

## **WHAT HAVE THEY DONE TO MY ART?**

### **Part 4**

## **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO STUDIO MANNERS?**

When I was a lad, I learned certain tenets of civilization: A man going into a mens' room has priority over a man coming out; a sailboat has right of way over a motor boat; a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy has a right to the last seat on the subway (even if you can get to it first). These, and many other common sense rules made perfect sense to me and I found that these minor niceties made living in crowded societies more pleasant.

In my professional life as a musician, I learned the corollaries and direct applications. You don't talk back to the conductor. No matter how badly you think that he is butchering the music, shut up and play the way he directs. During my time in the U.S. Air Force, this was re-enforced. Basically, you learned to keep your mouth shut and your bowels open. The chain of command was sacred and you did nothing to ever challenge a superior officer, no matter how wrong he might be.

Then, I ended up in a recording studio and I found that none of the rules had changed. There was a chain of command and you better darn well know your place in the pecking order. The system always made perfect sense to me and I never questioned it because it worked and worked well. The pressure back then was really severe - the engineer had 40 or 50 Union musicians in the studio for a 3 hour session direct to 2 track. The financial penalties to the studio could be extreme if the engineer or studio equipment failed to make the deadline and the musicians went into overtime. Your career could end very rapidly.

I have noticed through the years, in observing sessions in other studios, that a lot of rules that I learned seem to have been forgotten. I really think that behavior in the control room is the result of early childhood training, or lack of it. The rules of democracy, where everyone has an equal voice, does not apply to a lot of real life work situations. The control room is certainly not a place where everyone is equal.

The engineer is king. He may have to listen to the producer, the A & R people and the group, but he certainly should not have to listen to the studio personnel. Our policy, for assistants and all other studio people is the old, tried and true adage: SPEAK WHEN SPOKEN TO. Don't put in

your 2 cents unless you are specifically asked for it. If the engineer asks for an absolutely wrong microphone for a given instrument, put it up. If he can't hear that it is wrong, then the ship is sinking anyway and the assistant can't save it.

On the other hand, if the assistant IS asked for a suggestion, he should be knowledgeable enough about the studio's equipment to make an intelligent suggestion. It is because of the terrible practice of free-lance engineering that we have come to the sorry state wherein the engineer has to learn the studio on the fly. In the days of house engineers, they would know every piece of gear in the studio and what it would sound like. It saved a great deal of time and expense for the client and made the assistant's life more tolerable.

Too often in this modern age, in effect, the assistant has to run the session, taking care of many of the chores which should really be done by the engineer. This has to be, because there is no way that an engineer new to our studio is going to know all 160 microphones nor most of the other outboard equipment. Most of this equipment is no longer what it was originally. Equipment has aged and changed specs and a lot of our stuff has been customized one way or another. Our master recorders were all built by us and they are different than what most floating engineers have encountered in other studios. These poor folks have to either wing it or they have to experiment to figure out how to get what they want. We understand this and we try our best to make an intrinsically bad situation work.

How the general studio personnel treat both the clients and musicians is another area where politeness is quite essential. The musicians, particularly, are the key element to the session and if they are miffed or if they are made to feel a lack of respect, they won't play well. As we say in the control room, 'if it ain't happening out there, it ain't going to happen in here'. We are not a large corporate type of operation and we try very hard to make everyone feel comfortable. The 'vibe' of a session is a very fragile thing - it can be destroyed in an instant by some inappropriate remark or some sour comment.

I studied with the principal trombonist of the Philadelphia Orchestra. One day I brought in a piece that I had to prepare for my lesson. "Mr. Gusikoff", I said, "This is one of the worst pieces of music that I have ever had to play". "Walter," said he, "They are paying you to play the tuba, not to be a music critic." A lesson for life. Our job is to help record the music, not to criticize it.

Many years ago, I was liaison for a BBC film crew who had come to New York to do a documentary about electronic music. The producer and cameraman had worked together for years and yet they still addressed each other as "MISTER". This may be going a bit far, but a little formality and respect goes a long way. "Please" and "thank you" are still wonderful words. They show at least some consideration for our fellow human beings. The idea of letting it 'all hang out' and splashing your ego around has no place in a recording studio. Leave your ego at the door - the clients will have enough for everyone.

What ever happened to tipping? It was customary for the engineer or the producer to tip the assistant for a job well done. The word 'tip' is an acronym. There was a basket in British pubs with the sign TO INSURE PROMPTNESS. The first letters were extracted to form the word 'tip'. Some of the older engineers who use our studio still observe this practice, God bless them. It is recognition and shows respect for the well-trained assistant who has made the session efficient and pleasant and who has certainly made the engineer's life easier.

We are in a service industry. Would you go back to a store where the salespersons were surly, who acted superior and talked down to you? I wouldn't, no matter how nice the merchandise and the physical environment. A good, positive, up-beat attitude is especially required in a recording studio where the client and engineer must have faith in the technical competence of the studio and its people. You simply cannot have unpleasant people greeting them at the door, nor can you have growling, dispirited, unknowledgeable assistants in the control room. We treat all of our clients with the respect that is due to them. After all, they have the money to spend that keeps us in business. We start at home with mutual respect for our co-workers. Clients sense happiness or unhappiness as they walk in your door and the studio personnel should always 'put on a happy face'. This is more easily done if they are really happy to be working in the studio, in the recording industry and in pleasant surroundings with pleasant and respectful people.

It all gets back to how you were brought up. When hiring new people for our studio, this is the most important factor. There are many well trained people to choose from and people can usually be taught what they don't know. But if the innate respect and politeness are not there, then the studio owner has a problem which will severely affect his/her business. Creating an environment that is non-intrusive and that renders a feeling of competence will make the sessions go smoother and everyone will go

home at night a little less tired.

Walter Sear