

Over the Top Giveaway!

Audio & Video Editors, Mixers, Post-Production, Live Streaming, Podcasting, Music Production, Video Production, and more!

TRENDING Today's: Shootout At the Speaker Corral- Geoff's GBU Theft! Part 3 Behringer X32: Affordable Digital Pro Line JBL's Dance Club Series Debuts At Boogie Nights DTPS Of Las Vegas: Flexibility Meets Discipline In The Desert

REBATES UP TO \$50 SYSTEM

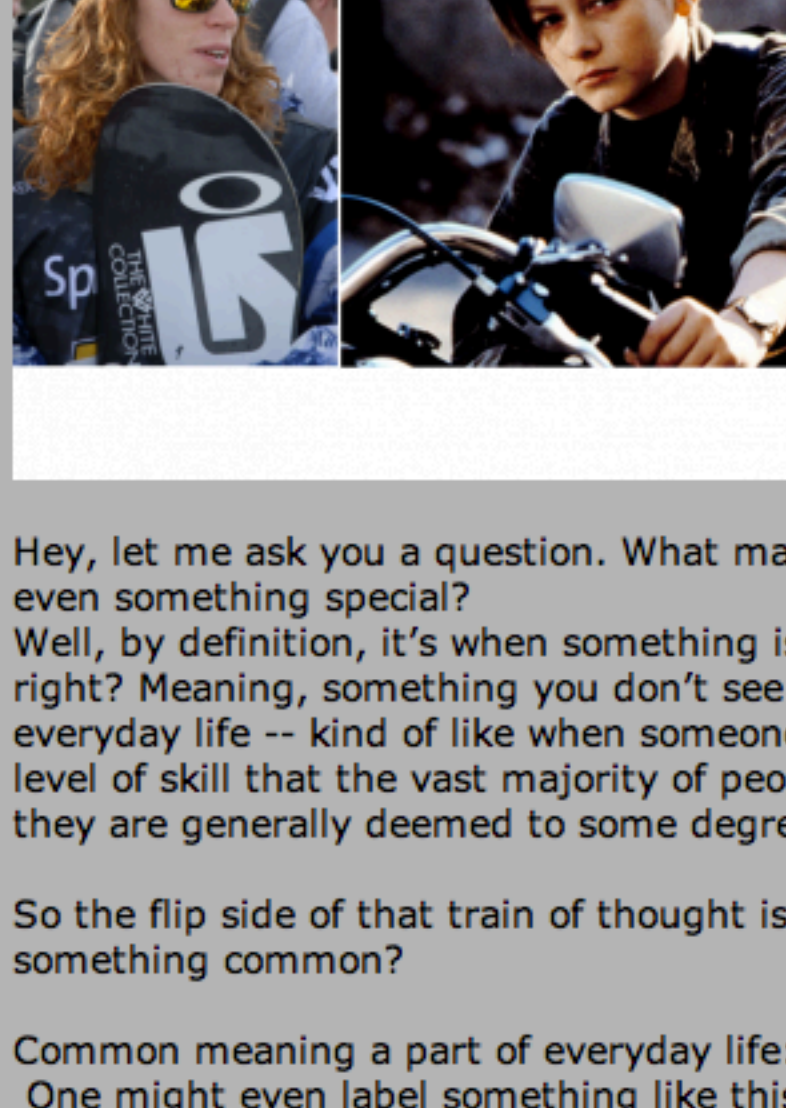
audio-technica

All time: Engineering, Safety Reports Cite Lack of Accountability, "Inadequate Lateral Bracing" "This Is How We Always Do It" Is Not Good Enough Gear Hunter Multi-mic system analysis with Rational Acoustics Smart and AUDIX TM-1s. Midas Intro's Pro 2 and Pro 2C at PLASA Touting The Merits Of The Behringer X32

Last viewed: Blue Man FOH Matt Fox This Week on Roadie TV—Snooki Tunes The PA Yamaha CA at Parson Audio Expo EAW Avision System Powers World-Class Night Life at the New Avision Mohegan Sun Nightclub Theft! Part 4

ARE YOU SPECIAL? HOW DO YOU KNOW

By robertscovill on Sun, 04/28/2013 - 11:46pm



Hey, let me ask you a question. What makes someone or even something special? Well, by definition, it's when something is un-common right? Meaning, something you don't see or experience in everyday life -- kind of like when someone displays a high level of skill that the vast majority of people don't have, they are generally deemed to some degree to be special.

