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MEDIA & MARKETING

Even Heavy-Metal Fans Complain That Today's Music Is Too Loud!!!

They Can't Hear the Details, Say Devotees of Metallica; Laying Blame on iPods

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Can a Metallica album be too loud?

The very thought might seem heretical to fans of the legendary metal band, which has been splitting eardrums with unrivaled power since the early 1980s.

But even though Metallica's ninth studio release, "Death Magnetic," is No. 1 on the album chart, with 827,000 copies sold in two weeks, some fans are bitterly disappointed: not by the songs or the performance, but the volume. It's so loud, they say, you can't hear the details of the music.

"Death Magnetic" is a flashpoint in a long-running music-industry fight. Over the years, rock and pop artists have increasingly sought to make their recordings sound louder to stand out on the radio, jukeboxes and, especially, iPods.

TURNING IT UP



sound quality from two Metallica clips: from "Death Magnetic" and "And Justice for All."

But audiophiles, recording professionals and some ordinary fans say the extra sonic wallop comes at a steep price. To make recorded music seem louder, engineers must reduce the "dynamic range," minimizing the difference between the soft and loud parts and creating a tidal wave of aural blandness.

"When there's no quiet, there can be no loud," said Matt Mayfield, a Minnesota electronic-music teacher, in a YouTube video that sketched out the battle lines of the loudness war. A recording's dynamic range can be measured by calculating the variation between its average sound level and its

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result of the band's attempts in the studio to make it as loud as possible. "Sonically it is barely listenable," reads one fan's online critique. Thousands have signed an online petition urging the band to re-mix the album and release it again.



Rick Rubin

Metallica and the album's producer, Rick Rubin, declined to comment. Cliff Burnstein, Metallica's co-manager, says the complainers are a tiny minority. He says 98% of listeners are "overwhelmingly positive," adding: "There's something exciting about the sound of this record that people are responding to."

Key Witness

But the critics have inadvertently recruited a key witness: Ted Jensen, the album's "mastering engineer," the person responsible for the sonic tweaks that translate music made in a studio into a product for mass duplication and playback by consumers.

Responding to a Metallica fan's email about loudness, Mr. Jensen sent a sympathetic reply that concluded: "Believe me, I'm not proud to be associated with this one." The fan posted the message on a Metallica bulletin board and it quickly drew attention.

Mr. Jensen regrets his choice of words but not the sentiment. "I'm not sure I would have said quite the same thing if I was posting it to the bulletin board," he says. But "it's certainly the way I feel about it."

The battle has roots in the era before compact discs. With vinyl records, "it was impossible to make loud past a certain point," says Bob Ludwig, a veteran mastering engineer. But digital technology made it possible to squeeze all of the sound into a narrow, high-volume range. In addition, music now is often optimized for play on the relatively low-fidelity earbuds for iPods, reducing incentives to offer a broad dynamic range.

The loudness war began heating up around the time CDs gained popularity, in the early 1980s. Guns N' Roses' "Appetite for Destruction" upped the ante in 1987, as did Metallica's 1991 "Black Album" and then the Red Hot Chili Peppers' "Californication" in 1999.

Less to Hear

Music released today typically has a dynamic range only a fourth to an eighth as wide as that of the 1990s. That means if you play a newly released CD right after one that's 15 years old, leaving the volume knob untouched, the new one is likely to sound four to

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near, because they end up wiping away nuances and details. Everything from a gently strummed guitar to a pounding snare drum is equally loud, leading to what some call "ear fatigue." If the listener turns down the volume knob, the music loses even more of its punch.



James Hetfield of Metallica performs with the band as they present their latest album, 'Death Magnetic,' in Berlin earlier this month. ASSOCIATED PRESS

But many musicians, producers and record-company executives "think that having a louder record is going to translate into greater sales," says Chris Athens, Mr. Jensen's business partner and a fellow engineer. "Nobody really wants to have a record that's not as loud as everybody else's" in an iTunes playlist, he adds.

Mastering engineers are caught in the crossfire. "I've had lots of people -- I mean lots and lots of people -- try and push a record to a place I thought it didn't belong," Mr. Athens says. "We try to deliver something that mitigates the damage the client wants. I drag my feet and give them something a little louder and a little louder."

Albums by some of the biggest names in rock, including the most recent by U2, Bruce Springsteen and Paul McCartney, have drawn flak. Bloggers last year singled out Mr. Ludwig, the veteran engineer, for the sound on Mr. Springsteen's "Magic," which some thought was tinny and loud.

Mr. Ludwig wouldn't discuss the instructions he was given, but said, "Bruce doesn't let anything out unless it's exactly the way he wants it to be." Mr. Springsteen and his manager, Jon Landau, declined through a spokeswoman to comment.

As for the deafening "Death Magnetic," it struck one fan as fitting for these tumultuous times, thanks to songs like "Broken, Beat and Scarred" and "All Nightmare Long," says Metallica's co-manager, Mr. Burnstein. He says an investment banker emailed to say

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