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Accessing Hollywood Live

by Jacob Lane

On the roof of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, Frank Duca, senior audio engineer for *Access Hollywood Live*, stands behind his Yamaha digital mixer, making last-minute adjustments. He cups his hand over the LED-embedded keys: A few inconveniently small umbrellas provide the only shade, and the glare of the sun makes it difficult to tell if the lights on the console are on or off. (A tent would be ideal, but it gets windy up on the roof, and anything larger than an umbrella is in danger of being blown off the building and onto the street below.) A computer monitor on a nearby table displays a list of cues for scene changes and sound bites: the "rundown". The time on the monitor reads 7:59. West Coast time.



Meanwhile, ten yards in front of the audio station, cameras and cinema lights surround a table where Billy Bush, anchor of *Access Hollywood Live*, is preparing for the live broadcast. He glances periodically at a large monitor positioned behind the cameras which is receiving a live video feed from Burbank, California.

The director is clearly audible through a speaker to the far left of Frank's console as she begins to count down from thirty. Through the other speakers positioned around the mixing console, I can hear both Billy's voice and the voice of his Burbank correspondent, Kit Hoover. When the countdown reaches one, the crew members in attendance clap clearly and evenly. Their applause is heard instantaneously in Burbank and in every television tuned in to the show.

Live from New York...and Burbank

Frank Duca has been mixing *Access Hollywood Live* since it premiered two years ago. The show is usually shot entirely in Burbank, but today's episode is bi-costal. Frank's task is to coordinate his mix with the mix in Burbank, effectively allowing the two hosts to have a natural, live conversation despite being on opposite sides of the country. At the start of the shoot, Frank establishes two dial-up remote IFB feeds with the studio in Burbank. The IFB feeds are piped through his mixing console out to wireless IFB receivers given to the talent and guests, enabling them to listen and respond naturally to Burbank. Frank must continuously monitor and adjust these channels while paying

simultaneous attention to the mix. Meanwhile, the talent's mics are sending audio to the mixer by way of a bank of Lectro wireless transmitters and receivers used in conjunction with antenna combiners and shark fin antennae. Frank mixes the audio and sends it back to Burbank embedded in the camera's video feed. Assuming master control doesn't decide to censor something before it airs, the audio which Frank mixes in New York can be heard on television as it is being mixed; live.

The signal path used for *Access Hollywood Live* is fairly standard for a show in which correspondents have to communicate instantaneously with a host at some different location. What makes Frank's setup unique is that there is no studio. Instead of a dedicated room where dedicated audio sources are mixed and sent out to be broadcast, he has condensed all of the components of a studio into a three-foot tall rack, which sits only feet away from the talent. While this hybrid approach, which falls somewhere in between studio and location mixing, is rarely seen on entertainment shows like *Access Hollywood*, it is a setup often used in hard news scenarios. "We're using field techniques," Frank explains. "This would be a normal live shot to add into *The Today Show* or *Nightly News* or whatever, but instead we're doing a whole show and setting it up sometimes in as little as an hour before airtime."

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This setup allows Frank to be uniquely mobile and flexible. He chooses gear based on the principle of "easy setup and easy breakdown" (though audio quality is just as important). His gear allows him to travel around the world with the show, using essentially the same equipment in each new location. Though Frank might spend days conceiving and planning the sound design for a show, the actual gear doesn't have to be assembled until the last minute. "I just built all of this right now," Frank indicates his mixing table, "but the actual components are the same components that we used in London."

Every Day a Different Problem

Besides allowing Frank to take a studio's worth of gear wherever he needs to be, this hybrid studio/location model allows Frank to take an active and immediate role in troubleshooting whatever problems arise on set. He made it clear that, while he likes working with his crossover setup, "I don't like having my heart bounce out of my chest when, you know, when there's issues." And there are always issues.

The show always works one way or another. "That's what we do."

In a stagnant studio environment, it is unlikely that some unforeseen error would threaten the broadcast. With Frank's mobile mixing station, "Every day you're in a different spot. Every day could be a different problem." The day before I visited the set of *Access Hollywood*, it had rained, and Frank was forced to move his station inside. With no video feed to see what was going on outside, he had no choice but to mix

the show blind, relying on talent and IFB audio, and an assistant, to tell him what was happening on set. He's frequently put into situations where he has to improvise a solution, sometimes in the middle of a broadcast, and yet Frank reminds me that, despite the inevitable technical glitches, the show always works one way or another. "That's what we do."