So the flip side of that train of thought is: what makes something common? Common meaning a part of everyday life: commonplace. One might even label something like this a "commodity" indicating that it is common to everyone.

Here is the dictionary definition of commodity. com·mod-i-ty [kuh-mod-i-tee] noun, plural com·mod-i-ties.

1. An article of trade or commerce, especially a product as distinguished from a service. The second part of the definition is really what I want to focus on today: "a product as distinguished from a service."

Can skill or even talent ever be commoditized? In the current landscape of technology, the human quest or pursuit moves forward. And along with it, the advancement of technology moves forward as a function of that quest.

There are all kinds of trickle-down ramifications from this process. Whether those ramifications are positive or negative can often depend upon which side of the innovation you're standing on.

I recently read a Wall Street Journal article where the case was made regarding technology innovation displacing an entire middle class of workers in the world.

The examples the article cited were robotics replacing factory line workers at even migrant farmers. This in turn creates a fixed-cost 24-hour workforce for which the company doesn't have to provide benefits or even pay a wage. The computer drives the machines performing highly skilled but repetitive manufacturing tasks, the software is capable of replacing mid-level managers whose role is primarily metrics and analysis, and so on and so on...

Frankly (and depressing) they made a pretty solid case, and by the end of the read the threat felt very real.

This got me thinking about our own world of media, music production and creation. I started wondering if we might be seeing a similar sort of thing either now or in the near future.

I remember thinking, "Wow, do we even have a middle class in music production?" or even, "Was there ever one?"

If we look at our industry through the prism of the Wall Street Journal article mentioned above and stick to the idea that technology creation is the driving force behind the destruction of an entire middle class of workers, it's easy to make some analogies.

I mean there is certainly no shortage of people willing to promote the idea that technology, and specifically computers, have killed the music business.

I'm of the opinion that this accusation is more convenient than accurate, especially if you are looking through the prism of "business" where music business revenues are significantly higher than the pre-computer era.

I would suggest that if one dug a little deeper, what they might find is that the advent of lower cost and more powerful technology became the genesis of the "home recording industry."

You heard me right: industry.

This industry has provided a means for the blurring of the definition of professional vs. consumer.

Who is a musician and who is not a musician? Who is a recording engineer or producer and who is an enthusiast or hobbyist?

In fact, one could even begin to argue the virtues of what actually constitutes a musical skill or an engineering skill. Don't believe me?

Ask yourself a few pointed questions here and then rationalize your answer.

In today's world, what distinguishes the person engineering records at a (name) marquee studio name here) from the guy mixing completely in the box in his bedroom?

Is it from the perspective of who is getting viable results? (read as: unit sales)

The perspective of who is releasing award product? (read as: critically acclaimed or relevant winning)

The quality and capabilities of the gear he/she is exposed to or working with? (read as: is it capable of a professional result?)

skill [skill] noun 1. the ability, coming from one's knowledge, practice, aptitude, etc., to do something well 2. competent excellence in performance; expertness; dexterity 3. a craft, trade, or job requiring manual dexterity or special training in which a person has competence and experience

tal-ent (tal-uhnt) noun 1. a special natural ability or aptitude 2. a capacity for achievement or success; ability

There was a time when the state of, and more importantly the availability of, the necessary technology was price-prohibitive. This was coupled with an undefined and unwritten, but clearly understood, level of quality that served as a natural filter or barrier to keep those deemed as "amateurs" in the minor leagues. Only established musicians, engineers and producers had access to the technologically advanced gear which allowed them to work at the perceived "professional" level.

But the availability of technology with incredible power and quality is now available to the masses -- and I do mean masses. Higher quality is available at lower and lower costs. Enthusiasts can now afford the technology that can make light work out of what was originally deemed heavy lifting that required a professional specialist.

But there is also something that has been cunningly tagging along for the ride, lying just below the surface for some time now. Does this level of technology take a step toward "commoditizing" skill and talent?

Can you say this because technology, in and of itself, is now providing a pathway for folks with limited skill or background to easily perform workflows and achieve results previously defined as a "professional" with a fraction of the effort?

I'll give you a quick example here.

A few years back now, I was at a father/son retreat with my son. At one point, the boys broke off from the dads and went off on their own adventures. The dads then had some down time to sit around the fire, drink adult beverages and talk about manly things.

