

INTERNET ARCHIVE
WayBackMachine

12 captures
24 Feb 04 - 12 Apr 16

http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/sep99/articles/engineer.htm Go

DEC JUN JAN
6
2012 2015 2016 Close Help

by Radial engineering

summing mixer... works with all the old modules and adds advanced features to the new!

Search News Articles Forum SOS TV Subscribe Shop Readers' Adverts Information WebExtras

More In This Series:

- [Part 1 \(Apr 1999\)](#)
- [Part 2 \(May 1999\)](#)
- [Part 3 \(Jun 1999\)](#)

How To Become A Recording Engineer, Part 4

Tips & Techniques

People + Opinion : Industry / Music Biz

Published in SOS September 1999

[Printer-friendly version](#)SHARE [f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [...](#)

So, you've made it from dogsbody and tea boy through tape op and Assistant Engineer... In the last part of this series, **David Mellor** explains the roles and responsibilities of the recording engineer, and what you ought to do if you'd like to make engineering a life-long career. This is the last article in a four-part series. Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#).

As a fully fledged recording engineer, you will have a pretty busy lifestyle. If you are good, your services should be in demand every day of the year, and you may find it difficult to get any time away from work for rest, recreation or holidays. What will fill your working day in this way? Well, the recording engineer's job on a recording project complements that of the producer (and the programmer, if the nature of the work calls for one). The producer, as you know, is in charge of setting the overall tone of the recording, in close consultation with the record company and the writer, or perhaps the key members of the band. As the recording engineer, you are there to make the producer's dream a sonic reality.

Engineer Management (I) -- Lola Weidner & Paul Wright of SARM Studios



Lola Weidner is Studio Manager of the three SARM studio complexes, SARM West, SARM East and SARM Hook End. Paul Wright is an in-house engineer who works in all of SARM's studios. Lola recruits young hopefuls as night receptionists and trains them up to become top-class recording engineers. Lola: "Most of our sessions are staffed by in-house engineers. It's unusual now in the industry, but it hasn't always been. In the old days, people used in-house engineers all the time, and they would go to a studio because a certain engineer was based there. That's what we get now, and all my in-house engineers are busy, because they know the studios they are working in, and they have better CVs than most freelance engineers. When you're attached to a complex like this, you work with all kinds of people, and gain all kinds of experience. One day you might work with Trevor Horn, the next day it could be Ladysmith Black Mambazo, another day William Orbit. You get to learn your craft that way."

Paul: "There are lots of good reasons for staying in-house, rather than going freelance. Someone like Trevor Horn will only work with top-notch people, so you get the chance to work on sessions with world-class engineers and producers, and you learn your skills from some of the best people in the industry. Also, you have access at SARM to a lot of really good equipment, so when the time comes when you do go freelance,

further on in your career, hopefully you have a much broader and in-depth knowledge. As a freelance engineer, you don't get a chance to pop into a studio after a session to experiment with the gear and see what it does." Lola: "And it's an advantage for me to make sure that somebody like Paul stays here. He's very much a teacher in the building and shows the younger guys how to do it. We have strict ways of doing certain things -- a kind of SARM standard -- and we like to make sure it's carried on through. We have kept up this standard over the years, and anyone who trained at SARM can get a job anywhere in the world."



Working With Producers

Sadly, making this happen is not always easy. The simplest approach to recording a band in the studio -- slavishly reproducing their live sound -- is by no means necessarily the best way to go; the results are often amateurish in comparison with modern production standards. So the producer and key band members may have to strip down the sound of the band, analyse it and rebuild it, creating in the process the definitive recordings of their songs. Many newcomers to studio work are amazed at the sheer scale of trial and error that routinely goes on during this kind of process; studio professionals are often prepared to put their life and soul into a piece of work over an extended period of time, and then scrap it completely when they realise that it isn't turning out as they want. It is important also to remember that producers may not have a complete idea of how a track

should sound (in fact they may not have any idea at all) and it could fall to the engineer, among others, to provide the necessary 'surprise and delight' that you hope will eventually wow the record-buying public.

