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How to Become a Recording Engineer, Part 2

Tips & Techniques

People + Opinion : Industry / Music Biz

Published in SOS May 1999

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In order to become a professional music recording engineer, you have to start at the bottom and work up. But in such a competitive business, how do you even get in at the bottom? **David Mellor** explores various possibilities. This is the second article in a four-part series. Read [Part 1](#), [Part 3](#) and [Part 4](#).



As I explained last month, to get a job in a recording studio you have to be very lucky - the odds are stacked against you. You could be the most brilliant bedroom studio engineer, perhaps even with a track record of small label releases selling up to one or two thousand copies each behind you, but this means little to the owner or manager of a major studio. What you need more than anything else is a little bit of good luck. Although you might choose to deduce from this that you have no control over your future success or lack of it, you can at least improve your prospects - and this month I'm going to tell you a few of the things you can do to put yourself in a more favourable position.

Selling Yourself

To sell yourself to a recording studio manager, high-pressure hard-sell tactics will definitely not work; you need a softly-softly approach. The traditional method of getting a job in a studio is by writing letters, and this is well known. What is less widely realised is just how many letters you are likely to have to write. Consider the situation for a moment. You can only be offered an interview at a studio when there is a vacancy there. Interviews will be offered to promising candidates whose letters land on the studio manager's desk in the week the vacancy occurs, or perhaps also those that landed there in the week or two beforehand. There can only be a vacancy when someone is promoted, gets another job, goes freelance or is fired. Since this might happen a couple of times a year in any particular studio, if you only write 10 or 20 letters in total before giving up then you just haven't given yourself much of a chance. You really need to find the addresses of all the studios in your area and write to each one (directories that list studios, like the one shown on page 160, can be a big help here). And when you have written to them all to no avail, wait three months and write again. You may get the occasional reply saying that they are keeping your letter on file, but it is very likely to be 'archived' into the wastebasket before a vacancy eventually does arise.

Although writing a letter - even many letters - might seem like a long shot, it has worked in the past for other people and it will work again. So what can you put in the letter to maximise your chances? Well, your letter must, through your words and presentation, give the studio manager confidence that you are a suitable candidate - so it should be neat, but appear casual and relaxed at the same time. After all, as a fully-fledged engineer you will have to radiate an aura of calm at all times. Your age will be an important factor so if you are 17, or approaching 17, put this very early in the letter because it is probably the ideal age to start. If you are over 21 or thereabouts, your chances start to diminish, so leave it till later in the letter (but don't leave it out). However, if you are a little older, don't give up (see the 'For Oldies Only!' box).



You will need to show an interest in music, of course, but this must be a wide-ranging interest in the creative aspects of music. If you come across as a dedicated fan of a small cross-section of music then you are limiting your employment prospects almost to vanishing point. You should also demonstrate a technical interest. In some ways it's better to say that you have experimented recording a mate's band with your grandad's old reel-to-reel recorder than it would be to say that you have a sophisticated home studio that you use to create MIDI compositions. As mentioned last month, studio managers usually prefer to develop your skills themselves from scratch, rather than fight your preconceived (and possibly only partially-formed) ideas of how recordings should be made.

Easy Options

Basically, the studio manager wants someone who will be easy to employ, who will perform basic tasks efficiently, yet has the potential to become a good assistant engineer. To understand what I mean by 'easy to employ' you would have to put yourself in the manager's place and see the job from his or her perspective. Firstly, you should be willing and able to work for very low pay. Some freelance engineers work in smaller studios for no payment except free use of the studio in down time. You wouldn't expect this in a larger studio, but the recording industry is very competitive and profit margins are often small, so the person who makes the tea isn't going to earn a fortune.

You may of course be very willing to work for low pay, but are you able? If you have financial commitments of any kind, you have to find a way of abandoning them or you will be forced to

Of Course - The Educational Perspective

To get a view from one person closely involved

look for a better paid job. Children and mortgage repayments are not compatible with becoming a trainee engineer, so you will definitely need to delay these until you are established in your career. Of course, if you are 17 or 18 you are unlikely to be thinking about either in the near future, but you may be thinking about renting accommodation. Rent is another significant financial commitment, so you might want to consider living with your parents (you won't be spending much time there when you're an engineer anyway!). If you live with your parents in London, you are in an ideal situation since most of the UK's top studios are located there. If you live elsewhere then you will have fewer studios from which to choose, or you will have to move to London and pay a high rent for a tiny bedsit.

