

The Show Goes On



Working in the Australian Entertainment Industry

An insider's perspective

by **Julius Grafton**

Volume 1



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julius Grafton today heads Julius Events College, Australia's only tertiary education institution specifically founded to provide technical and management training for the entertainment industry. He also publishes CX Magazine, the trade journal for the entertainment technology industry in Australia (www.juliusmedia.com). ENTECH trade show, the peak industry event (www.etf.com.au) was founded and run by Julius for ten years until it was sold to finance the college. Julius has almost 40 years experience working in the industry, he ran away to work with rock bands in the 1970's. He is passionate about the industry, and devotes one day a week as guest lecturer in schools across Australia. Julius is still a practicing live sound engineer, event organizer and lighting designer.

First Published July 2007.

Copyright 2007: Absolute copyright exists in this work in favor of the author. No unauthorized reproduction or transmission by any means is allowable.

SCHOOL COPIES: Schools may photocopy this work in full, and distribute to any enrolled student. No additional authorization is required for this.

INTRODUCTION

The curtain goes up, and the show kicks off with song one or scene one. The audience is excited – being there sure beats watching it on DVD or TV. There's something about a crowd, the anticipation, the certainty that something will transport us away. Our mood will shift.

Getting that show up is the job of my people: that small army of backstage workers, crew and management, who are sometimes typecast and stereotyped. It takes a certain kind of person to work in Entertainment, and that's what this story is all about.

After almost 40 years of show business I am never tired of it. There's too much happening, lots changing, but the principle remains the same: the show must go on. And it will!

I thought I'd seen it all, but the entertainment and events industry is continually changing, and the capacity to be surprised is always there.

AUSTRALIA'S ENTERTAINMENT SCENE

Most people only know what they see. TV and theatre, concerts and nightclubs are the most visible evidence of our entertainment industry. Humans tend to focus on what interests themselves. I must confess I am not really into Opera, so I don't follow that form of the art.

I came up in the touring band scene, with healthy slabs of theatre mixed in. So I am always fairly well connected to the 'pulse' of those art forms.

Way back in the 1970's I did my first corporate theatre gigs. I didn't know Sunbeam made so many electric fry pans, but after a weekend of product launches for them I knew their whole catalogue. The managing director did a big reveal through a wall of fireworks. My job was to make sure he survived.

I started to notice how often my colleagues were booked into the Hilton Ballroom or the Regent Hotel Ballroom for what looked to me like obscure company functions. After another long weekend spent spotlighting hair models at a Schwarzkopf function, I realised there was a lot of business serving companies who needed to make a statement. That was the 1970's.

I went on tour with different bands and performers and often we were booked onto a corporate show, usually at the end of conference dinner. The act would be paid well, fed and watered, and we would meet up with the technical crew assigned to the event. They were using the best and latest equipment, accommodated in five star hotels, and no where near as road fatigued as we were. The show was always great – corporate delegates were there for a good time, and they had one.

It's no surprise that today the corporate gig accounts for the lion's share of revenue in the entertainment biz. Simple evidence of this is that Staging Connections Group

Limited, the largest provider of event technical services in Australia, employs 1,100 people in seven countries – mainly Australia. They have grown their business internationally, using good old Australian ingenuity.

In my time I've done a lot of diverse work – I really enjoy fashion parades, and big parties. I did the annual Art Gallery of NSW Christmas Party for a slab of time in the 1970's. That taught me about high society and how to relate to a brief using sensitivity. I had to listen to what was being asked of me!

The other end of the spectrum is the multicultural event, where a concert or festival is promoted direct to an ethnic group via their own media. I was always surprised at the scale and intensity of a lot of these, and I provided technical services to many of them. That taught me about the art of communication at an entirely different level, sometimes involving sign language and visual charades.

Live work doesn't end with theatre, corporate, festivals, concerts and tours. There is the fixed installation market, and there are plenty of clubs and venues around the country where people work. Most symbolic of these is the Sydney Opera House.

Most governments support the creative arts in their communities, and build tax payer funded theatres, performing arts centres and sporting venues. All of these need technical services.

Finally, the more mundane but technically tricky end of the market is the public venue, such as installations in airports, at sporting grounds, and in places such as Parliament House. 'The House' in Canberra supports a hard working team of audio visual and audio specialists, who ensure that the words and pictures go where they are needed, and that they are understood. Well, they make sure everything is visible and audible – no technician anywhere can make some of our politicians easier to understand!

