

## *In Conversation With Donal Whelan From Hafod Mastering*

*Donal Whelan calls himself as a mastering engineer “first and foremost”. A seasoned mastering engineer with over 25 years of expertise in sound mastering, Whelan has worked with reputed artistes from the world over, along with mastering major Bollywood music chartbusters from movies such as Pathaan and Adipurush. In this interview, Whelan sits down for a conversation with the PALM Technology Magazine Team and discusses his foray into the world of mastering, whether he prefers a digital setup or an analogue setup, his unique experience at the PALM Conference 2023, and more.*



**D**onal Whelan has always been an avid lover of music. So much so, he even enrolled in a course for Music and Sound Recording at the Surrey University. From that point onwards, there was no looking back for Whelan, “I studied music and sound recording at the prestigious Tonmeister course at Surrey University and there was an opportunity to take a year out in industry part way through the course.”

He adds, “There was a mastering house called Chop Em Out in the list of placements, and they had one of the first two digital audio workstations in London. That sounded futuristic and exciting so I applied for that placement and got it. After graduating, I was offered a full-time post there and that’s where my mastering career started.”

Whelan founded **Hafod Mastering** in December of 2004, an endeavour in helping his clients bring their artistic, sonic vision to life, which continues till date. Whelan has stepped back from front-line mastering, but his passion for sound engineering and recording finds a reflection in the way he carries out day-to-day administrative activities at Hafod Mastering. Whelan affirms, “Since stepping back from front-line mastering to focus on running the business, my main responsibility is taking care of our clients. I deal with enquiries, bookings, billing, and co-ordinating mastering sessions for **Gethin John** and **Levi Owen**, our two main engineers. I also deal with book-keeping, accounts, social media and studio maintenance and upgrades. Every now and then, I step back into the studio to master a high-profile project, but most days, Gethin and Levi take care of the mastering.”

He further cements that his desire to show up at work every day is driven by his very nature of work, “My main motivation to work is helping clients realise their musical visions. We get a lot of positive responses from our clients and each one makes me happy. Occasionally, we get an emotional response from a client saying their song sounds just how they imagined it could and that they’re grateful we helped them get there. Those moments lift me and they’re why we do this work. Music is a mysterious and powerful force that makes the world a better place and I feel privileged to be a part of the process that builds bridges between the musician and the music listener.”

# Mastering The Art Of Sound

For Whelan, music is universal. Sound belongs to every single human being. Which is why, Whelan established Mastering World in conjunction with Hafod Mastering in 2005. Mastering World, an online mastering portal consisting of a network of independent mastering studios, is Whelan's brainchild, which allows him to leverage the playing field for independent music artists around the world, "I've always felt that the online mastering portal has helped to democratise mastering. Today, pretty much every mastering studio offers online mastering, but back in 2005, we had one of the first online mastering services on the Internet. Clients from all over the world were sending us their music to master - people who lived nowhere near a decent mastering studio, were also really excited to be able to do so. By now, every artist knows they can use pretty much any mastering studio, as long as they can save up for the fee."

A mastering engineer is as good as his/her mastering room. Whelan agrees, and talks about the most pivotal factor every mastering engineer should keep in mind while setting up a mastering room, "The most important part of a mastering room is the listening environment. You need to be able to hear exactly what is going on with a mix, you need to hear exactly what changes you're making to a mix and, most importantly, you need to hear when to stop changing it because it's right."

According to Whelan, a mastering engineer also needs to have a holistic approach when it comes to choosing the right equipment. He confirms, "Everything in our room has a part to play in making great sounding masters - the mains power supply, the mains wiring, the audio interconnects, the monitoring system, analogue equipment choices and the contents of the digital toolkit."

## Donal Whelan On The Current Sound Engineering Landscape:

With the advent of digital audio setups, a widespread debate has surfaced in the pro sound recording/mixing/mastering industry regarding the viability of digital audio setups against analogue setups. But for Whelan, it's all about looking at the glass half-full in both the scenarios. He responds, "Digital audio has given every musician the ability to have a fully equipped recording studio at their disposal. This is a remarkable achievement and the power of the tools available to everybody is stunning. Even for professional mastering engineers, digital algorithms can do things we could never do in the analogue domain. Conversely, there is a certain sheen and quality to the sound of a well set up analogue processing chain and that is simply not achievable in the digital domain. In our studio, we use the analogue chain to shape the overall sound and we use digital processing to zoom in on the details that the analogue equipment can't reach. We think of it as the best of both worlds."

