REALITY CHECK

Are There Jobs for All Those Audio School Graduates?

By Barbara Schultz

"**I** wonder what it would be like if we all became what we wanted to be when we grew up. I mean, imagine a world full of firemen, cowboys, nurses and ballerinas." That's a Lily Tomlin quote from an early *Saturday Night Live* episode. It is funny to imagine, and it's just as odd to think about what the world would be like if we all became what we wanted to be when we were teenagers. Imagine a world full of guitar gods, celebrity chefs, NBA players and rock 'n' roll recording engineers. In other words, not everyone can end up in his or her dream career. And logic dictates that a music industry plagued by piracy and poor sales also doesn't demand thousands more music recording engineers every year.

Still, thousands of high school grads head off to audio school to follow their dream of working in a studio, recording bands. Part of what they're bound to learn is that few of them will find full-time employment in a high-end music studio. Like all those former-future ballerinas out there, audio students sometimes need a reality check.

Conservatory of Recording Arts and Sciences (CRAS) graduate Joe Caravalho at Engine Room (New York City). Inset: Greg Stefus of CRAS.

REALITY-BASED EDUCATION

To help audio students face the realities of a down economy, and a really down music industry, without giving up their dreams, many of the established audio education schools and programs offer career-counseling services and internship opportunities for a range of audio careers. As director of the student services department at the Conservatory of Recording Arts and Sciences (Tempe, Ariz.; audiorecordingschool.com), Greg Stefus guides students into internships that provide essential work experience—a mandatory part of his program.

"I'm a graduate of the Conservatory," he says. "When I came here, I wanted to make rock 'n' roll records. By the time I left, it didn't matter what I was doing. If I was making sound sound great, I was happy doing it, in any capacity. Most of our students understand by the time they leave here that even though you want to be idealistic to yourself, audio is a business and there are a hundred different ways to make money in audio if you keep your mind open to it."

Stefus says that CRAS emphasizes "reality-based teaching. That means we teach all aspects of the industry." The idea is that with a broad base of audio skills, students will be able to find some kind of work in the industry after graduation. So those aspiring band recordists will also come out of CRAS' program with some understanding of creating and mixing sound for film and TV, game audio, sound reinforcement and music business. He works side-by-side with the CRAS faculty to make sure the school's curriculum reflects changes in the job market.

The biggest change the conservatory has recently made is embracing the idea of the owner-operator as a likely outcome for many students. "With the digital revolution and everyone going smaller and everyone being able to record," he says, "we made a huge overhaul of the program, so everyone starts with their own laptop and recording setup. After completing the course curriculum, every student has the ability to enter and excel in the industry. Getting into audio now, you are going to be your own company to some extent."

Krysti O'Rourke, director of career services at Five Towns College (Long Island, N.Y.; ftc.edu), also collaborates with college faculty to fine-tune course offerings to prepare students for employment. "We make sure all of our students are exposed to our MIDI lab, post-production, audio theory, corporate audio," O'Rourke says. "We've seen a greater need in the live sound market recently, so our office has been developing more internship opportunities that provide exposure in live sound. Select students also receive exposure by working at our performing-arts center, The Dix Hills Performing Arts Center."

Like Stefus, O'Rourke says her office strongly encourages students to consider employment in all aspects of the industry. Grads might have to piece together three part-time jobs or take a full-time job with a label or audio equipment manufacturer, or with a company that provides corporate A/V while recording bands on the side.

"Many of our graduates have their own home studios and are diversified in a lot of different areas, besides being musicians," she says. "We do have students who get jobs in big studios and we're proud of that. We have an interns and graduates at Avatar and Electricy Lady and the Magic Shop, as well as other fine recording studios. We want students to have their dreams, but

Ex'pression College for Digital Arts students in one of the many hands-on classes. Inset: Shiloh Hobel, senior director of industry and career services

"Services include resume and cover letter assistance, research help, interview tips, strategic goal planning and review, location-specific market information and job leads. We also govern credited internships for organizations and facilities across the country, and offer the internship opportunities to eligible students."

Full Sail's Industry Outreach department is devoted to building and maintaining relationships with audio professionals. CRAS' Stefus agrees that these kinds of relationships are essential to generating great internship and job leads for students. "My department attends various national audio events and we spend a lot of time in the cities where they take place, letting people know who we are and maintaining relationships in the audio community."

