

6. Department of Music & Sound Recording

Runner/Assistant Engineer at a music recording studio

Employer's area of work

Our studio was the first purpose built recording studio in the world when it opened its doors in 1931. It is based in northwest London. Over the years it has recorded a huge variety of musical styles including pop, rock, classical and film. Notable projects have been the Star Wars films, The Beatles and more recently Oasis and Narnia's 'Prince Caspian'. The building houses four recording studios, numerous mastering rooms, video edit suites, edit rooms and a bar/restaurant. It has also expanded into the next-door building, which is the interactive department (web and DVD design). With all of these facilities, this studio is capable of seeing a project through from beginning to end.

Main activities

My primary job as a runner is to ensure the smooth running of the studios and sessions on a day-to-day basis. A typical workday would begin at 8:30am, as I am expected to be in before any clients arrive or sessions begin. The morning routine involves checking every studio and lounge is tidy and stocked with necessary items (pens, pads of paper, etc). Any unnecessary items not required for that day's sessions are removed and put away. Each runner has an internal phone so that we can be contacted by any member of staff. Calls in the morning often include showing clients down to the relevant studios, hence the importance of getting everything tidied before they arrive. Once a client has arrived their needs become my responsibility until they leave. Clients' requests often involve getting food and drinks from onsite or offsite (such as Starbucks, Feng Sushi, and Harry Morgans). Other requests include photocopying music scores and giving tours of the studios. A vast majority of my time is taken up by setups and packdowns. These provide excellent opportunity to become familiarized with the mic collection and engineer setups. It is not uncommon for there to be a different session in for each day of the week, and this can result in derigging at the end of the day and setting up the next days sessions straight afterwards. As most sessions end at 9pm, it is easy to see why long days and late nights are common.

In order to set up effectively I must communicate with the engineer to find out their requests/preferences. Useful information to be obtained is the number of musicians, the mics to be booked, the layout, the plug up sheet and any outboard that is needed. All of this information can allow the assistants and runners to complete the setup.

The hierarchy of a studio session post is as follows: Engineer, 1st Assistant, 2nd Assistant and runner. As the year progresses runners act as 1st and 2nd assistants on numerous sessions.

My duties as a runner on a session are to ensure the studios have jugs of coffee and water, each person in the control room is provided with a drink on request, food is ordered and laid out for clients and engineers during lunch and dinner breaks and the occasional coffee run to Starbucks or Carluccios is undertaken. Whilst these are the main tasks, I must be ready to undertake any task requested by the clients. One particular example involved me buying swimming shorts from Selfridges for a band.

There can often be overlap between runner and assistant duties on a session. Whilst 2nd assistants may undertake runner duties and vice versa, they act in a more technical capacity on the session. They're often required to head out on to the floor to deal with any problems that arise, for example replacing faulty headphones, moving microphones setting up heaters or lights, and moving screens. A 2nd assistant must be alert at all times as any problems on the floor must be sorted by them and within very short time constraints.

The 1st assistant is usually the person operating the record rig (Pro Tools, Pyramix or tape machine). This can mean spending the whole day behind a computer with very few breaks. They must also prepare Pro Tools sessions, import Midi and audio, make edits and do backups of the session data. It is important that a runner and 2nd assistant ensure the 1st assistant is comfortable throughout the session.

When not assigned to a session, my other duties include taking mail to the post office, tidying of the studios and corridors, giving studio tours and talks to clients and keeping a stock check of resources (e.g. CDs, DVDs, tapes). Whilst most of these tasks seem mundane or of low responsibility, they all ensure the studios run smoothly and are presented in the best possible light.

Level of Responsibility

At the beginning of the placement, time is spent doing tasks of low-level responsibility. This would usually mean getting teas and coffees for studios clients and engineers, post office runs, studio tidying and the moving of boxes.

Over time the engineers became less hands on with regards to setting up on the floor. Once they felt confident with my ability, they would let the assistants and myself get on with the setup whilst they continue prepping the control room. Whilst this is a fairly straight forward task, making mistakes can prolong the time it takes to setup which in turn can lead to irritable engineers and clients!

The next stage of responsibility would involve operating a session's backup. Three weeks into my placement I was given the opportunity to operate 4 DTRS machines whilst keeping a take log for a high profile classical pianist and orchestra. Although I was very nervous, I got through the sessions with no problems. This resulted in me continuing on the sessions every time the clients came back. It was reassuring to know a client had requested my services for their sessions.

