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The Many Roles of a

by Eric McKinney

Wonderland Studios

Successful Project Studio Owner

(and how to become an in-demand local producer)

So you want to become a studio owner and/or an in-demand local producer? Do you realize what sort of work that entails? Do you understand all the different skills you may need to be successful in that venture? What about all the various roles you will be asked or forced to take on with projects/clients?

Wait a minute, I didn't sign up for all this.

Those of us in the music business all know that project studios are popping up everywhere these days. These are usually smaller-type studios than the professional large-scale recording studios, but can often produce high quality work for a much cheaper price for various recording artists.

These types of studios have flourished in recent years due to the falling prices with equipment and recording accessories, as well as less-expensive digital hard-disk recording products and software that's now widely available in the marketplace. But running a successful project studio can require you to develop skills to be many different people - project coordinator, record producer, psychologist, advisor, versatile scheduler, great communicator, storyteller, business person and entrepreneur, just to name a few.

In addition, just like almost any business, it also hinges on strong people skills and building relationships with your clients. This in turn helps spread the word about the studio, about working directly with you, and brings in referral projects or repeat business

Producer or Psychologist?

(the goal of any business, right?).

But being a good business person is not enough, though, since this is indeed a recording studio. You will need to develop strong audio engineering skills which alone encompass a large area of expertise.

You need a good basic understanding of signal flow, recording gear, microphones, acoustics and psychoacoustics, instruments and music in general. You need to have a good idea how to record and reproduce sound through electronic and mechanical means. Many people go to school for years just to learn these skills, and most recording engineers/producers are continually learning, and gaining experience in this field with every project, due to every project being a bit different.

There are so many skills, elements and roles that you will likely need to develop. We don't have room to discuss everything in this article, but let us discuss a few important items in more detail, give some examples and help open your mind towards what you may be getting yourself into with this line of work.

When to Listen, Suggest, and *Shut-Up!*

Even after working with hundreds of musicians/artists in the studio, it never ceases to amaze me that using psychology throughout the session tends to be needed to move things along smoother, make everybody excited, work through bad performances, and to keep the sessions moving along in general.

For example, I recall many sessions where the musician(s) get frustrated or even start self-doubting their performances or songs altogether. And there are times that they just are not hearing things back in the speakers or headphones how they thought they recorded it. They may start trying to change direction with a performance of an already established and potentially great part of the song.

Sometimes, just some simple reassurance or comments such as "that is sounding great" or "that's a really cool take right

Above Photo: Lajon Witherspoon, Sevendust, Scout Bar, SA

Left and centerpiece: Photo courtesy of Monicalina Photography, Monica Coggins

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there is all that's needed. They often perk right back up and collect their confidence. One of the most important roles of a good producer is knowing exactly what to say at the right time, and when not to say anything at all. Critically listening to the tracks and being able to point out specifics (whether good or bad) will let the artist know that you are in the moment and helping them.

Sometimes a given performance may not be exactly what was needed for the song, or just simply did not sound right for some reason. At this point you need to find a way to get the musician(s) to ultimately re-do a track. A good producer can come up with a way, without hurting anybody's feelings, to suggest or convince them in doing the part over again. Choosing your words carefully, the inflections of your voice and your body language are all crucial and almost an art-form in itself for communicating and ultimately guiding them through to a better performance. As mentioned online in Wikipedia, "a music producer could be compared to the film director in that the producer's job is to create, shape and mould a piece of music in accordance with their vision for the album."

However, in accordance with the above statements, as a producer, you have to constantly take some cues from the artist. Most artists are very sensitive and passionate about their music, and ultimately may know exactly what they are trying to get across with the musical piece. On the other hand, some do not know. But, you have to find common ground here in working with the musician. Listen to what the musician is telling you and give them the benefit of the doubt. It is ultimately, their art on the line.

Also, a musician with studio

experience just may use a bit of psychology back your way as well, to possibly stroke your ego and help guide things the way they see fit for the project.

I recall a comment from producer Butch Vig, from when he was working with Nirvana on *Nevermind*, and Kurt Cobain simply did not want to double-track some vocal and guitar parts. Butch thought it sounded better doubled (same part recorded twice), and subtly mentioned, "John Lennon double-tracked." That comment, that quick thinking, and that bit of psychology ultimately got Kurt to change his mind, which in turn helped with the elaborate production on that landmark album.

