

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: It's Studio Radicals, a new dCS podcast that celebrates the musical visionaries who are breaking new ground in their field. I'm your host, Kate Hutchinson. I'm a journalist and broadcaster, and over 8 episodes I'll be meeting some truly innovative minds, from leading producers and composers, to engineers and pioneers.

Now, mastering is the final part of the album-making process – where the songs are fine-tuned and all the elements are shaped into a cohesive whole.

Cicely Balston: Mastering is a bit like sculpting sound. It's to do with shaping and slightly manipulating, in the sonic sphere, in order to present people's music as well as it possibly can be presented.

Kate Hutchinson: Cicely Balston is one of the UK's breakthrough young talents. They took the Tonmeister course at the University of Surrey and after that, went from working in leading London studios like Gearbox and Air to Abbey Road, with its iconic zebra crossing out front and some legendary gold discs lining the reception walls.

Cicely Balston: There's always people outside. They're on the crossing, they're taking photos or whatever, and you thread your way through them and then come through the gate and come up the stairs.

Kate Hutchinson: Cicely has a hugely varied list of credits and has put their finishing touches to everything from punk to alt-pop to UK jazz, as well as some of the most memorable film soundtracks of the past few years. They've also worked on the back catalogue of some guy called David Bowie...

Cicely Balston: Nile Rodgers came in when we were doing *Let's Dance*, Tony Visconti came in when we were doing *Lodger*, *Low* and *Heroes*.

Kate Hutchinson: Cicely's ear for detail has been recognised twice at the Music Producers Guild Awards – the high watermark for those behind the mixing desk in the UK. They won Mastering Engineer of the Year in 2023 and 2025, and also this year, they were part of the team that took home the award for Best Original Score Recording for their work on the very memorable thriller-comedy *Saltburn*. Cicely's approach to listening goes way beyond the technical. Their finely-tuned intuition can elevate a track from great to unforgettable.

Cicely Balston: I want people to be able to engage with the details as much as possible. 'cause I think that brings the most emotional impact.

Kate Hutchinson: Today I'm at Abbey Road Studios with Cicely Balston.

Obviously this is a bit of a legendary studio. I'm really excited to be at Abbey Road. How does it feel walking through the gates every morning?

Cicely Balston: It's just really fun, and, yeah, it's amazing to be somewhere with so much history.

Kate Hutchinson: I mean, you grew up in London, right? So it must be really amazing to end up working somewhere that is so much part of that lineage of great musical history here.

Cicely Balston: Yeah, it is. I feel very lucky in that I've worked at a couple of big London studios. It's amazing to be here now 'cause it's amazing to work somewhere that everyone has heard of, most people know the name. And when I used to work at Air Studios – I actually really vividly remember driving past Air, in the car with my dad when I was a teenager and him being like, that's a recording studio!

Kate Hutchinson: What was your end goal when you started out with mastering? What kind of music did you aspire to work on?

Cicely Balston: Honestly, anything. I wouldn't say I thought I will actively get into mastering from a position of not being in it at all. I think I didn't really realise it was a job until somewhere at some point at university. But the path has sort of unfolded. It's always been more of a, like... of the options that are in front of me, what do I want to pursue? So I did a placement year, I worked at a place called Gearbox Records, and I worked at a couple of other studios at that time as well, doing recording, doing mixing, assisting. But I just really liked being at Gearbox and I really liked the side of mastering that's quite quick. I think it's amazing that I get to work on all this kind of different genres, different music, so many different projects.

And I did vinyl mastering from the start, and that was a whole world that I thought was quite cool, quite interesting. It was quite fun to learn something so tactile, so I enjoyed being at Gearbox and they offered me a job after university, so I went back there and then I thought, well, this is really cool, but I'd love to learn more. And then a job at Air, an assisting role at Air came up.

Kate Hutchinson: While you were at Air, you ended up working on a dream remastering project, which was the David Bowie catalogue. How did that feel as someone that was just starting out? Because you were an assistant mastering engineer at that point, right?

Cicely Balston: Yeah, and it was an amazing one to assist on, because actually mastering assisting isn't necessarily a very common role, but in the scope of that project, they were working with a mastering engineer called Ray Staff, who was at Air, who employed me. They were working with him because he was there the first time round and he did a lot of the tapes and he was at Trident Studios around the time, you know, various of the tapes, we'd get the master tapes in and Ray's handwriting would be on them, from the '70s. It was every album of Bowie's, grouped into box sets by chronological order. And not only would the main albums be there, but all the b-sides, there'd be a live album, the singles.

