

25. Department of Music & Sound Recording Assistant at an independent recording studio

My placement recording studio consists of two residential recording facilities, designed to specialise in pop and rock music. Studio 1's live room was tailored from the village's old chapel and therefore has a very distinctive, lively acoustic. Studio 2 has a smaller live room but a larger control room and so it is used for overdubbing and mixing. Further accommodation is currently being built along with the possibility of a third studio.

The business is family run; in addition to the studio manager and his wife, there are only two in-house engineers, a maintenance engineer, another student assistant, a chef and a cleaner. The studio's reputation for its friendly, homely atmosphere and its rural seclusion attracts artists from all over Europe and even further a field.

Main Activities

The initial tasks assigned to me were opening and closing the studio, powering up and shutting down the session rig, setting up and maintaining an organised, safe and tidy recording area, and undertaking the turn-around before next group of clients arrived. I was soon put in charge of meeting and greeting the bands and producers, introducing them to staff and showing them around the establishment. I closely assisted the session engineer and producer technically, whilst making sure that they and the musicians were happy and supplied with refreshments.

During my placement, my duties were progressively increased and I was eventually fully involved in all sides of the recording and mixing processes; towards the end of the year I entirely ran my own session (see later sections). Due to the small size of the business, I occasionally helped out with domestic and secretarial tasks such as cleaning, cooking and answering the telephones.

Level of Responsibility

The level of responsibility depended on the nature of the session. As I was usually the first member of staff to greet the clients (in person or by phone), my role was to create the right impression, representing the company appropriately; on some sessions, I was the only member of staff present. Before a session began, I ensured that all equipment was 'zeroed' and ready for operation. I logged and removed any faulty equipment and, where possible, discovered the problem and fixed it, for example I replaced the drive units of the studio monitors. It was my responsibility to set up clients' additional outboard units prior to the session so that the inputs and outputs came up on the patch bay and were tested, ready to use. During the session, I was expected to maintain a neat and detailed log of the complicated patch bay and know immediately when asked where a signal was going. I would also have to mark and log recall information and re-set equipment quickly on request. With the amount of outboard and multiple isolation rooms used on an average session, this proved to be quite a task. Some clients would constantly change their minds about where they wanted microphones placed and patched to; consequently, there would be a lot of running around to meet their requirements at the same time as keeping the log updated. It was important that the session ran smoothly to avoid the band getting impatient; the reputation of the studio is mostly spread by word of mouth and so it was crucial to appear competent and organised.

I was responsible for safety within the recording areas, making sure all cables were secured and that the clients were aware of any potentially dangerous obstructions; if an accident had

occurred then there could have been legal repercussions for the studio. I would often make headphone or monitor mixes for the band members, set up their guitar pedals and sometimes, having gained a producer's respect, would be left to run overdub sessions. On these occasions, I was effectively in charge and trusted to choose microphones, set levels, and handle the individual artists in a way that kept them happy and got the takes needed. I was frequently left unsupervised to make final 'comps' (choose the best bits of the takes and edit them together), use Auto-Tune to tweak vocals, and add triggered samples to drum tracks. My work was not checked, so it was important that I got it right.

I was entrusted with bouncing down final mixes and listening through the masters as the last check before they were sent to the record company for listening. Anything I missed and any mistakes I made throughout the session would reflect badly on the studio's professionalism and efficiency. At the end of each day I would back up the session files. This was very important as, if a problem occurred with the computer, the backup disk would be the only way to retrieve the work done. If the files were not backed up, the studio would be obliged to offer the band additional free recording days to catch up, which would cost the company money and create a bad reputation for the studio.

My highest level of responsibility attained was when I engineered my own session (see achievements section).

Creative and Technical Achievements

The scope for creative and technical input during a session greatly varied, dependant on the people I was working with. With most bands that arrived with their own producer and/or engineer, it was not appropriate for an assistant to make suggestions; however, some clients were very open to ideas and asked for my opinions. When a band came in without their own producer or engineer, there were more possibilities for me to get hands-on experience.

I had many musical opportunities on sessions; for example, a producer realised that I had a musical ear and asked me to arrange some string parts. I was often asked to improvise backing vocal harmonies and percussion parts and had the opportunity to play violin and kora (African harp) on recordings, as well as socially playing with some fantastic musicians in free time. I am credited for performing on several albums, including vocals on one and solo violin on another.