Another element in preparing students for the workplace is people skills. This is a particular sticking point for Hobel, a former recording artist and a vet in management, spanning nearly two decades with both The Plant Studios in Sausalito, Calif., and music producer Narada Michael Walden. Like Stefus, she sees that many students will also be future entrepreneurs; she makes it her job to ensure that Ex'pression graduates know the business and the personal sides of audio, as well as the technical side. "We are teaching them how to start their own businesses, how to prepare content and demo reels for the different fields they will be entering, how to pay attention to the 'human' element of the business and how to keep the work of the artist at the forefront of their production workflow," Stefus says. "We focus on training students so that, in the media field, we are serving the clients' needs, training students to be self-reliant when necessary to complete a project, but also how to work with a team to reach a common goal."

Ex'pression also offers a class in Studio Etiquette and Psychology that helps students develop those all-important interpersonal skills. Full Sail does as well, via an initiative the school calls its "Global Professionalism" program. "This was in response to repeated appeals from employers for a system to measure and encourage professionalism and the soft skills that entails," explains Rice. "Through the program, faculty and staff track a code of conduct that is representative of the industry: timeliness, evidencing respect, preparation, attentiveness and following compliance protocol."

"You have to have that personality that people want to work with," Five Towns' O'Rourke says. "You're not going to be able to record if you don't have clients, if people don't want to work with you."

there's also reality to the professional world and how to adapt and adjust your career for success. We had a panel for our required internship class where a group of senior-level interns spoke to the younger students, and they were saying how it is sometimes a challenge to get an internship. Students need to get their resumes together, reach out to companies, go on interviews."

O'Rourke walks a line between opening doors—reaching out to major studios, labels and manufacturers—and requiring students to develop the skills and confidence that will appeal to employers. Her office also stays in touch with students after they graduate, continuing to give help and guidance. "Many of our successful graduates working at major companies reach out to us all the time to bring us back the opportunities to our students now—that's a great compliment to the college," she says. "We do a lot of one-on-one counseling with them while they are here, from assisting them with finding internships on campus or off campus, offering workshops and job-placement advice, and we're still offering assistance with internships and job placement after they graduate."

STUDENT SERVICES

That's the good news for audio students: Many audio schools clearly acknowledge their responsibility not only to turn out graduates with great technical chops, but also to help them along their career path. Shiloh Hobel, senior director of industry and career services at Ex'pression College for Digital Arts (Emeryville, Calif.; expression.edu), says that her team includes five advisors who provide individualized career guidance. "From resume building to holding mock interviews to reviewing cover letters, our advisors offer tips and techniques so that our students and recent alumni are better prepared to successfully enter the job market," she says. "Our department also organizes employer interviewing sessions, networking and portfolio review events, and an industry speaker series."

At the large and many-faceted Full Sail University (Winter Park, Fla.; fullsail.edu), Doree Rice is associate director of career development. Her department is 55 people strong and takes a three-tiered approach to student career advancement: There's an advisor team, a team that conducts industry outreach and one that facilitates an alumni network. "Industry-specific advisors meet one-on-one with the student to partner his or her career pursuit," Rice explains.

GETTING INTO GAMES

One area where audio schools seem to be treading lightly is the burgeoning videogame audio business. From the outside, this would seem to be a key career-growth area for audio engineers. The videogame business is strong, though definitely cyclical, and all of the schools we approached for this story have added game audio to their course offerings. However, Stefus says that job opportunities for game audio engineers are still quite rare.

"Game audio is a growing area of our industry," he says. "The idea of audio people getting into games and not being programmers is still new. We're still developing relationships to show software-development companies the advan-

tages of taking on young, ambitious engineers. When I was at the Game Developers Conference, I talked to two audio guys for a major software-development company, and they only had two audio guys on staff. They told me that on one of their projects, when the video, programming and integration were done, those people were having keggers before the project even got to audio. They were celebrating the game completion. So audio is still really the last step; of course, it's crucial, but it's the last thing they concern themselves with. We frequently find that the audio is outsourced to sound design and post-production facilities. Hopefully, we'll see in the next couple of years with great programs like Audiokinetic Wwise and FMOD—middleware software—audio engineers will start being more involved."

FOLLOW THE PASSION

Stefus does help hundreds of students find pro-level audio internships every year and wants CRAS students to grab every bit of experience they can get. "This is a passion industry," he says. "I always encourage my students to remember this is the only golden ticket they get. The internship is a guarantee going through CRAS. You never know where you're going to end up. We have students who start here all the time who want to make rock 'n' roll records. Then at the end of our 42-week program, they're working for NBC Universal Sports and they never imagined that. I certainly didn't think I would be teaching 11 years ago when I first got into this business. Follow your passion first and let the world work with you after that."

Students at work at Five Towns College