

## REINFORCEMENT

## Reflections on Building a Career

● It recently occurred to me that twenty years have passed since I did my first paid show. Admittedly, I was in high school and only got \$15, but it was the start of something that has supported family and friends for many years. As a result, I have given some thought as to what it takes to prosper in this industry.

Even after twenty years, I still love music. I love the feeling of working with it, of putting my hands on it and shaping it. I love adding my input to something and making 20,000 people go 'YEAH!'

A good sound mixer can take a band with no sound check, and inside of a minute make the place rocking, and within a song and a half, make you think you've got the

record at 110 dB. Of course this takes experience, but it is the kind of pressure a great live mixer loves, and with my current act, it's the kind I get all the time. When you have taken a band from ground zero to the Stratosphere in one song, you can be sure the cheers at the end of the song are for you, too; and you can be sure that a shiver still goes down your back, even after twenty years.

You have to listen to and like *all* kinds of music if you want to survive in this business. I couldn't have survived this long if I wasn't intimately involved with many kinds of music: Rock, Blues, Jazz, Folk, Anything. Yet, this has led to so many highlights in my life that I sometimes can't believe the history

of my career myself. Sometimes when I tell people some of the things that have happened to me, I think I really have lived everyone's teenage dream of the perfect life.

## LONG TERM MEMORIES

I am constantly surprised at how many irreplaceable friends and memories I have. You can't work with every single star in this business, but you can work with too many to count! Years ago, James Brown liked the job a co-worker and I did so much that he brought Foster and I out on stage, introduced us to the audience, then had us bring 'our women' (as he called them) out, and had us all take a bow. Afterwards he danced with 'the women' on stage, and then fi-

nally, as Snagglepuss would say, it was time to "Exit Stage Left." (Of course, the inside joke on television is that Snagglepuss goes to the Audience Left after such a statement, moving in the opposite direction from the way he really should.)

When the show was over, James called me into the dressing room and tipped everyone \$100. Discussing the night afterwards, we all figured that no night could ever be as magic as that. Boy, were we ever wrong!

Instead, my life has been a series of peaks as wonderful as that night. Could there be one single peak in a life when just a few of the headlines include: helping Duran Duran get ready for Live Aid, doing enough shows with Sammy Davis, Jr. that he offered business advice, many magic nights with James Brown, taking one of the world's premier singers, Judy Collins, everywhere from the Tonight Show, Disney Channel and Showtime to arenas with 15,000 people. And along the way, I've mixed acts like B.B. King, Wynton Marsalis, and many, many others to crowds as large as 65,000. Then this past summer, I was asked by The City of New York to be the "official" city sound engineer, making me the first soundman ever appointed as the result of a Supreme Court decision.

## ADVICE

So, what advice could I possibly give someone else who wants to live a dream like mine? *Don't Give Up.* I am constantly surprised by how

The Supreme Court decision in *The City Of New York versus Rock Against Racism* is the only sound decision to have ever gone to the Supreme Court. The outcome of the decision is that The City Of New York received permission from The Supreme Court to run any sound system that is on the city's property.

The case is a perfect example of where being nice is important, because if the original soundman had done so, the case never would have gone as far, nor cost the money it did.)

many good people in our business disappear. To most people, the music business is not about making millions of dollars. It's about creating something that affects you *deeply, spiritually*. It is impossible to effectively relate the feeling of 20,000 people cheering your work. There is no other business where thousands of people will immediately evaluate your work and render their decision in no uncertain terms.

I am amazed at how many people drift into our business instead of actually preparing for it. The entertainment industry is a hard business to break into. It requires the same sort of planning that comes with becoming a doctor or lawyer. An awful lot of kids see someone on MTV making the big bucks at age 21 and think that is how the music industry works; you get discovered and you're a star (for about 15 minutes). Instead, the music industry is really comprised of many individuals who slowly built their careers from part-time to full-time; people who spent years in the doldrums waiting to show they have what it takes.

What does it take? Mainly it takes talent, knowledge, and "Balls With A Capital B." The first two should be obvious, but how will you react when you need to run out in front of 15,000 people to fix something? Will you be able to speak intelligently and confidently when dealing with your first multi-platinum performer?

It's hard to remember that people are looking to you for answers when you've never done something before. It takes a lot of "Balls With A Capital B" to answer confidently and knowledgeably about something you are just really doing for the first time. I remember my first "real" job in this business. I saw an ad in a newspaper for a soundman to work with a now world-famous act. I figured, 'what is a manager going to want out of a 20-year-old kid?' Nothing, unless you are giving him *answers*.

Now, I knew that every soundman in the world was going after this job; I knew that everyone was going to say, "I've seen XXXXX, I really want to work for him. I think he's going to be a star." So, I walked in, sat down and said, "I've seen this

show a dozen times and this, this and this is wrong with the show, this is wrong with the staging, this is wrong with the lighting, and this, this and this is wrong with the sound." Within three minutes, the manager had sent all other applicants home. Why? Because, even though he didn't agree with me on most points, I had opinions and was willing to share my ideas to try and make a better show.

## RULES

So, after this much time, I can offer some advice on how to survive and avoid the pitfalls of the business. Thousands of small rules won't help you, but a few general ones work all the time:

Get as much sleep as you can on the road and stop eating all those cheeseburgers! Exercise.

Force yourself to take time for your family, because you never know what's going to happen.

Be a Boy Scout—Be Prepared! Not just with every tool in the business, but mentally.

Try to be nice. This sounds pretty basic, but things can get pretty frazzled out on the road. Smile. Try to tell a joke a day.

(One important note: There is a certain ego trip that goes along with putting your hands on 50,000 watts. Sure, you have enough power to move people to ecstasy, but you also have enough power to hurt people. There is a certain responsibility to what you are doing. It becomes imperative that you learn quite a bit about system design before you just turn it up so it Rocks The House. The cabinets that are closest to the audience can really hurt some people, so it becomes important that you learn about system design and measurement before you think that having a great sounding mix is the ultimate answer. And don't forget those are your ears you're assaulting, too.)

There is no way of knowing whether you'll survive in our business. There is only one guaranteed reward—personal satisfaction. But if you stick with it, plan your moves and make sure it's obvious you like what you're doing, one day you're going to realize that your "hobby" has turned into the most fun career you could ever imagine. 