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## How To Become A Recording Engineer, Part 3

### Tips & Techniques

People + Opinion : Industry / Music Biz

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This month, **David Mellor** considers the progression from first studio job to Assistant Engineer. This is the third article in a four-part series. Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 4](#).

Success! You have landed a job in a recording studio. You are paid real money - not a lot - and you are exactly in the place you want to be. You have been offered a position with a job title something along the lines of 'Studio Assistant'. Notice that you are not an Assistant Engineer yet, but you hope to be. So what's your part in the recording process? Basically, you hang around and help out. If anyone needs something doing, you do it quickly and efficiently, and you have the sixth sense to know what they want before they open their mouth to ask. You'll make the tea and coffee, and empty the ashtrays on a regular basis, plus a hundred and one other things, many of them specific to the particular studio you find yourself in. What you need to do while you are at this stage is prove yourself. The people already in the recording industry are talented and capable, but most of all they are dedicated, and many of them hardly seem to go home. There may be a European Union initiative to impose a 48-hour maximum working week, but studios never have worked like that, and basically can't. Can you imagine engineers working in shifts, and producers suddenly finding that the people they were working with yesterday are on a day off, and they now have to work with an engineer and assistant they have never met before? You will prove yourself by carrying out every task well and with a smile on your face, by working hours as long as the people around you, and by always performing a little better than you were expected to. When you have done this for a few months, you will start to make your way up the ladder.

#### Studio Etiquette

When you first start work in the studio itself, you will find that you are effectively the assistant engineer's assistant. Your progression over the next couple of years will be to full assistant, and then hopefully to engineer. You will watch and learn, and gain experience slowly. The first thing you will need to know, however, is studio etiquette - what to do and, most importantly, what not to do. What not to do can actually be covered very quickly.

- Don't speak until you are spoken to.
- Don't walk around the room except to accomplish specific tasks.
- Never stand between the mixing console and the speakers, and if the studio does film or surround mixes, don't stand in front of either of the rear speakers.
- Don't eat in the control room unless the engineer and producer are taking a break and they are eating too.
- Definitely don't smoke if there are non-smokers in the room, and if you do smoke always be ready to stub out even a freshly lit cigarette if a task comes to hand.
- Don't leave the room unless it is clear that the engineer and producer are having a break.
- Don't try to impress anyone with your technical or musical knowledge.
- When a band or artist is around, don't mention other bands or artists.
- Don't read *Sound On Sound* while on duty!

I think all of this should be pretty obvious, but it doesn't hurt to point it out. There are a couple more points that are not so obvious and need saying. Firstly, although artists and bands often appear to have immense egos and infinite self-confidence, frequently that is just an outer shell and sometimes a protection mechanism. Inside, they can be just as insecure as the rest of us, and often more so. There are two ways in which artists can be very deeply insulted and hurt, and you might not realize the extent of the problem caused. Firstly, you must take every care to get the artist's name right in both pronunciation and spelling. In the studio, mispronouncing a name more than once, or spelling a name incorrectly isn't just an irritation - it's a sign that you regard the artist as irrelevant, and even established people don't like that because it implies that they are no longer considered important by the young (you!). The second way in which an artist can be deeply hurt is when you hear their new song and you say, "It sounds a bit like..." Many songs do sound a bit like others, but can still go on to have considerable success despite that. It's not your responsibility to pass judgment.

I have listed quite a number of things that you shouldn't do in the studio. But what should you do to be seen as an effective studio assistant? It's harder to make a specific list, but you should bear in mind at all times that you have to justify your presence in the studio. If you are not helping, then you will be asked to hang around elsewhere. Although I have said that you

"...the engineers do all the clever stuff and get

are going to have to keep your mouth shut a lot of the time, one day there will be an opportunity to have your say. Here are two possibilities:

- The artist or band, the producer and the engineer seem to have reached a dead end. The track needs something, but no-one knows quite what. You think you do.
- There's a technical problem in the studio. Perhaps the computer has just crashed and the programmer doesn't know what caused it. It keeps on crashing and you, perhaps because of experience you gained on another session, know why, and you are absolutely certain that you are right.

