MASTERS
OF MASTERING

PAUL ABBOTT
Zen Mastering

Web: www.zenmastering.com
Clientele: Indie Labels and Independent Artists (Folk, Singer/Songwriter, Country, Alternative Rock)

As a musician, Paul Abbott was never satisfied with the results he got on a limited budget. Determined to make a difference, he started his own recording/mastering facility for independent artists. With over 10 years of experience as an engineer, Abbott founded Zen Mastering five years ago and keeps his fees down by running the operation in a "Zen-like" manner — simple and efficient.

CHOOSING AN ENGINEER

Sometimes you can work out a deal with mastering engineers if you just talk with them. Artists should also find which mastering lab is right for their music. Read the liner notes on albums. Schedule a meeting before committing to the project — most mastering facilities will give you a free consultation. Check out the facility, the equipment and talk to the engineer who will be working on your record. Bring a reference recording that you want your record to sound like — and, listen to the engineer's work, as well.

On my site, I have examples that show the difference between "before and after." And, most importantly, make sure that the engineer "gets" your music and has the same vision for it, because, by all means, you want to maintain the integrity of your music.

PROBLEM MIXES

Generally, the low end causes the greatest difficulties. If you don't record your bass and drums correctly, it will affect the whole track. Other recordings will be muddy with no separation between the instruments. A lot of times that occurs because the monitors aren't very good and the act doesn't hear the problem before they come for mastering. You can usually tell when it's the monitors, though, because the balance is off.

Even more problematic are tracks that have been over-processed with too many effects in the mix. You have to understand that there's a limit to what we can do in mastering. It's really a balancing act and every time we correct one part it will affect another part somewhere else — and not always for the good of the whole.