Views from the Top

To offer additional insights into careers in the music and recording industry, four professionals have shared their views on career development and requirements for success in today’s music recording world.

• Leslie Ann Jones, Director of Music Recording and Scoring at Skywalker Sound

• Murray Allen, Vice President of Post Production, Electronic Arts, Inc.

• Gary and Joan Gand, Music Retailers and Owners of Gand Music & Sound

• Gregg Hildebrandt, Northern California Sales Rep for the TASCAM, a Division of TEAC of America

An Interview with Leslie Ann Jones

Director of Music Recording and Scoring at Skywalker Sound

Leslie Ann Jones is Director of Music Recording and Scoring at Skywalker Sound, the recording and production facilities built by George Lucas in Marin County, California. She has been a recording and mixing engineer for twenty-five years, during which time she has worked with such artists as Herbie Hancock, Angela Bofill, Michael Feinstein, Michelle Shocked, BeBe & CeCe Winans, Bobby McFerrin, Holly Near, Rosemary Clooney, and Narada Michael Walden. She launched her film score mixing career with Francis Ford Coppola’s Apocalypse Now.

Starting her career at L.A.’s ABC Studios in 1975, she joined the staff of San Francisco’s famed Automatt Recording Studios from 1978–1987. Next up was a ten-year post at Hollywood’s Capitol Studios. Leslie returned to Northern California in 1997 to accept her current position at Skywalker Sound.

In addition to her work recording and mixing music albums and film scores at Skywalker, Leslie also serves as the Chairwoman of the Recording Academy, the 14,000-member trade organization responsible for the Grammy awards and numerous other educational initiatives.
Keith: What drew you to music or recording initially?

Leslie: Well, I guess it’s because I grew up in the music business, because my parents were performers and I was a guitar player. I just kind of progressed from that. I actually was drawn to music first, then the recording business later.

K: What can you share about your first paying gig in the business?

L: Well, as a recording engineer, I was working for ABC Records, which was owned by the ABC Television Network. They had a recording studio.

I’d already done a lot of live sound and had taken a couple of recording engineer courses, which were the first offered in L.A. I actually wanted to be a record producer and manager; I wanted to emulate Peter Asher. I didn’t really plan on being an engineer. But I thought I should learn something about engineering, to make me a better producer/manager.

So I just went and asked. I knew the studio manager, Phil Kaye. I told him I wanted the job, and he said, “Well, there aren’t any other women doing what you want to do. I don’t know how it will work, so we’ll just see how the clients react to you. We’ll just have to play it by ear.”

K: What background, training, or education has proven helpful for you during your career?

L: Let’s see, I think reading a lot proved really helpful. Most people that go into this line of work have at least some sort of natural inclination for either the music or the technology.

As I said, the two recording classes that I took were the first offered in L.A., and mostly for me it was because I was so self-taught that I really needed to double-check what I thought I knew.

But I started out reading magazines like Stereo Review and Hi-Fidelity because there was no Mix magazine when I started out.

Many people came to it from kind of a broadcast or Heath Kit home electronic background. Many of your readers may not even know what Heath Kit is. Heath Kit was a catalog company in the 1950s–1970s that provided home electronics kits for ham radio and hi-fi enthusiasts to build their own equipment.

K: Heath Kit is important to many engineers of our vintage because it provided the hands-on aspect.

L: Absolutely.
K: I think many of us got those little kits, those “Build an AM Radio Kit” on our ninth birthday or whatever. I can do this, you know. They provided a breadboard, soldering iron, parts list, instructions, and off we went.

L: Well, yes. Those classes helped me a lot because by the time I got the job at ABC, which was essentially making tape copies on an eight-hour shift, I had already learned quite a bit about sound.

I was familiar enough with tape machines so that no one had to point and say, “That’s a seven-inch reel, that’s a ten-inch reel.” I wasn’t terribly nervous and I understood the basic process of recording.

I sometimes think now what happens is kids learn too much, and when they go into their first job, they’re not able to keep an open mind.

I feel that some of the schools forget or don’t spend enough time on the fundamentals. Instead they emphasize learning how to run Pro Tools or an SSL (Solid State Logic) board.

And then, of course, they get to their first job and the place doesn’t use either one. So don’t overlook the importance of really mastering the basics.

K: Were there any early mentors who influenced you?

L: There were many. I kept a really open mind and I asked a lot of questions. I was very eager to learn and jump right in and do new things. I was the person who raised my hand whenever there was an opportunity to take on something new. When you do that, people naturally start to feed you more information.

But I would say my first main mentor was [engineer and producer] Roy Halee. And then after that, it would be [engineer] Fred Catero and [producer] David Rubinson.

L: When I met Roy, he was head of A&R for ABC Records. And he came from CBS/Columbia Records. And actually he and Fred had both worked together in New York in the ’50s and ’60s. And then Roy moved to California and Fred moved to San Francisco.

Roy had engineered and produced Simon & Garfunkel, among many other great artists such as Blood Sweat & Tears, Bob Dylan, Journey, Laura Nyro, Boz Scaggs, and Paul Simon. When I worked with Roy, he was working with Rufus and other artists signed to ABC.

And Fred, of course, recorded Janis Joplin, Santana, Herbie Hancock,
The Pointer Sisters—every kind of major artist that was representative of the San Francisco sound—as well as Barbra Streisand, Bob Dylan, Chicago, and other CBS artists.

David Rubinson was the producer who developed many of those acts, and he and Fred were a team working together out of the Automatt [now a parking lot at Fourth and Folsom in San Francisco].

K: Now fast-forward to the present day. We mentioned your official job title. Let’s talk a little bit about your role in the day-to-day workings of Skywalker, because I understand you wear a couple of different hats in your job.

L: Well, I not only run the studio but I’m responsible for every aspect of the recording operations: booking the studio, the administration, the budget, the personnel, hiring/firing, buying equipment—all of that.

I help to steer it and market the scoring facility. Really, the scoring stage operates like any small business.

Plus, I’m still a recording engineer. So although I don’t record every session, I do record about 30 percent of what goes on here.

K: What part of your job gives you the most satisfaction?

L: Obviously, the studio work is always very satisfying. But it’s easy to get burned out when you do too much of it, which is why I chose to pursue a job that is a bit different, but one that is still rewarding and a lot of fun. Whether I’m the engineer or not, I really enjoy when people have a great time here.

L: However, I would say that being in the room when a great performance is happening is still the main thing that inspires me.

K: Could you describe an entry-level position at Skywalker?

L: On the scoring stage, that gig is as a runner, which we have now although it’s not a full-time position. The runner is just called in on an as-needed basis, because we only have the one music studio.

L: For the rest of the Skywalker facilities [home to the post production and mixing stages for hundreds of hit movies, as well as special effects division, Industrial Light and Magic], most people come in as central machine room operators (MRO) for the mix stage. Sometimes they might come in as transfer people, as well. But that requires quite a bit more experience and education.
A transfer op may have been somebody who worked at a smaller facility for a year or two, got their feet wet, and knows the difference between a single stripe and dual stripe mag, drop-frame and non-drop-frame time code, and so forth.

K: Could you identify three attributes or skills—it could be either—that you would look for in an entry-level person?

L: I think we tend to gravitate towards people that have the right amount of enthusiasm.

We don’t have a lot of people working here, and there isn’t any formal time period that you’re going to stay in each job. It just seems that those people that tend to excel at what they do, who grow and progress through the organization—start as a mix tech and progress to a mixer—are the ones that have the most self-motivation. They can think for themselves, they are smart, and they invest the time to educate themselves.

I really think not knowing too much and not knowing too little is key. I mean, even for a runner, the guy we have now studied for a number of years at Berklee College of Music in Boston. I don’t have to worry about him knowing the etiquette in the room or being unfamiliar with equipment. He has a really strong music background. Yet he doesn’t know so much that he expects to walk in and be an assistant engineer right away. He’s willing to make food runs and do whatever it takes to keep the session running, just so he can be here.

But there are only so many jobs, so you have to be flexible and be willing to fit in wherever you can. You need to stay attuned to the opportunities that might present themselves and be willing to jump in and take a chance. That’s what I’ve done in the last twenty-five years—let’s see, I’ve had five jobs. This is my fifth job.

