Two Alums Make Peerless Sounds

Grammy-nominated mastering engineers work to perfect audio tracks | BY JOEL BROWN

Jeff Lipton (Questrom'93) and Maria Rice (CAS'04), in Studio A at Peerless Mastering's Newtonville, Mass., headquarters

JEFF LIPTON AND MARIA Rice work inside a drab industrial building in Newtonville, Mass., where their neighbors include a bus company and a sewing studio. Inside the Peerless Mastering suite, however, you'll find two state-of-the-art mastering studios—small, windowless rooms with enough computer and audio equipment to resemble the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*.

Here, Lipton (Questrom'93) and Rice (CAS'04) perform the all-important postproduction task known as mastering, which involves perfecting each audio track and capturing the optimal mix for distribution. The two were nominated for this year's Grammy Awards as mastering engineers in Category 68: Best Historical Album for *Ork Records: New York, New York*.

The *Ork* two-CD or four-LP set documents the output of the little-known Ork label, which released music by rockers orbiting New York's CBGB club in the 1970s, including Television, Richard Hell, and the Feelies. Ken Shipley and Rob Sevier, cofounders of the archival label Numero Group, produced the set, issued in 2015 by Numero. Shipley and Sevier shared the nomination with Lipton and Rice, who remastered the songs from recordings and original studio tapes. (Bob Dylan's *The Cutting Edge 1965–1966: The Bootleg Series, Vol. 12, Collector's Edition* won the Grammy.)

Mastering is "the final creative phase of the music recording process," says Lipton. "I'll listen to every song on a record before I work on it and try to get inside the head of the artists and try to figure out what they're going for. The music will tell me the story."

By the time the music arrives at Peerless—often as files sent over the internet—the musicians are done recording. "By the time you get to mastering," Lipton says, "it's the first time you're thinking about how the songs relate to each other and how they're going to go together, how cohesive everything is. We take a bunch of separate mixes and make them work together as a whole."

"We make it sound like a record," says Rice. That may mean slightly raising the volume on one track or lowering it on another, along with adjustments such as equalization, compression, and limiting (which most listeners will never need to understand).

"Here, every change is very fine, like a tenth or a quarter of a decibel," Rice says. "These very fine changes accumulate across the whole texture of the mixes, so they all have a similar sound image." Mastering engineers need terrific ears and a room that will give them the exact sound of the source recording. Peerless Studio A was designed by acoustician Bob Alach of Alactronics in Wellesley, Mass., to be the most neutral-sounding—"flat"—room possible.

"People who know how to hear properly are shocked that they're able to hear things they've never heard anywhere else," says Alach, who studied at BU and worked at WBUR, the University's National Public Radio station. That includes previously unnoticed glitches and distortion on favorite albums. "Put on *Abbey Road* and it's horrifying," Alach says with a chuckle.

Lipton started out taping local bands and the occasional national act in clubs all over Boston and Cambridge in the late '80s and early '90s, while working by day as a biomedical data specialist at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. The bands liked what they heard on his recordings, and eventually asked him to master their records. He started out working from his apartment and opened the Newtonville facility in 1999.

Rice earned a BA in psychology at the College of Arts & Sciences while also studying classical piano. She came on board full time in 2006.

For the Grammy-nominated *Ork Records* set, the two "rebuilt the Ork catalog from the ground up," Shipley says. "They pieced together singles, original masters, cassette tapes, CDs, and four-track tapes to create a seamless rendering of this legendary label."