

# MASTERS

## Howie Weinberg

**Company:** Howie Weinberg Mastering

**Clientele:** U2, Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, Coheed and Cambria

**Contact:** <http://howieweinbergmastering.com>

**Howie Weinberg got his start under the tutelage of famed mastering engineer Bob Ludwig. He began as a studio jack-of-all-trades, but as his skills sharpened Ludwig built him his own room and things quickly mushroomed. In time, Weinberg has relocated to the West Coast, established his own studio and continues to expand his client roster. He has mastered more than 2,500 records, notably the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack.**

**Which mix problems can be addressed in the mastering stage? Which can't?**

I can fix anything—if it's too much bottom, too little bottom, too much top. I can change the whole characteristics of the recording, if need be. I work with a lot of well-known mixers and their mixes are pretty much dead-on. Much of what I do is take their work and make sure that it transfers and feels nice.

**What are the new challenges in mastering today, something that wouldn't have been an issue five years ago?**

Equipment gets better every year but it doesn't mean that mixes are getting better. There are still a lot of amateurs out there. Right now everyone uses a lot of the same workstations, a lot of the same plug-ins. So it comes down to skills.

**How closely do you work with mix engineers?**

Pretty closely, since they're the ones who usually filter me the gigs. Often they just send me the files and I don't hear from them, because they know I'll take care of them.

It's always a good idea to have a chat with the client, or get their notes, before I master because some people like it super loud, some people like it dynamic.

**What's the ideal format for mixes that you receive?**

24-bit, anywhere from 44.1 to 96 [kHz]. But to be honest, bit formats are useless. If you record something at 96 kHz, that's a crappy mix—sample rates aren't going to make it sound better.

**Have you ever mastered a 24-carat gold CD? It's been said that gold discs sound closer to the original recordings.**

That's probably a bunch of bunk. It may have a lower error rate, but I'm not sure that anyone can actually hear it.

**Generally, are the online mastering forums a good resource?**

They're pretty accurate. You have to sift through who's giving the information. Is it someone who has a lot of experience or is it a newcomer? A lot of kids do their homework these days and it shows in their work.

**Are there red flags that tell a musician that might be working with a less than reputable mastering engineer?**

There are some cases where new guys are qualified, but why would you want to have someone who's worked on 50 or 100 records instead of someone who's worked on 2,000? Maybe the [less experienced] guy is cheaper, but the bottom line is that you get what you pay for.

**What's the biggest mastering challenge you've ever faced?**

I spent two and a half weeks mastering a U2 record in the '90s. Everybody showed up and they weren't even finished mixing. There were four different producers, four engineers and the band was hitting the road soon. But when we finally finished and pushed "play," damn but didn't it sound great.

**What's the biggest technical challenge/problem you've ever gotten out of?**

Half the time when I make records too loud, the client complains. If you make them too soft, they complain that they're not loud enough. But as long as my gear works, I'm happy. I don't really have technical problems.

**What do you say to fledgling mastering engineers?**

It's a tough gig. How do you get credits if you don't have any? Just follow your dreams and one day a project will show up that will put you on the map.



*"Maybe the [less experienced] guy is cheaper, but the bottom line is that you get what you pay for."*

## Maor Appelbaum

**Company:** Maor Appelbaum Mastering

**Clientele:** Sepultura, Halford, Yngwie Malmsteen

**Contact:** <http://maorappelbaum.com>, 818-564-9276

Maor Appelbaum got his start with Sylvia Massy, producer and engineer of Tool's *Undertow*. Ultimately he relocated to Los Angeles, CA, and launched his own studio. Today clients send him files from as far away as Europe and Asia. Although he has worked with a number of heavy/death metal bands, he doesn't limit himself to any single genre and says he strives not to impress his own sound on a record.

**Which mix problems can be addressed in the mastering stage? Which can't?**

I prefer to get a duller mix than a bright one. A duller mix I can brighten easily. You can create problems because high-end was added, but not in a balanced way. For example, you can have a mix with a lot of open cymbals but the vocals are dull. When I try to brighten the vocals, the cymbals become sizzled.

**What are the new challenges in mastering today?**

People put too many plug-ins on the master buss in a way that can't be undone. That limits what I can do and it takes away from the quality of the mix. If I get a mix with no buss compression, I have the option of adding it. But when it's done in a mix and I ask them to take it off, it tears it apart.

**How closely do you work with mix engineers?**

In case the producer or mixer wants changes, I'll accommodate them and make revisions. I like to extend communications so that each side is comfortable making suggestions. They appreciate me caring about a project and going the extra mile.