CHOOSING A JOB

One of the best things about Australia is that because we are more than one FedEx day away from anywhere in the North World, we need to be versatile. By virtue of isolation we've become adept at many things – not just because international help is more than a day away, but also because we've not been as exposed to many international work practices.

On the West End or Broadway there are rightly a small army of specialists who'll never do anything other than operate a console or fly rigging lines. Way down here in Australia we have virtually no 'dedicated' specialists; rather we all have learned multiple skills. Better still, we tend to enjoy doing varied tasks.

At my college we sometimes meet people who are obsessed with one skill set, like mixing on a Digico console, or programming moving lights on a Jands Vista. Some students come in with very specific dreams of tour managing a certain rock band, or becoming a successful promoter.

Live your passion! Don't let anyone tell you that you're dreaming, or that you'll never get there! If you are an upcoming virtuoso guitarist, then keep on practicing. There is a fantastic creative release in singing, playing, drawing, writing, dancing, designing, and building things. Don't ever stop, and don't forget how good you've felt when whatever you've done has worked out or moved people.

I'm a practical person, so I tend to be pragmatic and I tell my college students that they will one day nail their passion, but that along the way they'll need to pay their dues to play the blues.

It's interesting how your career develops. Some of my students are in places they never imagined. The class of 2006 is an example: Susi is working for an events company in London. Nathan has set up his own corporate AV business, and is hiring equipment and services to companies. Steve is in Singapore as this is written, working on Singapore National Day as a projection technician. Of all my graduates in 2006, I don't know of one who hasn't got a job somewhere in the entertainment and events industry – and if they didn't, they know they can call me.

I'm proud to say that I've got former students employed all over the world, and many of them are achieving dreams, once they've proved themselves.

WHAT ARE THE JOBS LIKE?

Everything in entertainment is characterised by an immovable deadline, namely that the curtain goes up and the show goes on. This makes us unlike most other industries. Sure an airline must launch a flight at a given time, but they also have the ability to build elasticity into their schedules. Their clients are captive at the gate and the bags are checked in, so they can manage a delay. But if our show doesn't go on, we have an auditorium full of people who will rightly get very upset.

There's nothing like the adrenaline rush that comes with running late – and there's seldom anything better than the feeling of satisfaction when we finish a show and it all goes to plan. But it takes nerves of steel to handle the unpredictable things that threaten our schedules.

There are a few pre-requisites to working in entertainment.

Firstly you need energy; you need to be able to manage your own stamina and performance across the working day and the working week. That means not peaking early, or burning out. The industry does feature long hours, and learning to manage these is no different to any other form of shift work. Your general mobility is an issue, there certainly are people less able or with some disability – if that's you, then it is a barrier and a challenge but not necessarily a dead stop.

Next thing on your list of must-haves is the ability to remain calm under pressure. Perhaps I should say the ability to *learn to be calm* under pressure! All of us have triggers and I am the first to admit that I have panicked and run around like a crazy

fool in the past. One absolute classic was when my new sound system totally went berserk and started fizzing and crackling at 110dB during the opening number at a product launch in 1984. I must admit, I ran out the fire exit. In my defence, I wasn't deserting my post as I wasn't actually doing anything at the time. I was just panicking! I ran all the way down the street and back in the front door of the venue, to arrive at the top of the stairs all breathless and see my crew sort the problem. Which was a loose power plug on the band's keyboard – not our department, but it messed everything up nonetheless. Billy Idol suffered the same fate at the footie Grand Final a few years ago – keyboard cable fritzed, earth leakage breaker trips, PA stops.

The final thing you need is related to the previous one, and that is some ability to communicate with your fellow humans. There are plenty of grunting, mono syllabic and nerd like specialists in the biz, but they have generally paid their dues. It's hard to get ahead if you can't communicate.

SPECIALISATION – AND GIRLS

While you may be fixated on a specialisation, it is not necessarily going to work out that way. Of all the students I meet in my college, about one third are fixated on a certain niche of the industry, and of them almost all end up changing their perspectives after gaining experience through college study or work.

It's funny, but the majority don't really know what they want to do, they just know they want to work in entertainment, because they've been bitten by the bug or because they have acting or music in their blood. The good thing is, I think it's better to have an open mind and to take things as they come.

There are some specialty areas that are not a natural fit for some people. An events manager needs to be a solid communicator, negotiator, and really good at managing processes. A stage manager needs to be VERY calm under pressure and fast to process what is happening and then issue concise cues and instructions FAST.

