

What the F#ck is "Industry Standard"?

by Garrett Haines, with Larry Crane



After receiving negative feedback regarding her release, a talented artist I'd worked with dropped me a line.

Apparently a random critic of her album had declared that "the song was satisfactory and the singing beautiful, but the sound of the final product was not up to *industry standard*." Being conscientious, and hoping to present the best work she could, the artist asked me why the product was not up to "industry standard," and what she should do to make it so. Oh, boy...

First off, it is important to remember that some marketing terms are *created concepts*, designed to imply product desirability in the minds of consumers. For example, in the food industry, packaging terms like "natural," "artisan," "whole grains," and "sustainable," are often misused, unregulated, and many times rendered completely meaningless. Meanwhile, over in the recording field, artists are pummeled with similarly useless terms such as "radio ready," "mastering grade," "standard 2 second song spacing," "warm," "vintage-style," "punchy," and, of course, "industry standard." I mean, what does a "world-class" studio [End Rant, *Tape Op* #24] offer that sets it apart from other facilities? On the surface, these terms can sound authentic. However, they generally have absolutely zero meaning among audio professionals.

In fact, on the technical front, few industries have *less* standardization than audio. Unfortunately, when guidelines exist, many vendors disregard them. The Audio Engineering Society attempts to set standards for audio production, but do these even stick? Most notably, the standard outlined in AES17-2020 stipulates the proper way to calculate loudness for music. However, numerous meters on equipment, and even DAWs, completely ignore it.

But saying an audio recording is not up to an "industry standard" is *completely* meaningless. Sure, there are egregious audio examples out there of sub-standard recordings, such as massive distortion, poorly placed microphones, or nasty phase problems (though these were explicitly *not* the case with her album). Listen to the history of recorded music and you'll stumble across thousands of examples of shoddily recorded music where limitations of the recording gear, room, or engineer did nothing to impede the music from getting on the radio or making fans happy. Take Robert Johnson's *King of the Delta Blues Singers* album. Did the low fidelity field recording on this record keep the Rolling Stones from worshipping this LP? Nope.

From an artists' point of view, this "not up to industry standard" comment can certainly be cause for apprehension and introspection. We all want the recorded music we present to the world to be the best version of what we can offer. Her response is normal and understandable. If I were younger, and first-time dipping my toes into the audio industry, I would have the same exact questions and be anxious as well.

I don't want to discount the person who gave her this feedback. They may be knowledgeable, but still relying on "industry standard" as some type of shorthand. Perhaps they want to appear discerning, or simply make it sound like they are offering valuable insights. Regardless, using terms that have no real assignable meaning doesn't give anyone much to go on.

Evaluating art is always subjective, but critics should justify their conclusions. If we could obtain some details on what this critic hears and is reacting to, we could analyze their arguments. But without specifics, we'll have to simply ignore them, keep making our music, ask questions, and believe in what we are creating! ☺

Garrett Haines masters music to his own "standard" at <treelady.com>.

See also Larry's End Rant in *Tape Op* #48, "Words I Do Not Understand."