And so it was this incredible archiving, yeah, presentation of all this music side by side. I don't think I've ever had that engagement with any other artist. And someone who I like so much anyway.

Kate Hutchinson: So you were a big Bowie fan at the time?

Cicely Balston: So I was definitely a Bowie fan before, and I'm significantly more of a Bowie fan since, having spent three years listening to everything from each era. At one point we were getting the multi-tracks out. We were listening to the original half inch masters, we'd have different producers. I remember Nile Rodgers came in when we were doing *Let's Dance*, Tony

Visconti came in when we were doing *Lodger*, *Low* and *Heroes*. And so to get not only the actual records, but everything around them, everything that was going on at that time, was incredible.

Kate Hutchinson: Just a few legends coming into the studio, to check out what you're doing!

Cicely Balston: Yeah, I'm really lucky. Ha ha! I'm very lucky.

Kate Hutchinson: One of the things I'm really interested in, in terms of remastering material, is that I wonder how you approach it when the artist in question isn't around themselves to consult?

Cicely Balston: Specifically on that project, Bowie did plan out all of the stuff that was happening, that was very much him and then it was his estate were were heavily involved, at every stage and the producers made a real concerted effort, to get people involved.

And that is the balance of making sure that you're doing something that people want and that people would be happy with. And when you're working on stuff that so many people have a very strong connection to, it is a really tricky line to balance between doing what's needed – because it's being remastered for a reason, for the re-release or for an anniversary release, or to bring it more in line with today's tastes, or for today's media, while being true to the thing that people were connecting with in the first place.

And there is a lot of problem-solving. And also it's to do with... there's as much problem solving in the technical domain. Like, who has the master tapes? How do they sound? Are they still OK, physically? Are they still in good nick? Trying to source audio, trying to get what might be the best possible sounding thing. And even if that's not necessarily what people might think, it's the best sounding thing, but you know, unless you were there in the room listening to all the options, then you can't know that that was the decision that was being made. And at some point someone just has to make that call. You can't please everyone, I guess.

Kate Hutchinson: Did you learn anything new about Bowie's music after working on that, after being so close to it for three years?

Cicely Balston: Yeah, I mean, we did a lot of demos, we would be listening to songs in there, like slightly preformed stages, was amazing. And I think what definitely struck me was like often the takes that you hear in the main versions, in the released versions are almost exactly the same as you hear in every demo running up to it. His delivery – it was never like, oh, I'm just gonna mumble this version. It was like every performance was a performance.

Kate Hutchinson: What did you learn from those first few years at Gearbox and Air? 'Cos you took on a really interesting mix of projects there across all different sorts of genres.

Cicely Balston: I think Gearbox especially, because it's a label as well, and at the time there were only a few of us working there. It's still a pretty small operation. The love of music really shone true there. And it's not like that has been absent in any way from anyone else, but we were a small team, I used to spend 15 minutes or so in the mornings when it was me and someone called Adam Sieff, who has been really involved in the music industry for a long time, and it would be like musical education with Adam. For 15 minutes he'd be like, 'Have you heard

this track? Have you heard this track? Oh, you need to listen to this classic recording of this. You need to listen to that.'

And the same, actually, across everything that we were doing. Because it was a label and a studio, we were really able to hone in on the projects and the music that really spoke to us. So we did a direct-to-disc once with someone called Emily Barker & The Red Clay Halo. And that was amazing 'cause that came from them, they really wanted to do this direct-to-vinyl or direct-to-lacquer project where they had to do a whole side, no stopping. It was just coming straight through the mixing, being mixed live straight into the lathe. That was really amazing. The Binker and Moses record, I think at that time that they did, I remember that one really vividly.

Kate Hutchinson: So that's Binker Golding and Moses Boyd, two of the emerging stars of the UK jazz scene of recent years. That was quite an important scene to you growing up, right?

Cicely Balston: Yeah. I was growing up in London, we had Saturday morning jazz band with Nikki Yeoh, who's just a phenomenal teacher. She is an incredible person. I just feel so lucky to have been in a capital city that the people that we were learning from were people that you could then go and see them do their shows. We would have visiting teachers that would pop in that she knew that maybe she had taught 10 years ago or whatever. And they were then on tour with whoever, I think Sam Beste came in at one point, mid Amy Winehouse tour or something like that. I think it made a career in music seem almost possible because we were seeing people who were professional and doing a wide variety of things. And you can suddenly see the path as it could open up for you.