Being a producer/engineer myself, I store all sorts of bits of information like that in my head, ready to whip out any particular story or comment as needed for a session. For example, I remember a comment over lunch one time from producer/engineer David Thoenner (engineer for John Mellencamp, John Lennon, Matchbox 20), where he mentioned working with Mutt Lange, the legendary producer, on AC/DC's "For Those About to Rock." Mutt had gotten some great guitar sounds like David had never heard before, and David mentioned how it really had a lot to do with the perspective of the vocal against the tracks.

Therefore, I sometimes pull out that story to remind clients about the perspective of the vocal against the instrument tracks and how that can really make the song sound more rockin' and louder if the vocal is not so out front of the music (making it almost harder to hear every word and more like you were at a loud concert). That bit of information/education often helps a client really listen and focus on the level of the vocals. Stories, comments, education,

psychology in general – they are all tools you can use with guiding the bands and artists through the entire production of their project.

What am I

Engineer/producer, business person or scheduler?

Juggling all of the various roles and aspects of your job logically and excellently will be crucial to your success in this business. Even while being a producer/engineer, you are still an entrepreneur – someone who organizes a business venture and assumes the risk for it, and you are a business person – one engaged in business.

You need to make the best use of your time to make that time equal money. This all comes down to scheduling. You will be forced to schedule all of your business affairs and projects, and try to make every client happy by meeting their project schedule.

Take note, in my experience almost every band/artist underestimates the amount of time that will be required to get the desired results for their recording project. Therefore, you will need to take this into account for them as you are scheduling your next few weeks and months of projects.

You will want to build some "holes" into your schedule to have extra days for certain projects. And of course, each client has the most important project, and needs their project done by their deadline, right? So, you will likely have to find a way to constantly shuffle projects around a bit, find extra time for

one project, while another may get delayed for some reason (maybe the band had a fight and they are canceling sessions that week, or someone is not finished working up parts of a song, or they are sick or just cannot get out of some other obligations).

Another aspect of this type of career is the amount of extra work that is required by you, long after the musicians have tracked their parts and have left the studio. Even if the clients want to be around for all the work you are doing they simply do not need to always be there. These tasks include cleaning up tracks (taking out the noisy parts of individual tracks, noisy guitar amp hum, lip smacks or headphone noise in between vocal phrases) and applying EQ to enhance various tracks, getting a general mix (levels between instruments and vocal parts happening), compiling tracks from various alternate takes/passes of a vocal part or guitar solo and so on. Of course, many of these tasks are where an assistant engineer comes in handy, and you can possibly delegate specific tasks to them. As busy as you might be, it is important that you learn how to get everything done in a timely manner.

Also, as a producer/engineer, I like to be well prepared before a session. Therefore, I will arrive early and prepare the studio for the project. I'll get prepared for the type of tracking or mixing that we will be doing that day. As a producer, I often play various instruments on a project, and may want time to experiment with ideas for the instrument layers. Therefore, I usually do that when the client is not around, just to experiment and flush out some ideas for the parts. I may lay these parts into the track and see what the client thinks at the next

session (unless the client specifically wants to be more involved in the instrument layers). But I always try to have plenty of great ideas to suggest to them. There may be some ideas or special effects that you want to experiment with for a particular song. It can be best to try out those ideas without the client right beside you in the studio, just to see if you can obtain what you're hearing in your head and then present it to them.

Every project is different

every client is unique and time may sometimes seem irrelevant

Something you learn after working hundreds of studio projects is that every client is unique, everybody will likely want to do something different, and you need to be able to recognize what is the most productive way for that client to work. Some clients will have specific structures and musical parts worked out for songs ahead of time, and others will want to experiment and "wing it" in the studio, trying to find and create something during the recording process.

You need to be understanding of the creative process and willing and open to trying different things. I have found that, generally, if you are open to any ideas that the client may have, they will feel that you respect them and are giving them that opportunity to experiment with musical ideas for their project.

I have had many clients come back to work with me after working in another studio (a studio where engineers/producers were not as open to experimenting and trying various ideas) and simply mention to me how easy it is to work with me, how

comfortable they were working with me, and how they really like that I let them experiment. After all, you do not always know what is best for a song - give the band/artist a chance to be brilliant.

