



# A Young Master

at Mastering  
Adam Ayan polishes  
albums for some of the  
best in the business.

By KAREN AHO

Photograph by LOYALL SEWALL

Each year the Grammy Foundation gives 108 awards, triple the number of Oscars but no less prestigious, given the competitive nature of the music industry.

Last year one of those gilded gramophones came home to Portland's Gateway Mastering Studios, and not just for the boss, Bob Ludwig, a legend in the mastering field with plenty of Grammys to his name. This

one, a coveted first, sits on the desk of his protégé, a fast-track young talent named Adam Ayan, who, less than a decade out of college, is polishing albums for some of the biggest names in the business: Bob Marley, Keith Urban, Nirvana, LeAnn Rimes, Faith Hill, Nine Inch Nails, Carrie Underwood, Wynonna Judd, and the Rolling Stones among them.

"I didn't expect to get to this

level so early on," Ayan says. "If you'd asked me in college I probably would have said, 'Yeah, I'll get there.' But I didn't expect it would happen so quickly."

Scott Billington, a producer at Rounder Records, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, sought Ayan out for the demanding project that later won the 2005 Grammy for best historical album: a digitally restored Alan Lomax 1938 Library

**Musicians visiting for a session are mesmerized. "Wow, I have never heard my music sound this good before," they say.**

of Congress recording of legendary jazz composer and pianist Jelly Roll Morton.

"It all comes down to one thing: Adam has great ears. He has the ability to hear what's missing, to hear if something's out of balance, and to make it sound better, more present, more lively," Billington says. "Plus, he's always a really pleasant person to work with."

Pleasant is a quality Ayan emanates. At 31, he has a round, almost boyish face and wears his brown hair cropped close. He has a gentle, upbeat voice. His tone is accommodating. It's hard to believe he used to be heavy metal rocker, until he laughs and tells you that heavy metalists are often calm and soft-spoken off stage.

When I arrive at Gateway studios to interview him, Ayan deflects attention away from himself and toward his coworkers, whom he introduces to me as we tour the two-story suite. As we walk upstairs, he highlights the stores of computer equipment used in today's remote, digital mastering field and bypasses any mention of the fact that megastars like Bruce Springsteen and Lou Reed hang out here when they're finishing an album.

At the end of the hall, Ayan waves me inside a small room where two production engineers are finishing a sound check. The two 30-somethings are seated in large, tilting office chairs in casual clothes and large headphones. One scans something on the

web; the other thumbs through a magazine.

"You know," I joke, "to the casual observer they don't appear as if they're really working."

Ayan kindly laughs at this silly and potentially offensive remark, and with his response displays a grace atypical for a man his age. Without a hint of defensiveness and still carrying a slight smile, he explains that the engineers have highly trained ears. They are listening carefully for any defects in the audio—slight ticks, pops or skips—before it is shipped to the manufacturer.

As we move down the hall, past the 29 framed gold and platinum albums Ayan has already mastered, I realize that this ease is the product of true confidence, the kind that is earned through solid work.

Ayan grew up in Malden, Mass., and Windham, N.H., captured in the crosshairs of the era of the Walkman and dawn of MTV. He was the kid who was always tuned in. He bought his first album with newspaper-route money in elementary school (Joan Jett & the Blackhearts' "I love Rock 'N Roll") and by high school was playing in a thrash metal band with friends called Winter's Edge. Inspired by Metallica's long, bizarre bass solo "(Anesthesia) Pulling Teeth," he chose the bass guitar and surrounded himself with better guitarists to self-train.

At Pinkerton Academy, a New Hampshire prep school, he took advantage of a strong music department and considered continuing at a music conservatory until his practical side intervened. Why not study recording as well and expand the number of job

options, he thought. "Little did I know there were just as few jobs on that side," he says now.

At the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, he gradually shifted his focus from performance to recording, and by senior year served as president of the campus Audio Engineering Society, where it was his job to recruit industry speakers. Ayan called Bob Ludwig. "I kind of set my sights on some big names," Ayan says.

