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How To Become A Recording Engineer, Part 1

Tips & Techniques

People + Opinion : Industry / Music Biz

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Do you want to engineer top acts in top studios? Are you prepared to devote your entire life to music recording? In this new series, **David Mellor** explains how you can become a professional music recording engineer. This is the first article in a four-part series. Read [Part 2](#), [Part 3](#) and [Part 4](#).

Project studio equipment is becoming ever more affordable, and better in quality. Once it was highly unusual for anyone to have a studio at home: now it is commonplace. Only a few years ago, affordable equipment couldn't compete in terms of sound quality with pro gear: now it can be every bit as good. So why is there still such a thing as a commercial studio, a studio that is available to everyone for hire at an hourly or daily rate? Why doesn't everyone record in the comfort of their own home?

There are several answers to these questions. One might be that a project calls for a large number of musicians and you can't fit them all into your own studio. Or perhaps you need to use the acoustics of a large room to capture a better sound. These are very valid reasons and difficult to argue with. But I think there are other reasons why commercial studios, even though some might be struggling a little during the current project studio boom, will always be a valuable resource for the recording musician. The first is that a purpose-designed space is always going to be a better productivity tool than a converted bedroom. There is only so much equipment you can fit into a four-by-three-metre room, and even though you might install tie lines to another part of the house or flat that has better acoustics for recording acoustic instruments and vocals, you are always going to have to compromise between the requirements of the studio and those of everyday domestic life. If the sound leaking from your studio annoys the neighbours, you will have other worries to contend with too.

The second, and most important, justification for the continued existence of commercial studios is that they become centres of professionalism and expertise. If a studio has good equipment and good acoustics, and every other possible factor is favourable, then the best artists will want to record there and they will bring with them the best engineers and producers. Assistant engineers employed by the studio will therefore learn directly from the best possible tutors and go on to be the top engineers and producers of the future. Feedback from the studio's clients will allow the owner or manager to fine-tune the equipment provision, and other facilities, to the precise requirements of their *clientèle*. Compare this with the enthusiastic and talented musician who sets up a home project studio with equipment bought on the advice of a dealer and then learns how to record by the slow process of trial and error. Yes, you can get amazing results this way, and the isolation a home studio imposes can in a way encourage its own kind of creativity, but this kind of self-tuition can never beat an apprenticeship with the masters of the craft.

In this series I hope to explain how to set about becoming an engineer in a commercial studio. The things you will eventually need to know include just about everything you will read in *Sound On Sound's* Technique features, but what I would like to do is concentrate on the bare essentials -- the knowledge that will get you into the studio in the first place, and up and running as an effective assistant engineer before too long. The rest you will pick up along the way. You will see the engineer connect the equipment in a certain manner, then when you have some spare time you can check out your library of back issues of *Sound On Sound* to learn the details. And while you are learning about the equipment, most importantly, you will be learning about sound and music itself, and how to work with producers and musicians. Not everyone, however technically capable, is cut out to be a recording engineer, and being able to interact effectively with the people who actually create the music is a skill that can only be learned by doing the job.

Engineers -- Technicians Or Musicians?

I think most interested people will already have a pretty good idea of the answer to this question, but it's worth mentioning the differences between music recording engineering and other types of sound engineering and recording. The biggest difference is that the music recording engineer is much more of a musician than technician, whereas in any other type of sound engineering a solid grasp of the technical aspects of the equipment, and the systems into which it is connected, is of utmost importance. A PA engineer, for example, needs to be able to get a good sound for a band and for an audience, but you won't get very far in your PA career unless you know how to set the equipment up, and you know how to fix or work around the inevitable problems that occur. Even in a broadcast sound studio, where the equipment is permanently installed and ready for use, probably with maintenance staff on standby, the general atmosphere is technical, and the engineers spend their lunch breaks chatting about the best brand of tape for their DTRS recorders, and other fascinating topics.