There are many more ways in which your opinion could be sought, but there is going to be a first time, and you may have to be patient. When it comes, say exactly what you think, and make it something very useful. You may in certain circumstances be treading a very fine line between telling someone what they want to hear, and making a virtual criticism of their earlier decisions, but do your best. It's your chance to be heard and perhaps take a step up the ladder. Be honest, be modest and be right. And if what you say proves to be wrong, just bide your time for another opportunity to crop up. Gradually, the work you do will have more responsibility attached to it, and you will be asked to set up the studio and deal with administrative tasks. Eventually, you should progress to full Assistant Engineer status.

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#### The Assistant Engineer's View - Andy Ward

Andy Ward (23) is a freelance assistant engineer who frequently works at London's Strongroom studio, and is currently establishing his position as assistant. His credits include Carl Cox, DJ Shadow, Thunder, Faithless, Boy George, Ian Brown and UNKLE. So how did he get into recording?

"Through an old friend from college [*Stuart Thomas, now Technical Manager of Strongroom. Andy and Stuart were both Sound Engineering students at City of Westminster College, London*] who I always kept in touch with. I needed some work so I came down to help out, and I've pretty much been here ever since. They just got me down to see how I get on with people. They consider your personality quite a lot here, and also whether you're going to mix with the type of clients they have and the other staff that are already here."



How has your career progressed so far?

"I must have been doing this easily four and a half years now. I'm now freelance. As well as at the Strongroom, I work at Livingston, and used to work at Berwick Street occasionally. I've also done some engineering at Jacob's in the countryside, which was nice, but mainly now it's here. I'm not in a particular hurry now. I used to be - I wanted to get engineering as soon as possible, but now I don't think you can rush it. If you want to be a quality engineer you just have to take your time."

What were your first tasks?

"I used to work in rehearsal studios and a little 16-track studio, so I used to be there soldering leads together and moving backline around for bands. At the Strongroom, I started assisting in studios straight away, because by the time I started here I had already had a fair bit of experience. It's nice to see the back of the soldering irons..."

What do you do to prepare for a session?

"Make sure the desk is zeroed [*returning all knobs and switches to their off or neutral position*], which it usually is from the last session. Make sure there are sharp chinagraph pencils around for the scribble strips, and that you have all your track sheets and stuff you know you'll need throughout the day, including the tapes for the day's work. If there are tapes to be stored, get them all sorted out - basically, just make sure things can run as smoothly as possible."

What do you do during the session?

"You hang around in the studio and patch gear in for the engineers, make sure they are OK, and just be there so you are on hand when they need you. I make ridiculous amounts of teas and coffees all day long, which I don't really mind. In a mixing session, you are doing patching, and if hired gear comes in, you set all that up and make sure it's on tie-lines ready to go straight away in case the engineer wants it. And you try and pamper the engineer really, make sure that all he has to do is move faders around, twiddle knobs, and listen. He shouldn't really have to do anything else; that's why you have assistant engineers."

And after a session?

"Total recalls [*logging all the settings and connections in the studio so the setup can be recreated at a later date if necessary*] are quite a big part of it, and something you keep an eye on throughout the day. After the session, you can take a long time doing backups. Sometimes, it can be a few months later when you come to recall a session, and when you finally press Play on the tape machine it can be a bit nerve-racking, especially if the producer, the artist and the engineer are listening to how your recall's going to come back. You've always got your fingers crossed that you haven't messed it up, because you nearly always do the logging, all these important little notes on effects and stuff late at night, at five or six in the morning - it's a post-session thing. You have got to stay on the case, otherwise the whole recall will screw up."

What about studio etiquette?

"You have to relax and get along with the clients. You try to make them feel at ease, ask them if they need anything, have a chat and a laugh; that's the best way. But obviously you need a professional attitude as well."

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Do you get difficult clients?

"Not really. Sometimes people who have just been signed, or people who like to think they are a bit more successful than they are; they're the ones that are a bit ruder than the really successful artists. The ones that think they have got something to prove."

