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WHAT'S WRONG?

# THE TWICE-TOLD TALE OF MR. NATHANIEL KUNKEL

Wherein **Mr. Kunkel** and his erstwhile associate **Mr. Timothy Ford** do two takes on **The Importance of Being Kunkel**.

## TAKE #1 by TIMOTHY FORD

*"Every time I hear a recording that I like the sound on, I look at who recorded it, and the majority of the time it's Nathaniel Kunkel." —Al Schmitt*

Producer/engineer Nathaniel Kunkel is the principal of Studio Without Walls, a turnkey, go-anywhere ultra-high-end remote recording facility. For cave dwellers only: Nathaniel's recent credits include B.B. King, Sting, Maroon 5, Keane, Good Charlotte, Morrissey, and The Crystal Method — and he won an Emmy in 2004 for the Sting special — *Inside — The Songs of Sacred Love*.

For the rest of us: Read on.

### So what the hell is Studio Without Walls?

**Nathaniel Kunkel:** SWW is more of a methodology, a concept of putting together a recording studio. Recording studios are all really the same basic parts. When I was working at different recording studios I realized that what all the great recording studios had in common was great infrastructure, so SWW really is nothing more than a modular, scalable infrastructure design that I came up with so that I could do multiple projects of different scales and not have to have so much equipment involved that it becomes cost-prohibitive. That way I could scale my studio in a very efficient, inexpensive way between gigs.

**Because you don't have so many built-in engineering assistants on salary?**

photography by Aaron Rapoport









# KUNKEL

As far as I'm concerned everything should be set to internal clock and sample rate converted. That way, I would never need to think about all this crap. Having to think about word clock is about as much fun as having to think about grounding. So choose not to. Besides, digital noises from clocking errors are usually really high frequencies; almost no one can hear that high.



The room speakers are five JBL LSRs supported by two subwoofers doing bass management front and rear. I really love these monitors. The main reason I like them is that I can do room-mode correction on the low frequencies, I can move from room to room, and I can shoot the speakers to calibrate them to be flat — they're not digital speakers, they're analog speakers, so I don't have to worry about what's going on conversion-wise. The other reason I love them is they translate impeccably. While I have some reservations about whether or not they're the most pleasant-sounding speakers I've ever worked on, they're not extraordinarily fatiguing, and what I leave with here sounds identical in my car. It also sounds the same on the stage at Disney.

And for headphones I use Sony MDR 7506s.

#### Does your console go on remote?

**NK:** I use an Icon D Command . . . if I was going somewhere for over a week, I would take it, but I can do everything with a keyboard and a mouse that I can do with it. I've thought about buying one of those tiny controllers, a Command8 — it's Ethernet, isn't it?

#### No . . . MIDI.

**NK:** If I had millions of dollars and I was doing this from scratch, I'd go buy 32 channels of this new GML 2032, a one-rack-space,

mic-pre, EQ, and DI, and an insert point so the mic pre is separate from the equalizer, with a built-in power supply, and then I'd buy two of these Aurora 16s, which are one-rack-space 16-channel A/D, D/As. So I'd have 32 channels of AES/EUB in-and-out with mic pres, in one huge big tall rack. That would be my remote recording input rig.

#### The way you're talking about it we'll give you six months. . . .

**NK:** No. I'm not going to do it. I don't do that much live recording. And people don't much care how a record sounds anymore. Put that in your article. I have to supplement things all the time and I'm always paying for stuff, because I want things to be good and sound good — and people don't care. They don't want to spend money on it, they don't think there's a difference between the better converter and the not-better converter. All you have to do is turn on an old Buddy Holly record that was made on a three-track and listen to that vocal to know we are just not doing it that well any more. Everybody knows a Nat King Cole vocal sounds way better than most things anyone does now. Why? Do we compress it too much in order to be more competitive? Is it because of digital medium? Should everything go into analog? We don't know, but the truth is we know it was better back then. We're not doing the work we should be. Pro Tools is just like any other recording device. All the skills that you needed when

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you were trying to decide if your tape machine was over-biased, you still need now. This concept of turn it on, plug it in, and it's working perfectly — it's a lie. You should be looking at your clocking architecture.