And one of those jobs is counting the three years I spent as an independent engineer. I am pleased to say that, in each of my jobs, I have gone past what I thought I knew or tried something kind of different, with an element of risk. Realizing that the next career move wasn’t necessarily safe. That’s the only way you can really grow.

And that risk/growth relationship is a preview of what you’re going to have to do when you finally sit in the chair as an engineer anyway. You are going to have to get past...
whatever knowledge you have to when the client says, “That's too orange.” You have to figure out what that means and how to make the track sound more “green.”

You should know enough about what you're doing and the tools that you have available to you to creatively get the job done.

K: What is the salary range for an entry-level position?

L: Well, interns get paid less than staff positions, although they do get paid. It is anywhere from $10–$18 per hour depending on what the person will be doing.

K: When a person is getting started in the business, they are there to primarily learn—not so much to earn. Try to get into a good learning situation, because the money comes later.

L: Yeah. Actually, that’s why I really recommend that a person get a job in the biggest studio they can find and not take a job in a one-room place. Chances are, they're not going to really learn in a one-room studio.

K: Skywalker has an internship program. Could you talk about it briefly?

L: Well, it is handled through our human resources department. First a department like ours must decide each year whether or not to request an intern because the salary to pay the intern comes out of each department's budget.

And then if anyone applied for an internship with the scoring stage as his or her preference, then we would probably get one.

L: But every company is different. Some do it like Capitol Records, where they would hire six interns from local music business programs throughout L.A., and they would spend a week in each department.

K: You mentioned you have a runner/intern now on the scoring stage. Can you estimate what percentage of new hires are current or former interns?

L: Around 20 percent.

K: Do you have any tips you can offer to somebody who is thinking about getting into the business? When you started, you walked in and approached Phil Kaye at ABC and said, “I'd like to engineer here.” Things are quite a bit different now, obviously.
L: Yes, I think they are different. A lot of people that we consider tend to come recommended from other people in the business. We also have a relationship with certain schools. I might e-mail the head of the recording department asking if they have any outstanding students, which is exactly what I did the last time we were looking for somebody. I contacted Los Medanos, San Francisco State, and Berklee College of Music and just asked if anyone had a couple of bright young kids. A referral like that is one way to get a start.

The other way is just to call around, and if somebody says they’re not hiring, send them a resume and follow it up with another call. Or, you can ask if you can come by, drop off your resume, and see the studio. That way, the person who is hiring gets a chance to meet you, even though they might not be thinking about it at the time.

That approach may not work at some facilities that just do not have time or availability to accommodate drop-in visitors, but for many studios, it will work, so it’s worth a try.

You should ask, “May I stop by and drop off my resume and meet you, and spend about five minutes speaking with you?” Studio managers are generally very busy people, but at least you’ve had the opportunity to meet a person in the music community and hopefully make a favorable impression.

K: As far as resources, is there anything you think someone coming into the business should be looking at?

L: Well, I think for somebody just starting out, Mix might be a little too much. I guess Recording or EQ magazine might be a better place to start.

We haven’t yet talked about knowing computers, either. You certainly don’t have to know Pro Tools editing, but you really should know the fundamentals of either a Mac or a PC. I think having some knowledge of hard disk editing is quite an advantage.

I would also suggest joining the Recording Academy as an associate or as an affiliate member, because you still have access to any of the workshops that are offered once you’re on the mailing list. A lot of those events are free. So the networking and educational opportunities available in that organization are available whether you’re a voting member or not.

A lot of schools have student AES (Audio Engineering Society) chapters; I know San Francisco State does.
As far as conventions, I would think now, NAMM would be a good place to go to learn a little bit about who the players are in the technology side of recording.

K: Long term, what’s your sense of the career opportunity represented by becoming a recording engineer?

L: Well, I think it can still be a [good] career opportunity, but I know that even well-respected veteran engineers are learning Pro Tools or some other hard disk editing system, because clients are kind of expecting that and they want that available to them. Colleagues of mine have said, “Why should they pay someone else [to do hard disk editing] when they can pay me?”

So that’s certainly job security. I’m still pretty bullish on that, but I think there are many opportunities out there with distribution changing with the Internet, uploading, and new technologies.

K: Do you have any parting thoughts?

L: Master the basics and the fundamentals.

I think that’s the big advantage of working in a big place and not in a small place—you’re exposed to a lot more. In my nine years at Capitol, I was pushed to do so many things, not only the level of clientele that we had, but just kind of the things we were asked to do. All the Frank Sinatra ednet ISDN sessions for the two Duets albums happened at Capitol. Then we shifted gears to record a film score with a large orchestra at the next session. You wouldn’t really get that kind of experience in a one-room studio. It makes you much more valuable as an employee because eventually, you are going to have to look for another job. It always happens.

K: It’s true. A person’s depth of knowledge makes them much more valuable to their employer.

Do you have any Yoda-like pearls of wisdom to share in closing?

L: Use your ears, Luke—use your ears.
An Interview with Murray Allen
Vice President of Post Production
Electronic Arts, Inc.

Murray Allen’s career spans more than fifty years in the music and entertainment industry. He has been a musician, producer, session player, studio owner, and studio designer, and now serves as Vice President of Post Production for one of the world’s most successful electronic gaming companies, Electronic Arts, based in Redwood City, CA.

During the golden era of big bands, he played sax and clarinet with the Glenn Miller, Sauter Finegan, Bobby Sherwood, and Skitch Henderson bands. Murray backed up artists including Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Frankie Laine, and Perry Como. His session work includes dates with Stevie Wonder, The Platters, and Andy Williams.

When the guitar began to rule pop music, Murray started to engineer recording sessions, rapidly becoming one of the most in-demand engineers in Chicago, recording the likes of Ramsey Lewis, Duke Ellington, Steve Allen, Stan Kenton, and Sammy Davis, Jr. In the early ’70s, he became president of Universal Recording, where he would stay for the next seventeen years. During that time, the studio won numerous Emmy and Grammy nominations, and compiled a substantial number of Clio awards (the Oscar-equivalent of the advertising industry).

Murray’s insatiable quest for knowledge and love of technology led Universal to many “firsts” in the recording industry: pioneering the use of digital audio workstations in commercial production; offering video sweetening (in 1971) before SMPTE time code was developed; and mentoring other studio owners and managers in recording studio management.

During Murray’s watch at Universal, more than 250 feature film and television soundtracks were recorded by the studio staff including: Steel Magnolias, Home Alone, Flatliners, The Witches of Eastwick, Brighton Beach Memoirs, Sea of Love, Midnight Run, and many more. In its heyday, Universal employed more than 400 employees.

In his current position, he heads up audio and video post production, quality assurance, testing, and customer service for Electronic Arts. He has been sound designer of the Grammy awards telecast for twenty years, and an active member of the Recording Academy and SPARS.
Murray is a man with a boundless supply of energy, an uncanny ability to identify and develop new talent, and a passion for excellence in everything he undertakes. One quote from Murray sums up his apparent ability to do just about anything to which he sets his mind: “I’m not concerned with problems, I’m only concerned with solutions.”

Keith: What drew you to the music and recording business?

Murray: Well, it’s a funny story. I started playing an instrument when I was about six years old. I started on piano, and then I migrated over to clarinet when I was eight years old. But my first love was physics. I really loved being an engineer and doing all kinds of stuff that related to physics.

When I was in high school, however, everybody had to take swimming, and I’ve always been afraid of the water. So the only way you could get out of swimming was to be in the military band. Now because I already played clarinet pretty well, I joined the military band. So I became a musician because I had a fear of water.

Later on when I got out of high school, I went to Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) because I wanted to be a physicist. That was my goal. But I already was a working musician. I’d been working as a musician since I was about thirteen years old.

I had my own Society Band at the Moraine Hotel on Chicago’s North Shore when I was sixteen years old.

When I was enrolled at IIT in the 1940s, an engineer with a masters degree working on the Manhattan Project was earning about $7,500 a year. As a musician I was already making $8,000 a year.

So I thought, why do I want to spend all this time getting an advanced degree in physics, even though I love it, to earn less money? Coming up through the Depression, money has been a very important motivation for me.

