

Learning is an ongoing process. In the competitive field of audio engineering, failing to continue to learn and grow is a career death sentence. Unfortunately, there are certain pieces of advice we tend to throw around that, while well-intended, only hinder our own progress.

These mantras are repeated so often we sometimes say them without any consideration. This leads us down those roads — you know — the ones that are paved with good intentions.

Here are four misused pieces of advice that we really need to stop doling out.

1. Just Use Your Ears!

What it's intended to mean: The ultimate barometer for how something sounds is ... well ... how it sounds. It's important not to let things like meters, or the fact that a knob is turned up all the way, or maybe the fact that there are no knobs turned at all, influence our objective listening. Yes, maybe we added 20 dB of low end to the vocal — that is probably a mistake in most cases — but if it sounds good, then so be it!

How we misuse it: It seems whenever discussing a technique someone inevitably comes along and says “Just Use Your Ears!” Assuredly thinking they are giving out some ground-breaking coin of wisdom.

Example: Here's some techniques for compressing and reshaping a bass guitar. Eight Facebook comments later: “The best technique for compressing a bass is to use your ears!” STOP THAT.

Of all the pieces of asinine advice this one has got to be the worst.

We all use our ears. Most people have been using their ears their whole lives. And most people can't mix records.

I've tried to reshape my bass guitar by smell and I can tell you ears are absolutely the way to go.

But that has nothing to do with technique. Our ears will tell us if a technique is working or not, not what the techniques are.

2. You Can't Polish a Turd

What it's intended to mean: It's important to get things done right at the source. The better things are at the beginning, the better they will ultimately come out at the end. And if something is absolutely garbage coming in, all the clean up in the world won't save it.

How we misuse it: This phrase has become the theme song for passing the buck. The reality is recordings are seldom perfect. It's rare that every musician is super solid every day. It's rarer that we have the perfect instruments with the perfect player in a perfect room with a perfect mic collection and everything just goes perfect. It's vastly more common that mistakes are made and printed, one of the band members is maybe not 100% practiced on the song, there's too much bleed in a mic — whatever. It's our jobs to identify problems and do our best to fix them. Will some things be totally salvageable? No. Does that mean we shouldn't polish it up? No.

3. It's The Ear, Not The Gear

What it's intended to mean: The skill of the craftsman is vastly more important than the tool.

How we misuse it: The craftsman is going to have a hell of a hard time building a house with a rubber hammer. Without irony, we use this advice to essentially negate the advice about turd polishing. The fact is, we still use stuff like mics and preamps and EQs to get music recorded. So while it's true that our skill will trump our gear there's still going to be a quality gap between a \$90 mic plugged directly into an interface and a \$9,000 mic running through a \$4,000 preamp. The intention of this advice is to say we don't need a million dollar setup to get million dollar results — not to use the cheapest pieces of crap you can find and expect a big budget sound.

4. There Are No Rules!

What it's intended to mean: Music is art, and what makes art good or not isn't dependent on any strict factors. There isn't one goal that we are always working towards when producing music. Experimentation is key!

How we misuse it: There are no rules ... therefore, we don't need to know what we're doing! Sorry to burst that bubble, but not having rules doesn't mean there aren't accepted principles. And while no one is required to adhere to any principles, being aware of them really helps!

Also worth noting: in addition to the aesthetic principles that define various genres, there are also technical rules that do exist. Things like phase, headroom, pickup patterns ... basically anything revolving around the concept of reality.

Conclusion

If we use this advice correctly it means we rely on getting the best we can given the resources at our disposal. We experiment with the results, and use our ears and judgement as the ultimate barometer of what's working and what's not. We make solutions, not excuses.

If we use this advice incorrectly it means we do whatever we want without having to invest the time to do it well, or the money to do it right. And if it doesn't work out, it's only because someone else messed up or people just aren't seeing it.