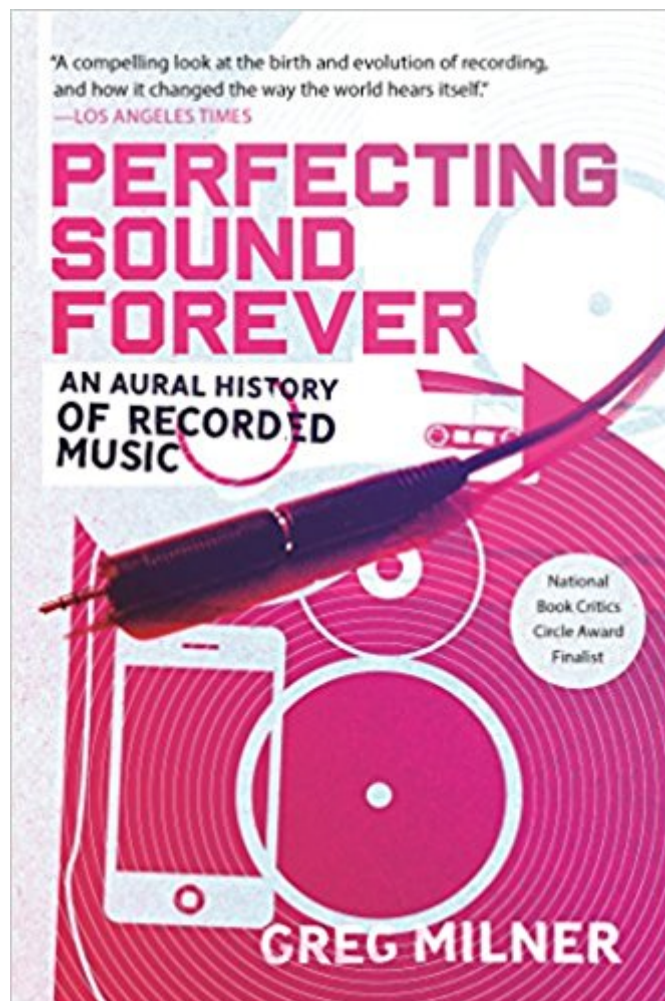




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Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History Of Recorded Music



Synopsis

In 1915, Thomas Edison proclaimed that he could record a live performance and reproduce it perfectly, shocking audiences who found themselves unable to tell whether what they were hearing was an Edison Diamond Disc or a flesh-and-blood musician. Today, the equation is reversed. Whereas Edison proposed that a real performance could be rebuilt with absolute perfection, Pro Tools and digital samplers now allow musicians and engineers to create the illusion of performances that never were. In between lies a century of sonic exploration into the balance between the real and the represented. Tracing the contours of this history, Greg Milner takes us through the major breakthroughs and glorious failures in the art and science of recording. An American soldier monitoring Nazi radio transmissions stumbles onto the open yet revolutionary secret of magnetic tape. Japanese and Dutch researchers build a first-generation digital audio format and watch as their "compact disc" is marketed by the music industry as the second coming of Edison yet derided as heretical by analog loyalists. The music world becomes addicted to volume in the nineties and fights a self-defeating "loudness war" to get its fix. From Les Paul to Phil Spector to King Tubby, from vinyl to pirated CDs to iPods, Milner's *Perfecting Sound Forever* pulls apart musical history to answer a crucial question: Should a recording document reality as faithfully as possible, or should it improve upon or somehow transcend the music it records? The answers he uncovers will change the very way we think about music.

