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As told to Leah Mandel, 3973 words.

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On music and community

Mastering engineer Heba Kadry on the path that led her from a corporate advertising job to the world of sound engineering, the value of working with people who make you better, and how she cracked the glass ceiling of a predominantly male-dominated field.
Can you tell me what it is that you do—in layman's terms?

Over the years I've come up with many analogies of what mastering is. Because it's been viewed as this dark-art mystery, even by seasoned producers and mixers. One analogy a lot of people like is that it's like an Instagram filter. The photo is taken, but you want to give it more life. You can change the contrast. You can change the brightness. You can make it feel more vivid. But that's really not giving it a lot of credit.

The second analogy, which is my favorite (and I have stolen it from Miho Hatori, who told me this is how she views mastering) is that mastering is like being an art gallerist. You have a bunch of paintings and you have a theme and you have a room. You want to present the art in the best way possible. It's up to you to decide where to put it in the room, what kind of frames you want to use, what kind of lighting needs to be projected on it, what kind of journey you want to create.

It's got to feel like it's all done together with intention, and the listen is super smooth. I do get involved sometimes a little bit earlier in the mixing stage, but for the most part I'm a very objective point of view. I have an unbiased vision or approach to the record. "How do I tie this together and make it feel like it's all cut from the same cloth?"

Sometimes mastering can be very light-handed, depending on the record and what the artist wants. If the mixes are perfect, there's really no need for me to fuck with it. Sometimes you really have to dig in and get creative and do a lot of back and forth to bring it up to what it should be, or if there are three or four songs that don't sound the same as the others. Being able to communicate is so important. You can't just send the files off and expect them to come back all nice and loud and ready and prepped without any kind of communication. It's just such a gamut of what it could be. It's great. One day I come in and I'm super light and I'm barely touching the mixes, and another day I'm really digging in. It's such a chameleon kind of job.

How do you choose the records you work on? You've worked with serpentwithfeet, YOB, (Sandy) Alex G, Jenny Hval, Lightning Bolt, Holly Herndon, Diamanda Galas, Bobby Krlic's *Midsommar* score… These are all over the board. You *are* kind of a chameleon.

I don't want to be the mastering engineer that only does one type of thing. What's awesome about this job is that every day I'm working on a new record. I could work on something and it completely changes my mind about the artist or the music. I'm like, "Holy shit. I was so in the dark about this," I'm a fan immediately. I fucking love that.

To me it's about the people. Music is a people job. If you work with a certain producer or mixer and you really like their work and they trust you to take care of their albums—that's a channel for my work. There's a specific pool of people that I'm their go-to person. Then there's another channel that's like, "Wow, this artist is awesome. I'd love to work with them." In a sense, I'm at a point in my career where I can pick and choose, for which I'm very fortunate and lucky. Sometimes I really try to push myself and be like, "You should work on this record. It's weird, but let's do it." It's the people. If they're good, awesome people that have a great passion and vibe, then yeah, why not?

How did you get into music?

I grew up in Egypt and took classical piano on and off for many years. My dad is self-taught. He plays a bunch of things. We always had a synth at home that he would fuck around with. He'd play musical chairs when it was my birthday. It was natural for me to pick up the synth or the piano. I never really thought about audio; growing up in the Middle East in the '90s, there's no avenue. My parents listened to a lot of classical Arabic music like Umm Kulthum, Fairuz, and Abdel Wahab. There was lots of music in the household, but it's not something I aspired to pursue at all. My mom was a chemist. My dad is an engineer. My brother is this genius mathematician engineer guy. I had to go down the academic path and prove myself—but, I veered off.

How did you get to where you are now?

I studied business administration at American University in Cairo. The worst. Awful. I was trying to do the right thing and get [a degree] that would give me a job. Everything changed when I got a job after college at J. Walter Thompson in Cairo, an international ad agency. I fucking hated that job. I was an account exec, which is client service basically. I was terrible at it. But there's an art department, and a lot of production that goes on with ads. I got thrown into the fire one day by one of the art directors who needed a piece for a Cadbury commercial. She was like, "You play something, don't you? We need an in-house piece." That was it for me.

