

Assistants for assistance

The altering complexion of the production process has empowered previously 'lowly' individuals to rise and make a difference. DAN DALEY says assistants are vital for a successful producer and 'assistant' is now a very worthy and important job description that will also broaden as the years unravel.

SPEAK TO MY ASSISTANT.' Has a bit of nice ring to it, doesn't it? The idea of the personal assistant is one of those things that conveys the sense of having arrived, a measure of one's success. Well, don't get too puffed up about it. A production assistant today is hardly a perk anymore. With the amount of documentation that the music industry generates, it's become an absolute necessity.

The term 'assistant' automatically connotes technical assistance, as in assistant engineer. However, the job descriptions are manifold. Consider the paperwork: an album of 12 to 14 songs is going to need not only the usual logs of who played or performed what role on the recordings, as well as where they were done (and that's increasingly more and more studios per song), but also legal documentation such as rights clearances, sampling clearances, and any performances by anyone covered under potentially restrictive contracts with other companies. ('Lenny appears on this recording courtesy of So and So Records.')

This is all apart from the actual technical work expected of a production assistant, which includes knowing your set up (this week's version, anyway), coordinating studio, engineer and musician schedules, and knowing how to run and trouble-shoot every bit of your gear kit.

If it seems like too much, it is. Until a few years ago, producers could count on some of the load being borne by other entities. Record labels did much of the tracking of clearances and other legal minutiae. Recording studio management



was often quite happy to help with scheduling, and of course assistant engineers, employed by studios, existed solely for the sake of the producer clients, spending every spare minute learning all they could about every piece of gear in the place.

However, much of this support infrastructure has disappeared along with what we used to call the record industry, the studio industry and much else.

Producers now are working as often as not for small independent record labels that rarely have the staff (or all too often the sense) to handle the legal documentation tasks. Furthermore, recordings increasingly take place in personal studio environments, which also are not staffed to handle much in the way of administrative tasks.

First, let's look at what a producer need consider in choosing an assistant. Reliability. No amount of technical chops or other brilliance makes up for not being there on time and being all there, if you get my drift. Accept that no one person will likely be able to do it all after a certain point. When a career is slow, you might reasonably expect a technical assistant to be able to handle certain non-technical chores, such as coordinating scheduling and sourcing equipment rentals, for instance. But during an active career or period in a career, stretching human resources backfires in the long run. We've discussed producer managers in the past in this space. An attorney or ambitious accountant might also be good resources to consider as things heat up. Key is knowing when you need to delegate responsibilities.

That said, though, I want to spend time on what I think is something many people reading this might want to think about. There are a few insightful people out there who have figured out that there's a need for help for producers and have established themselves as professional production assistants. Nashville is perhaps the centre of this approach; until about three years ago, the city's installed base of major producers would do as many as a dozen records a year using a production line approach that Henry Ford would have marvelled at, with a pool of engineers they had chosen specifically to work on things like overdubs and digital fixes while the producers juggled

two or three records simultaneously.

This would not have worked without the city's small but intensely busy corps of PAs, some of whom worked for more than one producer at a time. What was particularly marvellous about this bunch was that they would handle the technical and administrative triage that might have baffled most creative types. If they weren't technically inclined enough, they found someone who was and subcontracted. I can tell you that some of these folks working for top producers made incomes that many engineers, and even a few young producers, would envy. (Nashville was one of the few studio cultures I encountered in which producers employed their own second engineers, rarely relying solely on studio supplied ones. The combination of a crack PA and second engineer really streamlined what they could accomplish.)

That changed considerably in the wake of massive record company consolidation over the last three years or so. Nashville's top producers no longer automatically run record labels anymore, budgets can't support putative luxuries like assistants, and the producers have moved largely into their own personal studios.

But that's exactly where the opportunity lies, I think. I was having a conversation recently with a friend, Tony Maserati, who's mixed some great records for artists like Beyoncé and Mary J. Blige. His administrative and technical assistance is spread out over a wide swatch: two technical assistants — one for programming and one for general studio details, as well as a manager to handle career strategies and scheduling. We agreed that a diligent, knowledgeable

assistant is the equivalent of gold.

In the course of the conversation, it emerged that there are a lot of talented people out there, but that in an ego-driven environment like the music industry talent will often be outstripped by ambition. For those individuals who are not part of the one-tenth-of-one-percent cohort of top producers, and who can make a candid assessment of their careers at a certain point in their lives, there's a large, interesting and potentially lucrative void out there waiting to be filled. As noted earlier, Nashville in its heyday proved that. Simply adapt the business model needs to current realities.

Imagine the employment listing for a position like this: 'Wanted — someone skilled in the use of high-tech digital and analogue recording equipment. Must have good interpersonal skills, able to coordinate complex scheduling, be willing to travel and sublimate ego. Pay commensurate with how addicted client becomes to the right person.'

At a time when no job is sinecure anymore, people have to prove their worth on an almost daily basis. The flip side of that is that those who can cut it become crucial to the employer. In this case, that's the producer. If you can provide the support cushion around someone else's career, you're gold to them.

There are models of organised pools of production assistants, but they tend to be found mainly in the video world. In audio, the itinerant entrepreneur is the more common icon. But it can work. I've known Lauren Kuch for years, during which time she built herself a brilliant business in Nashville as a professional production assistant, working for top producers including Emory Gordy. Kuch is a realist — she

acknowledges that the current landscape of the music industry does not lend itself to her original business model, one in which she took a graduated percentage of the studio budgets, capped at five percent. However, she says that other models can work, such as retainer arrangements. From a handful of producers that could amount to living and then some. As she points out, no one is getting the kind of money they used to in the record game, so expectations have to be scaled back. But that said, Kuch shows how to adapt: she's added publishing administration to her repertoire — an important niche for savvy producers who can secure percentages of copyrights on what they produce or who co-write with artists.

'It's like watching paint dry,' she concedes of the tedium that accompanies administering anything. 'But it keeps you in the loop and it adds another service that producers need,' she adds. Kuch also continues to act as a contractor for sessions, a service that requires membership in the American Federation of Musicians but which has also formed the basis of a pension from the union. She also has a small gear rental sideline on a few choice pieces.

The two key points here are, for producers: don't shortchange yourself in terms of building your support base. A career is the result of long-term strategies, not short-term tactics. For aspiring producers: understand that not everyone is going to grab the brass ring, and the ring itself might be of an even cheaper metal as the music business reverts to a cottage industry. You want to be a producer, but consider working with producers in related capacities. There are more ways than ever to skin cats these days. ■