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History & Criticism

Customer Reviews

Recording gadgets evolve with dizzying speed, but debates over their effects on music never

change, according to this fascinating study of technology and aesthetics. Journalist Milner (coauthor, *Metallica: This Monster Lives*) surveys developments in recording, from Thomas Edison's complaints about those new-fangled Victrolas to the contemporary controversy between CD and vinyl. With every advance of hardware, he notes, comes accompanying shifts in the sound of music: the sense of physical space implied by stereo sound; the advent of rock 'n' roll reverb; the big obnoxious ambient drum sound that defined the '80s under the Phil Collins dictatorship; the unsettling robotic tone imparted to vocals by today's Auto-Tune pitch-correction software; the arms race toward ear-grabbing, distortion-heavy loudness that leaves us surrounded by music that does nothing but shout. Perennial arguments about the fidelity of new technologies, he contends, miss the point: now that every record is digitally spliced together out of multiple tracks and far-flung samples, there is no authentic musical performance for the sound engineer's true auteur to record. Milner combines a lucid exposition of acoustics and technology with a critic's keen discernment of the pop-music soundscape. The result is a real ear-opener that will captivate fans and techies alike. (June 16) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

• Perfecting Sound Forever is an exhaustively researched, extraordinarily inquisitive book that dissects the central question within all music criticism: When we say that something sounds good, what are we really saying? And perhaps more importantly, what are we really hearing? • CHUCK KLOSTERMAN • A compelling look at the birth and evolution of recording, and how it changed the way the world hears itself. • MARC WEINGARTEN, Los Angeles Times • Greg Milner tells the story of recorded music with novelistic verve, ferocious attention to detail, and a soulful ambivalence about our quest for sonic perfection. He shows how great recordings come about not through advances in technology but through a love of the art, and that same love is the motor of his prose. • Alex Ross, author of *The Rest Is Noise* • You may never listen to Lady Gaga the same way again . . . [Milner is] a gifted storyteller with an ear for absurdity . . . You might not think a book about reverb could thrill. Milner's does. • MIKAEL WOOD, Time Out New York • Very, very, very few books will change the way you listen to music. This is one such book. Read it. • JARVIS COCKER

A fascinating look at how sound recording has changed over the years. (I posted a review from my Kindle version, but it never showed up). Two items missing when describing the warmth of LPs: 1) Are the new 180 gram LPs mastered from digitized master files or the actual master tape? 2) Years

ago I re-bought one of my favorite LPs, as I was wearing out my original. But it sounded muddy and terrible. Later I found out that record companies would make a new version of an album's "master tape" from the previous version, which would then become the current version. I was shocked, as I knew that copying analog to analog would degrade the sound. From a sonic perspective, CDs are great in that they induced record companies to go back to original master tapes to get the best sound. Had CDs not come out, LPs would be in a sad state. Quality of sound became an important factor in music. Sadly, too much emphasis gets placed on how music sounds, rather than the music itself. Side note: I recently bought some HDTracks super-audio downloads online, but I can't hear any greater quality. My headphones only cost \$50, but I should be able to detect something more. Side note 2: While I love digitized movies (which have made old movies look better than ever), you can see where digital degrades the image by looking at "2001: a space odyssey". In the original film version, the "eye" of HAL looked perfectly murky, but in digitized versions, it looks like there are bands of color in it. It's a minor issue, but perfectly illustrates what is lost when images are digitally compressed. The same is true of audio compression. But if you're only missing 1%, how much do you want to spend to get that 1% improvement? Side note 3: I loved how the book ended by going back to an Edison recording and finding out that they didn't sound as awful as the scratchy versions we usually hear.

I read this book on the suggestion of Mike Johnston of The Online Photographer. An audiophile as well as a master photographer, Johnston keyed in on one of the outstanding aspects of Milner's book: the conflict between forces that wanted to record music as purely as they could and those who wanted to capture, somehow, the effect of the music. This struggle began with Edison's recording cylinder and continues through today. Milner describes the technical challenges that musicians and recording engineers have faced, but places them in the context of demands from the music industry (recording studios, record labels, radio stations, etc.), which gives the story an angle that makes it more meaningful to fans such as myself. After all, I don't understand what frequency modulation really is, but I am interested in how FM stations used electronic devices to manipulate the sounds of records and CDs. If I had any criticisms of Milner's work, I'd focus on two things. One, he focuses somewhat narrowly on popular music. While he seems to like a lot of the same bands that I do, I wonder how the book might have been different had he focused more on classical (which gets some good coverage, especially Telarc) or other styles such as jazz (which seems almost wholly absent). To be fair, maybe popular music stretched the technology further. My other criticism focuses on the scope of the work. The book focuses on a relatively narrow set of people. I would

have liked to have learned more about some of the other personalities involved. That said, I doubt the market for a 1000-page book on music recording is very large. All in all, a fascinating read and a must for music lovers who care about recording quality.