The recent trend in the Indian pro sound mastering landscape has been to outsource mastering projects to studios in London. While it raises a question on the capacity of mastering studios in India to deliver quality projects, Whelan isn't pessimistic on his part. Reflecting on the probable reason behind huge mastering projects being undertaken by studios overseas, Whelan comments, "I think India has some excellent mastering studios and mastering engineers. Perhaps the reason we get called is that we specialise in mastering whereas our Indian counterparts are mostly mix and master engineers. From our point of view at Hafod Mastering, I believe our clients appreciate the artistic sensibilities we bring to a master and also the fastidious attention to detail we've given our room and the extra sonic subtleties that adds to their music."

At the recently organized **PALM Conference**, a key feature of **PALM Expo 2023**, held at the BEC, Mumbai, India, Donal Whelan and Gethin John addressed the audience with a session on sound mastering, where they spoke at length about the major differences between self-mastering and pro mastering. Adding onto his ses-

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sion, Whelan shares what sets self-mastering and pro mastering poles apart, "Firstly, as pro mastering engineers, we bring fresh ears and fresh perspective to a mix - it's impossible for the mix engineer to hear the song for the first time and they know the mix in so much detail. A pro mastering engineer hears the song for the first time and can make better judgements based on that first impression. Secondly, a mastering room is set up specifically for the task of mastering, so it's likely to have a more accurate listening environment and more optimal outboard and signal paths than a room optimised for mixing and mastering."

Having said that, Whelan doesn't believe that mastering is superior to mixing when it comes to creating music that listeners can immerse themselves in. He believes in allocating equal weightage to mixing, mastering, and even songwriting, and production, "I don't think mastering is more important than recording or mixing. In fact, I'd also give equal weight to production and arrangement. You need good people making good decisions all the way through the songwriting and production process to get an excellent sounding song at the end of it."

Whelan's enriching experience at the PALM Expo Conference was met with warm response and further elevated with seasoned mastering engineers in attendance. Speaking about the same, Whelan quips, "Gethin and I had a lot of fun at the PALM Expo Conference. We were humbled with a packed room with some senior engineers visible in the ranks. Our seminar was well received, and although the Q&A Session was cut a little short, we had some interesting questions from the audience."

He adds, "We spoke about the attention to detail we've put into our room design - the mains electricity supply and wiring, and the analogue audio configuration and connectivity - and about how those factors can significantly improve the quality of the room's audio output. The most common response we got when talking afterwards to engineers was that these points are not often discussed and that they appreciated us raising the issues. The second most common question was 'Tell us more about your buffer amps', which are our prototype 35V Brook amplifiers. These are currently being developed by an R&D team in New Zealand, led by our studio designer, Murray Harris."

Becoming a successful mastering engineer isn't an overnight process. It takes years and years of practice, persistence, and passion to 'master' the art. But most importantly, it takes communication and compassion to ace the career trajectory. Talking about some of the key qualities every mastering engineer must possess, Whelan stresses, "Apart from the obvious listening, technical and musical skills, any aspiring engineer should work on their people and communication skills. Be respectful, be kind, be open and be authentic. People work with people they like and good communication skills are a superpower."

For aspiring mastering engineers, Whelan has three key advices. He elaborates, "To all aspiring mastering engineers, my technical advice, always listen to your before-and-after comparisons at the same volume. My people advice, listen to your client and their needs and do your best to get under the skin of the song and really feel what the songwriter is trying to convey. My listening advice, trust your ears. Do whatever it takes to make your ears happy and your soul sing."

Conversing about his pipeline of recent projects, Whelan concludes, "Gethin and I recently finished mastering the songs from The Great Indian Family. Gethin recently mastered the songs from *Pathaan* and *Adipurush*. We never know what's in the pipeline, we just get a call when a mix is finished and heading our way!" Now, that's a marriage of spontaneity, professionalism, and passion that makes a mastering engineer a mastering engineer!

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