In a music recording studio, all the actual recording equipment is permanently set up so the only real technical knowledge is, say, how to patch in a rented compressor. The ability to line up a 24-track analogue recorder was once considered an essential skill, but modern equipment is either maintenance-free (which means that when your hard disk fails, you junk it!), or so sophisticated that it needs specialist service attention. We could draw an analogy with a concert pianist who knows what all

the 88 keys and three pedals do, but can't tune his own instrument and certainly wouldn't know how to maintain it other than to give it a quick polish every now and then. It is certainly possible to become an engineer just knowing how to operate the equipment, with little or no electronic or digital knowledge beyond that. Having said all this, however, I should add that while the ability to work effectively with the producer and musicians and get the right sounds is of paramount importance, creative recording is all about getting *more* out of the equipment -- possibly more than it was ever designed for. To be able to do this, and keep one step ahead of the competition, an engineer should have at least a feeling for what is going on inside the equipment, even if he or she doesn't understand what every last component or every last digit does.

Engineer Or Psychologist?

Recording is of course a technical and musical process, but it is also about dealing with people. If you don't have, or can't acquire, interpersonal skills, you'll never become a recording engineer in a commercial studio. This is potentially one of the drawbacks to the recording courses that are available, both privately and in universities and colleges of further education. Courses can teach you how to engineer, but it is almost impossible to simulate the working environment sufficiently closely to encourage the development of people skills. Recording studios, therefore, will often almost prefer to take junior staff off the street than consider applicants who may already have considerable technical knowledge and skill. This way they can be sure that a balance of skills develops gradually, and that the new starter shows sufficient respect for the other people in the studio, rather than weighing in with an 'I know it all already' attitude. And if you know nothing to start with, you will tend to pay more attention to putting the right amount of sugar in everyone's tea and coffee!

There is a common misapprehension that to work in a recording studio you have to be 'cool' in some way. Not so -- the only cool people in the studio are the artists in their shades and leather trousers. Everyone else is cool only in the sense of being unflappable in a crisis. Most of the recording studio people I have come across, including engineers, receptionists and managers, appear to be the nicest, friendliest, most outgoing people you could ever care to meet, without even the merest hint of 'attitude'. And if it's all an act, it's a good one.

Keep It Quiet!

The career of a recording engineer usually follows a pretty standard route. You will start at the bottom well away from the action, probably in reception (night reception perhaps) and the broom cupboard. Chances are that if a toilet gets blocked during the night then you'll have to clear that out too! If you are good at these basic jobs, then your studio manager will probably keep you doing them as long as possible. This might seem unfair, but if your mind is so fixed on the studio that you can't concentrate on the menial tasks, you will probably be let go. Contrary to popular opinion, it's actually quite easy to get a job in a recording studio -- if you happen to be in the right place at the right time. If the studio manager likes the look of you and you come across well in the interview, then you'll be in. But you are in only on the strictest probation, and at the first sign that you are anything less than totally willing, able and uncomplaining in the face of any task, your probation period will come to a sudden end. I have known instances where a youngster has got into a studio but hasn't liked the menial work -- or the manager -- and then left thinking that they would easily walk into another studio job. Big mistake!

After you have done night reception for six months, you might get your big break and the studio door will open for you -- to clean out the ashtrays! No, seriously, you will get into the studio and control room quite early on but at first it will be to tidy up when there are no clients around, though soon you will be tending to their tea, coffee and snack requirements. Eventually you will be allowed to sit quietly in the control room in case your assistance is needed. Keep your mouth firmly closed at all times and never draw attention to yourself by walking around the room unless it's necessary or unless at least two other people are doing so. When you are first in the control room with clients present there will be little you can do to help, and much you can do to annoy. While you are sitting quietly, remember to stay alert because the engineer could ask you to do something at any time. Gradually, you will find yourself doing more and more tasks which are directly concerned with the recording, and as you watch and learn you are on the way to becoming a competent and efficient assistant engineer.

Finally, you will come to a stage when you think you can run a session unassisted. Traditionally, there are two ways this can happen. One is where, probably in a smaller studio, the manager will let you use down time to work on your own projects. In some studios, the free use of down time is offered as an alternative to money as remuneration for your efforts! Moving up from assistant to full engineer via this route is probably the least stressful option since you have the opportunity to make a few mistakes as you progress without irritating a paying client and ruining the studio's reputation. The other way you might make the transition from assistant to engineer is via a lucky break -- when, for example, you arrive at the studio and set everything up as normal for a session, only to find that the engineer has flu and you will have to take over. This really has happened, and I reckon that sometimes it is actually planned that an assistant gets thrown into the deep end in this way, when the studio thinks that the time is right. Just like being thrown in at the deep end of the swimming pool, it is a case of sink or swim. You can't run screaming in a blind panic from the studio since that is hardly likely to help advance your career. You have to coolly and calmly recollect everything you have learned about running a session and slip with apparent ease and comfort into the engineer's chair.