Pressing record on a DAW doesn't make you an engineer. Learning how to manipulate the tools to get the most quality out of them is being an engineer. Eddie Kramer probably isn't the best Pro Tools guy, but Jimmy Page could go to him and say "I need it to be more purple, man," and he'd get that — because he's a great engineer. Interns come in to train and spend five minutes in the studio and they say, "I can run Pro Tools for you." And it's like, "Dude, you're not going to run Pro Tools for me for four years," because I'm running Pro Tools — for the artist. The intern would be running Pro Tools for himself. There's a sort-of technology-born disconnect. All this should be transparent — artists should never know what you're recording to. All they should be thinking is, "Man, my headphones sound great." As soon as you start talking to them, like, "I can tune that for you," you're impeding the progress of the session. As soon as you tweak their ear, making them conscious of something unnecessary, that they can't put their finger on, they go, "What's that?" and they're somewhere they don't need to go. It has to be transparent.

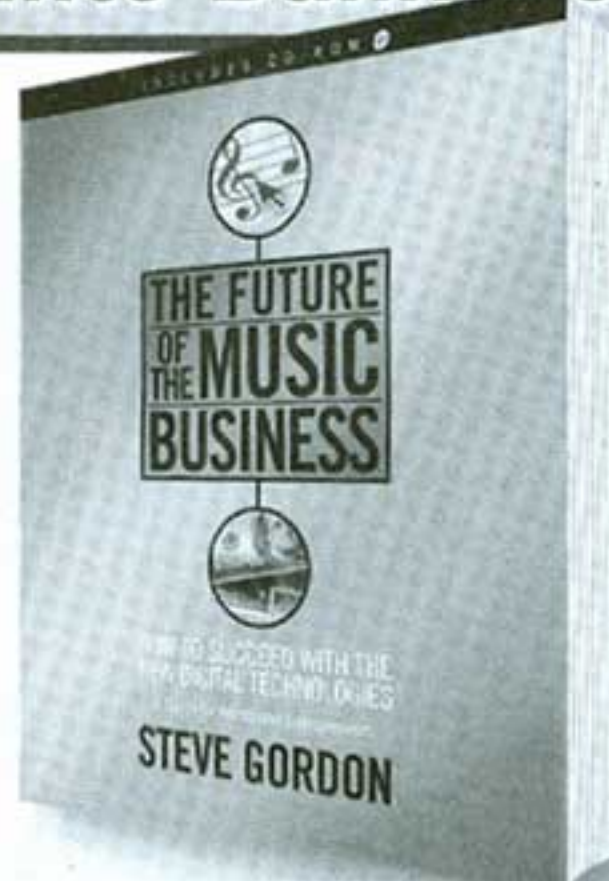
It comes down to what was going on when I was training. Pay attention — to everything that's going on. Work hard. This

is a hard job. Everyone thinks, with the consumerification of music, "Hey groovy, man, I'm going to write this thing, and do a beat, and get four points, and I'm going to buy a house and a bitchin' car." The real music industry — the people who are really working — work really, really hard, and they come home exhausted. Making music is hard. There's so many people who just get it out — fast — who don't pay attention to the lace and filigree — that's why there's so much crap out there. The people that I know in this industry who are really world-class — the Al Schmitts, the Ed Cherneys, the George Massenburgs, the Matt Walkers — they all have patience. You can't rush art. Sometimes you have to wait for it to happen and help bring it to fruition. George Massenburg said something to me when I had been working for him for five months. He said, "You know, Nathaniel, getting a good sound isn't hard. Having a good time in the studio isn't hard. Learning how to interface with artists isn't hard. Having fun mixing isn't hard. The hard part about this job is paying attention to absolutely every single thing that happens for the entire day."

Every button that gets pressed, every knob that gets turned by anybody anywhere in this entire room, you have to not only know about it and remember it, but also have an intimate knowledge of what it means and what the repercussions of it are. That is hard to do for 12 hours a day — flat out, that's hard to do. That's the hard part of this job.

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# KUNKEL

And if by chance you do let a small flaw escape your grasp while you're not listening, don't worry. It will never see the light of day in 6 to 8 months; record labels lose everything. The important thing to remember is this; if you think something sounds bad you probably suck at listening. So convince yourself that all your stuff sounds great all the time, no matter what you hear. That is a useful skill and will save you a ton of time.



## TAKE #2 By Nathaniel Kunkel

### WHAT CAN I DO TO WRONG THIS UP A BIT?

*How do I keep myself from doing something wrong?*

A most important, yet often overlooked question. All too often we ask ourselves as engineers, "How shall I ever do this as well as that guy?" Well as any great tennis player will tell you, not blowing it when things are easy, is as important as pulling off the impossible when times take a turn for the worse.