It was my first time in a studio. I got bit by the bug there, and one thing led to another. After a couple spots, I approached the engineer at one of the bigger studios, one of the top engineers in the Middle East. I was like, "What do I need to do to become you?" He said, "Go to audio school. Get the basics down. But it's not going to be easy to be an engineer, let alone a female engineer in Egypt. You're going to have a hard time." When he said that to me, I was like, "You know what? There's a ceiling, and I'm going to fucking break it." That was how it all came about.

After audio school, I got an internship at SugarHill Recording Studios in Houston, the oldest continuously operating recording studio in the United States, older than Sun. It's where Destiny's Child and Beyoncé did all their early records. It was falling apart a bit. The gear is amazing and the people were wonderful. I got really lucky with that. I had lots of great mentors.

I tried recording and I tried mixing. I didn't really find myself in those completely. I saw mastering as the last frontier. I came to New York in 2007. New York is obviously the city to be if you want to really learn the ropes as far as mastering is concerned. I was like, "I'm going to give it a shot. If it doesn't work out, I'll just ship back out to Egypt and be an engineer there," because I was totally running out of money and options. I interned at a studio in the city. Then I eventually got hired there. It was a really tough, cutthroat environment. I didn't get that much time in the studio. That's when I decided, "I just have to do it myself. I gotta DIY it." I broke out on my own, and here I am.

How do you know when a project is done?

Something is never done. If time and money and deadlines were no object, people would tweak until the cows came home. Ultimately, I would like to think something is done when I master it and I send it off and I'm so stoked about it. I feel like, "Wow, I really brought this one home." And then I get the same feedback from the artist, that it is just beyond their imagination. Where it comes back to them, and they get excited about the mixes again. Or if there was something they were worried about, and it gets addressed and sounds better than they would've thought.

The Neon Indian record [*Vega INTL. Night School*], oh my god, that was very hard work. We were mastering while the mixes were still flowing in, so the two processes were happening at the same time. Because we had such an insane deadline. It *had* to be done that date. And I was getting kicked out of my studio in Williamsburg like everyone else when it got turned into condos. I had to tear everything down and move here. We worked for three or four days straight, nonstop. Man, Alan [Palomo] was a trooper. He was in here with me every day, morning until night. Then he would go and DJ somewhere and come back the next morning with interludes and ideas that he wanted to do. I'm like, "When did you have time to do this? Do you sleep?" He really makes the process fun, because he's such a good dude.

That really motivates me. If you're working on a record where the person is wonderful to be around and they inspire you and you see in them what inspires them about their music and you feel that, then you become infected by their passion. It makes you actually work harder because you really want to please them. You really want them to be happy. Music is people. It's all about people. It's a people field.

No matter what kind of AI shit that comes out now that's like self-mastering or self-mixing—something where you just send it off and it comes back mastered—it will never replace people. I would not be able to have the conversation I just had with Diamanda [Galas] if I were a software.

Music really is about emotion, and connection. I feel like everyone's been saying that to me recently.

It is. Man. I watched this documentary about people that use music for Alzheimer's patients. They found that when a human being listens to music, it fires up all the parts of our brain. When they scan your brain, it lights up all your neurons, everywhere. When they did these tests on people with Alzheimer's, they found that their eyes lit up, they were tapping their feet to songs that they would've been listening to in their 30s. It's so fucking powerful. It really is. It makes sense, right? Why do we love music so much? Can you imagine a day without music?

It's something you can never take away from human beings. Artists really do have the power. I've gotten really interested in music law lately. It's disingenuous, the way streaming services market their companies as a solution platform, when it really isn't at all. It's completely manipulative and exploitative. They still refuse to explain the money breakdown. Where is the money going? I think vinyl is the last frontier in that way, where you have a physical product and the money goes to a certain degree back to the artist. What remains is artists who now just tour forever until their backs break and get burned out and then they do something else. That's the reality.

Do you ever experience burnout? How do you avoid it?