So I then became a professional musician. I went to New York. I wanted to study from Joe Allard, who was considered the best clarinet/saxophone teacher in the country at that time. And when I was there I got to play a little bit on the Calvacade of Bands, WOR radio, and I worked full-time at Roseland Ballroom as a lead saxophone player. And then I was going to be drafted for the Korean War.
So I came back and I went to college to stay out of the draft. And I finally got tired of that. So I enlisted in the army. I figured I should get it out of the way. But because I enlisted in the army, I was able to choose my duty station and I joined the Fifth Army Band. Next, I got myself a radio show that we did five days a week. We did it with my own five-piece band. And my piano player for three years was the incomparable Bill Evans.

I was stationed near Chicago, and during that time, I started moonlighting playing record dates. It was highly illegal and definitely against the regulations. But I did it and I never got caught.

So by the time I got out of the army, I went on the road with a band to work at the Hilton chain for about a year, after which I took my own band into the Conrad Hilton Hotel in Chicago.

I was there for two years, and I was working record dates and everything else. Then finally I had so many record dates, that's all I did. I became a full-time studio musician. I did that from about 1956–57, all the way through to the mid-1960s. I recorded hundreds of albums and singles.

Anyway, around 1965 I could see that rock 'n' roll was starting to come in. Where I used to work about twenty-seven sessions per week, it was getting down to maybe twenty. I've always kept charts and graphs on whatever I was doing. Got down to about twenty sessions a week, and then about fifteen. We used to have about five saxophone players in every session, Henry Mancini-type arrangements. We were getting down to three or four saxes.

Well, I was the number-two call, so I always worked. But I thought I needed to make a decision. I've either got to learn to engineer again, or I have to learn to play the guitar. One of the two.

Backtracking a bit to my time in New York in the early 1950s, I worked the Roseland Ballroom. We had air shots every night where we broadcast over CBS and ABC, and then NBC.

The next day I'd go over to the station and listen to a playback of what we did. They used to record it. I sounded terrible.

So I went over to Manny's Music store one day and I bought an Ampex tape recorder and speakers, amplifiers, and microphones. It took me three years to pay for it, but I learned how to use it and how to make a decent recording. Having a science background, it was no big deal. I learned how to mix, record,
and take the machine apart and put it back together again. I knew how to repair it and keep it running just right.

So consequently then, going back to the mid-1960s, I decided to get back into recording. I knew what makes an Ampex recorder work. I knew about mixing. So I started mixing a few dates and all of a sudden, clients wanted me to start mixing for them.

Well, because I was making so much money in residuals playing on commercials, I said, “The only way I’ll work for you as a mixer is if you also hire me as a musician.” So they started doing that.

What happened then is that I became extremely busy. The other mixer in Chicago at that time was a man named Bruce Swedien. Now Bruce was going to work for another company in Chicago, but he had a one-year no-compete clause. So for one year, I became the number-one mixer.

I was mixing sessions at RCA, CBS, and at Universal in the morning, and recording music. But in the afternoon, they were taking the 8-track tapes back over to Universal or some other place to finish. They put the announcers on and did the final mix.

I didn’t get a piece of that action. I was only getting the music part. So two other engineers and myself opened up a studio called “Audio Finishers,” a real hole-in-the-wall. But, then we added some experimental acoustic treatment to it, and we called it the Audio Finishers so that we could do that finishing work in the afternoon.

But then RCA in Chicago closed down for a year because they wanted to move, and Curtis Mayfield and all these Chicago acts needed a place to record. Well, it turns out that at this time we got the first 16-track recorder in Chicago.

Acoustically the place was great for stacking [overdubbing], since it had great separation. So all of a sudden we started getting all the Curtis Mayfield work, Donnie Hathaway, Roberta Flack, and we started “stealing” business from CBS and from Universal, because the sound of our little room was so good. Plus, we had the only 16-track in town. And because we were good mixers, we got great sounds.

Universal came to us and said that we were killing them. They asked if we could enter into some type of agreement. We knew that our studio was limited in what it could do, because it was so small. Universal had such large, great sounding rooms.
So we made a deal with Universal. One thing led to another and eventually we took over management in 1970, then bought the studio in 1975. I still was working sessions, by the way, and engineering. I was going back and forth between the two studios.

The rest is history. We quickly became a gigantic operation—a major studio. We were nominated three times for TEC awards. We did over 250 feature films. We did every note of music in the original Blues Brothers film, which I’m very proud of. We had a cassette manufacturing plant working under contract for CBS and Motown. At that time, we had more than 400 employees.

But a funny thing happened. After twelve years running Universal, around 1985, I started getting very tired of running a recording studio. I hate to admit this, but we started getting to where everything was stacked one track at a time. We didn’t use big orchestras anymore. Producers who were getting into the business now were not musicians. Computer programming was the coming wave for pop music production.

And although we were the first studio to do so many things, I was getting very bored. We had to spend so much money just to keep up with the competition, it was terrible. So I decided to get out of the studio business. I sold the company in 1989 and I stayed on for about another year. And then I was a consultant for about a year. I worked with Editel [one of the leading post production houses] in Chicago.

I also worked with Tom Kobayashi who left Lucas Arts at that time and founded ednet. I helped him work with Crescent Moon Studios down in Florida, and put in a T1 line between them and Capitol Studios in Los Angeles—so that Gloria Estefan could do her Christmas album from her home in Florida and the band could play live in California.

Phil Ramone was the producer. Phil and I have worked together for so many years. That technology is what kicked off the Sinatra Duets album, which was the first chart topper that proved that artists could collaborate over T1 or ISDN lines from anywhere in the world. The artist, producer, and musicians no longer had to be in the same studio.

**K:** How did you make the move to Electronic Arts?

**M:** One day the phone rang and it was a headhunter asking me, “Murray, would you like to go out and live in California?” He said there’s a job
opening at Electronic Arts, and I came out here and I interviewed. Silicon Valley in 1993 closely resembled the record business back in the early 1950s. So I said, “Yes, this is going to be fun.” And that’s how I got to where I am today.

K: Do you remember your first paying gig?

M: When I was thirteen, we used to go out and play at the local park districts. Whatever they collected at the door we split among the band. So we would get $2–$3 each, or something like that.

Actually, when I was about twelve years old, I was on a radio show in Chicago called “The Joe Kelly Quiz Kids Band.” We did a couple of shows. We didn’t get paid for it because in those days, the musician’s union was extremely strong.

K: Sure. You couldn’t be paid without membership in the union.

M: That’s right. And we couldn’t join the union until we were sixteen. So they gave us a waiver. They had to have a bunch of musicians stand by and get paid while we did the actual playing. But the first actual payment I got was these little park-concert-type things.

K: You mentioned earlier that you had loved science and had studied it avidly both in high school and afterwards at the Illinois Institute of Technology. That obviously came in handy when you bought your first Ampex tape recorder.

M: Well, I understood about electronics and signal flow, because I had a scientific type of mind. I still do to this day. In order words, I do not want anybody telling me, “This does not work.” Instead, let’s see why it doesn’t work, and let’s figure out how we make it work. I’m not concerned with problems; I am only concerned with solutions.

K: You mentioned a couple of people early on who were influences on you. Is there anyone in particular?

M: Well, Bill Putnam was a big influence, actually because he built Universal. Bill Putnam, Bernie Clapper, and Bob Weber came out of the service, and they were up in Evanston, Illinois.

They started a business doing time-delay broadcasting. They got the contract from ABC, it was then called the Blue Network, to do these time-delay broadcasts.

So the performances that were broadcast in New York would come over the phone lines to them in Evanston. They then recorded it on 16-inch transcription disks.
The performance would be rebroadcast in Chicago at the appropriate time. ABC at that time had a studio on top of the Civic Opera building. Part of their deal was that Bill and his partners could use this studio to do some music recording, which they wanted to do.

There were about fifteen guys that were the original owners of Universal Recording. One of them was a guy named Jerry Bradley. He owned a club in Chicago, a nightclub called the 5100 Club. He was the one that introduced me to Danny Thomas, who was the comedian at his club.

This was before television became so popular, and everybody would go out at night to a club and drink. Anyway, Bradley’s son went to high school with me. We had a high school band, and we were to break-in the studio, Universal, to see how it sounded.

