



Photo: Getty Images

Just what the Dr prescribed

How this writer learned to appreciate music once again



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THE beauty of being a music writer is that I've had the opportunity to listen to various types of music, from classical to jazz to K-pop. But I never realised how much the beauty of music could be marred by the way it's served.

And it seems that I'd been marring my listening pleasure for quite a while. For example, downloading highly compressed MP3 files, which might save space on the computer, but in reality, degrades all the nuances in recorded music. And apparently, one ought to get good speakers and headphones too.

Which apparently was where I went wrong. I never really cared much for the kind of speakers or headphones I used. But as the late comedian Bill Cosby once said, you can have the best steak in the world, but if you serve it on a trash can lid ... well, not quite the greatest idea in the world. And I was apparently listening to

music via a metaphorical trash can lid.

Talking to producer Steve Lillywhite (who's produced, among others, U2, the Dave Matthews Band and Beady Eye) earlier this year, he decried how going digital has spoiled the pleasure of listening to what he called "true sound" — the sound that you hear in the recording studio as made by the musicians in the studio, thanks to using too much compression and not having the proper equipment to reproduce the sound.

"I don't know how people can listen to music on those computer speakers," he said. Er, guilty, right here.

They got the beats

It was the desire to make music sound good, that drove Jimmy Iovine and Dr Dre into producing the Beats By Dr Dre range of headphones. Dre and Iovine were in town last week for the Mnet Asian Music Awards, where Dre performed with Snoop Dogg (their first performance together in years), but they also took time out to talk about the philosophy behind Beats By Dr Dre.

"I ran into him on the beach one day," said Iovine. "We'd been through a lot together, you know, with Tupac, Snoop and all that. And Dre, he doesn't talk a lot — he can be a lot of fun, but he's serious too

— and he said: 'A company wants me to sell sneakers'. And I said: 'Screw sneakers, let's make speakers'.

"And he said: 'I have this word, beats, and I want to use it for something'. I said: 'Speakers and headphones, Beats by Dr Dre'. He said: 'Sounds cool'. And we went to work. Just like that. We do a lot of things just like that."

Like Lillywhite, Iovine also lamented how computers "degraded" the sound of music, said Iovine.

"Computers sound really bad — not the speakers on the computer, but the actual hardware and the software sound really bad on about 80 per cent of computers," he said.

"Why (Beats) started was because we were not happy with the sound quality of the music. People spend a lot of time and money making music and all along the way it gets decimated. So we want to promote great sounding music.

"If we do really well, then other companies will have to make their equipment sound really good. More importantly, it is that everybody feels the pressure — from consumer electronic companies to technology companies — of making music sound great."

Apparently, my enjoyment of music had been victim to bad mathematics on

my part. As Iovine explained: "If you have music on an iPod that's say \$300 and you play it back on a speaker that's \$5, the math doesn't work. You have to get all your equipment in the line to sound good.

"Do you turn your music up? People turn their music up to 10, you know why? They're looking for emotion, but they don't know that you don't get emotion by turning it up to 10. You have to make it sound good, then you don't have to make it so loud."

Speakers corner

It's something that Allen Sides, the head of Ocean Way Audio, has consistently tried to achieve with his speakers. Although Ocean Way is known as a recording studio with facilities in America as well as in places like St Bart's, Sides was keen to remind this reporter that he actually started out making speakers in his bedroom — when he was 14.

"I had very understanding parents," he quipped. "But really, I got into the recording business because I built speakers and I wanted to make recordings that were good enough for my speakers."

Sides has since recorded over 400 albums for artists such as Phil Collins, Green Day, Eric Clapton, Mary J Blige, Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. Over at the Ocean Way Audio

(Singapore) showroom in Adelphi sits what's possibly the biggest speaker system for a home I'd ever seen: The HRI Monitor System. Each HRI speaker measures approximately 3m by 3m (there are three of them), and the set took up an entire wall at the showroom. I was almost afraid I'd be blown away.

"I think you'll like this," said Sides, popping in a CD. And I couldn't have sworn I'd gone to music heaven. I was hearing a diapason that I never heard before. And even when the volume level was turned down low, all the nuances were still discernible.

"When you get a speaker that has tremendous resolution, the recordings that are exceptional are simply amazing," beamed Sides, who added that "getting into super high-end home theatre systems" was where Ocean Way was heading.

But Sides' passion for music perfection was evident. "We take the time to build everything by hand," he said. "For equalisers, each has a hand-wound coil for each frequency. It takes time to do that, but what a difference. If the speakers you have are producing the sound accurately, then it's going to sound amazing."

What price for good music?

But of course, high quality sound also comes at a high price, all things considered. Ocean Way's HR3 speakers — the so-called "entry level" speakers — have a manufacturer's suggested retail price of \$125,000 per pair, and the behemoth HRI costs \$675,000 per full system.

However, according to Sides, there are people who won't think twice about splurging for these systems.

"The high-end hasn't really been that much affected (by the economy)," he explained. "When we're talking about this level, it's not that big a deal for them. Money is not an issue. For the ultra high-end, the market is good. And for the hobbyist, if it really means that much to them, they'll put away the funds for it."

According to local up-and-coming rapper Shigga Shay, it's the quality that counts more than price. "For example, I would consider the quality first when it comes to purchasing headphones, then the price and then the design. I feel that if you scrimp and save on cheap headphones,



Yo, listen up: Dr Dre and Jimmy Iovine (above) at the unveiling of the Beats By Dr Dre products. Sound masters: Kevin Tan of Ocean Way Audio (Singapore) and Allen Sides.

you're not going to enjoy what you hear. So it's definitely good to invest some money for some good quality audio!"

But again, that really depends on the individual. Singer-songwriter Suzanne Vega, for instance, said she wasn't too choosy

about her equipment. "I'm not a hi-tech snob. When I was young, I had a transistor radio and I was happy with that," she said.

"But I listen to songs on my iPhone and I use Beats By Dr Dre — the sound is so warm. But other than that, I'm not too

picky. I don't need everything to be hi-tech. It doesn't irritate me when things are lo-fi."

For Iovine, the quality makes it worth the price. "We just want to make a great product," he said, adding that they had announced three new Beats headphones, including a Bluetooth model, and a pro model, Beats Mixr. (Incidentally, the Monster Beats Studio headphones cost \$5420 at the Apple store.)

"What's really important for us is to make something that we would use ourselves. So it takes a long time to make one, and we don't want to make too many products, because you make too many products, you can't make them correctly and you can't market them correctly.

"I like the Beats legacy to be that it turned around the degradation of music brought on by the so-called digital revolution. I would like beats to be the company that pushed that, and got that started, got the ball rolling."

Well, sign me up then. But, er, if there's anybody out there who wants to contribute to my purchasing a HR3, you won't find any resistance from me.

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