The world of music management is not for the faint hearted, nor is that of the promoter. Those jobs are really entrepreneurial and you need to understand the fundamentals of business in general beforehand.

Of course there is an army of assistants working backstage – putting wireless microphone packs onto performers, operating follow-spots (not suitable if you freak out at heights), rigging lights and sound, working at front of house in the venue, liaising with clients or delegates at a conference, doing audio at a press conference, operating a camera, setting up lights outside the toilets at an outdoor festival ... really, the list goes on.

In very recent times there's been a breakdown in the stereotype that men do technical roles and women are events managers. I think there's a reverse discrimination factor at work now where women who can do technical work are getting employed in preference to guys, and while the girls are still in the minority I think this is a positive

move! Many people in management now say that a girl can do virtually any role, so there you are – consider that encouragement!

Our industry has people who prefer to work in an office and go home at night – and our industry has people with no fixed address who just love the transient lifestyle. I've done it all, and I've done it around the clock and around the world. These days I mainly like to go home to the family and have (most) weekends off – but you'll still find me at strange hours behind an audio console, doing what I love best. Helping to make great music!

WHERE IS THE WORK? NOT!

One of the great myths of our time is that you can do a college course and get a job in a recording studio. I'm continually amazed to see this line of deception advertised everywhere – all over the world. It's a dream, and not like the dreams I've talked about earlier.

Think about it – there are no jobs advertised anywhere in recording studios. Set up an alert on Seek.com. This is because there are not many recording studios out there, most people can, and do, record onto their PC using Garage Band, Pro Tools or Cubase. Those studios that do exist have enough engineers, believe me.

The only line of work within a recording studio is for those who choose to open their own, and then you'll be hard pressed to generate more than \$50 an hour, for an expensive lump of real estate with heaps of extra sound treatment, air conditioning, and a lot of expensive equipment.

The worst thing is that those studio engineering courses don't give you the broad bunch of skills you need to do anything else – you just learn about studio audio. Not live audio, where there are variable acoustics and where every show and every venue are different. Not about plug and patch and trouble shoot. Just about sitting in a dark room where everything is already patched and the acoustic is fixed.

Still worse yet, a lot of those courses don't bother with business skills, safety, or anything much at all. Just recording. I can't think of anything more boring, but they rope in THOUSANDS of students every year. There's something about the allure of a big control room, maybe all those little lights mesmerise people?

Be careful of colleges who talk about now adding on the stuff you need, because if they are primarily teaching recording, then you'll just get the other subjects bolted on as an afterthought.

We do have a recording studio, and it's a fine one. We use it as part of a whole suite of training that includes camera work, editing video, lighting, live sound, business and management skills.

It's no secret; the starting place for virtually all my college students is corporate theatre, events, or working for a production company. Start working, get experience, and very specifically get contacts.

FAME - AND FORTUNE AS WELL!

Sometimes I'm asked the million dollar question: "how much money can I make in the entertainment industry"? The answer is, as much or as little as possible, because it will depend whether you're entrepreneurial or just there to be excellent and be paid for it.

I have a very good friend who started a sound and lighting company in 1990. I was actually a partner at the start, but I sold out to start my magazine business. My friend now owns six industrial buildings around his sound and lighting company. In the Sydney property market that equals fantastic success in just 16 years. I tip my hat to the guy, and you'd never know he is so successful, because he is modest about it.

In my case I've tended to reinvest everything to get where I am today, but I could have settled into any one of my earlier businesses and taken the cash out every year.

There are people working freelance who endure feast and famine, and then there's people working freelance who end up forming a collective to share the work around because they get offered far too much of it.

General expectations: a trainee or junior will earn very little, but should be prepared to make that sacrifice for the first year or so. Someone with some experience, or who has a senior qualification like a Diploma, should start at about \$18 plus per hour and expect to earn at least \$35k in the first year.

The army of freelance crew out there are charging anything from \$25 per hour to \$65, depending on who they are, what they do, and what the work is about.

There aren't many corporate jets in the entertainment biz, at least not for those who work backstage – but consider this: it's a surprisingly stable industry. What other technology based industry holds people for decades? Certainly not the I.T. industry where people can get retrenched en-masse on Friday, and find themselves with obsolete skills on Monday.

Entertainment – it's like the Hotel California: "*you can check out, but you can never leave*" (with apologies to The Eagles!)

WHAT NOT TO DO

Don't ever, ever act unprofessionally back stage. That will stereotype you as – unprofessional. The first and most common mistake new people make is to go totally ga - ga when they see a star or celebrity. Especially bad: asking for an autograph.