Our high school band went up there and we recorded at Universal, atop the Civic Opera House. And I remember the tune we recorded was “A Starry Night.” Da da da da da [Murray hums the melody]… by Tchaikovsky. Those were fun days, in 1946.

Anyway, Bill Putnam was the engineer. That’s where I first met Bill. Now later on they did the Harmonicats up there. “Peg of My Heart,” which was a huge hit record. That’s where they used the “john” for the echo chambers. Bill was an influence on me, from an engineering point of view, early on.

A lot of guys influenced me early in my life when I was on the road. Like Morrie Feld, who was the drummer with the Benny Goodman Sextet for many years.

When I was on the road, I was in the backup band for Frankie Laine, and the drummer and my roommate was Morrie. He taught me about the importance of rhythm and time in jazz. Another one was Joe Daly, a Chicago saxophone player. He and I were roommates in a lot of bands. He was a great jazz player. Mel Lewis, Louis Bellson, and Peter Erskine all had a musical impact on me.

And, of course, Bill Evans [the great jazz pianist] was a tremendous influence; I enjoyed working with him every night for three years.

K: Now fast-forward to today. Tell me a bit about what you do at Electronic Arts.

M: From an audio and video [production] point of view, I try and keep people [moving] back towards the center. There’s a natural tendency for younger people to try to experi-
ment. They all have tastes, but
many don't realize what makes a
production really work. So try and
keep things aimed towards the
center, knowing that if it doesn’t
have that magic, it doesn’t mean a
damn thing.

In any sort of audio or visual produc-
tion, you have to have a vision for
what the project will come out like,
and go with it—I hate committees.

K: Meaning, you should have a vision
and stick with it.

M: Yes, and pick the right people to
get the job done. You know, not
everybody may agree that this is
the best way of doing it, but as long
as you are in what I call that “win-
dow of acceptability”—you're cool.

K: So some of your time is spent as a
coach? Mentoring to some degree?

M: I do a lot of mentoring. That's
probably the biggest thing I do at
Electronic Arts. But I have 300
people working for me, so a lot of it
is just making decisions on: How
do we handle this? What do we do
about this? Let's see what it will
take to get the job done right.”
Whether it is about money, people,
or whatever is required. Then you
can make the decision; if it’s too
costly, you don’t do it.

K: What aspect of your current role
at Electronic Arts do you enjoy
the most?

M: Building teams. I’ve built a number
of teams in the time I’ve been here.
I was given the assignment of start-
ing a customer support team. This
was three and a half years ago. We
are now considered to be the best
technical support group in the
whole business.

Management asked me to develop a
product-testing team. When I start-
ed the testing team, I had two peo-
ple. I now have 150 people on the
testing team and we did sixty-two
titles this year. Today’s games have
a great deal of depth, so testing is a
complex process.

K: Building these teams is obviously
something you enjoy greatly.

M: Well, that’s what I did at Universal.
I like to build teams, build loyalty. I
believe that to be a leader, you
have to first have been a follower.
In other words, before you can play
first saxophone, you have got to
spend a lot of years playing second
saxophone. So you know what it takes to be part of a team and make it work. Once you do that, the most important thing is being honest, being fair, and being consistent.

I stress that you must be honest, you must be fair, you must be consistent, and you must have a passion for what you do. If you don’t have a passion, you should get out of the business right now.

K: What’s an entry-level position like at Electronic Arts? What would somebody be doing there when they started out?

M: In my groups, most people start off in technical support. First, they have to pass a test, and then go through a rigorous three-week training program, and we send them back to school to learn about what we do. Next, they go through a two-week, hands-on mentoring and polishing process.

At that point, they’re ready to get on the phone solving problems for our customers—which is the toughest job in the world.

But through that, they learn what our customer needs. It’s very important that you always listen to your customer. If you don’t listen to your customer, you are in deep trouble.

In other words, they develop a dialog with the customers and they develop a skill for understanding what our customers need—how the games work. Of course all these persons are avid gamers, so that’s another requirement.

K: I guess there’s no shortage of gamers!

M: No. And then from there they move on to testing. And from testing they may move into production, marketing, or the online division. However, it all starts at the beginning, the customer equation. Essentially, it is all about the product and the customer.

K: How about people working in audio or video production?

M: We bring experienced people in. My mixer, I hired from Universal Studios in L.A. I recruited my video staff from a post production company. People have got to get their experience from somewhere else and come to us as a journeyman, not an apprentice. We haven’t got time for training with our production schedules.

K: On the audio side they’re going to know the basics of Pro Tools. They’re going to know the basics of samplers or sequencers…
M: A lot more than basics. I mean they have to have experience, credits where they’ve been successful in the studio, and the same goes for video.

K: Can you tell me the salary range for an entry-level person?

M: When someone starts out in technical support, they get started at anywhere between $10 to $12 an hour. First as temp employees, and then, when they get hired, they may be at $25,000 to $27,000 a year.

K: That’s pretty good for entry level.

M: Well down here [in Silicon Valley] it isn’t. There are companies down here that start people at $17 per hour because of such a tight labor market.

But down here in the Valley, we have 1 percent unemployment at the bottom end [entry-level]. At the top end, we have zero unemployment right now.

K: Do you have any type of program where students who are in their final year of school or college can be exposed to what goes on…

M: We have a full-time staff that does this. And we actually go to the universities. We have recruiters that go out. We bring in interns. We have co-op programs. Sure. We do all of that. And the interns we recruit are paid positions.

K: Can you estimate what percentage of new hires are former or current interns?

M: I’m not sure what the percentage is, and it’s usually programmers. We go to Stanford, MIT, and various other schools. We look for programmers and artists, but mainly programmers.

We give them a project during the summer, and if they do well with it, we try and get them back the next summer. When they graduate, we try and hire them.

K: Are there any tips that you could share for someone wanting to enter the recording or interactive music business, to help them get their foot in the door?

M: First of all, you’ve got to decide what do you want to do. In other words, if you want to make money, then you should go into the banking business or to Wall Street or Montgomery Street here in San Francisco. If you want to sell jewelry, then work on 47th Street in New York City.
However, if you want to be in music, either go to L.A., New York, or Nashville. I prefer New York or Los Angeles. Wherever there's more competition, you'll have more opportunity. Never go to a place where there's no competition because there's no opportunity for you there.

K: That is a very important point.

M: Also, whatever you end up doing, you've got to learn to do better, at least in your own mind. You have to do it better than anybody else in the world does.

When I interview people here, I always ask the question, “What do you do better than anybody else in the world?” Pick one thing. I don't care what it is, but what do you do better than anybody else in the world?

The person must have enough self-esteem to really feel that they indeed do something better than somebody else. Now maybe they really do, which is even better. I also ask them to make up a “balance sheet” on their strong points and their weak points. Are you honest? Honesty is absolutely critical. It is important that a person doesn't lie, doesn't cheat, or isn't devious.

K: It's really true. Show people you have an interest in what they're doing and often times they want to open up to you.

M: That's right. Let them do the talking and they're more likely to hire you.

K: Are there any magazines, books, articles, or organizations that people who want to get into the business should keep their eye on?
M: It’s all on the Web now—just start surfing. You’ve also got to start looking for job sites on the Web—there’s so many of them.

But basically you should focus yourself. Decide what you want to do and how you want to do it. Just aim in that direction and work at it.

It may take you a month, it may take you two years, or it might take you five years. But when you get there, you’ve got what you want.

However, don’t put a timetable on your career. You may not hit the heights right away… Richard Strauss didn’t start writing good music until he was fifty years old.

My goal is to hit the peak of my career about a day before I die.

[Laughter.]

K: Hopefully that will be many years in the future, Murray, from what I can foretell.

M: Only God and myself will know, and I’m not going to talk.

[More laughter.]

K: What’s your glimpse into the future? Will entertainment media continue evolving?

M: Oh yeah, sure. Yeah, it has to. To just be competitive, sure.

Television is going to change with 2,000 channels. There’s a lot of opportunity there.

M: I hope the quality improves, with most of the music on TV it’s gotten so bad. It’s because people get out of college and they have Pro Tools or some kind of a sampler. They start creating music without any experience. And the producers that hire them have no experience either.

One thing I preach is that [good] music has to be entertaining music. It’s got to hit you in the nerves. It’s got to make you want to get up and dance. It’s got to make your whole body want to shake.