**What's the ideal format for mixes that you receive?**

A stereo interleaved WAV file. Multi-mono is fine too. I usually recommend some headroom: between minus 3 and 6 dB peaking. There's more chance that it will sound clear if there's more headroom and less chance of clipping it. I recommend keeping it the same sample rate and bit-depth as the original mix session. To keep the fidelity, it is best not to down/up-sample or dither. But I've also successfully mastered projects that have been changed in these ways.

**Do the online mastering forums offer good information?**

We're dealing with technology, art and taste. Some people have a great experience with certain hardware or software. Other people have a horrible experience. You need to find what's good for you. Just because a piece of gear is high quality doesn't mean that it's easy to use. And, you may not get the results you want quickly and that can make you not want to work with it.

**Are there red flags that show a musician he might be working with a less than reputable mastering engineer?**

It's always about communication. You can work with a reputable mastering engineer and get a great result, but if a problem suddenly arises and he's not willing to communicate with you, how can you deal with it? You can also work with someone who has less of a reputation and can bring you what you want. If there's a problem and you can talk with him, you can find a solution.

**What's the biggest technical challenge/problem you've ever gotten out of?**

Working on an album that has a lot of producers and/or mixers. In order to make such an album sound great, you have to find a way to compromise to achieve cohesiveness. You can't make everything flow without making adjustments, and sometimes you have to take off something from a mix to accommodate the others.

**What advice do you give to fledgling mastering engineers?**

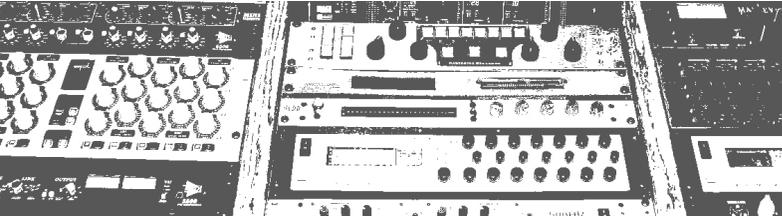
Understand the different genres and territories. When you do French rock, understand that it's not like American rock; Swedish metal isn't like American metal. Listen to all the styles and try to figure out how to accommodate each one.

**Any final advice?**

Experiment with different gear and see what you like. Not every piece is meant for every situation.



*"People put too many plug-ins on the master buss in a way that can't be undone."*



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## Joe LaPorta

**Company:** Sterling Sound

**Clientele:** Foo Fighters, Vampire Weekend, Imagine Dragons

**Contact:** [katy.samwell@sterling-sound.com](mailto:katy.samwell@sterling-sound.com), 212-604-9433

New York City-based Joe LaPorta began his career by making beats. Ultimately he landed a deal with New York hip-hop label Rawkus Records and worked in production and related fields. LaPorta interned with New York mastering studio The Lodge and stayed on there for eight years, eventually moving to famed mastering house Sterling Sound. Notably, he mastered Foo Fighters' Grammy-winning *Wasting Light*.

**Which mix problems can be addressed in the mastering stage? Which can't?**

Often kick drums and bass lines overlap and one may be dominant. So you need good separation and definition. When I have the stems or they go back to the mix and fix it on their own, that's a much more beneficial way to do it. Otherwise, you end up digging into the low end and taking away things that can hurt the drums. I often get mixes on the darker side and that's great because obtaining a high-end tends to have a nicer result than if I receive a bright mix that was done all in the box.

**What are the new challenges in mastering today?**

Getting mixes that are too hot are a potential problem. It has been compressed and limited too much and it has lost a lot of the bounce, dynamic and punch. Often I'll ask for a mix that's quieter, that doesn't have the stereo buss plug-ins. I'll have their loud one for a reference and then I'll take it to the next level.

**How closely do you work with mix engineers?**

Many of the mix engineers I've worked with send me mixes while they're still in the rough draft stages. I'll point out things that I'm hearing. Having good communication throughout the process is the best way to achieve something that everyone is happy with.

**What's the ideal format for mixes that you receive?**

I'm happy to work with any high-res WAV or AIFF formats, but I'm also seeing more 32-bit files since Pro Tools 10.

**Do the online mastering forums offer good information?**

If I'm in a crunch, I'll check them. There are a lot of people who hide behind usernames and claim to know it all. Other times I've received useful information. We have amazing technicians here, but if they're stumped I go to the forums as a last resort.

