

Projection

By Sean McCormick

Until I was about 26, I was a pretty lousy student. I had zero ability to fake an interest in that which didn't strike my fancy, which led to many appearances of "I" and "W" on my transcript. That being said, every so often a class would come up that did float my boat, and I tended to get an easy "A" in those. In 1992 I had signed up for an audio production class. I had been drumming in bands since I was 14 and already knew my way around mixers, recorders, synths, drum machines and microphones, but had very little understanding of actual audio fundamentals. This class was going to not only provide said fundamentals, but also allow the class access to an actual professional recording studio for our labs. We would also get to use a real band as a guinea pig. I was finally looking forward to going to class!

On the first day, we met at the Austin Community College Rio Grande campus. We were slated to be solely in a classroom the first few weeks while we learned factoids about the speed of sound and argued over whether a tree falling in the woods actually makes a noise if there's no one around to hear it. I think all of us were eager to quickly get through the book work so we could play with some expensive toys. We went around the room making our introductions, and eventually got to this one small, brunette girl, she introduced herself as Mary. I hadn't really noticed her up to that point, but it quickly became apparent that she was blind.

I was pretty stunned by this. If you've ever been in front of one of the larger mixing consoles, they are intimidating pieces of furniture. Sometimes hundreds of knobs and faders, phantom power switches, buttons, input and output jacks, lights, VU meters, with numbers etched into everything. Then there's all the outboard gear that connects to the mixing

board: compressors, delays, reverb units, speakers, complicated patch panels, lots of different cables, the actual reel to reel recorder and its accompanying remote control. And that's a pretty basic description. There's many other gadgets and peripherals that I won't bother to list. I was having a major 'does not compute' moment at the idea of not being able to see all these components while working with them. Speaking of computing, the World Wide Web had not yet been mass deployed in our schools, so this would have been sans any sort of computer assistance. Recording technology these days is almost all computer-based, save a handful of Luddites who still prefer the "warmth" of actual tape saturation and analog outboard gear versus the digital simulations that pervade the landscape. All at once I felt *pity* for her situation (that I knew nothing about), *incredulity* that someone would attempt this kind of a class, *annoyance* that this was probably going to be a headache for the instructor, and some *remorse* for the annoyance. *Admiration* for someone being brave enough to explore an interest, despite the obvious challenges, hadn't occurred to me yet.

Our instructor's name was Andy. A very friendly and cool fellow. He did not allow Mary's condition to affect him outwardly in the least, but initially I surmised he must have been internally flummoxed at the notion of navigating this girl through the myriad of buttons and blinky things that come with the territory. I figured he hadn't factored this scenario into his lesson plans before. It took a lot of restraint not to quiz him about the situation after class, it just seemed like such a conundrum.

The classroom portion went just like any other class, we had material to read and quizzes to take. Finally, it was time to venture out into the world. The college had an arrangement with an analog studio called Longhorn Audio. It had a decent-sized mixing console in the control room which recorded to a 24-track recorder onto 2" magnetic tape. Andy spent the first

few sessions familiarizing the class with the gear and workflow; no sense in wasting the band's time just yet. Reggae local Papa Mali had been recently doing some recording there, so we got to use his material to fool with. Our instructor kept Mary right by him so he could easily point out the different tactile surfaces of the equipment. Her participation didn't noticeably attenuate the rest of the class' experience in the least. Nor did she seem overwhelmed, she had the same friendly positivity she had possessed in the classroom and was truly enjoying the new surroundings. Another couple of weeks rolled by and it was time to bring in the band. They were called Apaches of Paris. Mary had obviously not been around rock musicians much, it was fun to watch her discover what loons they tend to be. She laughed a lot during that session.

At this point I began to feel pretty stupid and ashamed about projecting my own lack of imagination onto her from the beginning of class, as well as my unfounded assumption that the instructor was probably unhappy about the extra burden I perceived to exist. My early 20's and empathy didn't intersect too often. Like in the Adichie piece, I had 'single-storied' Mary. Yes, if she had decided to choose recording engineer as a career she was going to have a lot to contend with, but that didn't stop Rick Boggs, a successful producer/engineer who is a featured professional in the American Foundation for the Blind. In 1996 the International Society of Blind Audio Engineers (ISBAE) was founded. She had every right to be interested in and pursue music recording, regardless of the hurdles. My takeaway from that experience was that just because *I* may struggle to make sense of someone's situation, that doesn't *at all* mean they do. It's healthy to be aware of limitations. Just don't invent them...or assume them.