Ludwig was indeed big. His was the name on the back of records Ayan owned as a kid, a pioneer in the field. He'd moved from New York City to Portland in 1993 to open his own studio and—to Ayan's later benefit—he enjoyed talking to students. Ayan, who knew little about mastering, began pulling articles off the Internet in preparation for Ludwig's visit.

Mastering is the little-known third step in the four step music production process. The first step is to record an album (yes, they still call them albums), and it's often done in parts. The second is to mix those parts. This can take several months. The album is then shipped (these days via FTP files on-line) to a mastering engineer, who uses the latest in electronic and digital technology to bring out the best sound possible. He is the last stop in the artistic process before the album is manufactured and distributed.

To do the job well requires

**When Ayan slides in a Rolling Stones CD he remastered, it's as if a young Mick Jagger is in the corner wailing in 15 shades of pain.**



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both technical savvy and musical sensibility. A masterman must be able to interpret an artist's vision, envision a more vibrant version, and recreate it through dozens of subtle twists on an equalizer.

An artist might say, "Can you open it up?" and the masterman increases the high frequencies. "Make it warmer," and he raises the bass. By compressing or expanding range, he can make a piece more lively or loud, punchy or smooth.


"I liked the perspective of hearing the production as a whole, particularly coming to it as a fan of music," Ayan says. "I liked the perspective of bettering it as a whole."

After graduation Ayan called Ludwig. An internship wasn't possible; Gateway has strict privacy rules and doesn't hire unpaid staff. But a production engineer job soon opened, and Ayan passed Ludwig's famously difficult sound test.

After little more than a year at Gateway, Ayan started assisting Ludwig, learning the art of mastering from the master himself. Their sensibilities seemed to match, and Ludwig asked his overflow clients if they might give his young protégé a chance. They did. Not only did they come back, they referred friends. Ludwig called the acoustical engineers and had a copy of his first-rate isolation studio built upstairs so Ayan could master full time.

"Adam turned out to be an extremely gifted mastering engineer," Ludwig says. "Building a mastering room for him seemed like an obvious thing to do."

Ludwig is known for finding and building the best equipment available. As such, the studios are among the best acoustical spaces in the world. The walls in Ayan's Studio B have seven layers of sheetrock, the outer



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layers lined with absorption materials and refractor panes. The ceiling is essentially a foam base trap; the floor “floats” on a cushion of foam and springs to minimize vibrations and hold sound. Musicians visiting for a session are mesmerized, saying, “Wow, I have never heard my music sound this good before.”

Ayan sits in a chair facing the speakers, his head bent over hundreds of knobs as he slides along a console of equalizers and processors. He typically masters one album a day. It’s fast, and he’s focused. Only occasionally does he tap his foot. (“We pack a lot of work in here,” he says.) Individually, the alterations are difficult, if not impossible, for the untrained ear to detect. But combined and digitally enhanced, the mastered music pops brilliantly to life. When Ayan slides in a Rolling Stones CD he remastered, it’s as if a young Mick Jagger is in the corner wailing in 15 shades of pain.

“Part of my perspective, and part of why people come to me, is I know in my mind what this can be. Immediately, I’ll say, ‘This sounds a little dull to me,’ so I’ll make it a little livelier,” Ayan says.

Ayan remastered two of the top ten selling albums of 2006, Carrie Underwood’s *Some Hearts* and Rascal Flatts’ *Me & My Gang*, and they sit on a spare back table beside a green lava lamp. His granite desk is similarly bare, holding some CDs, a framed photo of his bride, and, in the corner, that golden Grammy. He’s proud of it. “It is well cared for,” he admits.

“I’d like professionally to stay at Gateway forever. I guess my dream would be for that success to continue,” Ayan says. “It’s a privilege to work with the amazing artists I get to work with, to get to work with them to make their art better and bring it to their fullest potential.” \*

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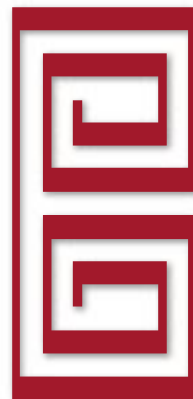
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