About 6 months into my placement I was given the opportunity to 1st assist on a rock band session. I was tasked with operating a 2-inch tape machine. This involved recording and playing back the takes, and also doing drop ins for overdubs. Tape machines require time to rewind, drop in and fast forward, meaning tasks are not as instant as on a computer. Missing the drop in would waste time, and would also make me look unprofessional, so for this reason drop ins required a lot of attention and accurate timing so in order to record the right bar. Having proved my ability on this session I was given the opportunity to first assist on numerous sessions I was assigned too for the remainder of the year.

Pro Tools is the primary recording platform used at our studio. On two occasions I was given tutorials on how to setup and operate Pro Tools. With this in mind I would then watch 1st assistants operating Pro Tools on

sessions, and this proved to be a useful learning experience. Soon I was being asked to prep sessions and assist. Once I began working with Pro Tools my level of responsibility stepped up. The pace of a session can be governed by the Pro Tools operator's speed and ability, so it was easy to understand why my hesitation could cost someone money. Fortunately I managed to get through my session with very few disruptions.

Achievements

There were two occasions that I would say were my proudest technical achievements. The first was working on the new Narnia film score 'Prince Caspian'. I worked along side the other placement year runner and together we were responsible for the whole setup of sessions. This meant together we were able to setup the entire orchestra in 5 hours without any assistance. We even received acknowledgement of a job well done from the engineers when after doing a mic scratch and headphone check, there was not one single fault!

The second technical achievement was on the film score 'Defiance'. Again I was working with an studio assistant and together we were tasked with preparing everything for the film sessions. The challenging thing about the project was that it ran for 2 weeks and required numerous studio changes. This meant setting up a large-scale orchestra in studio 1, and then 5 days later moving to studio 2 to do small-scale sections. We had to ensure microphones and outboard were booked appropriately for each studio, and that studios were setup or clear away very quickly.

Technical Development

My placement at the studio allowed me to work on a large variety of sessions. Each requiring different approaches and techniques coupled with the correct choice of equipment. I've gained an understanding of which mics to use and how to place them whether recording for example a large orchestra, Jazz band or solo marimba. I've learned how to operate Neve and SSL desks in every studio, and applied this knowledge appropriately to get the most from my downtime sessions.

I am also familiar with a variety of recording formats I used throughout the year. DAT, DTRS, Analogue 1, and 2 inch machines and of course Pro Tools. Advice and tips from the engineers has allowed me to gain an understanding of our studio's Pro Tools setup. My increased knowledge of shortcuts and has also improved my efficiency and speed of operation.

Professional development

Working on many sessions has given me an excellent understanding of session etiquette. For example when it is appropriate to speak or to keep quiet, and when to leave or enter a control room. These small things display the professionalism of our studio and its employees, something very important in a client based business. Clients walk in and out of our studio everyday so I learnt how to address and interact with them appropriately, and the results were reflected through the numerous positive emails and feedback I received.

Personal Development

The demands of the job meant I spent a majority of my time working, leaving very little time for anything else. It was not uncommon to work late in to the night or be in early, and long days become the norm. This allowed me to show my capacity for hard work, and also tested my perseverance. I impressed myself with how I was able to maintain a high standard of work for an extended period of time without complaining or giving up.

Time management is a very important skill during the placement year. As a runner I often found myself left to my own devices, or alone to complete a task. Knowing when I was needed elsewhere and how long the task may take was useful for planning my day or week. The recording industry often works to very strict deadlines and delays can waste a lot of money, so it was imperative that any tasks assigned to me were completed on time. Something as simple as missing a post office run or a slow pack down had its consequences.

Further Skills Requirement

If I wanted to pursue as an assistant engineer any further I would need to improve my Pro Tools skills. This could include setting up sessions, making quick and accurate edits and learning effective shortcuts. All of these tasks are likely to be performed on a session when under pressure, so mistakes must be avoided.

In conclusion my year at this studio has been a highly worthwhile experience. I learnt skills from some of the best engineering and technical staff in the world and have many amazing memories from my year. Although there were some long days, stressful sessions and difficult clients, I feel I have gained the knowledge to deal effectively with situations like that. I feel confident I can go back to university a more experienced and capable person and hope to apply all the knowledge I gained in to my studies. My year provided me with the most demanding and rewarding experiences in my life, and I have not one regret about working at this studio.