

**Studio Insider #96**  
**December, 2005**

**A day in the life**

Recently, a college student called me. He wanted to know about life in the music business in general, and life in a recording studio in particular. He was not the first to ask.

When young people inquire about the music business as a career, I often find myself conflicted between knowing how much I love what I do and then having to level with them about the huge amount of work needed to survive economically in this odd industry. I reflected on a few recent hectic days, and thought that you might enjoy reading about a “day in the life” here at Highland Studio.

**The alarm clock starts it all...**

The alarm clock doesn't even have to be plugged in any more. At a certain point in life, one's body performs the wake up service automatically, regardless of the hour one went to bed, and in complete disregard of the excitement and ensuing fatigue that come from playing to a packed house at a small but vibrant concert venue in Berkeley, followed by an hour and a half drive home to the Santa Cruz mountains where I think I got into bed before falling asleep.

**Balancing on the bouncing bike**

So I roll out of bed, blindly slide into my cycling clothes, and stumble out to get on the old mountain bike for the daily ride up Loma Prieta. The 30-minute climb up the mountain gradually coaxes my mind into cogent thought and my eyes into an awakening appreciation of the beauty of the coast 2400 feet below, dusted with fingers of fog as the marine layer slowly slips away and reveals the towns of Santa Cruz and Soquel. Some days the ride seems impossibly hard, but cardio-vascular health comes first for a guy who spends most of every day sitting in front of a mixing console. After I turn around, the coasting return ride takes only five minutes, capped off with a several hundred foot climb up the driveway.

**Eat, drink and be busy**

After my ride, I eat, shower, shave and leap down the house stairs, two at a time to the studio below, to put on some strong coffee and have a magical 45 minutes of practice time on the fiddle. When I'm lucky, I'll get a longer session in and work on some guitar or mando too.

Then it's into the office to check the calendar and inspect an order of CDR's we'd run the day before for a reading teacher who is recording the next great reading program here. The labels were all printed OK and the disks were waiting in the

“done” bin, so out to the shipping room to package them up and get them ready for UPS to pick up. Then back into the office to check email and phone machines and confirm an upcoming session at the studio with the Zaida Swedish Singers, for editing and mixing the tracks from the concert we recorded the month before. We’d sent them CDR’s of roughs of all the tunes so they could listen to them all on their own time and jot down comments and instructions.

### **Gourmet recording**

Back into the studio to inspect a 1/4” analog master tape of a fiddle student I had recorded back in 1986. He’s called and wants to make CD copies for his family and close friends. Turns out the tape is Ampex 456, which was a fine top of the line recording tape back then, but which has been found to have some problems with aging. The binding agent that holds the precious oxide (i.e., the music!) onto the tape has become unstable over the years, and the tape will need to be “cooked” (literally) to renew it before it can be played. So it’s into the oven with the tape, after removal of one of the metal reel flanges. Set oven for 130 degrees and set timer for two hours. Write note to put on the console to remind me to remove tape at lunch time.

### **If it’s 10:00, it must be Chuck**

It’s 10:00, and Chuck McCabe arrives, lunches in hand, ready for recording horn overdubs on his tune “Bonifay Rag.” The horn player, Rik Siverson, has driven up from Gilroy, and gets here just a few minutes behind Chuck. We’ve already made Rik some charts, but, due to the keys of the horns he’s bringing, we have to prepare a few extra ones in different keys. That goes pretty fast, and in this case, I’m glad I didn’t do these charts in Finale (the computer music notation program I use for making charts), because between the Mac, the Ethernet switch, the airport express printer server, and the Epson printer, communication from the studio big boy computer to the printer is often like a Mongolian shouting instructions at a Basque deaf-mute. My music pencils don’t usually have that problem.

### **Horny**

We help Rik unload a tuba, several mid-voiced horns, including a restored nineteenth century alto horn, a French horn, trumpets and cornets, a soprano sax, an alto sax, a bass sax, and a few more horns whose names are new to me. While Rik is assembling these instruments and warming up, I re-voice the studio to a dead environment, set up a main mic and headphones, as well as a “room mic” in the far corner of the studio. For this latter application, I use a Neumann U89 condenser mic set to the “omni” pattern. This means it will pick up sound equally from all directions, not just from the horn. I plan to record two tracks for each horn we record – one track with the main mic, placed close to the horn, and another fed with the U89 omni from across the room. I’ve done this before when recording multiple passes by one or two horn players to be used in putting to-

gether a simulated “town band.” The roomy, distant sound of the omni room mic, when panned to a different location in the mix from the main mic, provides an audible spaciousness and delayed set of reflections that do much to help smear the images of all the close-miked horns. For the main horn mic, sometimes I use a dynamic mic to help soften the brilliance; on other horns I use a large diaphragm condenser.

The session goes great! First, Rik lays down the melody on a trumpet that he mutes subtly with his hat. Next, he records the tuba part, playing the typical marching band bass lines. The middle voices are next, played on alto horn. The parts vary from chord chops (like a bluegrass mandolin) to sustained tones in harmonies. Then out comes the soprano sax, an old silver model with a bent bell and mouthpiece. Rik plays it like a clarinet, and we’re in trad jazz heaven as he blows a wonderful series of solos over the band accompaniment he’s just laid down. More soloing follows on the alto sax, and finally, a stylized melody on the trumpet caps off the arrangement.

## **Hungry**

I read my note on the console and head to the oven to carefully remove the precious plate of rejuvenated Ampex memories. Back to the studio. We eat our sandwiches in the control room, listening to various versions and arrangements of what Rik has just done, and then make a few decisions and edits in ProTools. We help Rik pack up, he leaves, and Chuck soon follows, looking forward to the next session when we’ll really study the tracks we have just gotten and finalize our arrangement and mix.

## **Gear Head**

I head back into the control room and remove a piece of non-functioning vintage gear from the rack. It’s an old Urei equalizer, a model 546. It seems like the power supply has died, and I use the internet to find and talk with the guy who restores and repairs old Urei and Universal Audio gear (James Gangwer, at [jamesgangwer.com](http://jamesgangwer.com).) The problem with vintage gear is just this – it’s old and tends to break down. I decide to risk the expense and ship the unit off to James. While in my gear head uniform, I install our new Avalon VT737SP into the rack. It’s a combo mic preamp, compressor, and equalizer that has wonderful features, great sound, and incredible build quality. And it’s brand new...

Time now to back up all the files from the day’s sessions onto the alternate set of firewire disk drives and then shut down the studio. It’s off to Los Gatos to meet my wife Marti Kendall and friend Neal Hellman, owner of Gourd Music, to attend the premier screening of “Los Gatos Then and Now,” for which we had recently recorded narrations. No time for dinner in between, so we all head out for dinner afterwards, after which I realize, “Man, I’m tired. What’s up for tomorrow?”

Oh, yeah – write the Studio Insider column for the Breakdown and send it off to Zeke after the Swedish Singers leave.

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