Now, as opposed to when I was younger, I definitely take weekends off. I don't listen to music so much in my car. I listen to classical music or podcasts or stuff like that. Back when I was broke, I couldn't take as much vacation time, but now I can afford to take time off, so I try to do that. And just being healthier. I was very unhealthy when I was younger. I'd work crazy hours. I'd be stressed out. I got all my grays in my hair when I was 29, just running ragged, trying to break into an industry that's very hard to break into, that's mostly relegated to old men. Most people think for mastering engineers to be good they have to be 60-plus years old, which is not the case, of course. There are many older mastering engineers I hugely respect, but there needs to be new blood. It's definitely changing, thank god.

So being healthier, finally getting health insurance in my 30s. That helps me from not burning out and not being so bogged down by the changes in the city, which can be so stressful. Running a studio is very expensive. Rent is very expensive. I always want to be working in the analog world, using actual physical gear [she rests a hand on the console], as opposed to being an in-the-box kind of person.

It's so beautiful. It has a presence.

It is truly something to behold and respect. You respect the gear. It's sacred because you can see it, you can touch it, you can smell it, you can feel it get hotter. If it breaks, it's like your child, you have to fix it. Whereas when you're working in the box [digitally], even though it's so great and the functionality is extremely amazing and you can do your job so much faster, you just don't appreciate it as much, because computers only last for two years or whatever. Then you get another one. Then the plugins are always changing. I really respect my console. I want to remain in this world as much as I can, but that shit costs money. It's very expensive. Building a studio is very expensive.

It's always finding that in-between. It's always a struggle. I want to be the kind of mastering engineer who works on the music that I love, and most of the time the music that I really, really love is by people who don't have budgets. So how do I create a business where I don't bankrupt myself by being able to afford all this gear, but also working with artists who I love and trying to accommodate their budgets? There is a part of me that's aspirational—and I definitely want to continue to work on big things—but I will never leave my people, because that's what made me as an engineer.

One day I got an email from Bettina [Richards] at Thrill Jockey Records in Chicago, a label that's been around forever. They put out tons of records. They don't have big budgets, but she does really, really good work. She reached out to me, "Hey, I have this EP that I need someone to work on, and I really need a cheap guy." I was like, "I'll do it." I think I did a few free things for her at the beginning. One thing led to another, and then she sent me a record for a small band called Future Islands. I did one of their earlier records. That was a launching pad for me. It's because of small labels giving a total no-name like me a shot. It's important to keep a music community alive. I think that's the only way we can survive, is if we have a strong music community.

Do you feel like you're working when you listen to music?

There's a part of my brain, if I listen to something, that wants to analyze it. Then I can totally switch that off and just enjoy it for what it is. Because ultimately if a song is great, it's great, and you will enjoy it for what it is. Then maybe I'll come back to the studio and want to study it and listen to it on the big speakers. Classical music has a lot of space in it, for the most part. That's something that my brain needs to unwind from a long day of listening to loud shit, because everybody wants their stuff loud.

I think it hits my neurons in a way that really soothes me. And it reminds me of being young, because I grew up listening to tons of classical music in the car. My grandfather was a huge classical music aficionado. I have many memories of him listening to classical music. There was this classical hour on Cairo radio. I think it was on Fridays in the morning. He'd be drinking his Turkish coffee with millions of cigarettes. It's nostalgic in a way.

Do you have any working habits you like? Or bad habits you need to avoid?

When I first come in, I don't like to just dive right into it. I like to turn all the gear on, let it warm up, make myself a cup of tea, and see what's going on in the world, get depressed, and then come back to the studio world. Then I'll get myself into the mode by talking to the artist and getting mentally prepared to work on a record. I like to listen to other things. I'll do my investigative work, like read interviews or what kind of records they like or what else they have put out, and listen to their prior records—really put myself in the right state of mind to work on this. And then I'll start. Then I'll go nonstop until I feel tired, or I'm hungry as fuck and it's time to take a break. I guess these are not good habits. I'm saying them out loud, they're not very good.