You've Made It!

How will you know when you have made it as an engineer? Are you an engineer the moment you begin your first solo session? Are you an engineer when the day comes when you realise that you don't have to assist any more? Are you an engineer when you get your first credit in a CD booklet? Or are you an engineer when it says 'Occupation: Recording Engineer' on a tax demand from the Inland Revenue? Since most recording engineers work freelance, the situation where a studio manager says, "Congratulations, you've got the job" never arises. Assistant engineers seem to metamorphose gradually into engineers, but there is one defining moment when you really can say that you are a fully fledged recording engineer -- when you get a phone call and the manager of an established act says, "I've heard your work and I'd like you to engineer my act's next single". Just say yes.

Confirmation of your status will come when you get a further call, some weeks or months in the future, and a management company who already represent a number of engineers offer you their services. This means you have made it -- you haven't made it big yet, but you are in the league. What happens to your career from this point is up to you, as it always has been. There is a saying among freelance workers of all kinds that you are only as good as your last job, which means that your reputation hangs upon the success or failure of the last piece of work you did. This is true up to a point. Success breeds success, and if you are associated with a successful single, the chances are that other people will want to share in what they perceive as being partly your success -- never mind that it was a brilliant song by an established artist which wasn't recorded all that well because you had a cold and your ears were blocked. Conversely, you might have made a brilliant recording of an average song performed by a nobody which peaked at 99 in the chart and was subsequently never heard of. If success can breed success, then it is equally true that failure can breed failure, and it may not all be down to you.

Studio View

Ian Davidson is Director of Virgin Studios, consisting of The Town House, Olympic Studios and Manor Mobiles.

If someone is looking for a job in a recording studio, should they write, telephone or call in person?

We only normally look at people's letters. We check what credentials they have via their letters and CVs. If someone telephoned we would ask them to write or we would be taking calls all day. We do keep everything on file.

What really happens to the letters?

In actual fact about once a year we have to have a clearout. We just can't keep everything. We also grade them as they come in. Some are actually hopeless so we write to them and say sorry we haven't got any vacancies, but the ones that are potentially good we do keep on file, and when we have a vacancy we go back six or eight months and pull out all the good ones.

If you did have a vacancy, what would you be looking for in the letter?

Someone with a reasonable education. Not necessarily A-levels but someone with five or six GCSEs of reasonable standard, hopefully including music and some technical subjects. We also like people who have got their own recording equipment, although it may only be very basic, people who have simple synthesizers, sequencers or little PC systems. We definitely would be more interested in them than people who haven't got any knowledge of recording music at all. We also would look at people who have done courses, although I am not a big fan of them, especially the completely private ones, because they are taking money off kids who at the end of it have not got much of a chance of getting a job. Nevertheless, if people have been on these courses, that's quite high in our priorities.

What age group are you looking for?

Around 17 to 19 is the ideal age. Although I say that, we have some quite experienced assistant engineers in their late twenties who are really good, but that is an unusual situation. They would have to have some unusual credentials to start at that age.

So the older they get...

The more likely they are to be set in their ways. What we like to do is mould the people into the way we work. It's not heavy or anything but people might pick up bad habits from other studios. If people have been at other studios for three or four years before they come to us they may do things differently. We like to take them fresh from school or college and train them in our own way.

What would you look for in the interview?

Just to endorse all of the reasons that they are there. Obviously we have picked them out from a CV. We would need to develop a conversation with them with regard to what's in their CV and get a bit deeper into it and point out that it's not as glamorous as they think. I'll tell them they are going to be working lots of hours and see how they react to all that. Normally people who have got to the interview stage know what they are going to be doing -- making tea, coffee, running errands, things like that. And personality is important, I want to see if they are particularly nervous, or if they are particularly cocky they may not go down too well. Something in between is what we are looking for.

