

# RICHARD DOWLING

## THE LAST OF THE MASTERING ENGINEERS



*Limerick mastering engineer Richard Dowling celebrates his 30th year in the music business this May. He chats to TLM about the undervalued art of mastering, his thirty years of experience and the ever-changing music industry.*

Dowling has witnessed single-handedly the 'death' of pop music, the rise of the MP3 and the eventual resurrection of vinyl records. To begin, Richard leads us into his own home-built mastering studio. The room was teeming with history from both Dowling's past and significant musical history; including an original piece of equipment used in the first cutting of Never Mind The Bollocks. The walls are adorned with a stunning collection of framed records, from U2 to Suede, showcasing thirty years of hard work and devotion to his craft.

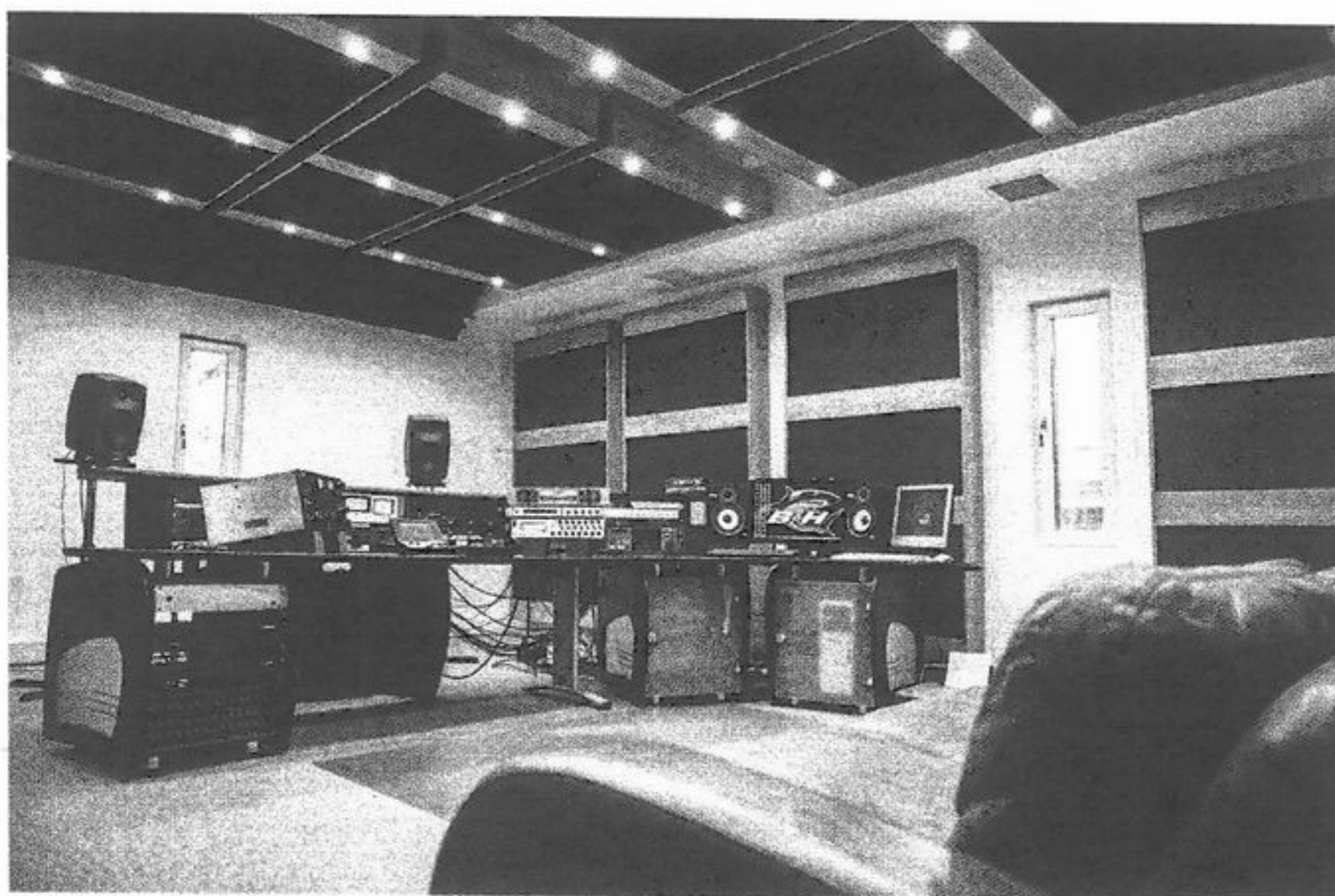
As for the mastering studio itself, "it's the only purpose-built room of its kind in the country. It's purposely built so that when I listen to music, it is absolutely true," Dowling explains. Designed by a London architect, the room has near perfect acoustics, specifically designed so nothing interferes with the process.

