

Buying with your Eyes

Andy Stewart advises using your ears for that next A/B test.

Somewhere in this issue of AudioTechnology there's a review of a pair of ATC T16 monitors that I wrote a few weeks ago. At the time, I wanted to talk about how the appearance of the speakers was affecting my aural perception of them, but space and relevance were being stretched to the limit. But I think it's a point worth making.

The ATCs have metal enclosures, unlike most speakers which are enclosed in wood. I was wondering what adjectives would have sprung to mind had they been made of jarrah instead of steel. Would they have seemed 'heavy' and 'warm' where they had been 'cold' and 'hard', or would it have made no difference? Well, apart from the changes timber would have made to the sound of the speakers, my mind would have drawn on all its past experiences of what wood sounds like – from knocking on someone's door to playing acoustic guitar. But because the speakers were constructed from metal and painted yellow, my mind was already beginning to form an opinion of them before I'd even turned them on.

So why was this? Why are we so easily influenced by our eyes when it's our ears that count? In the end, what your equipment looks like makes no difference to anyone but you and your clients. The listener can only 'see' what you reveal to them via their ears. They don't care whether your compressor is anodised red – they wouldn't even know what a compressor was. Fundamentally your studio should sound amazing because how it *sounds* will be the legacy you leave behind.

However, to say that the visual aesthetic of your equipment is irrelevant to your studio's performance is to miss one significant point. The look and feel of your space is vitally important to anyone who works in it. If you're in an environment like a studio day after day it might as well look good. The fact is, you can have all the right equipment and all the skills to use it but if the place is too small or it's painted a colour everyone hates, you've got a problem. Adding more equipment to that problem won't help. If people are made to feel uncomfortable you will inevitably hear that tension in their recordings and no EQ in the world can filter that out.

In our daily lives we make endless assumptions based on what we see, and we do it with such monotonous regularity that often we're not even aware of it. When we walk into a shop or studio full of audio equipment, the same rule applies. We A/B test everything with our eyes, and we do it in half a second and with no equipment. We don't require a familiar room and monitors, we don't need time and music we know backwards, we just carry it out instantly, and if we're not impressed in that instant we move on...

A good example of this from my point of view is the Focusrite

Green series. To me it was the ugliest range of outboard gear that I can recall. Because of this, I'm convinced that whoever designed its look couldn't possibly have got it to sound any good either. Now I

know this is an irrational response to a piece of audio equipment, but I'd argue that if you can find a compressor that sounds superb *and* looks a million bucks, it's better than a similar priced unit that has no aesthetic

value whatsoever. The problem with this expectation, however, is that because we're so adept at judging things visually, half the time we disregard the things we don't like the look of without even plugging them in. We never hear what they sound like, and if we did, we'd probably convince ourselves they sounded crap anyway. This is precisely the way I mistreated the Green series.

Now, if you're like me and you do this regularly, there are two things to consider. Firstly, how much good equipment are you missing out on when you dislike a product visually? Secondly, and more importantly, how can you be sure that what you *do* buy doesn't look great and sound average? Well, what you need to do is take it home and try it out. Ask yourself in private why you like it. If it sounds better than all your other reverbs, buy it. If it compresses differently to anything you've ever heard before and you *like* that sound, buy it. But if you're just trying to convince yourself that you need it because it has great VU meters that glow like Tutankhamen's golden tomb, then take it back, because you're probably wasting your money.

With every album you make, and every song you write, you become more experienced at deciding what's relevant and what's irrelevant to your finished products. But you also learn that it's enjoying the process that really matters. Life's too short to be making things that don't interest you and that's true of everything, from the lyrics you are singing to the aesthetics of your equipment. It's vitally important to own equipment that inspires you. So if your guitar disappoints you every time you hear it recorded, sell it. If you mix things drier than you would ideally like to because your reverbs are embarrassing, replace them with ones you want to turn *up*. There's just no point having stuff that lets you down.

Every time I make an album I listen to it over and over and ask myself a million questions about song arrangement, mic placement, and whether the things I am disappointed with were my own fault or that of the equipment. We all know the old adage that a good tradesperson never blames his or her tools, but it is similarly true of all good tradespeople that their tools are the best. So as you become more experienced don't be afraid to sell the boxes that constantly let you down. Ironically, if they looked great, and that's why you bought them, they'll probably be easier to sell...

