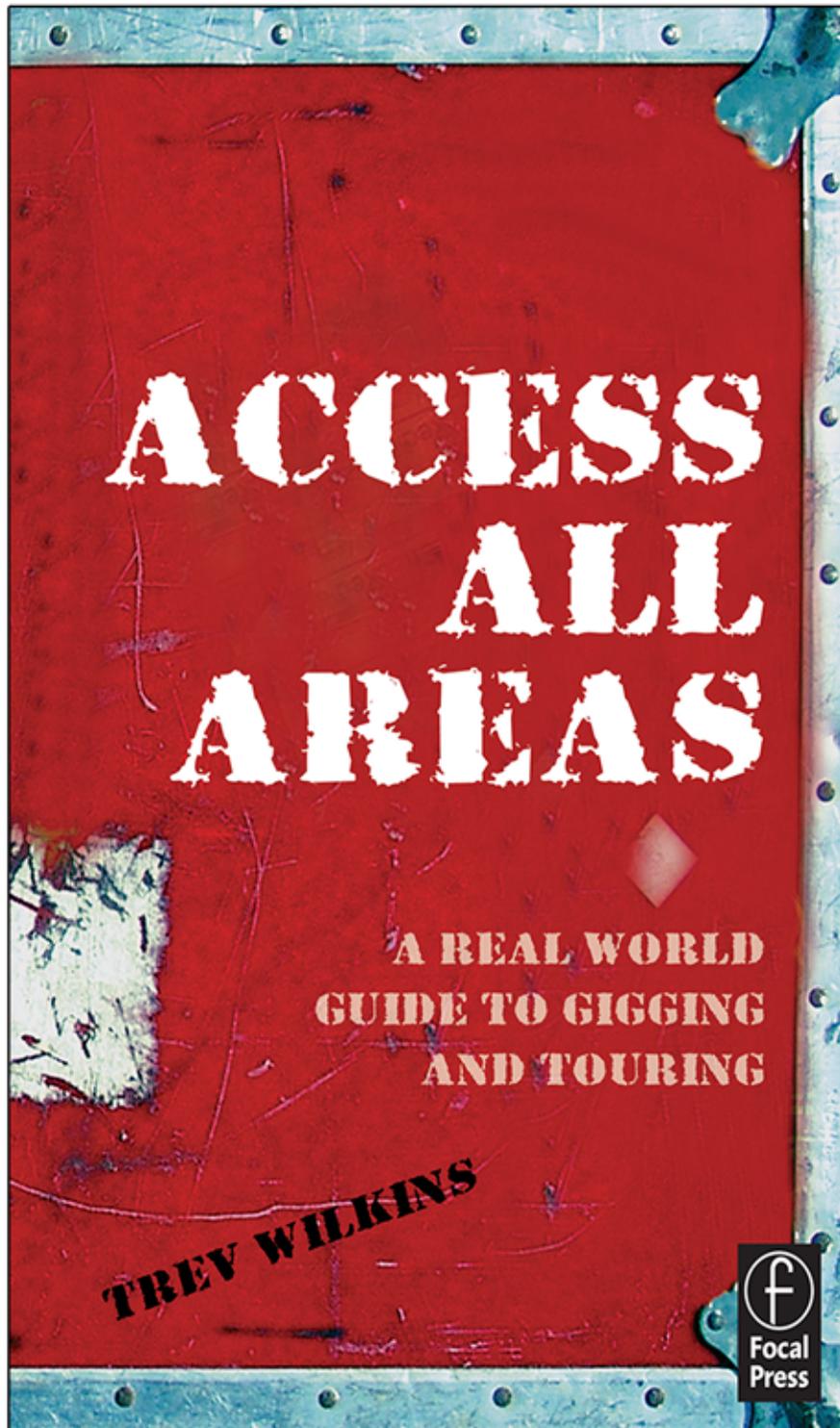




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1

Getting started

Welcome to the show

First of all, a big 'thank you' for purchasing this book. I do hope that you find it useful and keep it as a reference for when new situations arise or if you move into new fields within the industry. I'll be revising and updating the contents from time to time and will be adding new subjects along the way. If you have any requests for additional information, please let me know via the publisher.

The idea for the book developed as I came across many situations where information, knowledge, and communication would have made life much easier for the people involved in putting a show together, whether they be musicians, engineers, or venue staff. I don't envisage everyone being able to do every job required. Having some idea of how a show is put together from various viewpoints enables a deeper understanding of the bigger picture and also an appreciation of the problems faced by others.

The initial idea was to provide pointers for artists to improve their shows by understanding the equipment and techniques used by venues and crew in order to put on live productions. This idea was then extended to include an in-depth look at the 'nuts and bolts' involved so that potential engineers and technicians would be able to obtain a good grounding in many areas of live performance. This would also be relevant to artists wishing to further their technical knowledge, either to enable them to put together their own touring support system or so that they are better able to deal with crew and venues in a professional manner. It also provides a system of easy

2 Access All Areas

(a)



(b)



Whether you're here (a) or here (b) the show must go on

communication tools that should be followed by artists, crew, and venues alike. This provides everyone with the correct information needed to perform at an optimum level using widely accepted documentation; forewarned is forearmed as they say.