How did you learn about the equipment?

"Just from using downtime in the studios. That's the only way; a combination of free studio time and other engineers or assistants showing you the stuff."

Do you think your ears have developed over the last few years?

"Yes, a lot. You're sitting with respected engineers and producers who are constantly asking you what you think of their mixes. When you are in the studio just listening for 14 hours a day, you come on a long way."

After all this assisting, are you ready to engineer?

"Yes. Not in Studio 1, with the AMS-Neve Legend desk we have there, but in the SSL room, yes. I think my ears need a bit more training, but the technical side is no trouble."

### The Role Of The Assistant

So, you're about to graduate to the position of Assistant Engineer; what are your responsibilities now? Your role is easily explained: the engineers do all the clever stuff and get the sound right, and you help them by taking care of the day-to-day tasks that don't really need a highly paid, artistically brilliant expert, according to your ability. At first you won't be able to do much, but eventually you will be so completely knowledgeable about the studio and its equipment that you will become almost a consultant to visiting freelance engineers who haven't quite found their way around yet. Precisely what you do depends very much on the nature of the work in hand. If a full band are in the studio, you may be helping to set up the live room, and may carry the flight cases in and unpack th

**"You may in certain circumstances be treading a very fine line between telling someone what they want to hear, and making a virtual criticism of their earlier decisions..."**

em. According to the engineer's and band's directions you may assist in setting up the amplifiers, effects units and microphones. As well as mics, you will need to set out headphones, one pair per musician and one or more spare pairs just in case, and sorting out the tangle of microphone and headphone cables will be an important part of your job in this situation. The studio junior will also help out by handling computer equipment and cables. The assistant engineer(s) will set up those bits of any computer-based systems being used (such as Digidesign Pro Tools, or MIDI + Audio sequencers like Steinberg *Cubase VST* or Emagic's *Logic*) that they know well, and the programmers or Pro Tools operators will do the rest.

Selection of microphones is always the responsibility of engineers, but they may leave an initial choice to an assistant they have worked with before, only changing one if it doesn't appear to be working well in the context of the music. Engineers will expect you to be able to tell them which mic is coming up on which channel of the mixer, and for a small mic setup this is easy to do, but when you have 20 mics set out, you might feel the need to jot down some notes on paper. You may also label the scribble strip on the console, so the engineer doesn't have to get involved in this rather mechanical process at all. Sometimes the scribble is written onto masking

tape, and one strip is made up for each song. You will probably be responsible for changing the strips when necessary, and keeping them all in a safe place - usually somewhere on the control room wall.

#### The Assistant Engineer's View - Lem Lattimer



Lem Lattimer (26) is also a freelance assistant engineer working mainly at the Strongroom, but unlike Andy Ward, Lem is on his way towards full engineer status. His credits include M People, DJ Rap, The Prodigy, Spiritualized, Spice Girls, Talvin Singh, and Boyzone.

How did you get started?

I did the SAE course, took a year out travelling, then I came back and got a job. First of all I was at another big studio, but I hated it there; I was badly paid and badly treated. I spent every day just making teas and cleaning! I did that for about three weeks, and then I got an interview here at the Strongroom and went straight from there to here. I was lucky; it came at just the right time.

"I was a runner [*ie. general dogsbody*] for about two months. I lived in Studio 2 because it was brand new then, so I just sat there with the manual and learned about the Euphonix CS3000M desk. I knew the AMS-

Neve VR60 Legend from SAE. So I sat in Studio 2 all the time. During the first two months, I came in at weekends and just stuck my head in manuals, and then one day they just shoved me on a session when the assistant didn't turn up. I did OK, and then I stopped being a runner and started assisting all the time."

What did you do when you were the runner?

"Running errands for the office, making sure the studios were tidy before the sessions, helping out if the session was really busy and the assistant was doing other stuff, and making teas for the band. Taking the post down to the post office, cleaning up certain rooms, just odd jobs around the place that no-one else had time for."

So you learned during downtime?

