

It Could Happen To You

Ruminations on the pro audio career path

By Jack Alexander

We got the bad news last week – our favorite CD/DVD/you-name-it store is going out of business.

Massive bummer. Whoever did the ordering for that place is the best and found the best. In the few months I've been going there (since we moved the sound department at the college to its fancy new downtown location), my finances have taken a huge whack, exceeded only by the improvement in my disc collection.

Yesterday, as we picked over the body in the classical section, I heard some of the store's excellent

and obviously shell-shocked staff trying to sort out their futures, and it really tore me up. The classical guy (late 50's/early 60's, looked like he worked at an old-fashioned hardware store) and the jazz kid (couldn't have been more than 23, major piercings combined with what once was an early '80s new-wave haircut) were trying to sort out just how long the place would last, while trying not to radiate too much attitude as vultures like me scooped up all the bargains.

I never dealt much with the classical guy, but Ted Uzzle and some of my older relatives had – serious classical collectors who swore by this gentleman's knowledge and taste. The learning of a lifetime – which performance on what label from what era – fit to the taste of the customer. You can't get that into a book, you need an encyclopedia. There aren't job descriptions for people like that at Best Buy or Wal-Mart, and those entities don't have anything like the product catalog that was managed for this soon-to-be defunct store.

The kid will be hired by Tower Records, but the classical guy will be viewed as a potential liability: too expensive, too hard to manage, too much attitude, no respect for authority, and classical isn't selling anyway, right?

VALUE MENTALITY

We'd been told that the store hadn't been profitable for a long time. Well they would say that. Was it killed by file sharing, or the general muso-biz slump, or the big competitors, or lousy management? All of the above, along with the MBA-driven bottom line/shareholder "value at all costs" mentality that is everywhere and will never change.

As I sat in my ceremonial (10 feet by 10 feet, the only ceremony you could have in that thing is a bath) office, chug-



Are we going full circle? The modern reality for sound pros could come to resemble the past, plus a whole lot more.

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ging a Starbucks and futzing with the audiophile toys, I figured I was immune to the kind of hard reality those people at the disc store were facing.

Maybe, hopefully. But what about our business as a whole? Are we all going to passively sit around waiting for some punk in a suit to hand us our walking papers when it suits him and his masters?

This is an important issue for me, as the subtext to my work at the college is to get kids battle ready, to help give them some knowledge and skills to get (and stay) hired in the marketplace. Now that word "hired" is an interesting one. It used to mean a job for life – you look after the company and the company looks after you.

There are those who would say this concept was always a fiction, but many were able to eke out a more than decent existence by following that plan. For example, the IT professionals (this was in a recent *New York Times* article) at a big New York investment firm (1,500 of them), whose \$150K/year jobs are migrating to people in India who work for \$20K/year, probably believed all of it was still so.

And there are those who provide what is known as "certification" – they want their clientele to believe this as well. And those of us who do "education" have our own variations on the theme of long-term employment tied to the generosity and good will of the employer towards the properly prepared and loyal employee.

And for some it may still work, until some bright spark figures out

how to move their tasks to a lower cost provider somewhere cheap.

PUSHED ASIDE?

These "labor efficiencies" have been enabled by technology, and it's fair to say that some of us (me included) have pushed aside people who were the technical equivalent of the classical guy at some point in our careers.

Back in the day, sound reinforcement types had to be able to rig, do power distro, fix anything that broke, drive the semi, do carpentry, wire multipins, and, oh yeah, tweak the rig and mix the show. I'll never forget the first time I saw a Brit roadie whip the cover off a Harmonizer, grab a Fluke and fix the thing – sobering for a technical screw-up like me.

Nowadays the hardware does not require that kind of maintenance. The stuff's so solid these days I don't even have to whack my Harmonizer too often anymore.

I got away with concentrating on mixing and system engineering/EQ, and was able to hack together a career out of it. I glommed the sales/consultant/teaching thing on top of the show stuff, which meant that when one thing slowed down, or I got bored or was asked to leave, there was always something else to do. This wasn't a plan, it just happened.

