

## Want To Torture A Sound Mixer?

Ruminations of who's pleasing whom

By Sully

**W**hat's the worst thing that can happen to you? A direct assault on your person... Or is your ego more fragile? Me, I vote Ego.

I often have this mental image of the average sound mixer wandering the planet encased in a self-absorbed bubble with feet holes. The up side to such hubris is pretty positive; it allows for an unlimited number of head games to be performed at their expense. The downside, of course, is they're wandering *our* planet in a self-absorbed bubble with feet holes.

Want to torture a sound mixer? Immediately after a show, walk directly at them, smile big, slap them on the

back and then mention that you just saved 15 percent on your car insurance. Walk away.

Congratulate yourself. You've just infused your target with enough self-doubt by *not* mentioning his incomparable knob twiddling skills to last him to tomorrow's soundcheck. This, I tell you, *this* is great sport.

Familiar? Here's a test; the show you mixed the previous evening has been reviewed by a music pundit that you consider to be a minimum of one species, if not a complete genus, removed from your own. He waxes on in an impossibly detached tone, providing the reader with a cursory glimpse of his impending hipness.

Just toward the end of his dissertation, when you're sure your efforts have escaped notice, he tosses in a simple coda: "Perhaps my enjoyment of the evening would have been enhanced had the mix not sounded like a bag of cats being trampled by tiny Lithuanians wearing golf spikes..."

Your world becomes darkness...all is darkness. A table sings mournfully in the distance. Dogs continue to play cards. The sun dies.

*Think. Think. Who reads this? I need a plan...I'm gonna need jumper cables, three rubber boots and a shrimp fork. I'll pick up the clock and jar of peanut butter on my way.*

I can fix this...yes I can.

This is you or someone you know... Don't lie.

I once was a system engineer on a tour that had chosen to employ an absolute medical miracle as the front-of-house guy. This fellow possessed a brain only large enough to meet state and federal guidelines for poultry and an ego that kept his heart and lungs dangerously concerned about fair allocation of resources.



# The Life

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He also exhibited a completely baffled expression when forced to deal with anyone but the band or management. Upon the former or the latter's arrival, he became a game show host. In this mode, there simple were not enough cheeks on the planet to "double air kiss."

"Ohh", he would quiver to one of them sporting a new faux duckskin jacket, "I hear you've taken up Filipino rabbit herding. That sounds fascinating - take a few minutes and tell me all the details."

After the band left, he would resume his vacant, pre-vegetative stare. This demeanor in itself was of no concern to me. I simply hadn't the time for it. Get it in, get it up, get it down, and get it out. This is my system guy mantra.

However, during that point in the evening when I was contractually required to stand behind the guy and say things like, "you the man" and "sounds like the record," instead I would stroke my chin and imperceptibly shake my head from side to side. Never a word - simply the actions.

When he turned a furtive glare on me, I would whip out a big smile and mime the universal, "Are you OK? Need anything?" Then, back to the appraising chin stroking. After the show, as he hung around just a couple beats too long, truffle snuffling for compliments, I would pause, smile again at him and ask, "...didja have problems with that kick tonight?" Then scurry off to the stage to drop the PA.

In the intangible world of the mix, absolutely every one of us responds negatively to comments that are not completely positive. Let me say that again - if it's not flattery and encouragement including the word *godlike* somewhere in the text, most of us are left wondering what went wrong. Perhaps it's the highly subjective nature of our end results, our mixes. Maybe it's because we *think* we're so acutely aware of the nature and desires of those we attempt to please.

But are we simply wrong about *who* we think we are mixing for? There is always the obligatory lip service regarding the happiness of the ticket buyers from even the most road hardened engineers, yet truth be told,

most mixers take the suggestions offered by helpful show patrons with, um, grain of road salt.

Let me paraphrase the American contribution to the intelligentsia: "I don't know nothing 'bout art, but I know what I like." This statement (typically 25 minutes prior to the "what if we are just a finger in the anatomy of a greater being" conversation) is usually prelude to my response "check please."

But, what about that statement? I mean, sure, swell, as an outline for a career it needs work, but could it be that simple coming from a concert patron? "*I'm not technical, but I know what sounds good and that was absolutely (insert appropriate adjective)!*"

Since we debate the merits of what makes some of us great and some of us caterers, shouldn't we also consider this fortune cookie wisdom of the great unwashed? No, and here's why. All of their arguments are baseless and indefensible. Better data could be gathered from polling a marauding herd of debutantes then the average audience.

Equally, there's the fact that most sound folk hold a large measure of disdain for the general public. And why not? Once, after I told someone what I did for a living, he mentioned je didn't care what it sounded like, he could listen to the CD at home. He just wanted to be close to the band.

*And I was wondering if the attack on the snare compressor was set properly. Silly me.*

Here's my theory simply put: mix engineers are driven to perform to avoid the ridicule, derision and worst of all *silence* that awaits them should they fail at their task. But there's a rub; most of that usually comes from other engineers. It's a bit like *Lord of The Flies* with compression drivers. It's not premeditated evil, its just... Well, like many species, we like to kill and eat our wounded.

We like it a lot.

But I digress. Consider the following thought process: "If I make the mix impress the system engineer *here*, it's gotta completely dazzle the raging Visigoths on folding chairs out *there*."

There is a good deal of support for

this theory from a practical standpoint. Regional and national system engineers do a helluva lot of shows and experience the full dynamic range of talent in our industry. I'd dare say that qualifies them to judge the good, the bad, and the muddy.

So shouldn't the credence we're willing to give at least go to those with the most educated opinions? It'd be great to think we operate in a purely virtuous bubble where the only thing that matters is the pursuit of the grail; the perfect mix for the sake of the perfect mix, but the world tends to disregard that notion and instead imposes reality. So we push the mix past the 90 percent good to achieve 100 percent excellent for those we will see again every day or every week or every year.

Valid? Politically incorrect? Offensive to the overly pedantic?

*Yes please.*

True? Not important since the fallout is positive to the consumer. No harm. I'll admit, the merits of *the mix to audience or mix to peers* debate could continue ad naseum and if this were TV, I'd have a resolution for you that would sort this puppy out in 22 minutes.

I don't.

Instead, I find myself trying to roll with the rhythms of personalities and situations instead of raging against them.

It's going well I think.

There's no bow to tie this up. In the grand scheme of things this subject is not really that important, nor are we, as the supposed minions of vagabond minstrels. War, famine, pestilence, the completely baffling A/V systems on tour busses... These are all greater blights that deserve the attention of the world instead of us.

But we *should* count ourselves useful. At the end of the day, we've decreased the world's supply of cigarettes, increased retail sales at truck stops and most of us haven't tried to make cats channel Truman Capote on daytime TV.

*Find your swing, Bagger Vance, Bagger Vance.* ■

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