Kate Hutchinson: And I love the idea that you were immersed in this jazz and instrumental scene in London, and then you ended up working with a few of those artists. And one of the most notable ones is Nubya Garcia, one of the UK's most brilliant saxophonists.

Cicely Balston: She's a friend of mine, so we were there together in the Saturday morning jazz band as teenagers and we were at school together. It was really, really great to work on some of her early releases when she was just starting to create albums as her own project. And it's been nothing but wonderful to see her just stepping up and stepping up and being her incredible self.

Kate Hutchinson: Are you having to think about things differently when you're mastering an album where the saxophone is the sort of main voice, if you like? As opposed to something else.

Cicely Balston: I think I tend to keep things on quite a sonic level, I've noticed in myself. So for example, if people then come back to me later and say, oh, there's a swear word in the third verse or something, can you get rid of it? I probably won't have noticed that there was a swear word, because I'm not really taking in the lyrics as words.

I'm more prone to taking in the sound as sound, and so on that level, a saxophone isn't any different to a lead vocal because I'm still just listening to... it's the main focus and I'm still listening to the ways in which what I'm doing is affecting the tone of it and is affecting how it comes out or, or sets back.

It's quite a complicated instrument sonically, a saxophone. It's very wide frequency range and it can be very susceptible to very small frequency or phase shifts. But actually no, roughly, as far as I can, it's a very sonic experience I think that I'm, or that I have, it's sort of trying to step it

away from being like, that is a bass guitar, that is a saxophone, that is a vocal, and it's just much more like, how does this sound as a whole?

Kate Hutchinson: Where are we now in terms of listening? How have we evolved? 'Cause I feel like people's desire for a more quality listening experience has grown. How do you see that evolution?

Cicely Balston: Yeah, I think it's a really interesting time actually, because on the one hand we have this ability to compare anything at any time to anything else. And on the other hand, the technology is getting better, it's much more accessible now than it used to be. You know, if you remember the sort of first generation AirPods compared to what's coming out now, it sounds a lot nicer. People want stuff that sounds better. There is an appreciation and probably the surge in vinyl sales and things like that is part and parcel of people wanting to feel like they're listening in a much more sort of intentional way, I guess? So it's a sort of interesting space, but the music industry is still at its core trying to sell something, somewhere.

Something that I like is when people or artists can feel free to be a little bit cross-genre or to do something a little bit different. Whether that's musically or sonically, that's quite fun to play in, to see when it *is* possible to push things into a slightly unexpected direction. Or you might listen to it and you're thinking just instrumentation-wise, this music is this genre. But then sonically we're hearing something else. And that's definitely happening a lot.

The projects that I like working on the most is when you feel like there's a bit of space to discuss stuff. Sometimes I work on things and it feels like everyone's a bit, maybe, nervous or something, and with completely good reason in every individual case, whether that's because they've had one hit and they need to get the next one.

I love working on things where we can all feel a bit free to be like, oh, hey, yeah, that sounds cool, but like, maybe we should do this? It's the little subtle positioning. It's the little subtle sonic shifts. I like feeling free to take people out of their comfort zones, or to push things in certain directions.

Kate Hutchinson: How much of an art form is mastering an album? What are the sorts of different elements that go into it?

Cicely Balston: I think for me, the most important thing about mastering is that it's to do with bringing out the intention of the music. It isn't that I added X db or X frequency, or I used this compressor over this compressor – those are the tools that I use to do the thing. But it is about listening and *trying* to get what the intention was and trying to bring that out as much as it's possible to, so that everyone can hear what was trying to be said and what was trying to come across. The thing that I'm doing is taking something that is ostensibly quite close to being finished and I'm adding my subjective take on what needs to happen to finish it. And it's so project-specific and it's so track-specific that I can't give you any more tangible, you know, I can't explain any more like process-based explanations of what mastering is.

And so you can only ever really talk about zoomed-out intention of trying to make things sound good. Doing this to that track isn't gonna work for another track. And so I think people want a more process-based answer because they want to understand the steps that mastering is, but the steps are: have a listen, try and tune into your gut and what you think needs to happen and then do it. So it's about honing your instincts. And I think people are coming to me for *my*

instincts. I'm not changing things on a huge scale. The amount of change that's happened from something not existing to an album being mixed, you know, that's huge. Whereas what I'm doing is shaping and sculpting.

