



## Woe and Flutter (Pt. 1)

by Stephen Murphy

I recently signed on to mix a 12-song CD by a promising artist with a modest budget. Most of the material was tracked elsewhere, with a variety of engineers.

As the artist told me the history of the recordings, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him. So many things that could have gone wrong did go wrong, that I began to think he was the one named Murphy.

He started the project in respected commercial studio, recording basic tracks with top studio musicians hired at no small price. Days later, all this work was lost when the files were accidentally deleted from the studio's DAW system. The studio admitted its mistake, but informed him that they were only liable for the lost studio time.

The project was restarted at a studio that can be described as more "funky" than commercial. Part of the funk, it seems, literally seeps in from an adjoining auto body shop. Invasive fumes caused several work stoppages in the studio (preceded by work "foggages," I imagine).

The project proceeded at the studio and, despite a revolving set of engineers, equipment troubles and a studio ownership change, was nearing completion. Then the studio announced that it would be closing imminently because the building was sold. The artist provided a FireWire drive to the studio so he could transport his project to me for mixing.

### Great Expectations

What I was hoping to find on the drive was a folder for each song, with the song's session files and respective audio files within.

I don't know if this was the result of all those fumes, but what I got

was a disorganized jumble of 83 folders and subfolders, only two of which were clearly labeled with song titles – and those only contained a few audio files each. The rest of the files for the 11 songs (the 12th was to be transferred from a two-inch 24-track reel) were haphazardly scattered throughout the drive, all named Audio\_032 and the like.

Hopefully Pro Tools would know where to locate the respective tracks when I opened each song. Easier said than done. The session files, too, were scattered throughout the drive, sometimes buried deep within subfolders of a completely different song.

Worse, they were not labeled in any meaningful manner to indicate which was the latest version. Topping it off, the backup process the studio used rendered all files on the drive with the same date.

The process of sorting out just one song went like this:

Search the drive for the song title; attempt to load each of the five or six versions found; wait while PT searched the entire drive for the audio files; repeat for each version; eventually, one version would load most of the files; assume that's the one we'll use; move to next song title and start again.

Even in the best of circumstances, not all of the audio files could be found – those are probably still scattered across the closed studio's hard drives, with no hope of recovery. Adding to the woe, many of the files from which I will be mixing have been processed with EQ and effects, and the original files have been purged from the pool.

After two day's work sorting through the data, we were able to

reconstruct nine of the 11 songs, albeit with some missing overdubbed tracks. Two of the songs will have to be rerecorded from scratch.

Funny enough, the 12th song – the one I transferred from an old analog 24-track tape that needed baking – was the most straight forward: 24 tracks, all properly labeled, all in the same folder, all the same length, none permanently changed with plug-ins, ready to mix.

### Words to Learn and Sing

The reason I am relating this story is not to moan or criticize, but to hopefully offer something constructive to take away from all this. It is a philosophy that I adopted in my early studio-ownership days, and has prevented me from ever being the one responsible for such a mess:

*Engineer as if the project is entrusted to you for only a short time.*

If you perform your job with this always in mind, your work will be rendered in the most professional and organized manner. You will avoid the shortcuts and lazy engineering that leads to the problems described above. At the same time, you will help your clients and your business, and earn the respect of anyone else who may work on the project down the line.

Next month: *Woe and Flutter Pt.2.* – Practical tips to keep this from happening to you.

**PAR** Studio Editor Stephen Murphy has over 20 years production and engineering experience, including Grammy-winning & Gold/Platinum credits.