I myself have blown it way more times than I can, or wish to, remember. That's no worry for me though because my good friends remember them all for me. And thank goodness, why I would be horrified if I was robbed of my fondest blow-it memories. Ones that colorfully span, oh, just about forever: from showing up late to dinner with uncooked potatoes, to blowing up 24 cards of Dolby SR, to spilling a double cappuccino into a one-month-old console, to driving 11 hours away from a still working session with half the tapes in my car. These are stunningly happy memories for me indeed.

Luckily time marches on, and the only really important thing to remember is, never screw up the same way twice. That is the Holy Grail of blowing it. If you repeatedly blow the same thing you're not trying hard enough, or you can't do your job. Additionally, since this is a career largely taught by apprenticeship, you need the person teaching you to actually want to teach you. Being a blow-it will certainly hinder your likeability. Also, budgets are smaller and projects move more quickly now.

So if you are being taught how to engineer by someone, you better learn fast. I love to teach people, and when they make mistakes I have the perfect opportunity to drive home a point, but having someone make the same mistake over and over again makes me want to fire them. I'm sure most people feel the same way. If not, they should. So where does that leave most engineers, prone to blowing it, while trying to navigate the dark treacherous waters of, we'd hope, quality audio?

Well, the first steps we must take are:

1. Always pay attention.
2. Never blow it.
3. If we do blow it, learn from it.

Seems simple enough. Commandment simple if you ask me, but then you wouldn't believe how little effort is put toward these simple steps.

So there is my preamble on blowing it. We all do it, we all try not to, and we all regret it when we do.

Or do we?

I've had the pleasure of meeting a few distinguished individuals, who have honed blowing it to a razor sharp skill. They are, if you will, the Delta force of wrong. Page 1 from the encyclopedia of "Next." You know, the cats that eat all the string players' donuts in the morning, 30 minutes before downbeat. This article is for them, and the furthering of their craft. Everyone is looking to shatter the glass ceiling in this competitive world of audio engineering. That's boring. Let's explore crashing through the depths of the glass basement for a while.

So here is my basic change to the most normal of plans.



Instead of offering up cool things you might try to further your career in the studio, I'm going to share some methodologies you should apply when your only objective is to get fired. And the bonus is, most of these activities will adhere soundly to your reputation long after the gig is over. Like napalm.

Dark you say? Why thank you. Enjoy the pointers.

## 1. Be a Jerk.

Can't overstate this one enough. Being a jerk relays a real sense

of power. You definitely think you know what's going on if you're an asshole. And people respect that you know that about yourself. This is a great approach with an artist as well. You see, most artists are never just flat out told what to do. They thrive on it. Even if you're wrong, blurt it out. The more assholeish and all knowing the better, that way they know you really care about their project. If you are in any way unsure of this being the right tact, you need only think of your favorite studio stories about unreasonably terse engineers. Then ask yourself this one question: Are they still

working? For the most part, the answer is "no." What does that mean? It means this: If you are an asshole in the studio, people will talk about you way more than every other non-working engineer. Can you really even buy that kind of publicity?

## 2. Word clock distribution is for dorks.

Word clock distribution, what is that anyway? Sounds like some uber-geek solution to fixing the running timing of a spelling bee or something. And from what I can see, just as useful. Anyone who is experimenting with different clock sources with their digital gear obviously can't read. "Perfect sound, forever." Hello, remember that. We were promised perfect sound forever with digital, and I, for one, have no intention of letting audio manufacturers off the hook. Word clock is Digidesign's problem, not mine. Let them fix it. As far as I'm concerned everything should be set to internal clock and sample rate converted. That way, I would never need to think about all this crap. Having to think about word clock is about as much fun as having to think about grounding. So choose not to. Besides, digital noises from clocking errors are usually really high frequencies; almost no one can hear that high.

## 3. Be sure to fatigue your ears as fast as possible.

Listen loud for long periods of time, as early in the day as possible. Most people think that your perspective is better for the first couple hours of listening. They're wrong, dead wrong. You see, most people listen to music at the end of the day, you know, on the way home from work. Guess what they are? Fatigued, really fatigued. That's who we're selling to, the fatigued masses. So, fatigue early in the day and get in sync with the main stream. It is in there, in the very center of fatigue, when it all turns to a flat piece of cardboard right in front of you, that you should really dig in and rethink your mix approach. That's when you're in the zone. Time to start knob twisting with vigor.