I sometimes ran vocal warm-ups with singers and made suggestions between takes to help them get the most out of their voices. I was thrilled when a returning producer requested that I be pulled off another assignment to coach the singer of the band he was recording.

I found that the two in-house engineers worked very differently; one engineer liked to do most of the technical running of the session himself after everything was rigged and consequently most of my learning with him was initially from observing his techniques and asking questions. However, I slowly built up a rapport with him and he was eventually comfortable to leave me working alone tracking to ProTools, and later entirely in charge of a session. As the placement went on, he began to ask for my opinions on things such as how edits and microphones sounded as well as about instrumental tuning issues and recognising if microphones were in or out of phase. In contrast, the other in-house engineer allowed me to run ProTools on the night of my arrival and subsequently increased my creative and technical possibilities. My choices of microphone techniques and ideas for getting around technical problems were used as well as compositional suggestions during tracking. On several final mixes, I was involved as an equal partner for decisions and shared controls of the outboard, plug-ins and faders. I have been credited as 'Assistant Engineer' on most of the albums in which I was

involved. Towards the end of the placement, I would be put on sessions without the safety-net of an in-house engineer. I was put in charge of recording guide tracks, which I executed as professionally as possible; on a couple of occasions, the producer was so happy with a guide sound that he used it in the final mix without re-recording it.

One of my greatest achievements was when a well-known producer asked me to entirely engineer, produce and mix a 'bonus track' for a band. I was left to organise the recording around their main session and carried out the project in free time. The producer was very impressed with the end result and my mix was sent to the record company without any alterations. Since that session, he contacted me several times to assist him with sessions in his London studio and is now taking a Tonmeister student as an assistant next year. I am very proud to have made such a good impression and gained respect from an experienced, prestigious contact.

Professional, Personal and Technical Development

A skill that I had to learn very quickly was assessing how to interact with different clients and gauge the appropriate balance of informality to professionalism. For example, one producer did not notice that a vocal take had distorted; it would have been poor etiquette for me to point this out to him, so I privately mentioned it to the engineer, who tactfully resolved the problem.

I learned the importance of maintaining the correct atmosphere in the studio and it was interesting to observe how producers communicated with the musicians to earn their respect and encourage them to get their best performances. As the hours were very long, there were on occasion stresses and irritations between band members and, where I could, I found ways of diplomatically diffusing these situations, either by listening to an individual's complaint or simply by saying "I'll stick the kettle on"! This greatly developed my confidence and interpersonal skills and helped me cope with working with difficult people in awkward situations.

I worked with musicians of many backgrounds from all over the world, developing ways of getting over the language and cultural barriers. I also worked with one person who uses a wheelchair and so I had to improvise microphone and speaker positionings to make the session as comfortable for him as possible. I picked up many 'tricks of the trade' from engineers, gained knowledge of widely used microphones, outboard equipment, instruments and amplifiers, and observed a variety of techniques from producers, seeing first hand how they achieve 'their sound'. I have become a lot faster and more familiar with ProTools and a wide range of plug-ins, and my listening skills have definitely improved, especially during mixing sessions.

When I was not needed on a session, I used my initiative to find things to do, for example creating a standard session sheet for logging signal paths. I always tried to anticipate what was needed so that when I was asked to do something, I could say that it was already done; I sometimes stayed up all hours to get everything ready for the following day, which pleased clients. I asked the in-house engineers to listen to a few of my home recordings and we discussed them in-depth; also, on a few days when there was no session, I went through the studio desks and their automation systems with an engineer to familiarise myself fully with their use. I offered to assist the maintenance engineer on servicing days to help find and fix faults with equipment. I now feel that I have a better understanding of how a studio is put together.

Pursuing This Line of Work in the Future

Working at this studio has equipped me with many transferable skills and knowledge of the recording process from start to finish, as well as the music industry in general; it has aided me in

my professional and personal development and allowed me to also express my creative, musical side. To pursue a future career in a similar role, I would need to continue building on my practical experience, developing a varied portfolio and establishing a solid reputation. I would need to keep up to date with recent technical advances and familiarise myself with as many different studios as possible so as to feel comfortable and confident in all recording environments.