I tend to like listening to things in albums. I like listening to the whole, start to finish. And at the moment, I think it's hard. The world has moved to quite a single-based thing. And so trying to bridge that, join those two things where you're aware of the singles, of course, they're absolutely vital at the moment. But I want the whole, the finished whole, to feel cohesive, and there's various things that go into that and that actually I do sculpt the album as a whole, if I have the chance to. So something that might exist as a single, you might want it to sound in one specific way, but you might want it to sound different when it's sitting next to the other two tracks that it's next to on the album. And you might want it to sound calmer, or you might want... that bit's the high point of the album or that bit's the low point of the album, or whatever it is. And that might be a different set of sonic needs, almost. We put a lot of craft into the project as a whole, and maybe people don't realise that that's a process that's going on.

Kate Hutchinson: I love this idea of you as this master sculptor, sanding and smoothing some other bits over.

Cicely Balston: Yeah, I think it's the sanding and the smoothing. It's where to put it. Which light are we gonna put, what are we gonna put in the background, like, so that that sculpture looks as everyone intended it to, like a sculpture would look very different if you shoved it in the corner and didn't light it, versus put it in the middle of the room and really drew attention to it.

Kate Hutchinson: When you're looking at mastering tracks, are you thinking about things in more broad, impressionistic strokes? Are you thinking more about the emotion rather than the different elements that go into the track?

Cicely Balston: Yeah, I think I am 80% listening in broad strokes, and how it feels on a gut level. I'm always listening to the differences. I'm always listening to what I've done and putting things in and out and, and doing maybe the same thing on two different pieces of equipment and seeing how the different equipment sounds doing ostensibly the same change. But everything sounds different. Everything has a sound. And when you're dealing in quite small shifts, it's all about that difference. And one thing, you can have the same EQ settings and one EQ is gonna make the whole thing sound like a live, and one of them is gonna make it all shut down and just sound a bit strange. And even though you're doing the same thing on both, it's not because I've done plus 0.5 at whatever frequency, it's purely because I'm doing that *on* that specific piece of equipment. And so trying to tune into that. And so I'm pretty much always listening to the overall impact.

And then I might zoom in a little bit and sometimes something might feel good for the verse and it doesn't feel so good for the choruses. And then I might chop and change between settings at that point, or I might be tuning into one thing and I say, I really like how it's making the drums and the bass sit. And then someone else might be in the room and they were listening to the tambourine or something and they'll be like, oh, well it's actually making that maybe stick out a little bit. And I'll be like, oh, I hadn't really shifted my focus onto that. I was listening to something else. It's interesting what different people tune into, and the way that you might come in another day and suddenly the way that it's affecting a specific element will be a surprise because you were listening to something else.

Kate Hutchinson: So you have to listen to it a couple of times to make sure that you've ticked off all the different elements and considered them all.

Cicely Balston: Yes, definitely. Yeah yeah yeah. When people listen to the music that I've worked on, I think the main thing that I want them to get is to be able to hear all of the elements, all of the detail, all of the things that's making up that track. And I want those things to come across, irrespective of what they're listening on. And that's a tricky process, but trying to make sure that everything has the space and the clarity that it needs in the sound. So that even if you were listening on one small speaker, you're still getting the really key elements – whether that's the kick drum and the vocal, or whether that's the bass guitar and the tambourine, who knows? That's music specific and that's genre specific. And that's different track to track, but I want people to be able to engage with the details as much as possible. 'Cause I think that brings the most emotional impact.

Kate Hutchinson: How do you ensure that that emotional impact is punchy, no matter what format you're mastering for? Or maybe it's not the emotional impact that you're gunning for. Maybe you want people to feel a certain mood about your tracks, or a certain warmth, or visualise something in particular. I don't know. Smell something!

Cicely Balston: Wow, if I could make people smell things...! When I'm trying to think about people listening on lots of different formats, it's like trying to identify what's important in the music, what the intention was from the artist as to what things needed to come across, and making sure that those are as clear as possible. Then it's most likely to come across, across different formats and different mediums.

There's a line to be found between what's the most likely scenario. What are people who are gonna be listening to this? What are they more likely to want to hear? And so you can't sculpt everything for everyone. It's a constant subjective, almost hierarchy of which things to leave for who, and who's going to be engaging with this thing and how do we make sure it's there for them, for those that want to find it.

Kate Hutchinson: Do you ever leave little truffle mushrooms for people like that? Like if you're really listening out for this on a really excellent system, you will be able to hear this thing that no one else will be able to hear.