Additionally, some clients will like to work very fast in the studio, trying to get as much as possible accomplished in a session. While others, will be the complete opposite, wanting to think about details a lot, taking frequent breaks, and wanting to repeatedly listen to the tracks and take time to write very specific parts.

You have got to be able to judge when to push people, so that they feel like they are getting things accomplished in the studio, and when to just kind of let them take their time to develop and finish tracks for the songs. Be aware, that if enough is not getting done at the scheduled sessions, frustration may surface with the band/artist.

But if you are trying to push them forward before they are ready, that can create possible issues. There is a fine line, and you will have to use your judgment, experience and people skills with these tasks.

Remember, you have got a deadline, but you are trying to keep everybody happily working together and with you on the project.



Building your reputation and Career

Many of you have probably heard the statement, "you're only as good as your last project." Well, to some degree that is true, but it may not always be the case. Music is a fluid, living thing and once a CD is finished, it does not go away. I have had projects I completed a year or more ago all of a sudden get a lot of attention. Basically, you have really got to strive to make each project the best that you can, given the circumstances. Even though the musicians on your latest project may not be as talented as the last band, or the project may be a style of music that you are not as familiar with as others, or there are some musicians in the group that just do not see eye to eye with you on the vision of the recordings, you have got to find a way to do great work.

And honestly, from working in the studio business for more than fifteen years now, I will shoot you straight here and tell you that you really do not know what project or band is going to break out and sell tons of CDs or become the "next big thing." And that just may be the project that garners you the most attention and recognition and leads to many other studio projects.

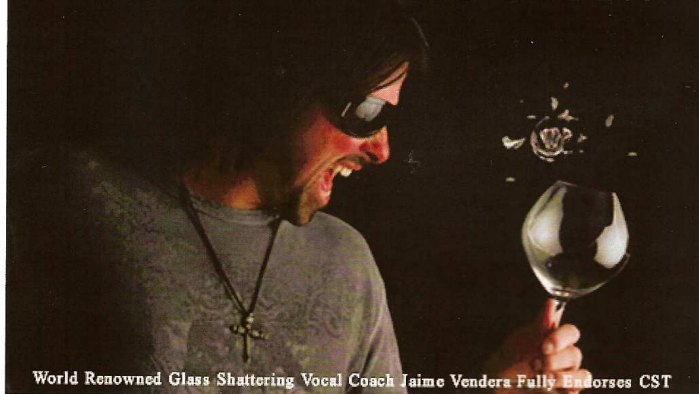
In addition to great work and great sounding recordings, one of the best

ways to build your production/engineering career is to set a great vibe in the studio and simply get along with each client that you work with (duh!). It does not matter how you really go about that, but being a hard working producer/engineer, a very professional individual, and generally a fun, nice person will not hurt. People talk, people spread the word about you and will refer others to you if they like working with you, as with any business. And the music business is a business of "who do you know?" and "this guy made my music sound awesome."

I have had clients post blogs on MySpace or their websites about working with me in the studio, and now over half of the projects I work on were referred to me from a previous client. You get to a point that you have so many bands/artists wanting to work with you, that you get to pick and choose the next best project for your career, or for your pocketbook, in some cases. Your rates go up as your reputation and experience builds, and you get to be much more selective of the projects that you take on. There is nothing better than getting to work on what you want to work on and getting paid to do it.

If you're working towards a career in the music business, good luck with your studio experiences and projects. Let's all make some great music to share with the world.

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Eric McKinney is an in-demand engineer/producer who co-owns and operates Wonderland Studios. Wonderland is a busy project studio facility in "The Live Music Capitol of the World," Austin, Texas.

For info about the studio, visit www.wonderlandstudios.info. Eric has a long list of engineering and production credits. He also tours as lead-guitarist with Mark McKinney and the Cosmic Cowboys who have gained 4 top-10 songs on the 2007/2008 Texas Music Charts, and have opened shows for such artists as Kevin Fowler, Randy Rodgers Band, Eli Young Band, Wade Bowen, Cross Canadian Ragweed, Miranda Lambert, Jack Ingram, Trent Summar and Trent Tomlinson.