"Perfecting Sound Forever" is both more and less than its title would imply. On the one hand, it is purportedly a history of the technology of recorded music. But it includes many lengthy sidetrips and stories which will engage readers who take an active interest in both the development and the application of recorded sound. For example, the author discusses at length the use of "sound tests" by the makers of the first acoustic recording and playback machines. In these tests (which were as much marketing techniques as much as "scientific" experiments), a singer or instrumentalist would pretend to be playing on stage, then walk off stage in the middle of the performance as a curtain was parted to show that the audience had been listening to an acoustic wax cylinder or disk played through a horn. Believe it or not, the audience was astonished to discover that it had not been listening to a live performance. Similar tests continued to be used right up until the present, always with the same result, which demonstrates the substantial psycho-acoustic element in the listening experience. Many readers, including myself, will enjoy Milner's lengthy sidetrips describing in detail such historic applications of new recording techniques as John and Alan Lomax's trips to the rural South to record "authentic Negro music," discovering along the way the great blues singer "Huddie" Ledbetter, better known as "Lead Belly." Many of these stories are only tangentially related to the central story of the development of audio recording techniques. Others, such as Milner's discussion of Les Paul's pioneering use of over-tracking to achieve the sound he wanted, are more directly related to the main narrative. If you are not irritated by the author's wanderings off the "track" (sort of an audiophile's "Moby Dick"), and you have a reasonable understanding of the main outlines of the development of audio technology, you will probably thoroughly enjoy this book. But be forewarned. As audio recording technology hits the crossroads intersecting it with the birth of rock 'n roll in the mid-fifties, there is almost no discussion of the application of audio technology to the recording of classical or jazz music. Milner confines his discussion to pop and rock almost exclusively thereafter. Although his discussion of the influence of the evolution of recording technology on the pop music field is important, if your tastes run to Miles Davis or Dmitri Shostakovich rather than hip-hop or The Red Hot Chili Peppers, you may find your enjoyment of the book substantially lessened. That said, Miller's exploration of the uses made of digital recording technology, with its promise of greater sensitivity and higher fidelity, is fascinating. He describes in great detail the "misuse" of audio compression and clipping to achieve greater "loudness" even though the results on pop music

paradoxically lessened the dynamic range and fidelity of the music being made. Milner paints a picture in which the democratization of the production of pop music made possible by the availability of ever more affordable devices to produce music - the "producer" could now record and remix from a garage instead of an acoustically pristine recording hall - contributed to the so-called "loudness wars" in which records were so compressed that the dynamic range of a pop song from beginning to end might be as little as 9 dB. Loudness got the attention of people flipping through the FM dials, and audiophiles were no longer the object of the producer's attention as the recording industry's prime demographic was hearing their favorite music through cheap stereo systems and later through MP3 devices such as iPods using low fidelity earbuds. The lesson seems to be that people get the music they deserve, and mediocre sound quality is perfectly satisfactory to the average listener. The author's thesis is that increasingly sophisticated production devices such as Pro-Tools and Auto-Tune, which allow the correction of pitch for a flat singer, and the assembly of "music" one note at a time rather than by capturing even a semblance of live ensemble musical performance, have paradoxically corrupted the quality of most modern recordings. It is interesting then that he winds up at the end of the book putting himself through the paces of a modern day "sound test." In a blind comparison of a uncompressed sound clip in almost CD quality, with an identical clip of the same music that has been compressed using a codec and bit rate unknown to him, the author tries to identify the compressed clip. You may be surprised at the results reported by Milner as he processes the music through his own psycho-acoustic equipment (his ears and his brain). Overall, I can confidently recommend this book to anyone with more than a passing interest in the history of audio recording, and some of the more interesting stories that are part of that history. However, if reading page after page about lossless and lossy dynamic compression in MP3 players produces sleepiness instead of excitement, you might want to pick up an old copy of Aaron Copland's "What To Listen For in Music."

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