Cicely Balston: I feel like a) probably bass is one of those ones, depending on how the kind of thing that it sounds. But you can leave quite a lot in, depending on what the overall sonic make-up of it is. And if you don't have it, if you can't reproduce that in your system, you just won't hear it. And for the few people that have systems that can, you know that you've left it in for them, and it's really nice.

Kate Hutchinson: An extra tambourine shake. For the real heads.

Cicely Balston: Something that I do that often feels like I'm being a little bit finicky when people are here, is gaps and fades. I am sitting there cranking the volume, listening to how the tail end, the last note, *how* it fades out and what's in that for people. And I guess one of the little things that maybe sometimes we do leave in is like if someone puts their guitar down or they make a little noise or they say something. And I quite like it when those things are in there, because most people, as soon as the last note hits, they probably switch off, or they move to a different song or whatever.

And sometimes if you stay, just tuning in, listening, you'll someone will say something at the end. I really like those kind of things. There's a lot that's being considered that maybe people don't realise is being considered. And it's like, I might turn the intro of something up by 2 db just for 10 seconds because it didn't feel like it quite hit properly when it came in off the back of the track before it. And maybe that was important, maybe it wasn't, but it's important to *me* because it feels better like that to me. And yeah, maybe people don't realise that we're sitting in here timing the gaps between tracks, making sure the next track comes in at the right place, or tweaking the little levels. Or sometimes the first note of the chorus, you just wanna hit it slightly harder, so I'm just turning up the tiniest amount, half a db or something. But I think it's important.

Kate Hutchinson: I think you've brilliantly demystified the art of mastering there. It was just making me think about how far we've come from that weird period. Was it in the '70s or '80s, where at the end of tracks, it just got turned down. That was the end of the song! Like oh, there it disappears off.

Cicely Balston: Yeah. We're done now! Is that the end of the side? Yes. Absolutely.

Kate Hutchinson: What do you love about working with up-and-coming bands like Witch Fever?

Cicely Balston: What I love about working with up-and-coming bands or artists is that you're part of the sculpting of where they end up going. There's no preconception about what they've done and what they need to sound like, because people are gonna expect something based on decades and decades of releases or whatever, that it's just purely trying to get to the core of what they're trying to present, in any instance. And then sculpt that and keep that true. And then you get to see them go on to bigger and bigger things. I did some tracks with a band called Punch Bag, and I think they self-released one of them and then they got signed and they've just released another single, and it's just doing so well. They're doing so well. They're on all these playlists, they're on all these features. And I met them – I hadn't met them when I was working on their tracks, but we were in contact.

But then I went to one of their gigs, and it's just so exciting to see these people who are hopefully having such a great time and they've got a really good time ahead of them. And they're just at the beginning of it and it's just such an exciting time for them and it's amazing to be part of that process and to be part of that team, whether that was just for the duration of the tracks that I did or not, that's fine. But it's just something really exciting. It's fun to be working on things when people might not have heard of who they are and then months down the line or whenever, suddenly they come out and people have heard of it or they've been to see a gig or they've suddenly had some engagement and you're like, oh yeah, I worked on that. You know, I was there!

Kate Hutchinson: Is that real-life, tangible connection even more important today? Because I guess you're sequestered away in this top room, the blinds are down. It can be quite isolating. So is that important to you, to remind yourself that you're part of a community, a musical community outside of these four walls?

Cicely Balston: It is so important and it's something that I am trying to find out or work out how to angle slightly back towards, I think I slightly lost it for a little while, or I wasn't living in London, I was just coming in to do the work and, and so trying to find the ways to feel engaged and part of

the team. To feel like you're part of, part of a community and like part of the wider picture is really important to me.

Kate Hutchinson: And you're not just an engineer for hire, you're not just a gun for hire. You have a sort of emotional connection to the projects you're working on.

Cicely Balston: Yeah, exactly. And I think that that mysterious thing of mastering, I'm not quite sure entirely where that comes from. Obviously I do mastering, so it's not a mysterious process to me. But I think the things that I find a bit more difficult is when you don't necessarily have that connection, is when it starts just shifting into a process that you just have to do and that you're just expected to... like that stuff is always harder and I always have to bring it back and remind myself to try and connect with the people, whoever they may be. Each release is their art, they've come to you to work on it. It's such an honour and a privileged position to be in.

This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Thank you for tuning in. Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. This episode starred Cicely Balston.