**Are there red flags that show a musician that he might be working with a less than reputable mastering engineer?**

Dealing with a mastering engineer who's stubborn and/or unwilling to accommodate. This is a customer service industry; we're here to facilitate what the client wants. You can always chime in with your experience, but it's up to the client. It's not always the case, but be cautious if the rates seem too good to be true.

**What's the biggest mastering challenge you've faced?**

Sometimes you'll have 80 percent of an album complete and then there are a few things at the end that are strikingly different. Getting those to sit in the same world can be difficult. Another challenge is mastering from digital and tape sources and piecing them together.

**What's the biggest technical challenge/problem you've ever gotten out of?**

When there have been time constraints, I've had a mix and had to fly-in vocals underneath it to raise the vocal volume. It can be tricky because you have to avoid issues such as phasing.

**What do you say to fledgling mastering engineers?**

Be prepared to work hard. It's a slow, tedious, detail-oriented process. There's little room for error, being that it's the final stage before people send off their babies to be manufactured. The artists and labels want to be sure that they're in good hands. For that to happen, they look at your body of work and it takes time to build that up.

**Any final advice?**

As a mastering engineer, you get a variety of material. Taking the same approach doesn't work all the time. Often it requires rethinking the whole plan. Sometimes minimalism is the most effective approach to mastering.



*"Many of the mix engineers I've worked with send me mixes while they're still in the rough draft stages."*

## Bob Vosgien

**Company:** Capitol Mastering

**Clientele:** Bob Seger, Sick Puppies, Graffiti6

**Contact:** ryan.simpson@umusic.com, 323-871-5003

**After graduating from Boston's Berklee School of Music in '84 with a degree in audio recording, Bob Vosgien switched coasts and took a job with Capitol Mastering in Hollywood as a production engineer, where he worked under famed mastering engineer Wally Traugott. He took a short breather from Capitol but it's now been his home since '98.**

### Which mix problems can be addressed in the mastering stage? Which can't?

We can't undo a mix that has been overlimited and overcompressed. If I get a mix that's too hot, too slammed, it's better for me to take it into my DAW digitally and then deal with it using plug-ins.

### What are the new challenges in mastering today?

The work I'm getting from mix engineers is of a much higher quality than even five years ago. It has probably caused other mastering guys to up their game because mixers are giving mastering a shot. I'm still able to beat them but it's getting a lot closer.

### How closely do you work with mix engineers?

A lot of the mixers I work with I've known for a long time. They already know the do's and don'ts. But it's still useful to have a listen to the mix when it's in process. It helps the final product.

### Do they understand your challenges and try to work with you?

They do. We usually talk about how hot they want it and how much dynamics they want to keep. Sometimes they'll want it as hot as the last Green Day record. But Green Day is a trio. You can get a sparse mix a lot louder than you can a mix with 10 layers of guitars and vocals. If you try to get your client's mix that loud, it'll implode.

### What's the ideal format for mixes that you receive?

96/24, 192/24 and I'm even getting some 32-bit floating point Pro Tools sessions. In fact, I'm doing a lot of 32-bit lately. It helps with the processing of plug-ins and it's supposed to be more workable headroom, although I haven't noticed that.

### Have you ever mastered a gold CD?

I did a few back in the day for Mobile Fidelity. I don't know if gold is any better. There's nothing that I did differently.

### Do the online mastering forums offer good information?

It's a mix of good and bad, but there will always be trolls. I used to have an email notification set up on one of the forums for anytime my name was mentioned. But I find that it's best to not even get involved in nasty debates.

### Are there red flags that show a musician that he might be working with a less than reputable mastering engineer?

The biggest red flag is the engineer's experience. I wouldn't hire a mastering engineer unless he'd been doing it for at least 10 years. I'm always learning new things because you never want to get too comfortable. This is a very competitive job. Credits mean a lot.

### What's the biggest mastering challenge you've ever faced?

No Doubt's *Tragic Kingdom*. There were so many reels of half-inch tape and multiple remixes. Spooling tape takes time.

### What's the biggest technical challenge/problem you've ever gotten out of?

The American remaster of *Meet The Beatles!* Those 1/4-inch tapes were probably the hottest 1/4-inches that I've ever come across. They were absolutely slammed. I had to drop the output of my 2-track by 6 dB to start.

### What do you say to fledgling mastering engineers?

Listen to a lot of good mixes and get plenty of practice. Mastering is challenging and competitive. There are so many well-equipped mastering rooms around the world now. It always comes down to the skill, experience and ears of the engineer. 



*"The work I'm getting from mix engineers is of a much higher quality than even five years ago."*