And if it doesn’t do that—then there’s always an opportunity for somebody who truly has the intuitive talent to create good music and good audio. And boy if you have it, then we need you! ☀
An Interview with Gary Gand  
President of Gand Music & Sound  
Northfield, Illinois

Gary and Joan Gand own and operate Gand Music & Sound in Northfield, IL, a suburb of Chicago. They have been a husband-and-wife team for more than thirty years, first playing in the same band and eventually opening a small guitar shop that has grown into one of the premiere music and recording retail stores in North America.

My interview with Gary (Joan was unavailable the day of our interview) clearly demonstrates the passion, commitment, and drive a person must have to get to the top of the music business. Gary’s multifaceted career includes stints as a performer, session musician, guitar repair whiz, engineer, and now president of a retail store that is known not only for the quality of its sales and service, but also for the savvy advice that Gand employees share with their customers. He talks about a career path that not many artists or musicians consider when they are starting off: music retailing. As you’ll see, it can provide a stable financial base that still allows you to follow your musical dreams while managing to pay the rent.

Joan has been a pianist since the age of five and studied electronic music at Northwestern University. She manages the operations of the store as well as advertising, catalog production, purchasing, and the Gand Web site. Gary has served as a Director of the National Association of Music Merchandisers (NAMM), and is a Syn-Aud-Con graduate. Gary still finds time to go out to do live sound—not just to keep current on the latest technologies, but because he genuinely enjoys helping entertain a coliseum full of people. Joan and Gary’s enthusiasm and passion for the music business is infectious to all who have the good fortune to work with them.
Keith: When did you and Joan start the business?

Gary: I started in 1971, with the keyboardist in my band at the time, who is my wife, Joan. We met in high school and we've been together ever since.

K: Unlike the trend towards chain music stores, you operate one retail location.

G: Right, one location, one store. We call ourselves the last of the independents.

Our strategy has always been to have one superstore rather than a bunch of less-than-super stores. Rather than spreading yourself too thin, we decided to take the approach that we were going to keep the one location that we've grown in. And put all our eggs in one basket.

K: How many employees do you have?

G: Right now we've got about twenty-five. Plus a lot of independent engineers and technicians, fix-it guys, consultants—whomever it takes to keep things rolling.

K: What drew you to music, the recording side of things initially?

G: Like a lot of kids, I saw the Beatles on Ed Sullivan when I was about ten years old. I wanted to play music. The whole folk boom was happening at the time in the early 1960s. My dad was a musician in college, a trumpet player. He bought my mother a guitar during the folk days. When she hung it on the wall, he immediately took it down to the basement and started to figure out how to play it.

And literally within hours I was down there asking, so what's going on down here? And my dad showed me how to play it.

Then my sister came down to see what we were doing, and within a few months we had a group, The Gand Family Singers. We started playing local coffee houses and Boy Scout meetings, that kind of stuff.

K: It sounds as if the influence of music around your home played a big role.

G: My dad had a big band in college. My mom was a fan. So there was always music in our house. The radio was always on. I mean I used to fall asleep every night listening to classical music.
We saw a lot of music when I was a kid. My parents took me to see everybody: Segovia, Ravi Shankar, Jimi Hendrix, the Beatles, Frank Zappa, Cream, to name just a few.

And then eventually we got into the family station wagon and headed out on the road. We played all the folk festivals. Played the University of Chicago and Berkeley, all the fiddle festivals down south, Disneyland, and television appearances.

When I got to be a teenager, I started playing rock ‘n’ roll. I was a banjo player, playing bluegrass. So I switched over to electric guitar. And that got me in front of a different audience. At the same time, we did some tape recordings with our folk trio. And you know, you go into a studio, which at that time was literally two microphones and a tape machine in somebody’s closet.

But later, by the time I was really playing electric guitar, things had developed beyond the Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s and Tommy [by The Who]. You know, the real recording revolution had started. So by the time I got into the studio with my own bands when I was a teenager, we were already recording to eight tracks.

I grew up being a technical person; the kid that was always building model planes and taking the family record player apart and putting it back together. I couldn’t help but want to be on the other side of the glass [in the control room] while things were going on. I took a really active role in recording sessions. You know, we’d run through a take and then I’d run on the other side of the glass and I would watch the engineer cue it up. I was fascinated by exactly what he was doing and why.

I would ask, “How are you getting that sound on the snare drum?” I learned most of it firsthand.

And then I did studio work [as a session musician] for a long time, to supplement my music income.

K: I did that, too.

G: Yeah, I played on commercials—a lot of beer commercials.

When I got to be eighteen, I was playing at night and doing session work in the daytime. And that’s when I decided to open the store. I was doing a lot of repair work and buying guitars at pawnshops and fixing them up and re-selling them for a profit. I needed somewhere to do it. So I opened a small office above a shoe store, which over the years grew into this 10,000-square-foot business.
K: And you met Joan somewhere along the way—was she in the band?

G: Right. About this time, Joan started playing in the band. She was a keyboard player and she also played mandolin. She was playing mandolin a little bit with the folk group, and then she was playing keyboards in our fusion band. She was doing some session work, too, at the same time.

I asked her to do some bookkeeping for the store, and she was also going to college.

K: I guess you might describe Joan’s activities as multi-tasking, before the word was even in our vocabulary.

G: Yeah, it didn’t exist yet. She was studying electronic music at Northwestern University. That was the year they opened an electronic music lab, so although I wasn’t enrolled there—I went to college there. [Laughs.] I used to sit in on her classes, and I worked in their electronic music studio there, kind of on the “QT,” at night. You know, to learn all about synthesis, and multitrack recording firsthand.

K: So you and Joan really started early.

G: Yeah, we started early, and I’ve got to say, for a lot of people, to be successful in the music industry, you have to get into it early. I think it’s something you have to be into firmly by the time you’re a teenager. It’s really not something that you get out of college and say: “You know, I think I’d like to be in the music industry.” It’s got to be in your blood. I think that’s a trait of anybody who is successful in anything.

If you look at kids who are good at sports, you find out that they started playing when they were five years old. They’ve always been into hockey or riding horses or whatever it is.

K: Can you describe your first paying gig?

G: My first paying job in the music business was actually a duo; it was me and my dad playing a Cub Scout meeting. I think we probably made somewhere in the two-figure range. [Laughs.] Maybe $10.

K: Have you had any formal training or education that’s proven helpful during the years you’ve been toiling away?

G: Well, I took a De Vry electronics course in high school. I was a little bit of an outcast because I was a vegetarian and had really long hair, which at the time wasn’t allowed.
So I took a lot of shop classes and tried to avoid the mainstream. But I did take this De Vry course, which was real early in the morning. That was a really good class for me. I learned all about tubes and transistors.

K: Basics. Stuff that sticks with you all along.

G: Yeah, and I took mechanical drawing, which was a great course because later on when I was working in the studio environment—it was all about block diagrams. Signal flow and learning to read schematics. Understanding patch bays and wiring. Mechanical drawing and the electronics course helped me put it together in my mind.

I would say, any kind of science and math courses you can take...do it.

K: They're going to help you.

G: Yeah, and the other thing is, studying electronic music in the early 1970s, at that time it was all done with patch cords. It was all monophonic.

And that was an incredible learning experience because that really prepared me for everything that came along later on in the studio world. Understanding equalizers and filters...

K: All the things that we use.

G: This is all pre-DSP (digital signal processing), so everything was right in front of you. Now, when you look at a synth, it's all buried menus. And you really don't know what's going on inside there.

K: Until you dig down and do some analysis.

G: Which most people don't do anymore because it just takes too much time.

K: They get a few cool sounds and they stick with them.

G: But I actually had to build these sounds from scratch, so I had a very intimate understanding of the signal flow and how the filters worked and how you modify a sound with an envelope generator and voltage control.

K: Let's talk a little bit about what happens in a typical day or an atypical day at Gand Music & Sound.

G: One of the things that we did when we started the store is we chose our hours around musicians' hours. So we open at noon. And we're open until 8 p.m.—seven days a week.
There's no point in this being a 9-to-5 kind of situation because musicians don't work from 9 to 5. So we really tailored ourselves to ourselves. I mean we were musicians, we were players, and all of our original customers, a lot of whom are still shopping here, were working musicians.