In the creative production process, it takes considerable experimentation to achieve the right sound, and the engineer will be a part of that. Capturing musical sounds on tape at their best is in itself a job that requires considerable skill, but the engineer has to go beyond that and provide creative alternatives that surpass the raw sounds of instruments and voices. Obviously a thorough knowledge of the handbook of recording techniques is required, but so is a willingness to push the equipment beyond what it was designed to do in search of a sound that will pique the listener's curiosity. It doesn't have to be much; many recordings are based around just one interesting sonic idea (in addition to all the musical and lyrical ideas, of course). But every day in the studio, producers will be searching for those interesting sonic ideas, and the engineer will be their principal aide in that search.

Often, producers will ask you for your opinion. This is hardly surprising, as they have a lot of difficult decisions to make, some of which can make or break careers: their own and the band's. It's no wonder that sometimes they want to test out a decision on someone else, and that someone else is usually the engineer, followed by the assistant engineer. In some ways, this is an engineer's training for becoming a producer later on in their career. What your response should be depends on the needs of the moment -- a decision only you can take. You may choose to suggest that it might be time to try a completely fresh approach. Or you may choose to soothe the egos of the various people around you. The ability to judge the correct response is part of being a good engineer.

Keeping Up

Another aspect of managing your career is keeping up to date with equipment. Of course, there is no reason why you can't make a hit record on a old console, as long as it is well maintained. But old gear will always eventually give way to new, and there are always new tricks to learn. In-house engineers will get the opportunity to familiarise themselves with new equipment as it comes in to their studios, but freelancers will have to ensure they don't get frozen out by technological change. Often the assistant engineer can come to the rescue; if an established freelance engineer is booked into a studio with (say) a new and unfamiliar mixing desk, in all probability the studio will provide an assistant who is already up to speed technically, even if his or her sonic skills are not yet fine-tuned. Established engineers, if they have sense, will use the opportunity to remain at the cutting edge.

Keeping up to date with mixing desk technology is vital, but there is a gulf opening up between older engineers, who find computer-based technology unfamiliar and daunting, and the younger ones who don't. Computer-based hard disk editing systems are now commonly used alongside the traditional mixing console and multitrack, and it is now rare to find a track that hasn't benefited from some kind of hard-disk tweaking. This area of technology is obviously changing very quickly because it is comparatively new, and the only way

to stay up to date is really to own a system yourself. This isn't as impossible as you might think; for example, Digidesign's Pro Tools is one very well-established system, and a software-only setup to run on an Apple Macintosh is surprisingly inexpensive. It might pay for itself anyway, figuratively speaking, when you consider how much you could learn in the privacy of your own bedroom studio, and what benefit this experience could have on your career.



Working With Programmers

The other person engineers will interact with frequently during the recording sessions will be the programmer. The programmer has two roles, which are sometimes split between two people. One is simply to have all the necessary equipment at the producer's disposal. Programmers commonly own their equipment, rather than simply knowing how to use it when it is hired in: the complexity of some hi-tech musical tools, particularly software, makes this an imperative. Their other role is to coax out of the equipment the right sounds, and catalogue and store those sounds for possible later use. Sounds can be further subdivided into samples and synth programs, and into programmed loops, rhythms and sample sequences. As an engineer, your interaction with the programmer will be partly as an assistant, interfacing the musical equipment with the mixing console and outboard effects, and fine-tuning the sounds. As you can probably work out from this description, the skills required for the roles of programmer and engineer can dovetail neatly together; as an engineer, you might in some circumstances be required to do some programming yourself, perhaps if you have already demonstrated an ability in this area, or if the project doesn't warrant employing a specialist programmer. It is important to remember, however, that the engineer's main place is behind the mixing console. There are many successful engineers who don't program, but who are still employed because they have the ability to get the sound right as it comes from the speakers.

