

Sound advice on how to make money for nothing

By John Leonard

Originally published in *The Stage & Television Today* magazine, 1986

Responding to one of the oldest urges known to man - the desire not to drink alone - our adviser on becoming an internationally famous sound designer even if you happen to be cloth-eared and totally ignorant has desired that anonymity is the better part of satire. So Backstage proudly presents the debut of "Soundman".

I am often asked how to break into the wonderful world of Theatre Sound. When people ask me this question, what they actually mean is, "How can I get to do sound designs for West End Musicals, and retire from life with a gold-plated hearing aid?"

Up until now, my answer has always been along the lines of "Hard work and dedication over many years will eventually bring you state of grace within the theatre and sound industry, and you will be able to mix with the great Sound Designers on an equal footing. I suggest you cut to your teeth on a regional tour of *Godspell* and progress from there." And such has been the tortuous path to the top. Until now.

'You must simply have Brothers in Arms on Compact Disc'

Now, as a result of worldwide research and close observation, I am able to bring you a formula for almost instant success as a sound designer, which, if followed closely, will take you to places you never thought possible. This formula is free, given to you out of the kindness of my heart, and with no thought of reward. All I ask is for one percent of your earnings over the next five years, before tax, as a gesture from how grateful you are. Agreed? Then read on, and discover the easy way to fame and fortune.

Nothing, as they say, is for nothing. First you will have to spend in order to profit, although the initial outlay is only a few hundred pounds. (Government grants exist for this sort of thing, so you may be able to con your local Job Centre into buying the really expensive bits, and calling it an Enterprise Allowance.)

First on your list of purchases should be a briefcase. Not just any old Samsonite job, but a custom-built case from one of the major flight-case manufacturers. This is essential if anyone is going to take you at all seriously. Note that an aluminium photographer's case will *not* suffice. People will simply think that you are a photographer, or worse still, a lighting designer, and that would never do. The case should be dark green or cerise, with all the edging and cornering palaver found on the average heavy-duty flight case, and should come with a discreet designer label saying Packhorse or C.P. Cases or Oakleigh Productions. It should weigh a ton, and be large enough to carry the rest of your purchases, and a few clothes and toiletry items for those last minute dashes to the West Indies.

Next comes the most expensive item on the list, a portable compact disc player. Preferably, you should purchase one of the earlier portables, as these sound rather like a reasonable quality cassette machine, and shouldn't burden you with the problem of actually having to listen to decent sound.

You should now start to build up a library of CDs. Quite frankly, it doesn't matter two hoots what you choose to listen to your spare time, but there are a number of discs that you simply *must* have in your portable flight case for public consumption. These are as follows: Brothers in Arms, by Dire Straits, Grace Jones Live, anything by Ricky Lee Jones, and something involving Trevor Pinnock. A good selection of offerings from the esoteric labels like Nimbus or Windham Hill is also a good idea, but you shouldn't actually ever have to play them, they are just for show.

Your next investment is one of time, rather than money, for you must learn the jargon of your chosen profession. This is very difficult to set out, as it is constantly changing, although by learning a few basics, you will soon be assimilated into that sort of circles where, by the simple expedient of keeping your ears open and your mouth closed, you will pick up the current usage. Most of the sound designer's jargon revolves around letters and numbers, and here are a few to be going on with. UPA1, USW, KMR82, AMS, JBL, AKG, U87, PCMF1, DDA, SSL, 451, 414, 4038 (A good one that), 456, 911, (Warning, can be applied to a type of car as well as a type of tape. Make sure you have grasped the correct conversational drift.), D190 (Only ever in jest.), SM58, V 500, A80, PR99, B77, SPX90 (Current buzzword, but fast becoming passé), DC300A, etcetera, etcetera.

It is quite possible to have a meaningful conversation simply using letters and numbers, and it is also possible to introduce letter and number combinations that you have made up on the spur of the moment, or misheard in other conversations. As everyone else will also be doing this, and will in any case be listening to themselves, rather than to you, you will hardly ever be caught out.