I'm told there's a bar in Los Angeles where a lot of the old Brit road dogs hang out, exchanging lies and trying to snag a tour. Most of them have all the skills noted above, except perhaps the ability to fake a

business or academic attitude. I've probably got most of them beat on the stuff I chose to learn, but they have me vaporized on the broad spectrum of skills that used to be the basis for a career in sound reinforcement.

But this isn't the basis anymore, and now we are (finally) coming to the point: I submit that those who wish to avoid the honor of employment at McDonald's or Wal-Mart in their 50's need to be multi-specialized. Not like the classical guy at the record store, who was obviously phenomenal in one specialty, a specialty ultimately declared irrelevant by the marketplace. His situation was O.K. as long as there were no major (file-sharing, whatever) changes in the disc store idiom, and he probably had a good run, but now what?

The sound person will need, in no particular order, to mix live front-of-house and monitors (real, not ear buds. That isn't mixing, sorry); handle system engineering, rig, record, specify and organize installs and have some knowledge of acoustics; speak Spanish, deal effectively in all aspects of computers, do projection, and even (yikes, count me out!) lighting. This, along with the usual backline stuff, truck loading and truck driving.

Somewhere in there, an individual capable of all this will cobble together a more than adequate income. But it probably won't come from any one employer, rather from several. The corporate bean counters have created a bottom-line shareholder/value-driven environment, so we must force the



Jack's Place

issue of our personal bottom lines.

As soon as the best people are only available on a non-salary (day-rate or hourly) basis, the potential employers will have to back their game down and start showing a little respect for tech crew. Financial respect, that is. As much of the hardware in our business has migrated from asset to commodity status, so has the perception of the value of the staff, and it's imperative that we fight back.

A DIRECTION

Some advice: If an individual can make him/herself valuable on a number of fronts, he/she increases the likelihood of a proper rate of pay, and can put up services for the highest bidder, perhaps further forcing up the price.

Within this model, there is no need for pension plans (can't be trusted, do your own) or profit sharing or stock ownership where you work. Take the money as it comes and make your own investments. Even health insurance can be used to hold you under corporate control, so best to pay a little more and make your own arrangements through a PPO (Personal Provider Organization) or whatever.

Don't sign any non-competes, and never ever share any part of a deal (install, consulting, rental, whatever) that you can somehow hack on your

own. Form a network with your friends and go after all the business in your area, under-bidding the competition. They have built-in overhead due to their business models, and this is one of your best weapons in a bidding war.

Nasty, eh? But just ask the people whose jobs are being shipped down a wire to "cost effective" environments. Because if you don't do something, who do you think could be next?

Obviously, everyone won't have the stomach for this, or the talent. My comments are directed at those with both, and who are burdened with the delusional notion that their employers have their best interests at heart.

As I pound this out, images form before my eyes of all the people who worked on the line making Zenith televisions here in Chicago, and the people who fixed TV's back in the days when they were actually fixed. I think of the studio maintenance people and radio engineers, and for that matter, the recording engineers. Going, going... Almost gone.

NEW IS OLD

Actually, it's kind of ironic, because the successful sound person of the future ends up looking a lot like the old-time roadie, who was capable of all the technical, logistical, and artistic functions associated with our busi-

ness. Perhaps better mannered (that would not be difficult), more computer savvy, but the new "soundperson" would look a lot like a Brit road-dog without the attitude and the coveralls.

A few years ago I was doing a pitch for a loudspeaker manufacturer at a major sound company, when I felt (sensed – you know what I mean) bad energy directed at me. This large sound company had just absorbed its main competitor, and it turned out that one of the few people retained from the defeated organization was in the room driving a forklift while I did my spiel to the victors.

I checked him out with some friends, and was told that he had been one of the more senior tech people at that other place. No wonder he was mad – driving a fork while his new bosses stood around in golf shirts yakking with the likes of me about the future of speaker technology. He had trusted his management and they had sold him down the river. Not a pretty sight, though at least he had a job, which is more than the Zenith people and the salaried recording engineers can claim.

Be warned – it could happen to you. ■

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