

## GUEST COMMENTARY

### The Digital Disaster

The views expressed in the following Commentary are not necessarily those of the magazine or its staff.

—The Editors

Right now, an international conspiracy of bozos is ripping up all the analog tracks and replacing them with digital. International conspiracy? Yes! Look at the Compact Disc part of the official upcoming digital future: The system was developed jointly by the relatively small Sony corporation of Japan and the rather large Dutch conglom, Philips. It is being promoted by means of an organization called the Compact Disc Group, headed by Emil Petrone, an executive with Philips affiliate PloyGram. With millions of dollars in their war chest supplied by Sony, Philips, and other hardware manufacturers and software suppliers like CBS, WEA, and EMI, the Compact Disc Group has been able to mount a huge media blitz.

Most of you have probably never heard a compact disc, but it's likely you're favorably disposed toward them. Everything you've heard about them has been positive. From MTV's VJs to the typical, eyewitness news local airhead reporter, who confuses ignorance with impartiality, to the syndicated columnists, you've heard and read that compact discs are the future—that they sound much better than "old fashioned" analog vinyl records, and that soon everyone will have a CD player.

On the other hand, DJs and VJs say whatever their advertising and promotion departments tell them to say, the local news reporters tend to be so stupid today that they simply rephrase the press releases the Compact Disc Group gave them, and most of the hi-fi press, sad to say, has gone along with the hype.

Leonard Feldman is one of the most prolific and visible hi-fi reviewers and columnists. He loves compact discs. He thinks all the players sound alike and that they're all great. He's also being paid by the Sony corporation to travel around the country and spread the gospel to retailers who need to be convinced that compact discs will succeed. Most of these retailers lost a lot on the quadraphonic debacle of the early seventies and they're understandably antsy about getting shafted again. Len tells the retailers that compact discs will be, even a hundred years from now, what LP records are today—the standard. It's a lie, of course.

Compact Discs are *not* the future.

They *don't* sound better than records, and soon very few people will still have CD Players. You've probably never read anything like that in print before! The people who think those things don't have millions of dollars to promote their positions.

Compact discs are a matter of choice. But once a performance has been recorded digitally, the damage is done. There's *nothing* the listener can do, regardless of the choice of playback medium. Those who think digital recording is a fundamentally flawed medium—a disaster—can't fight the likes of 3M, Sony, and Mitsubishi, who stand to make millions of dollars converting old-fashioned analog studios, into "state-of-the-art" digital ones. The stakes are high, the tactics tough. One very famous L.A. studio "went digital" a few years ago. The owner of the studio, a highly visible member of the recording community, aggressively



Michael Fremer

publicized the digital conversion, using uncharacteristically bombastic superlatives in many trade publication articles and on panels at industry conventions. To many observers, the man was getting very "commercial." Recently, it was announced that he had entered into a very lucrative digital business agreement with the company he was busy talking up to his peers a short time before. As Ed Meese found out recently, it may not be criminal behavior, but it sure ain't ethical!

But exactly what is this digital disaster? What's so bad about digital recording? To get an idea, just listen to *The Talking Heads Live*—an analog recording. Then listen to the new digitally recorded *Stop Making Sense*. One is inviting and involving. The other is confusing, fatiguing, and cold. There is a quality to all this digitally recorded music that's difficult to pin down with words. It's subtle, yet profound. Something's very wrong, but it's unidentifiable. Some critics refer to it as

"digititis."

Pro-digital people throw numbers around, appropriately enough, citing Grand Canyons of dynamic range, frequency responses from DC out to the unknown, total background silence, no wow or flutter—in short, audio perfection. Indeed, all the machines have about the same specs—and they all sound different.

The other argument that's been made (up until recently) is that you can't judge a digital recording by its analog disc version; you have to listen to a digital source. Now, the compact disc, a pure digital source, is here, and as the overwhelming majority of serious audiophiles have discovered, compact discs make digital recordings actually sound worse than their analog counterparts. Most serious audiophiles think records sound better than compact discs and that the finest analog recordings sound better than the finest

digital ones. It makes sense, too. Analog's had 100 years or so of refinement. Digital is brand new by comparison. In time, it might surpass the finest analog has to offer. Then, its advantages as a storage medium will be worthwhile. But for now, the conversion of the analog musical signal to digital code for storage and the conversion of it back to analog for playback is simply not being accomplished properly.

For now, an inferior sounding recording system and its consumer playback compact disc counterpart are riding a wave of public awareness and acceptance set in motion by a self-serving propagandistic media and business blitz engineered by the hardware and software manufacturers. We'll all be musically poorer for this period of unbearably poor sounding digital recordings. Guess who'll be the richer?

Michael Fremer

Writer / comedian Fremer supervised the sound for "Tron," nominated for an Oscar in the "Best Sound" category