As well as the number and letters, you would be well advised to take in a few well-chosen phrases to add to your vocabulary. It is best to stick to enigmatic generalisations, and trivial specifics, such as: "I went to see Time/Phantom/Les Miserables/Cats/Starlight, and the sound was really, well you know, really *itching* to go and ... you know?" or "I went to see Bowie/Simply Red/Dire Straits/The LSO/Me and My Girl, and the sound was absolutely ... well, you know, absolutely amazing. All the way through, I just kept thinking ... yeah, you know?" Nine times out of ten you will find that the person you are talking to agrees with you in exactly the same terms. The specific trivia is a bit harder, and I can do no more than quote a supreme piece of unassailable bullshit that I heard issuing from the lips of someone whose badge announced him to be a Radio Three producer.

I was attending a demonstration of a new loudspeaker, at a Hi-Fi show, and during part of the demonstration, which consisted of a CD of Trevor Pinnock playing the harpsichord, being reproduced at window-shattering levels, the following (shouted) exchange took place. Demonstrator: "Well, what do you think?" BBC Producer: (screaming at the top of his voice) "One yearns for that extra 1 dB at 12K." The demonstrator nodded sadly, and they turned up the wick another notch. I am convinced that this phrase was the

only one that the producer knew, and that he found it invaluable in every circumstance, when called upon for an opinion.

In order for the maximum impact to be created, these phrases need to be accompanied by the correct gestures, such as shrugs, half-closed eyes, a superior tilt of the head, and a knowing sideways glance. Practice looking supercilious, as you can often get away with not saying anything if you can produce a look that says “You complete and utter fraud. Your ears are obviously made of the coarsest cloth, your musical appreciation is nil, and your opinions are worthless. Kindly do not sully my space with your continued presence, you appalling guttersnipe.”

This look can be found and studied in a number of places, most commonly on the faces of sound men in the large subsidised companies, and lately on the faces of West End chief electricians who have watched countless musicals come and go, and have decided that, through a process of osmosis, they now know it all.

So far, so good. You should be getting the hang of things by now, and you should be well on the way to becoming a respected sound designer. Note that you have not actually done any work yet, but that your reputation is entirely based on your briefcase, your CD player, and your limited but expanding vocabulary.

Let us assume that someone has been sufficiently impressed by your accoutrements, and that they ask you to show for them. Don't panic, just ring of one of the larger hire companies and let the guys specify the show for you. You: “Hi, I'm doing 'ID!' for Triple Furnace, there's a 20 piece band and 17 in the cast ...” Hire Manager: “O.K., well I expect you'll want ...” there then follows a long list of numbers, followed by another number which is the hire price.

Two pieces of equipment are essential: one a trademark, the other a talisman

Ask him for the quote in writing, and for a couple of guys to help on the get-in, and you will have designed and installed your first show. But before you actually set foot in the theatre, there are a few other things that you need to do. You must adopt two pieces of equipment, one of which will become your trademark, the other of which will become your talisman. The trademark can be as obscure as you like, as long as it doesn't actually do anything important. It is simply there to advertise your presence to the cognoscenti, and to give you that slightly eccentric quality that all successful sound designers have.

With some, it's a nasty little lo-fi loudspeaker that gets used for 'near-field monitoring', with others it's the use of a particular microphone for quite unsuitable tasks.

The talisman is a different matter altogether. This piece of equipment will get you out of more sticky situations than anything else, and the wonderful thing about it is that you don't even have to use it to get some advantage from it.

Let's take an example, something that is currently in vogue, and yet not essential as a production tool. We'll call it a BLT 15Y Orbital Horizon Stretcher. This, you affirm, is the one piece of equipment that you really need to make the whole show sound superb. Unfortunately, it costs X thousand pounds, and the hire costs are prohibitive, so you'll just have to soldier on without it, doing the best you can under the circumstances. Then when anyone complains that perhaps all is not well with the sound, you grimace, shrug your shoulders (op. cit.), and intone the following incantation: "Well, I told them what we really needed was a BLT 15Y, but they just couldn't stretch to one on the production budget, so we're stuck with a lousy HCT Mk 2.7 with the '85 software update. What can you do?" The complainant will then sympathise deeply with you, and go and relate to all his friends how mean the production company are, and how you are doing a splendid job given the appalling conditions you are expected to work under.