I was sitting next to a couple of guys that were clearly friends. We start talking and, as luck would have it, within a few minutes they revealed to me they were in a band.

When the conversation moved to their discussion of recently buying "a pro tools", their enthusiasm suddenly jumped to the level of my teenage son's discovery of the SI Swimsuit issue.

If they were to have ask me what I did for a living I was going to say fire hydrant maintenance because I wanted to hear how this conversation was going to flush out: I didn't want to taunt it or intimidate it.

I sat quietly, listening and nodding my head from time to time. I remember marveling at what I heard.

These two guys fully understood what they got with the money they invested.

They were discussing the merits of everything from seeking out higher end pre-amps and converters; to comping vocals and guitar parts; using tempo maps and beat detective for quantizing live drums; and on and on.

I sat there marveling at how much knowledge they had seemingly acquired in a very short amount of time. Here was what were generally accepted as advanced concepts being discussed by a couple of guys that by any definition were part-time music hobbyists.

These guys had no desire to be rock stars in any place other than in their garage, with the possible exception of the odd gig every month or so. Their goal was just making some good sounding demos to get a few gigs.

Truth be known, mentally, I probably started writing this blog right then and there.

Okay, let's jump back the topic at hand and look back a few years.

With the establishment of the computer industry and the subsequent adoption of computers by the music creation industry, quietly, the mindset of manufacturers began to shift. In retrospect, it appears to be a tectonic shift.

You can trace this shift from the primary technology development costs (i.e. the actual development of the computer) which was handled by the computer industry itself. They did all the really expensive and deep work in terms of R&D and manufacturing.

The cottage industry of music creation technology could never have supported the development of the computer for its own uses. What it could clearly support though, was software and ancillary hardware development.

Now, probably contrary to popular thought, manufacturers in the music production technology business are very keen to listen to the end users, and in turn make products that address those needs.

It's an easy formula too.

The more requests you get for a feature, the more likely it is to show up in a product. Customer-driven development improves the odds of success; it's a big part of how manufacturers ensure they offer a relevant product that will be in demand.

Here's the granddaddy of examples:

The Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) was born from the desire of professional recording engineers to perform multi-track editing with the then conventional tools of a razor blade and a china marker.

At the time that the DAW was conceived, very few people could say with any credibility that they could have envisioned what the DAW has morphed into today, and how it would impact both worlds of recording and live audio production.

Now, here's what I find so interesting and, honestly speaking, a little unnerving.

I submit that to you that for the longest time in the life of music production technology development, nearly all features and enhancements were being driven by the professional community.

And, at some point the manufacturers became enticed to allow those features to trickle down into products that could now be priced more for the masses.

Why?

Because that's where the largest numbers of customers live and breathe. Ask yourself, are there more potential consumers that are enthusiasts or professionals in any given market? As the old saying goes, "you don't need to be a rocket surgeon to figure that one out."

Now apply that to a manufacturer's mindset when creating products that they need to sell in order to keep a company financially healthy. Question: Who will ultimately end up with the most leverage to influence future design and development? Answer: The ones responsible for the most revenue.

Ladies and Gentlemen: Let me introduce you to the "Prosumer"

The live sound industry today is standing at the precipice. They are peering over the edge of the abyss as the last bastion of a music creation industry where the delineation between the professional class and the consumer class is still clearly defined.

But you can count me as one of a growing number who believe that the downward spiral has begun.

An early warning indicator is the advent of incredibly low-cost digital console technology whose performance to price ratio is staggering.

There are even new live sound devices with approaches that boast "you don't have to know live sound in order to do live sound. The software walks you through it with language and graphics that anyone can understand."

Uh, so let me get this straight; the end goal is that someday all I'll need to do is essentially plug it in and turn it on?

Does the manufacturing industry believe my aspiration is to compete in my profession with "charlatans" at best or "audio janitors" at worst?

Yeah, maybe.

Why? Because that will open the door for the manufacturer to give the highest number of customers -- not necessarily professionals -- a piece of the pie in an environment that currently requires a fair amount of experience and skill in order for the result to be good.

This reminds me of a time not all that long ago when a low-cost analog mixer was touted as a viable alternative to the vaunted Neve consoles that everyone who was deemed "real" (read as: professional) was trucking in order to create pro-sounding recordings.

These low-cost inline consoles essentially offered the same routing capabilities as a Neve or SSL boards to anyone who could plow down a couple of thousand dollars. Again, they were touted by many, credible folks mind you, as a viable alternative.