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Whenever something really great happens in the studio take credit for it. No one will ever remember what really happened; they will remember only that you took credit for it. As a bonus, this is another great place to win points with an artist as well. Here is the deal, artists hate to come up with ideas; and they hate getting credit for great ideas even more.



## 4. Compressors are the fastest way to get a sound.

To hell with all accepted gain structure methodologies. Put a limiter on there right away. No need to check the microphone preamp gain either, there is almost always an input trim on the limiter. "Hiss?" Oh yes, lots please. "On the way to tape?" you ask. Sure, why not capture your superlative grasp of gain structure for every one that has the pleasure of working on your tracks to enjoy later. You know what they say, rather the wrong limiter than no limiter. Do you have a digital limiter? "Yes." Well slam that puppy on there. Stereo busses, vocals, no matter, just use it. It's digital, how can you go wrong?

## 5. Trust that most people hear better than you.

When you think something might be working incorrectly in the studio, seek the advice of a nearby expert. You know, a technician or someone like that. If their opinion differs from yours, you are most likely wrong. If the audio feels harsh, you hear digital noises, or something just feels wrong, and your technician says all is good, your ears are definitely the culprits. Don't trust them. Just do what you always do and try not to listen. If it gets approved, you're golden. And if by chance you do let a small flaw escape your grasp while you're not listening, don't worry. It will never see the light of day in 6 to 8 months; record labels lose everything. The important thing to remember is this: If you think something sounds bad you probably suck at listening. So convince yourself that all your stuff sounds great all the time, no matter what you hear. That is a useful skill and will save you a ton of time.

## 6. Live proudly knowing that you never make mistakes.

The correct implementation of this ethic is to never, ever, under any circumstances, check your work. Only losers do that. If you are worth your salt you'll get it right the first time. Does an F-18 pilot fly back to check to see if he blew up the target good enough? Hell no, he has some flunky check that from a satellite at the base, or his munitions had a camera, or something. You see he's got more important stuff to do than check his work, and so do you. Someone else will find your one in a million error anyway. That's why we have someone at the label to deliver it to. They check it. If we were delivering every disc for Amazon that would be one thing, but our job ends where it ends. QC is not in my dream job description and I would doubt it's in yours. Walk away from that last task early, fresh, and unencumbered.

## 7. Never let greatness stand-alone.

Whenever something really great happens in the studio, take credit for it. No one will ever remember what really happened; they will remember only that you took credit for it. As a bonus, this is another great place to win points with an artist as well. Here is the deal: Artists hate to come up with ideas, and they hate getting credit for great ideas even more.

For them, getting credit for a good idea is akin to pouring acid in their trousers. No fun. So, especially if they are the ones that come up with the idea, swoop in and claim it as your own right away. The speed at which you usurp their idea is critical too. Fast is good, directly in front of them, right away? That is as good as it gets.

## 8. Never use filters. Ever.

Who would ever categorically remove everything below, or above



a certain frequency? That's just an irrational overreaction. What if you want that stuff back? How screwed would you be then? This rule holds especially true when hi pass filtering before a compressor. Never do that. How do you expect the limiter to react to all that subsonic information if you filter it? Enough said.

## 9. Remain as competitive as possible with your peers. Share nothing.

You might not have noticed, but audio engineering is a pretty competitive business. And these people are not your friends. They will hunt you down and skin you alive for a shot at the toilet cleaning position. Just imagine what they will do for a mixing gig. With that in mind, this really goes back to point number one, but with an added emphasis. Go out of your way to treat other engineers like dirt. Peer respect is way overrated anyway; and it's not like they vote on the Grammy's or anything. Also, slamming another engineer on their gig, after they leave the room, is a great career mover. It will almost certainly get you noticed by that producer as well. They like tenacity, so show some effort.

## 10. Plug-ins always make something better.

This almost doesn't need to be said. It's a rule we all know. Crutch on your plug-ins, friends. They will fix *all* your problems. Especially compressors: Nothing will get you out of a jam like throwing a limiter plug with a default setting on all your tracks. Try this with a

low threshold de-esser as well. Your clients will be amazed at how quickly you made it sound like that.