If you do move to London, then consider travel arrangements since studio hours are long and you could find yourself coming home in the middle of the night. A good studio should insist that the client pays for a taxi for the assistant engineer after a certain time. This isn't universal, however, and I have in the past come across studios that would only consider male trainees on the grounds that they couldn't send a teenage girl home at three in the morning. Obviously this isn't fair, and in the majority of cases, discrimination according to gender would be illegal. In an ideal world it wouldn't happen, but an older male studio manager may subconsciously harbour the attitudes of a bygone era and imagine he is 'protecting' a female candidate by not offering her a job that will entail late-night travelling. Forewarned is forearmed, so be ready with your counterargument if necessary.

To summarise my points on being easy to employ: You should be willing and, most importantly, able to work for low pay. You will be at an advantage if you are young and live in London with your parents. It would be good to live close to tube and bus routes, night bus routes in particular.

Approach By Stealth

Although writing letters and asking straight out for a job is the time-honoured way of looking for work in a studio, it's not the only approach. The problem is that when you ask such a direct question, studio managers are immediately put on the defensive. They know that in all probability they are going to have to say no to you, even if you seem potentially good; if there is no vacancy, it doesn't matter how good you are. Very few managers enjoy saying no to bright, eager young applicants, and that is why many letters go unanswered or receive a standard reply. Even fewer like to say no face to face. You might stand a better chance if you write a letter saying that you are interested in working in a studio, and you want to find out what it's all about, but avoid saying that you specifically want a job in that studio. If you are lucky, and the manager is in a good mood, then you might be invited in to have a look round. At the very least you will learn a lot more about recording studios than you ever can sitting at home writing letters, and at best the manager might take to you and consider calling you when an opportunity does arise. You can make contact by telephone too. Some managers will react more positively to a phone call, others don't like being cold-called in this way, but whatever you do, try and find a way of showing an interest without putting the manager under even the slightest pressure because as soon as you do you will find the conversation is at an end.

First Contact

So, imagine you have landed an interview or a visit to a recording studio. How do you go about converting that into a job? Firstly, consider your personal presentation and appearance. You need to have an air of calm confidence to work in a recording studio, but without even the slightest trace of cockiness. I can't tell you how to acquire this, but I can say that a good way of practising is to go to other job interviews. For most jobs it's OK to be a little bit nervous at the interview, but one of the greatest skills of the recording engineer is to stay calm under pressure.

As far as your appearance goes, you will stand a better chance if you look like a recording engineer already, bearing in mind the style of music in which you want to work. It is perfectly possible that a dreadlocked engineer wearing red, green and gold can work in heavy rock music, or a shaven-headed, Doc Marten-booted engineer can record string quartets, but you have to ask yourself whether it is likely to happen. Discrimination on grounds of race is of course illegal but the

with courses in recording engineering and production, I went to John Lundsten, College Director of Alchemea in London. New courses are appearing every month at a variety of educational establishments all over the country, and there are several long-established outfits in London and further afield, such as the School of Audio Engineering, Gateway, Media Production Facilities and Islington Music Workshop, and The Academy Of Contemporary Music and Confetti (there are many, many more - just see the Classified pages in the back of *SOS* and you'll see what I mean!). Clearly, I couldn't talk to them all - this article would have taken up the rest of the mag - so Alchemea got lucky this time.

A private recording college in London, Alchemea are certainly well-equipped - they offer, amongst other facilities, SSL G-Series and Euphonix CS3000 mixing consoles. However, their course fees are correspondingly high - up to £7380 for the Full Time, Intensive Diploma course. Other courses and modules at Alchemea are available for rather less than this. So, you pay your money - what do you get? Over to John.

"We aim to provide skills that we think are desirable for the next generation of assistants, initially, and presumably engineers in a reasonable amount of time. It's a vocational training course. We provide appropriate information to explain the underlying theory behind what engineers do - obviously, a knowledge of the underlying principles extends the possibilities of what one can do - but far more important is the social aspect of getting along with and understanding people. Collaboration between people is a social art form, and the successful people are those who can translate exceedingly abstract ideas into actual recordings. Alchemea is a five-studio recording complex, and if that seems a million miles away from a conventional educational facility, that's because our view is that success in this field is largely to do with application and the social aspect."

A large number of colleges, both publicly funded and private, offer similar courses. Why should someone consider Alchemea for their education in recording?

"There is a lot of competition now, but a high proportion of the people who come out of here do get jobs. There are a variety of reasons for that, including their attitude. In a way it's a wonderful screening process for the employers. They are pretty much guaranteed that people who have done this much actual recording and have been exposed to a reasonably authentic atmosphere, are likely to be useful."

What qualifications do graduates get at the end of the course?