Engineers On Management

◆ SIE MEDWAY-SMITH

Sie Medway-Smith started his career as an assistant engineer at Milo Studios. His engineering credits include Robbie Williams, UNKLE and Placebo.

How did you decide to get a manager?

"It was about a year ago, and was a big step for me. For a long time, I had been producing and DJing as well as engineering. I was managing myself, but I had too many things to organise, so I looked at all the different managers that catered for everything I wanted to do -- engineer, produce and remix -- and Stephen Budd came up with the goods for me. He has a lot of good engineers and producers on his books, which is important because you need to be in good company -- respect rubs off."

www.digikey.com

How do you get work now?

"It seems to be that people who I worked with years ago just keep coming back. A lot of it is word of mouth. I get more work myself than my management get for me. With the work I get for myself, they just take a smaller percentage, but they still invoice for me and generally make things run smoothly."

♦ ASH HOWES



Ash Howes started his career at Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera's Gallery Studios. He now divides his time between production and mix engineering. His credits as a mix engineer include Alisha's Attic and Texas.

"Originally, I was managed by Nina Block at London Records; she was working as an A&R coordinator, but she would always have one or two engineers who she managed on a part-time basis. It was a good step up for me, because it's very difficult to get good management without hits, and it's difficult to get hits without major management. I was quite lucky that she took me under her wing and started to build my career; that's where management is so useful. After a year with her, as things escalated after Texas and Alisha's Attic, both Nina and I thought I really needed someone full-time so she hooked me up with Stephen Budd."

What advantages does management have for you now?

"When you are successful and working seven days a week all year, you just haven't got time to be out there meeting people. And also, as you get into production, there is an administrative and logistical side to each project that someone has to oversee. It's impossible for one person to be creative in the studio and at the same time handle all these other things. You also need to not just deal with the project in hand, but also set up the next one. Having management takes care of all that."

Do you have a different arrangement with your management if you find work yourself?

"I am very pleased with what Stephen Budd Management do for me, so if anyone brings me work I tend to give it to them anyway. I am more worried about doing a job really well than taking that extra percentage. It's just a weight off my mind for them to look after it."

**The Mix Engineer**

Not all engineers work with musicians, programmers and producers; mix engineers, for example, may work entirely alone, perhaps just with an assistant to handle routing and equipment connections. In the early years of multitrack recording, an engineer and producer would follow a project through all the way from inception to final mix, and the only other person who would do anything to the sound of a track would be the mastering engineer, who would independently optimise the final mix for transfer to the

"The producer is in charge of setting the overall tone of the recording... As the recording engineer, you are there to make the producer's dream a sonic reality."

consumer playback medium. These days, it is sometimes the case that a record company will dispense with the services of the original producer and engineer when the multitrack stage of the process is complete and a rough mix has been delivered. This used to be a bone of contention among producers who didn't like their work being messed around, but it now has to be accepted as a simple fact of life in the music industry. Some engineers are simply better mixers than others, to the extent that they can make a career out of mixing and never, or hardly ever, work with musicians or producers. This is life at the sharp end, because everyone else can blame the mix engineer for a song's lack of success. On the other hand, the mix engineer's contribution is very highly valued because the difference a good mix can make in terms of radio play and sales is well known, particularly by record companies (Bob Clearmountain is a good example of an engineer who has made his career in this way, as he explained in his recent interview in SOS June '99).

Mix engineers commonly take on certain aspects of the production role and, since no-one from the original sessions is present during the mix, they can absolutely rip the recording to shreds and rebuild it if they see fit. Consequently, the end result may be very different from the original producer's intentions; but none of this matters if the song sells, as no-one is going to turn money away! The mix engineer has the advantage of a more objective viewpoint. For instance, it may have taken immense effort to dream up, or make a perfect recording of, a particular musical line or harmony. In blissful ignorance of that fact, mix engineers can scrap such parts without a moment's hesitation if they don't feel they are right for the song. The original producers *should* be able to make that kind of harsh decision if necessary, but may not be able to bring themselves to do this.