Couple that mixer technology up with the low cost MDMs of the era, and the seeds were planted for the consumer home studio market using gear touted as "professional."

Water those seeds with a healthy dose of marketing by some key high-end musicians and engineers touting that their CDs were created entirely with the low-cost technology... and the result was an explosion of "prosumer-ism" fueling the subsequent explosion of the indie record label scene.

What wasn't often discussed was the fact that this now inexpensive, but potent technology still required skill and expertise to get professional results.

In fact, one could make a really cogent argument that the less features and quality the device offered, actually demanded more in terms of skill by the operator to get the quality result.

I guess my fear is that we're headed down a similar path in live sound: where customers will equate a product's low cost with less skill required to get the professional result.

As many folks have learned the hard way (yes houses of worship, I'm talking to you here), live sound is a highly skilled occupation. One where the amount of skill needed to deliver a good result has a lot of commonality regardless of the scale of the event.

I know right now there are manufacturers looking for unique ways to offset that need for skill in the area of live sound with automated software procedures, etc.

They will undoubtedly find ways to automate everything from advanced system tuning to something as simple as channel labeling.

Why? It's not just the nobility of innovation; nor is it simply at the behest of the professional community, it's because manufacturers on a never-ending quest for more customers. It's the basis and lifeblood of any business.

My bet is that over time the term "auto-tune" will end up referring to automated sound system tuning for live audio rather than the automatic pitch correction of a poorly performing vocalist.

Heck, what am I thinking? It will surely be both. So let me drag myself back to my original point.

What makes something or someone special? If the technology we use in the future becomes the catalyst for leveling the playing field between the professional and the consumer, are we then living in a world where musical and recording production skill will be commoditized?

How will a well-performed recording stand out? How will a well-executed recording stand out?

How will great live sound performances and mixes stand above the rest in the world if they are mostly pre-recorded, primarily mixed by software and then distributed by a room-aware PA system?

What will be at the core of human "aspiration" when we get there?

Okay, let me put in terms that most of us can more readily relate to.

Suppose a manufacturer developed an inexpensive snowboard that allowed any hack to perform at the same skill level of Shawn White on their very first use; would that be cool?

Hell, yes it would!

Would I go out and buy it? I would probably buy two!

But the philosophical question is: how do you as a culture then identify and reverse the talents and capabilities of a Shawn White?

How do we even identify him in a crowd of snowboarders all doing the same tricks?

If this magical board existed, then what makes what Shawn White does so special?

What would be the point of a snowboarding competition? It gets a little blurry doesn't it?

As I compose this blog, the Dave Grohl movie on Sound City is just hitting screens.

A few folks who have already seen it have told me that many of the artists and producers in the movie are pretty hard on some of the digital technology that was used during the era, and conversely extremely reverent toward the analog technology that is focal point of the film.

I would submit to you that all technology is completely benign without a human to flip the power switch and make a conscious and concerted decision regarding how it's going to be used, and then be accountable for the outcome.

Well...until, as they are in the Terminator movies, the computer becomes "self-aware"; I ask, "John Connor, where are you when we need you?"

MORE LIKE THIS... SOUNDPROLIVE powered by C&Ttextly

Run For Your Lives...The Lawyers Are Coming

This One's For You, Joe

Keep Up! Subscribe to the newsletter...

The Rise of the Prosumer

PreSonus AI:

Theft! Part 3

Gigs automation software SoundCity talent terminator

FACEBOOK COMMENTS BOX

Add a comment... Posting as Robert Scovill (@Chang)

Join Underhub Follow Video Producer at HTG Productions

Well that was rather long and rambling. What was the point again?

Reply Like Follow Post May 27 at 8:25pm

Facebook share options

Copyright 2011 | SoundProLive Network -- a Service of Level 11 Media, LLC | All Rights Reserved

GEQ 30-Band Graphic Equalizer for SoundGrid & Native Systems

POPULAR CONTENT FEATURED BLOGGERS SOUNDPROLIVE DIGITAL WHAT I DID THIS WEEK ADVERTISE ON SPL

GEAR HUNTER Search

JH16 PRO by JH AUDIO

JH Audio JH16 Pro In Ear Monitors

UP YOUR GAME WITH YOUR ARIZON FIG.

SOUNDPROLIVE DIGITAL EDITIONS