I've tried to keep it as broadly based as possible. A theater glossary is included to clarify much of the language and terms used that are peculiar to it. Even if you aren't working in theater, you may find the glossary useful as many of the terms are used generally.

Wild child

I first got into this business (like most people) when I had an interest from my school years. I did some acting and musical projects but I was always fascinated by the 'behind the scenes' goings-on and, although I had my heroes, I didn't particularly want to be a rock star. I found myself taking an interest in amplifiers and speakers, which led me into going to a friend's band rehearsals where I started to balance their guitar amps so that they were all audible and not overpowering the drums or vocals. All I usually did was turn them down but this provided a much better sound for everyone and I then became 'sound engineer' for gigs! The out-front sound was just a couple of speakers with an amplifier for the microphone. There wasn't really any mixing to do after I'd balanced them during soundcheck, so I started to look into other things to do during the show.

I then went on the slippery slope of adding 'extras' into the show. This started with a few lights and soon developed to include smoke pellets (you had to light them with a match) and flash bombs (well, baked bean cans with 'flash powder' fired using fuse wire and a big battery). I somehow survived this and progressed to using amplifiers with several channels, which meant you could use more than one microphone. Monitors, in the shape of more speakers, were just added on to the main system but pointing back at the band (feedback city!) and yet more lights and fireworks appeared as time went by.

If you did these things often enough without killing anyone or destroying any venues then eventually you'd get noticed by other bands and end up doing a bit of work for them. At this point I started charging a couple of beers per night, there wasn't too much competition as everyone wanted to be a rock star not a 'roadie'. My apprenticeship

4 *Access All Areas*

started with no knowledge at all but I learned something (and still do) every time I went on a gig.

The long and winding road

These experiences somehow led me to my first professional gig with a band that earned its living from playing and were permanently on tour. The gear, distances, and sound all got much bigger rather quickly. My knowledge of pyrotechnics was welcomed but the size of the flashes and bangs would of course have to increase!



The distances can become much bigger when you get out on the road

I learned such a lot from my years on the road with them because no matter what happened, the motto was 'the show must go on'. There would be weather warnings that you shouldn't travel unless your journey was an emergency and we'd go out. Equipment would break down but we'd still rig something up and do the show. The power in the venue would go off when we switched on but we'd find a way around it. Sometimes the sound-level

meters would cut the stage power as we were too loud, so we'd run leads from the cigarette machine sockets to bypass it. Whatever happened we would always do the show.

I wouldn't suggest for a moment that you do any of those things. It was a long time ago and things were very different then (including the law). It does illustrate that a bit of ingenuity can usually be brought into play when things get a little tough. This industry isn't one where you can easily take a day off or postpone a job until another day, so you have to become a 'Swiss Army Knife' with your skills and personality.



We had to be flexible to get the gear up in the ski lifts to 8000 feet in the Swiss Alps

All around the world

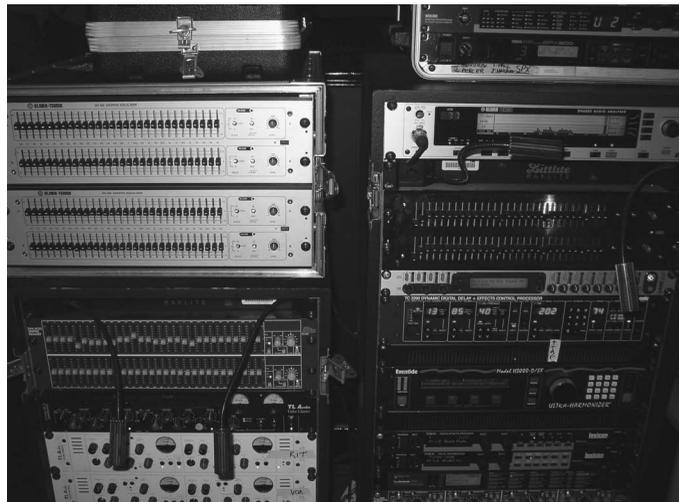
Wherever you are in the world you will find gremlins who creep in and throw a monkey wrench into the finely honed production. Some of the biggest shows have had major hitches, a famous one being 'The Wall' concert where close to half a million people saw Roger Waters perform an impromptu tap dance while a power failure

6 *Access All Areas*

was tracked down and sorted out. All the necessary preparations had been made on this very technological production but a simple power problem caused the stage monitoring system to fail rendering the artists unable to perform. All this gets forgotten though when your gig goes wrong, even if it's in front of only fifty people it still feels like a major disaster but you will learn from the experience and hopefully look back without too much trauma. It all seems much less stressful in the bar after the gig!