Engineer Management (II) -- Stephen Budd

Stephen Budd manages some of the UK's top engineers and producers. There comes a point where any engineer will need someone to handle the business aspects of their career. Here's why, Stephen: "An engineer needs a manager primarily because it's an exceptionally crowded marketplace out there for freelance engineers -- too many of them chasing too little work. They need somebody who is going to be aware of the projects that are floating around. It's a different market compared to producers -- unless an engineer is being sold as a mix engineer, they are being promoted primarily to producers. It's rare that a record company would specify an engineer for a project, so it is important to have contact with producers and their management. The other angle is that it's often advisable for the engineer's manager to be trying to sell the engineer to artists who produce themselves. Such artists are always going to need engineers to work with. A mix engineer would generally be appointed by the record company and would probably be marketed in the same manner as a record producer."



At what stage in his career does an engineer need management?

"Until you have worked on at least half-a-dozen successful records that everybody knows about, it's not advisable to become a freelance engineer. At that stage, you need management. I can't think of any freelance engineers who don't have management. Engineers generally come to us, and we are looking to take on those engineers who can graduate into production or become mix specialists; that's another area that is important."

What percentage of an engineer's income do you take?

"I generally take 20 percent and my clients seem to think it's well worth paying. A manager doesn't just find work for an engineer; there is also all the additional coordination. For example, engineers going off to do a gig abroad want to know that their accommodation is good, that their food is being paid for, that they're getting a *per diem*, generally in the region of £50 a day for their expenses, and that their travel arrangements are satisfactory. We also raise invoices for engineers, make sure they are paid, and ensure that we negotiate the best possible daily rate."

What would happen if an engineer who is managed by you found his own client?

"I have a pragmatic view on it. Generally speaking, if somebody is managed by me, they are managed by me exclusively for the world, and that's the way we work together. Obviously, there are some engineers who have had relationships with certain clients prior to their involvement with me. I wouldn't want to disrupt those relationships, but often engineers might want me to get involved anyway, because more often than not they feel they are not being paid enough and feel awkward dealing with a person who they have a very close relationship with in that way. It really depends on the circumstances. If someone had a long-standing client that I had nothing to do with introducing to them, I will still get involved in the overall coordination, the budgets, and probably looking over the contract and renegotiating the deal. For an existing client, I would probably agree to take a lesser percentage than my standard 20 percent for that specific project."

Career Moves -- Freelance Or In-house?

The career of a successful recording engineer follows a predictable route, as I have described in the earlier parts of this series, from studio dogsbody to assistant engineer to full engineer to producer -- but without a solid foundation of quality work, this progression will not take place. Without such a body of work, there will be no success, and to prosper and continue as an engineer, you have to be seen to be successful; your credit on the sleeve of a hit will lead to more offers of work. Correctly managed, this can be an unstoppable process.

There are two approaches to career management; one is to work in a big studio as an in-house engineer, the other is to go freelance. Freelancing is by far the most common way of working these days, but it hasn't always been so, and some studios still manage a stable of in-house engineers very

"There are two approaches to career management; one is to work in a big studio as an in-house engineer, the other is to go freelance."

successfully. If you are at an early stage in your career, you may be lucky enough to be taken on by a studio operating an in-house system. If this happens, it will probably be a large studio, or even a complex, as smaller studios simply don't have the resources to do this these days. You will start at the bottom and gradually rise to become a competent and confident assistant engineer, at the service of the client and included in the rate for the room. At this stage what you need more than anything is to work with a respected client, whether artist, band or producer. The key is to get an engineering credit on a successful record. Once you have that, your studio manager will use your name when they are trying to book artists into their rooms. You will graduate to full engineer status and your list of credits will grow. Eventually you may seek to move into the wider world outside the confines of the studio complex where you are employed, and become a freelance engineer.