"We have a marking scheme very much along the lines of NVQ [*National Vocational Qualifications*]. It's heavily loaded in the direction of actual practical skills, in other words being able to do things rather than to know about things. Therefore there's a whole series of tests during the course, some of which are practical, some of which are theoretical, which are principally there to let our students and ourselves know how well their body of knowledge and skills is developing. A number of projects need to be done, a wide variety of recording projects need to be handed in. Students who get to a certain standard, who we are happy with basically, get the diploma. Those that don't get a pass, and those that get below that don't get anything at all. For the whole thing to have any

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studio manager is perfectly entitled to enquire about your background and interests. In the overwhelming majority of cases you will not be judged on your size, shape, sex or skin colour, but the way you dress and style your hair can potentially make or break your chances from the moment the studio manager first sees you. And you won't get a job in any studio if you dress like a bank manager! Most engineers in fact wear pretty ordinary casual clothes and have wash-and-go hairstyles to suit their busy lives. Nearly always they are clean and neat, so as an interviewee you should be too. Don't whatever you do wear your favourite greyed-out Metallica T-shirt, as this will mark you out as a fan whose main interest is giggling with your idols rather than someone who wants to play an active role in the creation of new music!

You may be surprised to learn that the studio manager will probably not be remotely interested in the tape that you have brought with you which was recorded in your home studio. It's not your skills he or she will be looking for, it's your attitude. If you have the right attitude you will develop the skills, but if you don't have the right attitude then you won't be able to do the job properly, no matter what your technical knowledge. By all means take a tape along, and mention your home recording exploits, but wait for the studio manager to ask to hear it.

Training For Recording Engineers

If you look at the ads in this magazine you will find a number of courses promising to train you to become a recording engineer. Many people in the industry contend that the best way to train is on the job, and that you should therefore do everything you can to get into a studio, and regard courses as a second option. However, over the years, the better colleges and private institutions have gained a degree of respect in the industry, if not full acceptance as yet (more on courses in a moment). Remember too that most people who are influential in the recording industry do not have any qualifications in recording or studio management.

Certainly, there are certain things that training and education can't do:

- You can't train or educate someone in the personal skills necessary to work in a studio. By the age at which you would be eligible to

work in a studio, you either have them or you

don't. Having said that, people mature at different rates. Some people graduate to adulthood at age 16 (pity them!), others wait until they are approaching their thirties before they are ready to integrate properly into a very demanding professional working environment. Some never get there.

- Working in a top commercial studio involves dealing with all kinds of music. You can be

educated in musical awareness, but to be truly

accepting of music of all styles is a matter of personal attitude. By the way, did you know that the biggest-selling style of music worldwide is country and western?

- If the people working in the studio don't do their job properly, they either get fired or the studio goes bust. These are powerful motivators that are impossible to simulate in a training environment. Education will tell you nothing of the sheer pressure of the real world.

On the other hand, training and education, done well, will give you an awareness of the recording studio industry, both in a technical sense and as a money-making enterprise. You will hopefully learn certain core skills that will make you instantly useful in the studio, but don't expect to start mixing straight away - that's just too much to hope for. Perhaps the best thing you will get out of a course will be a certificate - not to show what a brilliant engineer you are, but to say in the most positive way that you are committed. If you can demonstrate that you have put your time and a large wedge of your own cash into your career in recording, that shows more than almost anything else that you really want to do it. And that type of motivation could get you your first job.

What To Look For In A Recording Course

- **Tutors who know the business**

credibility we have to have standards. It is not a situation where you have paid your money therefore you must get a bit of paper."

What are the most important things for an engineer or a would-be engineer to learn?

"To learn how to be part of a team and contribute to the overall process - how to apply your particular skills, technical and artistic, to the production. That applies to everyone from the most junior job up - even on the very mundane level of fetching cups of coffee, plugging in microphones, handing out headphones, when to keep your mouth shut, when not to keep your mouth shut. There are a lot of people that have done courses but have no idea of how to work in a team. We often receive mailshot studio applications that have been wrongly sent to us, and typically they say something like 'I am doing a course at XYZ. I have been doing it for six weeks, in 12 weeks time I shall be finished and I want to apply to your studio to be a producer. I shall be fully equipped to do this.' People like that clearly haven't a clue. What happens is although they might become a dab hand on a course with a SSL or Euphonix console, when they get into a studio they will be fetching coffees and winding up cables. However, we have got lots of people who have gone through the night supervision, reception, assistant route in 18 months to two years. And because they have realistic attitudes and they come with some knowledge, they don't need a lot of training or hand-holding."

How do you teach studio etiquette, professional attitude and the acceptance of long working hours?