This enclosed studio space is vital for the art of mastering. It requires not only a keen ear, but also the perfect environment. Mastering, for those who don't know, is the final stage in creating music; the cherry on top. "Before, a mastering engineer would receive the record lacquer before press, but now, in digital, it's someone listening to make sure a song is right before going out into the world. I bring it to a level that suffices for modern day release, the last step.

"The entire process of mastering is widely undervalued, with some even going so far as to skip the process entirely." Some people think they can do it themselves, some even bypass the process. There was a time when anyone couldn't be a mastering engineer," Dowling reminisces, "equipment alone in the UK cost £1000. Not everyone's a mastering engineer."

The arrival of household technology such as affordable computers, apps, tablets, resulted in a mass-confidence boost and bands began taking mastering into their own hands. "Soon everyone thought they could be a mastering engineer. But in this game, it's all about experience, it's the only way you'll get it right and the only way you'll gain trust." The game completely changed in little over a decade, but Dowling still powered on and remains to this day, one of the few original mastering engineers remaining.





Despite the drastic changes in technology, Dowling insists that the skills involved in mastering itself are only slightly affected. "Most of this job is about your experience and what goes on in your head. I listen to a piece and I'll know instantly what I want to do with it. That's not technology. It's what's upstairs. 60% of what I do is based on brain power and technology will never replace that." Dowling remains true to traditional mastering methods. "The way I work is old school. All the equipment is 'Outside the Box', meaning it's outside the computer. There are computer program versions of all this," he gestures to the heavy machinery and technology around him, "but I prefer the hardware, the 'Real Experience'." After the studio closure in London, Dowling managed to obtain over 50% of his original equipment, turning his studio into a museum of sorts. "We're lucky that the equipment is timeless. But again, they're just a tool to help you get to the end game. The rest is in your head."

Richard Dowling's journey into mastering began thirty years ago in Moylish, now LIT, where he studied electronics for three years. Immediately after his degree, he landed a job in a London studio. He worked as a runner for a while, making coffees and taking in all the information and experience that he could.

"You observe, you get the confidence and you move up the chain." Dowling explains. Not long after, Dowling was given an interview opportunity at PRT Records in Marble Arch in London, formerly known as the famous 70's label, PYE Records. "They were looking for a maintenance assistant and I'd just done three years of electronics. So, I was perfect and they gave me the job. I just didn't want to go from Moylish into Wang or Analog. I didn't want to do it. I did a course in London in '86 and I was useless because I wasn't a musician and I didn't understand anything. I just knew I wanted to do this. I was meant to be a mastering engineer and that's it. It is me, it's not a job, it's what I am."

The complex had two cutting rooms and two studios. During his time here, Dowling had the opportunity to work with some of the biggest names in music, including Simon Cowell, "I did a lot of work with Simon Cowell, who wasn't famous then. I've known Simon since I started in the UK and he knows what he wants," Dowling laughs, "I was doing a lot of work with pop music, like Pop Idol, Gareth Gates, S-Club 7, Steps and Five." Dowling also worked closely with a long list of other artists including Suede, Westlife, The Waterboys and even Sia. "I worked on Sia's first album. I didn't do all of it, but I certainly put it together.

I mastered and remastered about half the tracks." In recent years, Dowling has worked with up-and-coming Irish acts like SOAK, Beoga and The Villagers. When discussing his greatest experiences, he states "just being part of bigger things. Just to be doing it, I guess and to continue doing it."

Although mastering technology remains steadfast and timeless to this day, the rapid development of the internet pulled the industry into near-extinction when online streaming and the rise of MP3 downloads triggered the close of numerous studios, including PRT. "Back then there were more studios. On the West End alone you had seven or eight studios, but there's none now. The whole psychology of it is different now. We don't need to be there anymore, everything's become remote. The whole point of being in the West End in London was to be close to the record companies. Back in the day, the mix would come over on a bit of analogue tape, or DAT tape, by bike, then you'd master that. The whole point was to stay close to record companies, but you don't need that anymore. Everything is just a click away."

Near the end of our interview, Dowling reflects on his own path to mastering. "The kids that go to college just have to go out there and do it for themselves; set up studios or become a producer. Studios do still exist, but it's really hard. It's not the path anymore. Before, it had nothing to do with degrees. When I started off I was a runner and it didn't matter. My face fit the bill that day in the interview. For me, it was meant to be and since that moment I've been working flat out. I've had thirty years of a career out of it, which is remarkable."

Richard Dowling will celebrate 30 years as a mastering engineer this May. To find out more about his extensive and impressive discography you can check out his website at [wavmastering.com](http://wavmastering.com).

Article by: Christine Costello

Photography by Shane Serrano