I have a tendency to—and this is really terrible, I think it's a byproduct of my early days as an

engineer. The first 10 years as an engineer were the toughest shit of my life. When I'm working, I go straight through, no breaks. I don't eat. I drink lots of tea and lots of water, of course, but I don't like taking any breaks. I like to work sometimes eight, nine hours straight, because it keeps me sharp and focused. If I take a break in the middle and I go with the band to eat lunch or whatever, I'll come back with a burrito belly and I'll fall asleep at the console. I think I hit this wall and I lose my sense of sharpness. It's a bad habit, but it's worked for me, where I just work straight until I go home.

I'm a workaholic, too. All I do is stare at my computer screen and listen to music constantly.

Do you ever have the feeling that this will all go away tomorrow?

Oh yeah, of course.

Because I have that feeling, too. All the time. I feel like this could all disappear tomorrow. I think it's because, and I'm sure you could say the same, you chose a path that was nontraditional. You decided, "I'm going to pursue this thing that I love, which is music, and give it a shot. Then if I suck at it, I'm going to go back to the real world and do the lame job everybody does," or whatever. I think because we have made this very conscious decision not to take that path, there is this feeling that you're always going to be… not doomed, but it's great if I can just keep doing this for another five years. You're pursuing what you love, and there's always this nagging feeling that it could all go away tomorrow. You just never know what could happen.

I guess that is a very paranoid feeling, but in a way it makes me appreciate what I do. I feel so fucking fortunate, so lucky to do what I do. Sometimes I'll be working on something that's just so mind-blowing. I'm like, "How the fuck did I get here? Me? Really?" Like, wait a minute, I could be doing a desk job that I hate instead of this. Even when you're working with a difficult artist or difficult content or you just feel like you're sucking or something, you're like, "You know what? Tomorrow's a new day. I'm still really lucky that I'm doing this. This could all go away and I'm going to go back to Egypt to work in commercials again." Oh my god, I hope not. I'm really lucky to do this. If it all goes away tomorrow, then I've worked on a bunch of amazing records, and man, I couldn't ask for anything better, honestly.

Heba Kadry Recommends:

Protect your ears. Whether you're a musician or a concert go-er or waiting for the train. Ear protection from loud SPLs (sound pressure levels) will not only reduce the chances of permanent ear damage, it will make your concert experience so much better. I'm not talking about the $1 crap you buy from CVS. They usually come in these portable small pouches. 100% worth the small investment. Place them by your keys or your wallet so you never leave the house without it. I use the the molded ear plugs E.A.R. but these are cool, too.

Ryuichi Sakamoto: CODA. One of the most inspiring music documentaries ever made.

Learn to say no and not feel guilty about it. I spent way too many years of my life yes-ing everything. I thought that's what you had to do to get ahead. It eventually became so detrimental to my well-being, career, and sense of self worth. Become your own filter because no one else will do that for you. If someone approaches you and you can't work on a project for whatever reason, respond to them as soon as you can; don't waste their time hemming and hawing about it but also don't be an asshole. Recommend other friends or colleagues they could collaborate with. If you can't, someone else can. Preferable if they are a local engineer/producer or artist in the community. Support your community. If the community is strong, the music industry will continue to survive despite this current stifling bullshit we have to deal with right now. We cannot work in a bubble and expect things to fix themselves.

Susan Roger's interview on Gearclub podcast and her work in psychoacoustics. This woman and her work is a treasure.

Read the manual. You know what I mean—I know you've been putting it off because you assume it's boring, but you'll be surprised how much it can deepen your knowledge on equipment that you initially learned through experimentation.

If you're lost in the middle of a mix or a recording, stop. Zoom out. Take a walk or grab a coffee and clear your mind and ears. Come back to it, set your speaker level at a quiet or lower setting than you're accustomed to and find one focal point in the recording; whether vocals or kick or snare, etc. That is your focus for now, and at a lower volume you can hear the balances better and your brain can process the information better. Mute everything else around it and then bring all the instruments back in slowly. Listen beyond the flaws and try to address the issues one step at a time around your focal point.

Maurice Durufle's *Requiem, Op. 9.* A genius piece of work. I go back to this constantly.

Paul Stamet's book *Mycelium Running* really opened my eyes to how magical mushrooms are. Highly recommend listening to any of his talks online as well.

This short documentary on Eliane Radigue.

John Anthony West's water erosion theory on the Sphinx is absolutely brilliant.

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