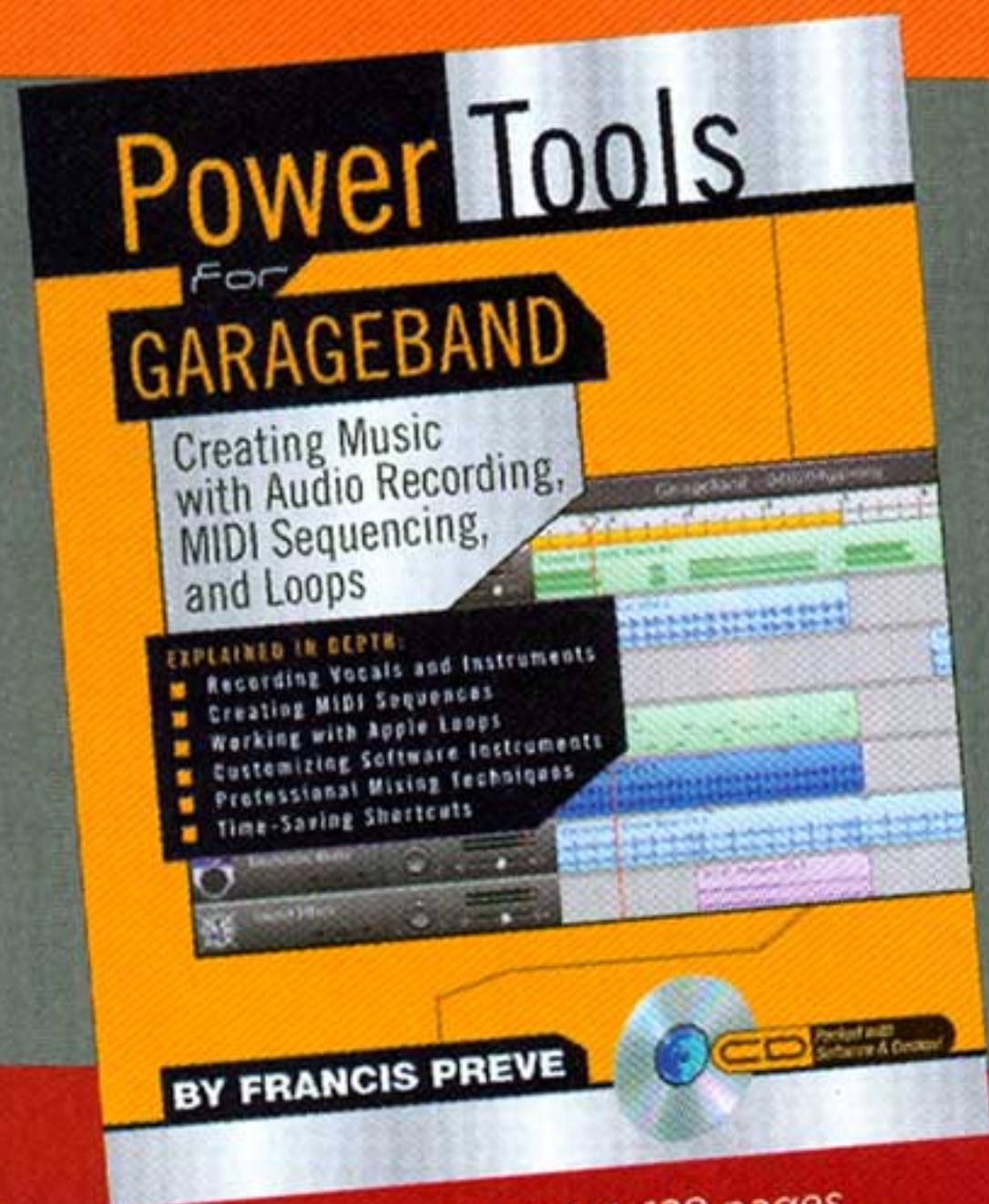
## 11. Always answer a question with authority.

Even if you have no idea what the answer is, whatsoever. That matters not. All that matters is that there was a question to be answered, and you answered it. Well done. Herein lies the real reason to read manuals as well: assimilation of catchphrases and super technical words. Nothing shores up a great line of top thought like some well-placed technical terms; and manuals are a superb place to pick those little gems up. Do what you can to permeate the workplace with your understanding as well. For instance, when you are working at Capitol Studios, or some place world class like that. Always pretend you know everything, especially when talking with the facilities chief engineer. They, in particular, have a keen appreciation for the ability to spew. You might even get a tour of the chamber. Also, take solace in the fact that if anyone gets wise to your lack of knowledge, they will keep it to themselves. Los Angeles, and the entertainment industry as a whole, place great importance on discretion and candor. Your secret is safe with them.

Well there you have it friends. Use with caution these words of direction. They will have the properly wrong effect. Trust me, I tried most of them. Once. **EQ**

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