"We offer a realistic environment. First of all, we are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As part of the course you will be required to do 24-track recordings with overdubs, straight stereo recordings, and so on. Also, we encourage people to work with real musicians who care about their music as much as our guys care about recording it, often at unsocial hours. So you confront all the real-world problems of working with people who are passionate about their music, and are maybe a bit eccentric or egocentric. If you are able to perform in those conditions, in other words if you are able to do a good recording and hopefully contribute to the process, you stand a chance out there."

What qualities do you look for in a tutor?

"They should basically be practitioners rather than theoreticians. A lot of people are quite good at doing their job but have no facility for explaining it to others. We are looking for somebody who is a credible working professional, can actually do the job and probably is a bit obsessive and passionate about it. That's not too difficult; lots of people are. But clearly they have to have the ability for explaining and infecting people with their enthusiasm."

Finally, how do you select students?

"We encourage people to visit the place. It's really a two-way process that happens here. It's for them obviously to check us out to see what we have on offer, and we also need to be confident that somebody has the right attitude. We are looking for someone who is going to apply themselves and has a realistic attitude of what the business is, of their job prospects, of what we have got to offer and what they have got to offer. Also we kind of celebrate the fact that you are going to be dog-tired and totally exhausted - and people who hear that when they come here and think, 'Wow that is really

No-one can teach you anything about professional music recording unless they have worked in the business themselves. This should be the first question you ask when you consider a college or educational institution: "How much real life experience do your tutors have?" Expect prevarication and evasiveness instead of a real answer and press your point. This isn't to say that every tutor has to have such experience. There has to be a professional attitude among the staff and this can be disseminated from those with professional experience to those that haven't, but are otherwise knowledgeable. In education there is the saying that those who can, do, and those who can't do, teach. (And they say that those who can't teach, teach teachers, but that's another story). This is true to an extent, but I said in the first part of this series that people who become recording engineers, or sound engineers of any type, often come to the point of 'burnout' where they don't want to do the job any more - there really is more to life than music recording eight days a week. It may be the case that your college tutors have left the recording industry to get their lives back, and teaching may be the role for which they are best suited.

great' probably have the right attitude. It certainly isn't the case that you pay us the money and just get the certificate without any pain or study."

• **Time with the equipment**

Ask how much hands-on time you will get working with the equipment. Note that this means working individually or at most in pairs. Working in pairs can actually often be better than working alone, from the point of view of learning, but once you get to groups of three or more one or two people will be doing the work and the others will be watching. Many educational establishments will have a showpiece studio with expensive equipment and facilities - but unless the fees are astronomically high you aren't likely to get much hands-on time in there yourself. If you are new to the industry, you will need core skills, and you don't need massive facilities for that. Look for a place where they have a lot of small setups, so you can actually get your hands on the faders.

For Oldies Only!

I do apologise if you are wearied by all the stuff in the main text directed to 17-year-olds. Of course you know all this stuff about how to dress for an interview and how to impress the studio manager. Or do you? Having had the experience of interviewing literally hundreds of applicants to sound engineering courses, I know that the older the interviewee, the more I need to know from them to be impressed. Why didn't you get into recording sooner for instance? There may be a number of very valid reasons, but the bright-eyed and bushy-tailed youngster who has never even considered doing anything else will inevitably be at an advantage, and you will have to find a way to compensate for that.

• **A recognised qualification**

Some recording educators offer only their own certificates that are not recognised by any other body. This type of certificate may be useful at the very least as a demonstration of your commitment, and if the educator has a good reputation then the certificate may be worth its weight in silver, perhaps even gold. If you go to a college that offers City & Guilds courses in Sound Engineering or BTEC (now part of Edexcel) courses in Music Technology then you will find that your qualification will open up further avenues to you should your attempt to get into recording prove unsuccessful. A BTEC National Diploma, for instance, is recognised as a suitable entry qualification for a degree course. The City and Guilds 1820 parts I, II and III courses in Sound Engineering, which are available at a number of colleges in the UK and Republic of Ireland, are all regulated by City of Westminster College, London where they were devised, and are among the toughest courses in any subject at their respective levels that City & Guilds offer. BTEC courses vary more from centre to centre, but they are rigorously moderated by representatives of Edexcel to make sure they all come up to the same high standard. Nevertheless, you should still ask about the experience of the tutors and the amount of hands-on time you are likely to get. There are also degree-level courses in subjects related to music recording, but you could find yourself with more academic qualifications than the studio manager who interviews you, which is rather dangerous ground to be standing on! **SOS**

This is the second article in a four-part series. Read [Part 1](#), [Part 3](#) and [Part 4](#).

Published in SOS May 1999

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