



Woe and Flutter (Pt.2)

by Stephen Murphy

In last month's column, I told the woeful story of the recording of a project I was hired to mix. The project was a 12-song CD by a promising artist with a modest budget. The material was tracked with a variety of engineers at several different studios.

The history of the tracking phase of the project was a textbook example of my eponymous law ("Anything that can go wrong, will..."), including the accidental deletion of several days' studio work with session musicians, a studio ownership change and subsequent closure, and a revolving-door set of engineers. The real problems, however, started when I booted up the FireWire hard drive on which the "ready-to-mix" files were stored.

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 contained within. 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 were indiscriminately scattered throughout the drive, all named "audio_01_032" and the like.

The session files, too, were scattered throughout the drive, sometimes buried deep within subfolders of completely different songs. Worse, they were not labeled in any meaningful manner to indicate which was the latest version. Topping it off, backup process the studio used rendered all files on the drive with the same time and date.

Even in the best of circumstances – when a session file was located that promised to be the latest version with all overdubs – not all of the audio files could be located on the drive. Several songs were missing one of the two overhead tracks, or a critical overdub. Adding to the woe, of the files that could be located, many had been permanently processed with EQ, gates, compression and/or effects, and the original files had been purged from the pool or left off the drive.

We spent several frustrating days simply sorting through the mess, and, in the end,

three of the tracks had to be rerecorded from the ground up.

Practical Philosophy

The reason I related this story was not to place blame or criticize, but to hopefully offer engineers 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 led to the problems described. 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.

In keeping with the above philosophy, the following are some practical tips to help digital workstation engineers stick to the high road. Most are obvious but bear repeating, especially in this age when many studios and engineers work on the same project:

1. Create a folder for each song. These individual song folders should reside within an overall project folder.

2. Name the individual tracks before recording. This will ensure that files on the hard drive are clearly named Kick or BassDI instead of audio_02_21 and audio32EQ_fade.

3. Check the disc allocation before recording. This will ensure tracks are recorded to the right folder, and prevent tracks from being excluded from a quick folder backup.

4. Adopt a consistent track naming and ordering convention. Besides the obvious organizational benefits, this assists greatly when plugging in files from one song into another song's mix setup or template.

5. Adopt a consistent song naming convention, save songs often, and name subsequent versions sequentially. Many programs offer a "save as +" shortcut

function that automatically increments the number at the end of a file name

6. Do not destructively process the audio files with EQ, gates etc. If offline processing is necessary due to limited computing power, for godsake, don't ever dump the original unprocessed files from the pool – hard drive space is cheap so there is no reason to ever do this. Instead of offline processing, "freeze" plugins if that option is available.

7. If you know the project will be going elsewhere, use the "Create Session Copy In" or "Save Project to New Folder" function from within the application. This will ensure that all files in use will reside within the copy folder.

8. Go the extra measure and create an OMF version of each song. This shouldn't take long, as it is only creates a small edit decision list (EDL) file referencing the time stamp and in/out points of the referenced files. This is the typical method of file exchange for audio-for-video and film work.

9. Unless otherwise required, use Broadcast Wave File as your export file type, since they contain an embedded time stamp – sessions can usually be recreated even without an OMF.

10. The absolutely failsafe method for transferring songs is to "consolidate" or "bounce" the tracks to create contiguous track files of equal length. As long as the track/file names are properly labeled, this method provides absolute compatibility between systems and eliminates missing and/or misplaced "event" problems.

11. Back up your recording sessions nightly – this would have prevented the complete loss of time and money at the first studio (and the loss of their client to another studio). Though we tend to think it won't happen to us, data loss can occur in a variety of devious and catastrophic ways.

A final small tip: don't always rely on your DAW's "recent files" list to pull up your projects – while it is a useful shortcut, it can also be a crutch that hides serious organizational problems on the drive.