Yeah, so whatever business you're in, you should tailor it to your customer.

But a typical day here is we get in about 11:30, pick up our voice mail, and get the store in shape. We clean up whatever is left over from the night before, vacuum. We check all the displays and make sure everything is still programmed from yesterday. At noon the pandemonium starts. We open the door and it just flows in.

We've got twenty phones lines and they all light up. People come pouring in the front door. We bat balls all day long.

You know, it's exciting. There's never a dull moment here. We've got a constant stream of new gear coming in all the time because we basically built our reputation on being the high-tech guys.

Every day we're getting some kind of new product in here. Most of which doesn't work. [Laughs.]

K: So your staff has to figure out how to make some of the gear work.

G: Yeah, they figure out how to make it work and where the bugs are. And what the “work-arounds” are. We then advise our customers accordingly.

K: Yeah, you probably sometimes advise the manufacturers, too, I would guess.

G: A lot of times, yeah. As many times as that happens, and as used to it as you try to get, it's still frustrating. You know, gear is frustrating. But at the same time, if you can master it, the results are incredible.

K: As far as day-to-day job responsibilities, you are involved in just about every aspect of the business, correct?

G: Yes, I'm constantly searching for new products. I talk to manufacturers about things that I would like to see happen. Things that need to happen with products that they already have on the market.

I also handle a lot of the publicity, perfecting the image that Gand has. I make sure our name is out there. I write releases for the magazines, and our Web site. I enjoy writing.
K: Yes, it’s another creative outlet.

G: Right, it’s like another aspect of performing. If you are a musician, you can communicate in so many ways. You can write lyrics, you can play music, you can do things journalistically, you can do album cover layout, you can do album notes, and you can write product reviews.

K: What’s your favorite aspect of your job?

G: Simple—the gear.

K: The gear?

G: I mean I’m a gear-head. I just love gear, equipment, and technology. Gear is cool.

I’m still a very hands-on guy. I mean there’s nothing better for me than somebody coming in to the store and saying, “You know, I just built this rack and I’m having all these problems.” I’m raring’ to go at it, so I’ll say, “Let’s see what it will take to get it working right.” Get rid of ground loops. Figure out why only one channel works. Rip the top off of a piece of gear and see what’s going on inside of it.

K: So if a musician walks in and he says, “I can’t figure this thing out,” you’re not up in an ivory tower somewhere, looking at spreadsheets all day?

G: No, definitely not.

K: You’re actually down on the floor where the action is?

G: Well, I do spend part of my time analyzing our business and our performance, so I do a good deal of looking at spreadsheets, but if I get a whiff of what is happening on the floor and I can get involved, I will.

If I have information I can share, I will. Because there’s a lot of people in this industry that have shared their knowledge with me. There is so much of it that it’s a lot easier now. So much of it is available in magazines and online. But when I started, there was none of that.

K: You had to go talk to somebody.

G: There were no vintage guitar books, no recording handbooks, or schools—none of that stuff. I had to talk to the guys in person and learned a lot that way. One of the most important things you can do if you have knowledge is share it with others.

K: Let’s talk about somebody who starts off at your store—it’s his or her first day. Who are they? What kind of a background do they have? Are they a musician?
G: Well, a lot of the kids that we have that start here are Columbia grads, from Columbia College [in Chicago], which is the big broadcasting and recording college.

Many of them intern here. We're part of Columbia's intern program. And then after they've interned here for a while and they learn the ropes and learn our computer system and everything, I just tell them point blank: when you graduate come and see me. And many do.

I'd say probably a quarter, maybe as much as 33 percent of the people we have here are Columbia grads.

If you want to get into the business, if you can get yourself aligned with a good school that has an intern program with a local studio or local store or whatever—that's a great way to get into the business. Test it out and see which part of it you like.

Some of the guys work for our sound company and they go on the road. Some of the guys are sales people here. Some of the guys work for our install division. There are all different outlets. And also, we have a lot of women working here in management positions, not secretarial positions. It's a good place for women to get a job too. I think the music industry offers good opportunities for women.

K: I do, too.

G: Generally we start people here at the front counter, just so they can learn people's faces and learn how to meet and greet, and get familiar with our regular customers.

And then depending on where their talents may lie, that's kind of the incubation period. Then we like to get them into a department. We're departmentalized here, like a department store.

We have a guitar department, we have a keyboard and synth department, we have a software department, we have a recording department, and we have a PA department. Each one specialized, so that the people in that department are extremely knowledgeable, instead of one guy who knows a little bit about a bunch of things in a store.

And having done all of those jobs myself, I know how hard it is to do them all well. It's better for the customer if they can speak with a specialist. That's how we do it.

Whatever inclination you show being at the front counter, that is generally where we'll put you. What is interesting is our store manager came in as a keyboard salesman. At the time, we didn't need a keyboard salesman. We
needed a recording salesman. And we told him that. He says okay, so I'll be a recording salesman. He was able to adapt. So many times a guy will come in with one thing in mind, but there will be a job opening somewhere else. You have to remain flexible.

K: Could you name a few key attributes or skills for an entry-level person?

G: The number one thing we're looking for is a good personality. When we say a good personality, we like someone who is friendly and outgoing, because you can't teach somebody that. We can teach you the technical side of the equipment, but we can't teach you how to be friendly.

Then the next thing is, you need to have some kind of knowledge of the audio world. That may be as limited as having a huge record collection, or it may be as extensive as being a software programmer. It may be having worked in a studio, or being on the concert committee in college. If you don't have a clue about music and you just like music, that's not enough.

Now, interestingly enough, our keyboard salesman right now is a classically trained clarinetist, and we don't sell clarinets or band instruments. Everything that is sold here is electric, with the exception of acoustic guitars. He's an incredible musician, a smart guy, and he likes people. It doesn't matter that the keyboard isn't his favorite instrument.

In fact, for about ten years, we've had a woman who was our lead guitar salesperson, and she doesn't play a lick of guitar. But she knows everything there is to know about a guitar and knows how to make the customer comfortable when she's showing them. If you want to talk shop, she's your person. If you want to jam, then hey, you're on your own.

The other thing about the music business that I find helpful is that appearance is basically meaningless. If you are concerned with your appearance, or if you have the kind of appearance that makes it difficult to get a job in the mall...

K: Come and see us?

G: Come and see us, yeah. [Laughs.] We’ve got people here with green hair, pierced everything, and lots of tattoos. And they’re waiting on customers who may be rappers with baggy clothes, or a woman in diamonds and an evening gown. Individuality is a natural part of the music world.
K: How about the salary range for an entry-level position?

G: We start people out in the $400-a-week range, about $10 an hour. Plus, health insurance kicks in after six months’ employment—once we know you are here for a while, and then we put you on. We also offer bonuses and incentives based on performance. So a sales person here that’s got a few years of experience, good on the phone, and keeps in touch with their customers and does a lot of follow-up work, you know, can make some serious money.

K: That’s great. You mentioned earlier that you do have an internship program, a relationship with Columbia College there. Is it paid or unpaid?

G: That’s unpaid. The school won’t let you pay their students, but they do receive college credit.

K: How long does it normally last?

G: It usually goes for a quarter. Sometimes it will go for two quarters, depending on...

K: What they have got going?

G: Yeah, what they have got going and what the school has going. Usually what I find is somebody will come and work here for a quarter or two. They’ll work at a studio for a quarter or two and then they are working somewhere else music- or broadcast-related. Maybe they will work at an entertainment agency, radio station, or they will work in a record store, or something like that.

K: Do you review them at the conclusion of their internship with Gand?

G: Yes, we do give them an evaluation and I think it’s important that they get credit for it. Because what’s the point? I mean the experience is wonderful, but...

K: They should get the college credit, too.

G: The other thing that comes from that for us, an internship gives us a peek into what this person is all about. If and when they come back and apply for a job, we’ve already got a pretty good idea what they are good at and if they’ll be able to contribute.

K: Are there any tips you can share for somebody wanting to get into the business?
G: Well, you need experience. Jimi Hendrix said it best, “Are you experienced?” And when somebody comes in to work in any of the divisions of our company, that's one of the first things I want to know, once they pass the rest of the tests. I want to know if they are friendly and if they have got a car. You have got to have a car to be able to get to work. And you’ve got to be punctual. People that show up late or drag their feet, forget it.