The other approach is to work as an assistant engineer, employed or freelance, until you are lucky enough to gain a number of good credits as a full engineer, maybe five or six chart hits or tracks on chart albums. Then it is possible to approach a manager or management company. They might even approach you -- it's hard to be good and not have anyone notice! Of course, the management company will want to take a share of your income, and 20 percent might seem like a lot (the days of managers taking 10 percent are long over). Nevertheless, a good manager will be able to advance you a lot further than you would get on your own. By yourself, you have to mingle with the industry and attract clients, maintain a diary of bookings (which is more complex than you might imagine) and chase payments. You will also have to haggle over your daily rate, and royalty if you are a mix engineer. All in all, you will end up doing a lot of work that isn't engineering -- and what are you good at, engineering or managing? For that 20 percent cut, the manager will get you a better daily rate, and get you work all year round, every day if you want. You will hardly have to worry about anything other than engineering

(although you will have to appoint an accountant separately to handle your income tax and VAT). You won't even have to take telephone calls, which can sometimes be unwelcome in the studio.

Your Future Career?

There is of course another key question: how much money can you make as an engineer? Well, early in your career you will of course be paid peanuts, but once you have developed a list of significant credits, you could look for fees of anything up to £500 a day -- though for this, you would have to be one of the top few engineers in the country. If this isn't quite up to your expectations, you could move on to mix engineering, where the rewards are sweeter. A top mix engineer in the UK -- really top, that is -- could earn up to £2000-£3000 per track, each track taking typically one or two days to mix, although there is no fixed time schedule.

However, the real reason why anyone goes into recording engineering as a career is simply for the love of it; to be able to work with music and musicians all day, every day. For most of us, this will remain a dream, but if you have been encouraged by this series to try to make a career in recording, and you do become successful in a few years time, don't forget to let SOS know all about it. We would love to interview you in these pages! [SOS](#)



This is the last article in a four-part series. Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#).

Published in SOS September 1999

[Home](#) | [Search](#) | [News](#) | [Current Issue](#) | [Tablet Mag](#) | [Articles](#) | [Forum](#) | [Blog](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Shop](#) | [Readers Ads](#)
[Advertise](#) | [Information](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Support](#) | [Login Help](#)

AVNET Dream Big, Buy Small.
Shop single quantities »

Email: Contact SOS
Telephone: +44 (0)1954 789888
Fax: +44 (0)1954 789895

Registered Office: Media House, Trafalgar Way, Bar Hill, Cambridge, CB23 8SQ, United Kingdom.

Sound On Sound Ltd is registered in England and Wales.
Company number: 3015516 VAT number: GB 638 5307 26

Current Magazine

Web Edition
Tablet Mag app
Buy PDF articles
Magazine Feedback

Subscribe

Subscribe Now
Web Subscription FAQs

Podcasts

Competitions

Home

SOS Shop

News

Search

New Search
Forum Search
Search Tips

Articles

Reviews
Technique
Sound Advice
People
Glossary

Help + Support

Forum

Today's Hot Topics
Forum Channel List
Forum Search
My Forum Home
My Forum Settings
My Private Messages
Forum Rules & Etiquette

SOS TV

Watch exhibition videos, tutorials, interviews, masterclasses

Readers Classifieds

Submit New Adverts
View My Adverts

My SOS

Change Password
Change My Email
Change My Address
My Subscription
My eNewsletters
My Downloads

Information

Advertising
Magazine On-sale Dates
About SOS
Contact SOS Staff
Controlled Circulation
Licensing Enquiries
SOS Logos & Graphics
SOS Site Analytics
Privacy Policy

We accept the following payment methods in our web Shop:



All contents copyright © SOS Publications Group and/or its licensors, 1985-2015. All rights reserved.

The contents of this article are subject to worldwide copyright protection and reproduction in whole or part, whether mechanical or electronic, is expressly forbidden without the prior written consent of the Publishers. Great care has been taken to ensure accuracy in the preparation of this article but neither Sound On Sound Limited nor the publishers can be held responsible for its contents. The views expressed are those of the contributors and not necessarily those of the publishers.

Web site designed & maintained by PB Associates | SOS | Relative Media