

ANALYSIS PLUS POWER CORDS

At Work In the Studio

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BEGINNING OBSERVATION

Over the last four or five years, power cords have arrived square in the center of audiophile awareness. I construct the specific nature of that emerging attention to “power cables” because, as the newest “components” in the well-heeled audiophile’s sonic arsenal, the once lowly power cord has now risen to a place of eminence. But only within the realm of audiophile enthusiasm. Not, on the whole, in recording studios.

The distinction I’m pointing to may seem trivial or incidental to the ongoing concerns that your not so average two-channel or multi-channel surround sound audio monster carries with him week to week. But it’s not trivial at all, for at least two reasons.

First, improvement in equipment at the point of recording – in studios, on location, in the mastering enclave (that mysterious den of inequity) – has an enormous influence on the music most audiophiles listen to. And enjoy. The better the microphones and cables used to capture and master your music, the more extraordinary it’s likely to sound when you dig into it.

Other factors enter into music recording and mastering equations. None is as important as the skill and taste of the recording engineers involved. Ditto the taste and skill of the mastering stylists who craft the final sound that puts all the sonic pieces together. Recording and mastering are art forms. In part the “art” of recording or mastering depends upon the specific equipment employed. What Engineer Number One accomplishes with an old Neve board differs a great deal from what Engineer Two achieves with a new Tascam digital board. My generation of recording guys, and those earlier, developed its artistic chops with tube gear in an analog recording environment. Although there are fewer and fewer of such places for them to work, one can still find a few old time “tube and analog” guys who own studios and keep their receding craft alive. Such engineering, both mastering and recording, is truly an art – but a flexible art highly interactive with the gear it relies upon to gather and then tailor musical sound.

Second, all recording and mastering work depends upon the quality of the electrical power it draws from. That observation is as subtle as noticing that gravity keeps bodies snug to the earth. It is an obvious fact, however, often overlooked or minimized.

FACTS ONE PLUS TWO

Over the years I've been startled time and again by vast sonic differences imparted by the quality of the power fed my own equipment, both at the point of recording and, later, in the mastering environment, which is a far different realm than the varied worlds of "on location" recording. The rule of thumb here is self-evident: the better, cleaner, and truer the source of power drawn from, the more accurate and "musical" the sound captured initially and crafted in mastering work.

All the more startling, therefore, to discover – as I have, over a long span – how variable the quality of power seems to be in even well-known, highly regarded studios . . . how incidental to the awareness of studio owners. Why that is the case I can only surmise, since I've never thought it was my place (or responsibility) to question the owner or engineers working in any studio I dwelled within, usually briefly. Imagine the nonsensical, self-discrediting outside "hot shot" strolling into an expensive New York or Los Angeles studio and grilling those on hand there about their apparent oversight regarding electrical power quality.

First of all, one often finds out how demoted the particular electrical power supply is only by accident or inadvertently. On the whole I do not walk around peering under consoles, in dark corners or behind walls (etcetera) to locate the source of a studio's power in order to examine its set up. I'm not an electrical engineer. I'm sure as hell not a "hot shot" and I don't regard myself adequate to evaluate every studio's power quality by simply nosing around. But, on occasion, I have the opportunity to hear directly what a specific piece of my own gear sounds like plugged into this or that power environment – at a club or concert hall; in a studio or mastering room. If you know the sonic signature (or the characteristic responses) of, say, a favorite microphone preamplifier, then you cannot help but be startled when and if it operates below its ordinary standards – when the one variable in its operation is the power it has been fed.

All of this is a long way around the significance of a simple place in the sonic chain. What I'm pointing to is that audiophiles, by and large, are well ahead of mastering and recording engineers in their appreciation for the salient results of improved power quality.

ANALYSIS PLUS TO THE RESCUE

Recently I was asked to visit a studio as an observer-friend. I was the guest of a musician whose group was being recorded. Since I'd recorded him and his group previously, in "live" circumstances, he wanted my opinion about the studio set up and its approach to recording his gang. I was glad to join the fun since I seldom get a "down" day to do nothing but be a sonic tourist. The occasion was like a vacation for me.

After several takes of the first song, the engineer on the console asked me what I was hearing on playback. The sound was good. Very good. I told him so. I was surprised, thus, when he asked me if I thought there was anything he could do to improve the sound he was getting. At first I was a bit stumped because, in truth, I did not know his large console at all. I'd never "flown" his particular board. And, just as important, I not at all interested in messing up another guy's kitchen. So I demurred. But he pressed on a bit. When I assured him that I really had no clue what specific, concrete step he might take to improve the sound, he asserted (nicely) that he'd been told by our mutual colleague that I had a certain slant on recording and so he, in turn, wanted to pick my brain a little if only to rethink some of his own habits.

Fair enough, I thought.

There was a break in the recording work soon after. We continued our banter, back and forth, when I realized I had an Analysis Plus power cord in the trunk of my car. It remained there after a recent "location" recording I'd done. So I suggested we swap power cords -- plug his console, which had a removable power cord of no particular distinction (in fact, a generic cord), to the wall outlet with the Analysis Plus "Power Oval Ten" cable. We did that.

When the session got started again, both of us heard immediately, graphically, how much more stunning the sound was from his studio monitors. The only change was the power cord swap. A generic cord, the kind you find everywhere, was replaced by a lovely, purplish-hued Analysis Plus power cable. Voila! Instant gratification. Immediate higher resolution. The console sang with greater clarity and dynamic fullness.

I, of course, was now an ace. A doubtful but genuine hot shot. I'd done nothing to deserve praise and appreciation except to remember, and retrieve from my car, the "Power Oval Ten" cable I'd forgotten to unload. My slight personal oversight became our collective sonic victory.

CONCLUDING FACTS

My new best recording pal asked me, at the conclusion of the day, as he replaced the old generic cord on the studio console (returning my handy dandy Analysis Plus cable to me) if I'd please not tell the studio owner about our swap out. He'd just been hired as a recording wonk. He was the new guy at the studio, still on probation, as it were. The genuinely coveted gig at what can only be considered a fairly posh, and very busy, recording studio put him into a quandary. On one hand, do the best you can. That was always his motto, he told me. On the other hand, he couldn't rock the boat in any way. "Do you think I want this guy who's just brought me on board to think I'm criticizing his room set up?" he asked me.

Of course not. I sympathized with his perplexity and with the potential delicacy of the situation. In various walks of life, and in several professional regimes, I've seen a Big Boss's ego stand in the way of a young plebe trying to work his way up the line of command. I've seen careers harmed or ruined merely because one bloated, self-defensive ego was devoted to protecting its perceived advantage (and territory) at the expense of common sense -- human creativity, sensitivity, and ethical balance notwithstanding.

Sad, but true. Yet one good thing on occasion follows from simple discoveries like the one we enjoyed that day at the studio. A fellow who, in one work place, is forced to toe the line or muzzle his creativity may soon move on to a better, more open and tolerant professional situation. When that occurs, not only surprise "discoveries" (such as this, renewed respect for the concrete importance of enhanced power), but a permanent if lamentable awareness of the illogic of human relations remains to educate someone liberated to his own best designs.

I was impressed that day by my young colleague, not because he heard what I heard but because of his overall savvy – and the look in his eye that suggested he'll find a way to get his own studio or his own unfettered gig someday. That's what it's all about once you recognize that, like music, recording is in fact an art to be explored wherever it leads.