

# Loudness war stirs quiet revolution

**Bands have turned up volume to get noticed  
audio engineers lead battle to crank it down**

January 01, 2008 | By Kathryn Masterson, Special to the Tribune

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To Death Cab for Cutie guitarist Chris Walla, fighting on the front line of music's "loudness wars" can feel like a lonely battle.

Walla, who produces albums for indie rock groups in addition to his own, doesn't want to follow the trend of recording albums as loud as possible simply because other bands are doing so. The music loses something when pushed to extreme volumes, Walla said, sacrificing its nuances and emotion for attention-grabbing sound.

"I really feel I'm on an island a lot of time," Walla said. "I don't get the sense the world sees this as a problem."

Walla does have some company on his side. A number of sound engineers and artists are taking a hard look at the effects of the so-called loudness war and producing albums at lower volumes. One producer who says he made loud records for years has started an organization called Turn Me Up, which aims to show artists, music labels and fans that louder doesn't always mean better.

"There's a happy medium, and CDs have gone much too far," said Bob Katz, a sound engineer in Florida. Music that is digitally altered to be louder isn't as enjoyable to listen to, he said, noting, "It's relentlessly, fatiguingly loud. The punch is gone, the impact is gone."

## Turn up the volume

How much louder are recordings now? Engineer Charles Dye, co-founder of Turn Me Up with artist John Ralston, estimates that records today are 6 to 8 decibels louder than they were 15 years ago, the equivalent of about a quarter turn of a volume knob. Katz said some music that is heavily compressed has gone up almost 20 decibels in 20 years.

Advances in recording technology have allowed sound engineers and producers to raise recordings' overall volume by compressing the dynamics of the audio during the mixing process. The compression technique removes the peaks and valleys, making all parts of a song equally loud.

It's something the average person might not even notice, unless they listened to a recording from 1992 next to one made in 2007. People are used to being bombarded by sound, from movies and blaring TV commercials to their iPods cranked up to drown out background noise on the bus or street.

"Life in general is just a lot more noisy than it was 20, 30, 50 years ago," said Alison Grimes, who heads the audiology clinic at UCLA Medical Center and is president of the American Academy of Audiology.

Listening to music compressed to the point where the valleys of softer songs have been removed may tax our hearing, because the ears are never given a chance to rest, Grimes said. "If it's given an opportunity to recover for a moment, it's going to be less damaging. The ear needs a little bit of recovery time."

That's why artists and producers complain that louder, heavily compressed songs are tiring to listen to over long periods of time.

"You get more apparent volume but less dynamics," said producer Kevin Killen, who has worked with Elvis Costello, Tori Amos and Jewel. "By the end of it, the listener just ends up feeling fatigued, a little like an assault to the ears."

Into the red zone

Compression has been used for years in television commercials -- which are often louder than the program they are sponsoring -- to catch people's attention with the loudness, sound engineers say. Now that songs are frequently bought as singles or heard on commercials rather than as part of an album, artists and labels feel the same pressure to grab listeners in a few seconds.

Commercials are important revenue streams for bands today, as well as a way to get their music heard, Death Cab's Walla said, and using compression is a way to get noticed.

But fans react positively to Death Cab songs that aren't mastered "into the red," meaning the audio signal is squeezed extensively so drums, guitars and vocals all sound the same.

"I think people are sick of being screamed at," Walla said.

Dye, the founder of Turn Me Up, acknowledged he contributed to the loudness wars. He produced and engineered loud, compressed recordings at the request of artists or labels, then started noticing that the volume level was inching up every year.

"I don't think we realized we went too far," Dye said.

He started Turn Me Up in hopes of showing musicians and those who work with them that they can create softer, more dynamic recordings. He doesn't think producers and labels set out to strip music of dynamics and emotion; they were simply increasing the volume because everyone else was.

The decision to follow the loudness trend was a struggle for Baltimore-based indie band The Seldon Plan. The group decided to make its fourth album louder with dynamic compression, in hopes of getting noticed in a marketplace moving toward placing music on television shows such as "Grey's Anatomy" rather than college radio.

"If we really wanted to have our music heard we had to make some compromises," said band member Michael Nestor, who also masters records for an independent label.

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