Service is KING

A good session begins with a professional assistant
by Bobby Owsinski

Often what makes the difference between facilities isn’t the gear, but the service, and the front line of service is a facility’s assistant engineers. While good ones may not be enough to keep clients coming back, a bad assistant engineer can turn a studio with even the latest high-tech gear into an unprofessional facility that customers never want to return to. So what exactly is it that makes a good assistant engineer world-class? The answers are not only for those who want to be assistants, but also for studio owners and managers who want their studio run like the major facilities.

Two incidents prompted this article — a comment from an intern stating that his recording school never taught him how to be an assistant, and some recent experiences
that caused me to compare the service (which mostly came down to the assistants) between studios. Since I never worked as one myself (I became an engineer/producer mostly as self-defense in my musician days), I give you my observations as someone who’s around them all the time. I know what I like and I know what bugs me, and I discuss it all the time with studio managers and other engineers. So here we go with some educated observations. The assistants in a studio are like sergeants in the army; they have responsibility for many of the in-the-trenches decisions and are the major contact point of the studio to the public. That being said, we can break a great assistant’s attributes down into two categories — attitude and responsibilities.

Attitude
1. Great assistants have a great attitude. They act like they want to be there. They act like they’re interested. They act like they both love their job and the project they’re working on. There’s nothing that they don’t like (at least outwardly). Nothing is worse than being in a session with someone who acts like he either doesn’t want to be there or like he absolutely hates the music and treats the people who are paying his wages with disdain. Enthusiasm for the job goes a long way and usually results in an engineer or producer requesting the assistant the next time (providing all the following points are met).

2. Great assistants always arrive early. They’re there at least an hour before the session is slated to start and have everything prepared, so when the principals arrive, everything is ready to go. If it’s a tracking date, the assistant has all the mics set up, and in their general areas (the engineer will do the final placement) with cables run. If it’s an overdub or mixing date, he has everything restored on the DAW or has the tape machine aligned and ready to go. He also has the console either recalled or returned to where the last session left off, thanks to the accurate notes that he kept from the last session (more on this later). Basically, everything is ready to go when the engineer or producer walks in.

3. Great assistants are always prepared during the session. They’re always thinking ahead and don’t have to be told things. If he knows that an overdub is coming up, he’ll have the mic, headphones and cables ready to go before it happens. If a singer is varying in level, he’ll have the limiter patched before being asked. One famed but gruff chief engineer at a major Hollywood facility used to tell his assistants, “When you see my coffee cup half-empty, I shouldn’t even have to ask you to fill it up.”

4. Great assistants are seen and not heard. They blend into the woodwork, keep their head down, and just do their job. They never offer an opinion unless asked, and even then are cautious with their reply. The customer is always right, and he’s not right if you give him the opposite opinion.

Responsibilities
5. Great assistants make sure everything is clean. Before the session even starts, the
assistant has made sure that all trash cans are emptied, and no soda cans or candy wrappers from the last session (or even worse, from yesterday) are still around. Nothing turns a client off like a dirty studio.

6. Great assistants have everything documented. Everything from mic placement to patchbay patches to outboard settings should be written down in the finest detail. All track and take sheets are filled in before the client even has time to ask about it (this is the first thing to do after setup). It is the most important duty of an assistant.

7. Great assistants make great labels. Yes, the studio has to have this ability first, but if it does (and it should in this day and age) the assistant should always take the time to make labels that look great for any tapes or CDs before they leave the studio. Great assistants never treat copies and labels as a burden, but as a necessary part of their job.

8. Great assistants call ahead to find out the session requirements. As soon as a session is booked, the assistant calls the client to find out the type of session, what type of gear or media they’ll be needing, and what kind of mics are required and their respective placement, as well as any rentals that might be needed.

9. Great assistants put things away after the session ends. At the end of the day, any unused mics, cables, outboard gear, or synthesizers are put away. Mics should never be left out unless they’re set in place for the following day, which is a good policy for studios of all sizes.

As you’ll notice, I never once mentioned anything about an assistant having great ears and knowing both the room and the gear. That, in fact, goes without saying. But it’s all the other things outlined that really make an exceptional assistant engineer. And only when the help rises above the pack can a studio be truly called “professional.”

One of the first to delve into surround sound music mixing as far back as 1995, Bobby Owsinski has worked on surround projects for Jimi Hendrix, The Who, Dokken, Iron Maiden, Eddie Money, Christopher Cross, Todd Rundgren, Firesign Theater, ELO, Pat Benatar, Shadowfax, Tangerine Dream, Tuck & Patti, Yanni, and George Winston among many others. He is a partner in Surround Associates.