

Talking Away the *Box*

On making technology disappear so that art, the artist, and the story can shine through.

BY · JOHN HANES

SUBJECT · AUDIO ENGINEERING · MIXING · PHILOSOPHY

This one is inspired by a subject brought up and discussed on the podcast Penn's Sunday School, episode 659 "Elan Lee (part II)". Host, Penn Jillette, of the magician duo Penn & Teller discussed his theory of magic.

The relevant discussion starts around 38:35 on the podcast.

Talking away the box is a concept, Penn says, "tied into making what you have to do look what you want to do", and Penn says "the secret of all magic".

Penn says:

"Any large scale magic illusions, you need to have a box, because the box does the god damn magic trick and the audience knows that. So you now have to convince them that you desperately wanted that box on stage. Your job is you can stand on stage and vanish like that (claps) with nothing

around you, but you've got to get the audience to believe that you'd rather do it stepping into a box. (laughs)"

This really got me thinking about musicians and mixing.

Now our problem might be a bit reversed from Penn's magic; we have the musician or singer already in the box, and want to convince the audience that they can do it with nothing around them.

A lot of what we do in mixing, especially with vocals, is to make it seem like what the musician has to do; stay in tune, stay in time, emote the song; is what they meant to do. We need to make it look easy, effortless, and intentional for them, even if it is not. We do a lot of cleaning up little mistakes, taking away distracting noises, modulating breaths so it doesn't sound like they are working that hard.

"I believe that if you are a really good musician, no one should know how good you are. They should never have any idea."

— PENN JILLETTE, PENN'S SUNDAY SCHOOL

Penn continues: We want to 'talk away the box' in that when we need the multiple tools available to us to fix and alter things, we want to try to make the technology disappear and make the audience believe that this performance is effortless and straight from the heart.

But when it truly is easy and effortless for them, we want to let that true musical talent shine through without tricks. There are some musicians and singers who are truly gifted and talented that we must let shine through.

I'm reminded of when we were working on the Kelly Clarkson Christmas Album, "Wrapped In Red", produced by Greg

Kurstin. I had received the multitrack files and was getting everything ready for mixing. Kelly's musical director, collaborator, and producer Jason Halbert and the band were in town for a stop on Kelly's tour and several of them stopped into the studio. I was playing some of the Christmas songs for them and I commented that she sounded so good, and Jason's response was 'most of the vocals were recorded straight through in one take'. That's just how good she is.

This is like that Steve Lukather scenario. Sometimes we don't need to pull out a bunch of tricks, sometimes we are presented with pure talent.

Another one, and timely and coincidentally another Christmas album. Sia's brilliant "Everyday Is Christmas" album; original songs written by Sia and Greg Kurstin. The musicianship, writing, and vocal arrangements blow me away. The genius of Sia's vocal harmonies and vocal arrangements become effortless and magical. Greg Kurstin's composing is genius. The story is that they started to write a couple of new Christmas songs, and then it just kept flowing; the whole album written, recorded, and mixed in a matter of weeks.

There are many other times when I feel that we are in the presence of genius when listening to and working on music where the goal in mixing is to let that shine and amplify it. There are things that just cannot

be created by the box. Ariana Grande can weave vocal texture and emote in amazing ways. Katy Perry can turn a phrase lyrically like alchemy. Beck's music is ear worm perfection. Bruno Mars and team are a genre blender who create music that embodies fun.

This room full of technology, computers, software, analog hardware; all of our training, techniques, and experience; all of this serves one purpose. We work in service to the message, to present the music as a vehicle for emotion, to make the technology disappear and let the art, the artist, and the story shine through.

If we, as music engineers and mixers, can do this. Then no one should know how good we are.

REFERENCED WORKS

Penn's Sunday School, Episode 659	"Elan Lee (part II)"
Kelly Clarkson	"Wrapped In Red" (2013)
Producer	Greg Kurstin
Musical Director	Jason Halbert
Sia	"Everyday Is Christmas" (2017)

ARTISTS MENTIONED

Bob Dylan	Musician
Steve Lukather	Guitarist (Toto)
Kelly Clarkson	Singer
Sia	Singer-Songwriter
Greg Kurstin	Producer / Composer
Ariana Grande	Singer
Katy Perry	Singer
Beck	Musician
Bruno Mars	Musician