The song remains the same

The basics of a show are still pretty much the same, only the technology has really changed. As an example we used to use an effects box called the Roland Chorus/Echo, which had knobs, meters, and a tape loop running constantly to create effects that we used on vocals. Nowadays you can get a box that's a third of the size and contains many more effects generated in a tiny chip and it doesn't even need a tape change. We still strive to achieve the same goal, though, of presenting a great performance and making the experience as good



Better-quality gear means higher expectations from the audience, so we have to strive for a high-quality sound

as we possibly can for the audience. With the advance in technology has come an advance in expectation from audiences. When vinyl records were the norm people were used to some background noise with their music. This meant that they didn't really hear the amplifier hiss on live shows as a bit of background noise was normal. In today's digital world of pristine production CDs the audience has a different mindset to measure with, so a noisy amplifier will be noticed.

Us and them

If you're looking toward working in this industry as a crew member, then you've probably heard that getting a job is more down to who you know than what you know. There is some truth in this although it doesn't mean that there is no way in. Most of the time, an experienced crew is needed to run a show, so recommendation and past history count for a lot. A company putting together a tour will use crew that they know can perform on all levels including being able to do it without falling out and trying to kill each other when times get difficult. It really is a team effort.



Crew should be able to perform on all levels but you might not be expected to do the soundcheck like these guys

8 *Access All Areas*

Another very important aspect is trust. You need to be trustworthy in all respects, particularly if you are working with major artists who need to keep their lives private. One mistake here and you will probably never get another job in the business again. If, however, you are good at your job, a nice person, and are trusted, then your name will more than likely be on the list for the next tour.

Actually getting a gig in the first place will probably mean making contact with lots of potential clients such as bands, solo acts, venues, and PA companies and asking if you can help. Be honest about your abilities and if possible send an update to your contacts occasionally (but don't pester them) with any relevant news to show that you're still interested. Shows often require local crew to load all the gear in, help set it up, and then tear down and load out again after the show has finished. This type of work may not be what you want to do in the long term but it is good start. You'll learn lots about the industry and show that you're willing to work.

I'm often asked what the best qualification for the business is and apart from experience I'd say a driver's license. If you can drive then you will often get a gig over someone who can't and apart from anything else you can



A driving license is quite a useful qualification to have. Do try and keep it clean though

travel to other areas to work and also transport gear if needed. Many small-scale productions use small vehicles and many large-scale productions have vehicles both large and small. If you can drive any of these vehicles then it's another skill that you have to offer most clients. It will also help you get some work driving delivery vans when you have no income between gigs!

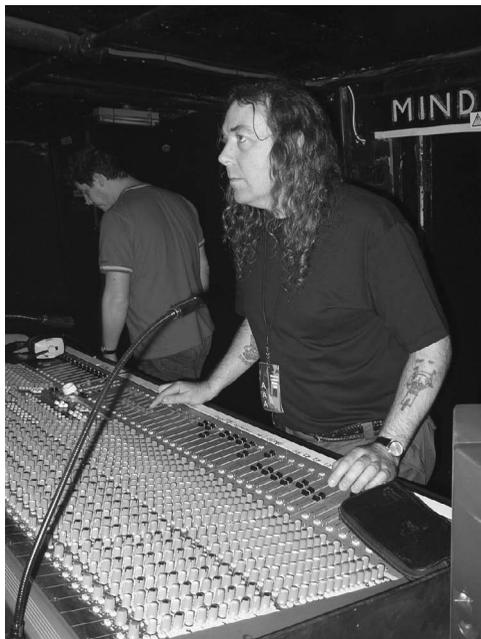
A large number of crew people work on a self-employed, freelance basis, which is the ideal for prospective employers as they don't have to employ you full-time and don't have to commit to all the other things necessary to employ someone 'on the books'. If they did then they would have to pay out a lot of money to keep you even when there are no gigs or tours for you to work on. As far as you're concerned you won't have the security of a regular job and will have to ensure you take care of your own expenses such as taxes, healthcare, pension, and so on but you will be able to work for a range of clients and charge whatever they will pay you. The money from a tour can look very good indeed when compared to some other occupations but bear in mind that you'll probably be working for many more hours without proper breaks, you won't be going home for possibly several weeks at a time and at the end of it you'll usually be unemployed for a while. I won't go into the details of freelancing as it is different in every country but there will be plenty of advice available locally.

For artists reading this book, I have spent quite a few years fronting my own band, so I understand your perspective as well as the one from the crew. The benefit of performing experience does help me when working with bands and artists who aren't too technically minded as I understand what they're trying to achieve. Many crew folk are also musicians and it's not unknown for crew to play a support slot for the main band (I know, I've done it).

For crew folks reading this book, I've worked as sound engineer, monitor engineer, backline technician, stage manager, lighting technician and all the associated jobs like driving and struggling with heavy gear on single gigs and tours in widely varying venues in many countries using some of the best and worst gear available.



I was in a band myself for some time, so I know what it's like up there



Author at work