You know, something that I learned being in concert audio for all that time is, you have to be on time. It is probably something that doesn't get stressed enough. One of my sayings is, It's impossible to be on time—you are either early or you are late. If you could get to the rest of your life about ten or fifteen minutes early, good things will happen to you.

K: It’s true.

G: There's a lot of other basic stuff. One is to tell the truth. If you need some time off work to go play a gig, don’t call in sick. Just say, “I have this audition,” or “These guys are coming to see my band,” or whatever it is. Be up-front about it, because it is more important to be honest than anything else. Trust is such a huge thing. And once you break that, there's no way to repair it. Once you lose somebody's trust you can’t get it back.

K: It's fragile.

G: I think another thing that's important in the music industry, on any side of it, is you have to be able to shift gears quickly. This is something that they can’t teach in school. You have to be able to just sit there and wait with absolutely nothing happening. And then “BOOM!” The bell rings, the band shows up, and you’ve got to go full speed. Zero-to-100 in three seconds.

K: Are there any resources that you would recommend?

G: Well, if you can't get experience firsthand, get it by reading about it. There are so many great resources now with all of the magazines. I mean they are all good. Even if you only read one or two of them regularly.

But the best thing to do is to go to gigs. Go to the studio and hang around. Go down to the local club and hang around. Befriend somebody at one of the local concert
halls, like one of the stagehands or somebody that can get you in. So you can come in the afternoon and watch the band set up.

When I was a kid, my dad said to me Saturday, “The circus is in town. We can do one of two things. We can go see the circus show tonight. Or we can go over there right now and watch them set up. Which would you like to do?”

I said, “Let’s go watch them set up.” I’d much rather watch them set up, build the tent, put the stand together, meet the animals, see the clowns. All of that stuff.

To actually watch these guys put it together just fascinated me. So I think, whatever aspect of the business you want to be in, go hang out and watch somebody else do it.

K: What about long-term career prospects? Obviously there has been a lot of pressure over the last few years on music retailers, with the advent of large catalog retailers. And now we’ve got these immense chains of super stores—Internet music stores are getting launched. If somebody wants to earn a decent living, what’s your take…is retail a good choice?

G: Retail is a great choice. It’s a great place to be because…year after year after year, there are more retail music sales. The growth is very consistent. There are more people into music, and they are buying more stuff. There is more stuff on the market that they want. When I started out in 1971, I was just selling vintage guitars. They stopped making old equipment a long time ago and I’m still in business. [Laughs.] How about that?

So we branched out and started selling new equipment. And then we started selling PA equipment. And then they invented the synthesizer. And then everybody wanted to record themselves. Then there was the drum machine. And then there was the sampler. And then we started selling computers. We were the first Apple Macintosh music dealer back in the 1980s. There’s always new stuff.

Now there’s MP3. Everybody is burning their own CDs. It’s fantastic. And it is not going to stop. The fact is, everybody wants to be entertained. They always did. I mean they used to feed people to the lions and call it entertainment.
So we're still going to see the same thing. They call it the World Wrestling Federation now. People love to experience “the big gig.”

For me, I still have a client that I go out and do concert sound gigs for six times a year. It’s a complete briefcase gig. No schlepping gear. It keeps me current, but at the same time, it's the same thrill that I had going to the circus with my dad. I mean you go into a huge ice arena with nothing in it. Eight hours later you're throwing a big party for 20,000 people.

The audience comes in and the show starts, and they get that look on their face, you know, they're awestruck.

And then eight hours later, you are gone, like a gypsy. You disappear into the night. It was just a magical dream.

K: That’s a great analogy. Are there any parting words of wisdom if you want to have a fulfilling career?

G: I think the most important thing is whatever you do, in the music industry, any industry, whatever job you're in: always do the best job you can whether you are making donuts at Krispy Kreme or setting up mic stands at the local studio.

Do the absolute best job you can at what you’re doing now, because it shows. And you should derive satisfaction with that, even if the job is menial. And that trains you for “the big gig.” Whatever it turns out to be.

And it takes discipline and practice to make it in the music business. Remember, you need to be pushed in order to grow. And the only way to grow is to continuously challenge yourself. ☑
An Interview with Gregg Hildebrandt
Northern California Sales Representative for TASCAM Division of TEAC of America

If you want to learn about the latest developments in recording technology, there’s no better source than Gregg Hildebrandt. In his more than twenty years in the industry he’s been involved in a number of revolutions, such as the move from tube to solid state electronics, from analog to digital, and many others. During his sixteen-year tenure at TASCAM, a name synonymous with the evolution of recording in America, he has been a product manager, clinician, division manager, and regional sales rep.

Although he modestly admits to little or no musical ability, his interpersonal skills and knowledge of recording technology have made him a respected industry resource. Gregg recently left TASCAM’s U.S. headquarters, where he had been division manager, to get back to his first love, working directly one-on-one with dealers and customers, listening to their needs, and helping them develop solutions with TASCAM technology.

Keith: Initially, Gregg, what drew you to music?

Gregg: Actually, it was kind of by accident. I was going to college at Fresno State at the time, and working on a major in electronic engineering and a minor in computer science.

I got a job working in a music store in Fresno fixing guitar amplifiers, because at that time solid state amplifiers had just hit the scene. So a lot of companies were coming out with solid state guitar amplifiers. That’s how I ended up in the music business.

K: You knew which type of transistor did what, in other words?

G: Yeah, because it was a unique time, right at the end of the tube technology–era and the beginning of solid state. At the time, Kustom had just come out with a line of guitar amplifiers and so the music store that I worked for in Fresno was the Kustom dealer. And of course, they had a lifetime guarantee. So since solid state was not as stable as it is now—you could say it kept me pretty busy. [Laughs.]
K: You mentioned you were studying electronics and computers at Fresno State. Did that help your career?

G: To be perfectly blunt, neither the electronics background nor the computer science background has really helped that much, long term. Those technologies were developing so rapidly, frankly, they evolved way past what I had learned within a matter of two or three years.

The formal training that’s been the most helpful to me, believe it or not, is various sales training and sales seminars. I have always been fascinated with just the theory of selling because it requires convincing people to your way of thinking.

K: Did you have any early mentors?

G: Absolutely. My first job was at a music store called Sound Stage in Fresno. As a matter of fact, that store still exists. The Spitzer family owns it now, but at the time Bob and Camille Wilson owned it. Bob Wilson was really my biggest early mentor. Because again, I had no music background whatsoever—just a technical background.

Bob came to me one day and said, “You know, you are pretty good talking with customers. Why don’t you become a salesman and sell things for me?” And I said, “Gee Bob, I could never be a salesman.” Because at that time, my impression of what a salesman was—what most people’s impression is—a used-car type of salesman. You know, with white shoes and a white belt. [Laughs.]

And Bob said, “No, all you really need to do is just explain the products to people. And if it’s the right product…they will buy it.”

And I answered, “But I’m not a musician, I don’t know anything about this type of equipment.”

Then he asked me, “Well, I tell you what, what are you really interested in?” I told him that I liked hi-fi and stereo equipment. So he said, “Well, that’s great. Why don’t we open up a little stereo section here and why don’t you pick a few lines, and get started selling hi-fi equipment? Okay?”

So we did that, and of course it was about six months later that I kind of evolved into learning more and more about musical instruments and started selling musical instruments.

He saw something in me and really got me started in the business and was very much of a guiding hand the first several years. He actually made me a store manager and then a branch manager as well.
K: It sounds as if there are two key points worth emphasizing regarding your start. The first is that, for people to excel, they have to work on something that they are enthusiastic about.

G: That’s exactly right.

K: So Bob knew that and put it to good use to get you into selling. He likely knew that long term, he wasn’t going to be a hi-fi dealer. The second point is that often the toughest part of selling, especially for someone who is new to sales, is demolishing their mental image of the pushy used-car salesman.

G: Yes, the myth that all sales people have to be high-pressure types. To this day, I find that really, it is just explaining the concept clearly and concisely, and then listening to what the customer has to say.