"Yes, when I wasn't actually doing anything. If I came here on a weekend, I'd maybe spend 12 or 13 hours a day learning. During the week, I was busy, but when I could, I'd sit in here until 11 o'clock at night just messing about. I taught myself. I could ask questions, but reading the manuals and just doing it yourself is the way to do it. There was an engineer here who was managed by the Strongroom. He used to come in on the weekend and do his own thing and I used to sit on in his sessions as well, watch him using the Euphonix and learn. But that was purely because I wanted to do it."

What's your view on studio etiquette?

"You have to be very aware of what's going on. For example, people might be just chatting and say that they might like to record something; then you should start setting a mic up. They won't always tell you to do it, you should just listen out. And you learn to be discreet. In studios, you hear lots of stories, and you should just keep them to yourself. The artist'll walk out of the room and the producer and engineer may start having a go while they're gone... but you can't run up to the artist and go, 'By the way...'. You have to know what to say and what not to say."

Do you work with computers?

"When I first started it was all on Ataris, Akais and two-inch tape. Then Macs started to appear, and then suddenly Pro Tools and *Logic* just exploded. I picked up using all that by watching and listening, since everyone's using them all the time. Obviously, there's a lot of time as an assistant when you are just doing nothing, so you can sit at the back of the room next to the Pro Tools engineer and just watch."

Is it important to be able to work with that type of equipment?

"Definitely - nowadays you have to. The days are gone when you could just be an engineer - now you have to be a programmer and a Pro Tools operator. That's essentially what goes on in studios now. You can't just be an engineer sitting at a desk. I have heard of old-school engineers who have been doing it since they were 18 and are now between 30 and 40 now; they haven't got a clue when it comes to Macs, and don't want to know, because they are well-established engineers or mix engineers. But if you're a young engineer, you have to know all about it."

Have your ears developed over the last few years?

"Definitely - my friends often wonder what the hell I am talking about when we're listening to music. When you're working with really good engineers and producers, you have to put your head in the speakers and hear what they are listening to. I can hear so much more than I could three years ago. I analyse music a lot more now, and I find it very hard to sit back and just listen any more."

How would you describe your lifestyle now?

"My life is like a rollercoaster at the moment. When I'm working, it's all day. Start at 11 in the morning and finish some time the next morning. But I love doing it and I'll spend all my waking hours on it."

They might not always stress this at audio school, but among your most important assets will be your secretarial skills, believe it or not. In fact the average secretary might make a very good assistant engineer, given an enthusiasm for sound and music, and the willingness to work long hours. There is an immense difference between professional and amateur recording in terms of the sheer bulk of tapes and other consumables used in the course of a project. Where you or I might use 10 ADAT tapes and a couple of DATs on an album length project, professionals might easily be looking at 10 times this quantity. Where you or I might aim at one best mix of a song, professionals are looking at pe

rhaps dozens of mixes, many of which are monitor or temporary mixes made as the project progresses, and even during the final mixing stage where the product is handed over to the record company, there may be several alternative mixes with only slight variations between them. As an assistant engineer, it will usually be your job to label all of these tapes so that anything that has ever been recorded during the entire project (and an album-length project might take several months or more) can be retrieved, hopefully at a moment's notice. Remember that there is no room for error. If you leave a few tapes unlabelled 'until later', then everyone will undoubtedly forget what's on them, and going through even a few tapes to find a particular mix is an expensive nightmare. And you won't just be dealing with tapes; you may well have to deal with the material produced by several computers, including floppy disks, CDRs, Zip and Jaz cartridges, Exabyte tapes for RADAR backup, hefty two-inch tapes and pretty much any other format you could name. And don't forget about the humble compact cassette. There will be plenty of those.

**"You will prove yourself by carrying out every task well and with a smile on your face, by working hours as long as the people around you, and by always performing a little better than you were expected to."**

All in all, the assistant engineer's job is a tough grind, relieved by the absolute joy of participating in music making at the highest level. An assistant engineer will gain experience that you could never get in a home studio, and will hopefully progress to the next rung of the ladder, and ultimately to mix engineer or producer. At that stage, the rewards of all that slog and hard labour will be well and truly reaped. ☺☺

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