

Kevin Killen – Music Delivery Thoughts

by Allen Farmelo

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See the rest of this interview in Tape Op issue #66.

Let's talk about what's going on these days. There are a million ways to come at it, but I'll just leave it wide open.

Well, things have changed so dramatically and we all know they've changed. The *big* question is: does music have value? That's really at the core of what a lot of the labels and artists are going through. And what is that value? And have we allowed a significant shift to occur in the public's mindset where music doesn't have value? Really, there's a certain portion of the argument that would suggest we've actually created a two-headed monster. Intrinsicly, I believe that there is value in music, and that it is the universal language, and that's the reason that people always gravitated towards it, regardless of the delivery mechanism. Whether it's vinyl, or some downloadable medium, people are always going to seek it out. But certain changes have occurred. There's always the art versus commerce argument, and you only have to be in the industry for four or five years to realize that that those two characters are unhappy bedfellows. They never coexist happily together. You know, it's very rare that you find people who come at it from those two perspectives and exist symbiotically. I think that what's happening now is that you've got this fracturing going on, because the industry has been set up in such a way that there's always been a certain number of new artists going through the mill, and a pool of established artists, too. And there's been this reservoir of talent, and a catalogue, that's feeding new development, and hopefully some intelligent decisions have been made over the years about finding new talent and promoting it. But in the last ten years, there's definitely been some miscalculations made. There had been an assumption that this thing was always going to continue the way it had, and you could start to see in the late '80s that that was not necessarily going to be the case. In the '90s, with the beginnings with Nirvana and Pearl Jam, people were clearly buying records, but if you actually broke down what people were buying, they were buying *a lot* of back-catalogue stuff, and you just had to logically conclude, "Oh my god, once everyone's replaced their old vinyl, we're not going to be able to sustain this level of sales, so what's going to happen then?" That's when you saw labels start to buy each other.

So a large percentage of CD sales at that time were people buying stuff they already owned, just converting to CDs.

That's one element of it. Then you had the labels converge and merge together, and what normally happens in those processes is that artists get dropped, and staff get dropped, and you've got a duality of purpose there. There's the fundamental shift away from development, and we definitely have seen it over the last fifteen years. And on top of that you've got the whole availability of a medium that allows people to copy, ad nauseam, at a level of quality that just isn't very good. You know, as engineers we've always wanted our music to sound as good as it did in the studio and vinyl came close to it, but even this whole notion of vinyl as the greatest sounding medium ever is a complete fallacy. It sounded great, of course, but...

...not on a crappy turntable.

Not on a crappy turntable, or on a crappy playback system. And if it was duplicated incorrectly it never sounded great and it *never* sounded as great as your master tape, ever. So, the promise of digital was that it would sound as good as your master tape. It took a while for that promise to become close to a

realization, and just as it did we were forced to adopt standards that were - well, 44.1 kHz/16 bit is a video standard, not an audio standard. Recordings have always suffered from the fact that the audience never really get to hear what the artist intended, *ever*.

Exactly.

So now they're listening to MP3s, and they've adopted that as the workable model, and it sounds horrible. A lot of the music just sounds like this buzzing in your head. It doesn't carry the elegance that it normally would have, the dynamic range that it should have, or the beauty that it could have. I think that, until we go back and reeducate people about the fact that music can transport you, and the way that it *should* transport you, then people are just going to go to the nearest place and, out of convenience, download what they assume to be the least offensive version, which is, at this point, an MP3. At this point in my career I feel like, along with my peers, we should really be guardians of how audio should sound, and I think that there's a need to engage the younger generations as to why they feel like music is disposable, because that's clearly what is happening. They assume that downloading a piece of music has no impact whatsoever, but the contrary is true. The music is supposed to have impact. The logical extension of this discussion would be that the artist that created that piece of work doesn't get paid, and therefore can't survive. And that's how they survive, by nurturing a piece of music, nurturing a project, and going out and putting it out in the world for all to criticize or embrace. I mean that takes a singularity of purpose to do that, and to be dismissive of that and say, "Well, it's okay. It's just file sharing." It's not sharing, it's stealing. No matter what way you look at it, it's stealing. I know that we've all done it, but at the end of the day we're supposed to support these people. You know, they're the ones who somehow capture all the emotions that we feel and put it into a form that we can all embrace and love, and it helps us to transport that emotion. And I think that as guardians, for want of a better word, of the industry, we almost need to get rid of every MP3 player and bring all their file sharing in here and let them sit in front of a great set of speaker and let them hear the difference. I think once you hear the difference it's like, "Ah!" Just because it works and it's convenient, doesn't mean that that's what the artist intended. Nine times out of ten, it's not.

Who else is responsible as guardians?

Labels. There's a lack of commitment there for labels to educate their staff and to be responsible with the products. I mean, if you think about it, they've got this huge legacy of catalogues that's available to them, and, if people at the label don't know the difference between a great sounding record and a poor sounding record, then that only reinforces what I've said. I mean, we're all culpable. It's not just artists, managers and labels; it's congress; it's everybody. We're all part of this.

Anybody who's affected?

Anyone who's affected by it. I've often sat at home, or sat at a studio, and listened to a piece of music and have been moved to tears, or have been moved to a different emotion, and I think "*Wow, it's incredible.*" I can think back to projects I worked on where I remember a specific instance in the recording and am chilled by that moment. *Something* is affecting me, and watching the artist being affected while they were delivering it, and you think, "that's the power of music." It's an incredibly powerful thing, and we've devalued that power, maybe because it's so available now. When I was a teenager I'd save up my money and I'd go to my local record store, spend my equivalent of five or six dollars on an album, and I'd go home and play it to death. I didn't have all those other distractions. That's not to say that these other opportunities for kids to spend their money on gaming and things aren't valid - they are - but music is so ubiquitous now. Seemed to me that 20 years ago there were a lot of records with a certain higher standard, and few of a lesser standard. Now there seems to be more of a lesser standard, and less of the higher standard. There is a lot of great music out there, and it's so affordable to record these days, and anybody can record anywhere, but there really should be no reason why it's poor. You know, it's such a *big* question. I'm not sure you can really concisely say in a couple

of sentences what the solution is, but I think that part of the solution is the education process. You really need to educate people into hearing the difference, and I wish that this industry would adopt a standard that was more beneficial to the way that audio could sound.