We definitely want a practical outlook. Even though you are not expected to understand the whole way a studio works, having an interest in placing microphones and understanding technology is necessary at the interview stage. And how they react to working all those long hours and losing their social life. I don't encourage that, but it is unfortunately the very nature of the way people work. It's just very long hours. If we put assistants with clients, basically the assistant has to work as long as the client is prepared to. Very often that's at least a 12-hour day.

How long will it be before an assistant does some real work in the studio?

We would normally put a new person into the tape store so we have someone constantly looking after fresh tapes, light bulb stores, running errands, just general dogsbody. They would usually spend about six or eight months doing that and then they would move on to the assisting stage. It really gives us a chance to assess their abilities and their suitability for the position whilst they are doing the tape store job, so that they can get familiar with the different tapes they are handling and get familiar with the studio culture basically, and that gives us a good idea whether they are suitable to move on up into the studio.

And how long would it be before they were operating the console?

That varies. I have had one or two people who have done that within a year but we do have assistant engineers who have been assisting for seven or eight years -- they just haven't had the break. They are capable of operating the console and running sessions but they haven't had the lucky breaks with the appropriate clients. I would say the minimum is a year, but it can be a lot longer.

How would that lucky break occur?

It just depends who they are working with. If they happen to gel nicely with a particular client they may be offered the next engineering gig with them. That's normally how it would happen. We do have some exceptional assistants who have got to the controls within 18 months to two years. That's really not normal though.

Do they get the chance to experiment in down time?

Yes, they are quite welcome to be in the studio. But luckily both Town House and Olympic are busy studios so

down time is not something that we want much of anyway. But they have got the opportunity -- they just have to ask the appropriate studio manager.

Do you ever have to let people go?

It's always an option. We normally do pick the right people but we have made one or two mistakes over the last 15 years or so. At the other end of the scale, when people have been assisting for a very long time they get really frustrated and they tend to move on themselves, which is good because it encourages younger people to come through. We don't want blockages in the system. If people are becoming stale then they should move on and seek management and try and make it on their own. It's down to their personality and also, as I said before, to getting a lucky break with a client who is going to be busy and is prepared to let a younger person man the console.

This is only partially true, however, because once you have a solid body of work behind you, you can afford to have the odd off-day now and then, as long as you don't make a habit of it. Some of the biggest-earning names in entertainment have made really awful mistakes in their careers, in the full view of the public, and have recovered to go on to greater success. It's fortunate that success is remembered and failure is usually forgotten.

So you've made it. As well as the immense pleasure and satisfaction you get from your work, you'll receive considerable amounts of money. If you have the ability to engineer successful recordings, more and more people will want you to work for them, to the extent that there won't be enough time to handle all the projects that are offered to you. What's the answer? Put up your rates until the number of people that can afford your services, and the amount of work they have for you, matches the time you have available. I have heard of engineers who have bought sizable houses for cash, and to get this major life event out of the way early on in your career frees you from much of the stress and strain normal people have to endure well into their fifties.

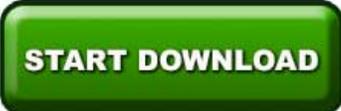
The only snag is that even though you may earn a lot of money, you won't have any time left to enjoy it! You will be in the studio day in, day out, month in, month out. Your skin will turn a deathly shade of grey and you will look like you have spent six months holidaying in a morgue. And even if you are good at your work, and successful, you will be under tremendous pressure. Artists and record companies trade on the success of their projects, and the failure of a career or a record label could just be the next single away. Inevitably, you will end up taking on much of this strain yourself, and eventually you may buckle under it. There may come a point where you simply have to get out of engineering for the sake of your health and well-being, or at least try and put yourself in a position where you can be more relaxed and pick and choose your projects. It is, however, difficult to back off from success -- you're either hot or you're nothing. City traders have similar stresses, which can be borne by someone in their twenties, but not as easily after the age of 30. The route from this point could be graceful retirement, or perhaps production in which, although it can be equally stressful, you have a greater degree of control over your projects (it is a well-established fact that stress is borne more easily by someone who feels that they are in charge of what they are doing).

Despite the long hours, the stress, and the many and varied other drawbacks to a career as a recording engineer, the excitement of capturing a musical performance to perfection is more than adequate compensation, and seeing a CD with your name on it in your high-street record store for the first time is a real thrill. Next month, I'll tell you how to get in on the fun. **SOS**

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