Think about it – professional entertainers are there to work, and backstage is their sanctuary from the rest of the world, where everyone wants a slice of them. I personally think it would be simply dreadful to be famous! I must confess that I do like to travel in style these days and I've sat in the same part of the airplane as the rich and famous, and they really don't get a break.

If you are good at your job, chances are you'll be invited to the after show/ after tour party (that means: after the work is actually finished!) and the stars will be there. You can take your significant other. That's an OK place to get an autograph and photo, but *wait for everyone else to ask first!*

There are some, not many, performers who are off the planet. Look at www.thesmokinggun.com for some classic demands of those more 'out there' performers.

Old saying: never meet your idols. When you do, you'll discover a mortal human with failings and foibles that you didn't expect. There's another analogy: when you reach the top, you look out over the horizon and often discover there's nothing there!

Give them space, show respect, and do your job quietly and professionally. Be focussed, not distracted. It's also a good idea to behave yourself. Here's a story from a friend of mine, Australia's greatest sound engineer Bruce Jackson.

Bruce was hired by Elvis Presley to do sound for The King. In the very early days this involved sitting side of stage, and Elvis' girl Ginger often sat next to Bruce. One night before a show in Vegas, one of the Memphis Mafia came out to Bruce and grunted that '*da boss want's to see ya*'. Bruce went straight down to the dressing room, and there is Elvis looking grim with a couple of goons either side of him.

"Bruce, Ginger tells me ya bin putting yer hand on her leg", Elvis muttered out of the side of his mouth. Before Bruce can collapse in shock (because it never happened) Elvis breaks into laughter, followed by the goons – who were disappointed that it wasn't true. They were looking forward to smacking Bruce around, for The King.

These days Bruce lives in Sydney and does sound for Barbra Streisand around the world, who is the most exacting and prestigious singer on the planet. He has the 'right stuff', and when you meet him you can see why – he is unassuming, confident, personable, intelligent and very professional. A poster boy for our art and country!

THE DARK SIDE OF ENTERTAINMENT

Drugs and alcohol. These are vices that are not exclusive to show business; plenty of people in plenty of places do them. It just happens that some performers abuse them. There was a time in the 1980's when I thought I was the only guy NOT doing white powder, pills or smoking dope. I'm no saint – I do like a drink, but I am blessed with a metabolism that isn't given to addictions. If I drink too much, I just fall asleep - with a smile on my face!

There was a very necessary correction phase where right through the 1990's many of those caught up in addictions were forced out of the industry or into rehab, and I'm proud to say that today you can expect close to zero occurrences where people abuse drugs or drink on the job. In the 1970's and the 1980's, a lot of people died or collapsed. And today there are now people dropping dead every week from hardened arteries in their 50's – because they went overboard a decade or two ago.

Some entertainers are still fairly open about their problems, and the stuff is around – but it is not tolerated on the job. There are pockets of drug abuse and dealing in the nightclub and DJ industry, and I'm here to tell you it is simply disgusting to hear of it.

For sure you'll see Prima Donna behaviour. Elton John, God bless him, confesses that he spent most of the 1980's consumed in a blizzard of cocaine, to the point where he called one hapless front desk clerk at a hotel and demanded they turn down the wind outside. At least he is laughing about it now – there are some occasional 'stars' who we all know are a total pain. One of them toured Sydney a few years ago, and I was told '*don't look at them during soundcheck*', and that they required a brand new toilet seat, still wrapped in plastic, be installed in the dressing room.

If you've ever seen the old movie 'Spinal Tap' then you'll have had a good laugh. Get it and admire the Marshall amp that goes to 11, plus the brown M & M's.....

Other than that, entertainment is like any industry – there are unscrupulous employers (in the minority), there are wheeler dealers who make and break promises. But the vast majority of people working backstage in entertainment today are fun people who are serious about their work.

CONCLUSION

These days I'm proud to admit I am an old roadie, albeit one with qualifications obtained later in life. And no tattoos. The old cliché of the roadie really doesn't apply anymore, but I would not have wanted one of my five daughters to marry one!

These days, everyone in entertainment is striving for excellence, in an environment where audiences are really demanding a lot. When you go to a show you expect the lights to illuminate the act, the sound to be fat and clear, and big video. These things were not taken for granted a few short years ago.

Whatever you do with your life, make it count! Thanks for reading.

Julius Grafton, Sydney 2007

Email me: julius@juliusmedia.com