Bob Wilson actually taught me to be a pretty decent guitar salesman, even though I couldn’t even tune a guitar at the time. Simply because other stores would hire hot guitar players to sell guitars, and of course when somebody comes in, and the salesman pulls a guitar down and starts wailing on it—there’s a real intimidation…

K: The customer promptly walks out the door.

G: Yes. And with me, I didn’t have that option. I would put the guitar in their hands [laughs]…and beg them, “Do something with it… please.”

K: That’s so true. You mentioned earlier, you’re currently representing TASCAM products throughout Northern California. So that means you are calling on…

G: Music stores…everything from small music stores to pro audio accounts, to film facilities like Skywalker, Saul Zaentz, and Zoetrope film centers. Because TASCAM has such a broad line of recording products, I also call on sound contractors and a few broadcast accounts as well.

Before that, I was division manager of TASCAM for eight years, and I lived in Los Angeles. Frankly, that’s life in the fast lane. After a certain amount of time, it became pretty obvious that I was ready for a change; I needed to kind of slow down a little bit.

I was fortunate because my boss knew that I had always wanted to move back home to Northern California, where I was born and
raised. He suggested, “Why don’t you open up a sales office for us up there?” So I did. I’m back out with customers and I love it.

I work with a wide variety of different users, with different applications and different levels of experiences and expertise: everything from a guitar player who is trying to buy his first mini-studio, up through Skywalker Sound, which is trying to figure out how to cram as much audio information over a high-speed network as possible while they build the next blockbuster movie soundtrack.

K: What’s the ratio of time you spend out in the field versus your home office?

G: Well, I typically try and spend one day a week in my home office, and that’s generally on Monday. And then I spend the rest of the week out in the field, because frankly that’s the part of the job that I enjoy the most—getting a chance to work with people, doing sales training and product training. I also like talking to some of the higher-end-users that are trying to figure out how to push that envelope a little bit.

K: So you’re helping people get the most out of the latest products and technologies, and training retailers to understand and educate their end-users about how TASCAM products work.

G: Yes, but the part of the job that is still the most fun, believe it or not, is when you are talking to somebody who has never done any recording before. I like to go through the basics of how multitrack works and what that can do to expand their fun. You will see their eyes light up when they realize the possibilities, and that new-found sense of discovery. It’s really something.

K: Could you describe an entry-level position at TASCAM?

G: TASCAM is a manufacturer and a distributor of recording products in the U. S. What most people would probably think of as entry-level would probably be at our headquarters in Los Angeles for order entry and things like that.

But what I would consider more of an entry-level position from a sales standpoint would be a sales rep position. Essentially that would be going out and calling on end-users and dealers on a regular basis.
K: Could you identify some of the key skills for someone getting started in the sales end of the business?

G: Absolutely. I think number one, they need to be “people” person, somebody that enjoys talking and listening to people. Because far and away the easiest way to sell a person something is to get them talking, and then listen. Which is just so much easier if you have a genuine interest in people.

Number two, a person has got to be very self-motivated. It isn’t a 9-to-5 job when you are out in the field doing sales. There isn’t a supervisor looking over your shoulder every step of the way. So you must be self-motivated and understand that your time is your most valuable asset.

And then three, I think it helps to be pretty well organized, because frankly, when you are a sales rep, you run an independent branch office. You basically are doing everything from paperwork to dealer mailings, and putting together material for trade shows, clinics, and presentations.

Organizational skills ensure that every effort you put out pays off in the greatest number of ways. That’s critically important.

K: What would be the salary range for a rookie sales rep?

G: It again depends entirely on the territories, but probably in the $36,000- to $48,000-a-year range, including both base salary and commission.

K: Is there any type of internship program at TASCAM’s home office in Los Angeles?

G: We have just started hiring interns within the TASCAM division. The corporate office has done some internship programs, more from a business administration standpoint.

One of the things we recently discovered is that a great deal of the schools require an internship in order to earn a degree. So one of the things that we have started doing within the last year is to bring on some interns, as an experiment. And as a matter of fact, I am going to be getting one soon here in Northern California.

K: How has the experiment gone so far?

G: We have had one in Phoenix, working with our regional sales manager now for about six months. And the experience has been very, very good because it allows somebody to get out, work with some of
the dealers, and find out if they really do want to do this type of work as a career. In fact, the person that was working with our regional in Phoenix was just hired by one of our dealers upon graduation.

K: Is the internship a paid or unpaid position?

G: It’s unpaid, because the schools require it to be an unpaid position. However, we do cover an intern’s expenses for gas, phones, copies, and what have you.

K: How long does the internship run?

G: They are typically positions that are designed to be six months to a year in duration. Just enough time to expose them to the realities of a sales position, while also getting exposure to some potential employers.

K: Do you have any tips for someone starting out to get their foot in the door?

G: Well, the biggest tip that I would offer would be to take your time and pay your dues. Upon graduation, an awful lot of people expect to start off with a high-paying, high-visibility job. Very few people actually do. So I think to be successful with a company, you need to work your way up. You need to have a very broad background. I would suggest someone get a position in a fairly small music retail environment, where you have the opportunity to wear a lot of different hats.

They should learn about many different products, because in that environment, you need to. That doesn’t mean that getting a sales position in a bigger retail establishment isn’t good. But you don’t quite have the opportunity to experience some of the things like going to the bank in the morning or dealing with the UPS driver.

K: That’s right. Or sweeping up the store after a clinic.

G: Exactly, or making sure that you sent out the invitations to the clinic, those type of things which, frankly, they seem real basic, but until you have an opportunity to make some mistakes, you don’t realize how important the little details are.

You should get an entry-level position where you’re going to get the broadest exposure to the realities of what you’ve got to do. In our industry in particular, very seldom do you end up in a position where you have a large staff to do all the different functions. Even when I was division
manager of TASCAM, everyone in management wore a whole bunch of different hats.

K: Are there any magazines, books, or trade associations that you would recommend as resources?

G: Trade magazines such as Mix, EQ, and Pro Sound News are very good. There’s an awful lot of information on the Internet. Just start searching for things that interest you. You will be amazed at how much information you can find. But subscribing to two or three of the industry magazines makes the most sense, because that will really give you a good feel for what’s going on.

The other thing that I would recommend for anyone going out on an interview would be to take the time to learn a little bit about the company you’re interviewing at. You’d be amazed at how many people show up for a job interview, and don’t have any idea whatsoever of what the company that they’re trying to get a job with actually does!

It’s impressive when somebody does come in for an interview and obviously they have taken the time to read a couple of catalogs or brochures. That really sets them apart from the great unwashed that are just trying to get a job.

K: What’s your long-term view as far as careers in the music, recording, or entertainment business?

G: I think they are excellent. They are evolving quite a bit, but I think they’re particularly good from a sales and a product standpoint.

Let’s face it, in the best or worst of times, entertainment and music have always tended to thrive, because it’s something that everybody enjoys in one form or another, whether it’s performing or listening to...or participating in, in some form or another.

For instance, if someone is buying an instrument, there needs to be a nice fit between the type of instrument, its cost, and their level of playing. Are they a beginner or a player with lots of experience? And so that’s where the expertise of a salesperson really pays off.

Just like in the clothing business. Let’s face it: I can’t imagine buying a suit over the Internet. It’s the same thing with musical instruments and recording equipment. People still want to have them in their hands and feel them and touch them and listen to them. That keeps our long-term prospects I think very, very good for the industry.
K: Do you have any tips on market segments you think that will be particularly hot in the future?

G: Yes, absolutely. I think that it's going to be the nontraditional users. In the past, when I got started in this business, pretty much whether you were selling musical instruments or recording equipment, we had a very limited potential audience. I mean the only reason somebody would want to record multitrack music would be if they were a professional musician. Now, with a lot of the computer-based software packages and sequencers, and a whole range of affordable instruments and recording tools, we've broadened the potential user base significantly. Plus the pricing of technology keeps coming down, so that people can do everything from taking home movies and putting them into the computer, then adding sound tracks to them, and things like that.

I think it's going to be these types of nontraditional users, the non-hard-core musician, who represent a huge market. This group will be absolutely booming in the future.

K: Do you have any parting words of wisdom?

G: The music business is totally a people-oriented business. It's not something that can be easily faked. And frankly, you will be as successful as the relationships you build over the years. Care about what you do, how you do it, and the people you work with. The rest will come to you.