Now let us look at the other possibility, i.e. that by some amazing chance, you are actually working on a show that has got a large budget. You pull your usual trick at the band call, and the production manager goes straight out and hires you the BLT 15Y, with the advanced software, *and* the full function remote. While he is out getting it, pull a few connecting cables out, and spend the next day or so trying to patch the damned thing back together. Subtly transfer the onus for having the BLT 15Y to someone else, preferably the composer or arranger, thus: "Well, *he/she* wanted it, so I'll just try and get it working as best I can." Next, sow the seeds of doubt. "The BLT 15Y is a great bit of gear, but it does have its problems. You can actually hear it working, and I think that it really does something nasty to the sound, still, if that's what they want, we'll just have to live with the result."

The beauty of the talisman is that it is completely adaptable, and can apply to any piece of equipment. The effect can be positive or negative, but the end result is always to deflect criticism away from its true place, squarely on your shoulders.

Thus armed, you can now enter the final phase of your training. The hire company will have specified and supplied your rig and recommended a competent operator, the casual labour will have installed it to their satisfaction, and you will have warded off all evil with your talismans and incantations.

The time has come to produce your ultimate weapon. Open your flight-case, sorry briefcase, and bring out your C.D. players, and your de-rigueur C.D.s. (You must learn to call these 'Software'.) Plug the player into the desk (or get the operator to do for you), and fit Brothers in Arms into the player. Set the track selector to Money for Nothing, and press the go button. Now sit back, and wait for the admiring comments. These are inevitable, as this particular C.D. is guaranteed to make any sound system amazingly good.

Loudspeaker manufacturers regard this disc as an industry standard for proving how good their product is, so there is no reason why you shouldn't share in some of the magic too. (Those of you who don't like Dire Straits can carry out the exercise with Grace Jones or Ricki Lee Jones, but the same results cannot be guaranteed.)

Once this ritual is completed you can almost go home and leave the rest to the operator and the composer or arranger, but if you do find that you are being asked to make some adjustments yourself, you should adopt the following emergency procedure. Call for complete and utter quiet, then play

the Trevor Pinnock C.D. at enormous level, with a quizzical look on your face. This will immediately raise your stock several points, on the basis that this is classical music and played on original instruments, and a purist recording, and you can blame the fact that it sounds thin and reedy on the instrumentation.

Once this has been achieved, grab the nearest microphone fader, and push it up until the most appalling feedback occurs. You will know when this happens, as it will sound like something from all those AC/DC albums that you really like listening to.

Pull the fader back down again fast, and shout "Sorry, my fault!" as loudly as possible. Lean over the mixing desk for a few seconds, and then twiddle one knob very decisively. It doesn't matter which one, the operator will put it right later. Put Dire Straits back on, and yell 'That's better, isn't it?' to the person who has complained. If this still doesn't satisfy them, and all other ploys have failed, you can, as a last resort, become belligerent, and blame the musicians, e.g. "The bloody band have been in the pub since 5.30, no wonder it all sounds dreadful." As this will almost certainly be true, they will not dare argue, and you can now collect your fee safe in the knowledge that either mass hysteria will prevent anyone from discovering your part in the ensuing debacle, or that the show will run forever anyway, and the operator will sort it all out after you have gone.

From now on, work will come thick and fast, and you can repeat the formula ad-infinitum. If all this seems too much like hard work to you, you could always try a different tack, and become a lighting designer for trade shows: "If only we had one of those Perky Auto Spots, but they're fiendishly expensive to hire .../Well of course that's the trouble with those Perky Auto Spots, they're very well, but they really do something nasty to the rest of the lighting, still, it's what the client wants, so I'll just have to soldier on and do the best I can ..."