I ask him what a truly "crazy" show would be. His answer: "Being downstairs on the street with a crowd screaming and yelling." While the sterile, disciplined applause of the crew is relatively easy to mix, a live crowd situation requires precise and thoughtful sound design. The ambient crowd mic will often send a much stronger signal than the talent mics, and that signal will have a much higher dynamic range. Frank compresses the audio across the board, preventing the crowd mic's level from fluctuating rapidly and uncontrollably. He then raises the talent mics above the crowd noise, balancing the two feeds so that the live crowd is present in the mix, but doesn't distract from the talent.

Mic Control

Frank's choice of how to mic the talent is also an important factor when it comes to dealing with the chaos of a live crowd. For example, some directional lavaliers are effective at cutting out crowd noise, but require the talent to face them at all times. If the talent turns their head away from a directional lav, they may move away from the mic's pick-up pattern, and the mic will cut them out as well as the crowd. For the royal wedding in London, Frank used a DPA mic. Taped to the cheek of the talent, this lav effectively cuts out all crowd noise while allowing the talent free range of motion. Ironically, the DPA can be too effective at isolating the talent. Frank doesn't use them unless absolutely necessary, since they make the crowd seem unnaturally quiet. His preferred lavalier for live on-location shows is the Sennheiser MKE2. "It's an omni, but it's a tighter pattern." Omnidirectional lavs with a tight pattern have the advantage of cutting out some of the crowd noise, but still allow the talent to turn their head without dropping out of the mix.

These are all decisions which Frank has to make on the fly. With a live show, the crew has to be prepared to improvise and solve problems as they arise. The live broadcast is tense, but once the show ends, the crew seems to relax a little. Frank assures me that, despite the chaos and the suspense inherent in live broadcasts, "Everyone here at *Access* is very easygoing, from talent to producers." A couple more guests come out to the roof, where the crew tapes their segments off the air. These "post-tapes" will be saved for broadcast during a later show. I ask Frank to talk about how a post-tape changes his approach to his work. "If something goes wrong, you get to do it again." He laughs. "That's it."

The Sound of the Future



Frank Duca and A2 Chris McKeivitt on set.

Ever since *Access Hollywood* made the transition to HD, the show's producers have asked Frank to select new equipment for the sound department as it is needed. A large part of this privilege involves weighing cost against convenience, since the producers are looking for him to recommend gear that is both current and cost-efficient. When the producers finally decided that it was worth buying a new mixer, Frank's first choice was a Yamaha DM1000, a digital model. Why? For one thing, digital mixers allow the user to apply a wide range of patches, including any external elements or any of an assortment of internal effects, to any input/output. The flexible software used by the DM1000 saves space on Frank's mobile studio by providing viable alternatives to external synthesizers and effects.

More importantly for chaotic live shows like *Access*, "The digital mixer will allow you to save 'scenes' with a press of a button, to bring up post-fader sends, pre-fader sends... reverb returns..." The ability to switch between pre-set "scenes" speeds up transitions between console configurations. Frank gave me an example of how he uses the DM1000's "scenes" function. When Jeff Bridges was scheduled to visit the show, Frank had been warned that he might want to play his guitar. Frank created a new scene, in which he applied reverb to two input channels, and saved the scene so that, if Bridges decided to play on the

day, Frank wouldn't be left frantically adjusting levels and applying effects as the show went live. At the start of Duca's 16-year career, it was impossible to be this prepared for sudden changes in a live broadcast. "I chose to move into the digital world because I want to be ahead of the curve. I don't want to be behind it."

Frank Duca is acutely aware of the need to stay on the bleeding edge of his field, now more than ever. Today, producers are doing all they can to trim the fat from their productions. Production teams now have to make due with as few crew members as possible, and with the bare minimum of equipment. This recent frugality within the film industry factored in to the decision to run *Access Hollywood Live* from Frank's mobile studio setup. "The show itself saves money by not having to use one of the control rooms."

"Being more conservative seems to be the consensus across the board, regardless of where you are," Frank says. "Quality, you know, doesn't necessarily mean quality anymore." He elaborates, "With the economy, and with the way television's going and technology, the umbrella over everything is: 'Try and get it done cheaper with less people quicker' Now it seems like the quality can suffer a little bit if we're still getting on the air, if we're going to save some money." Yet Frank doesn't see this conservative trend as a tragedy. Rather, it is a reality of the industry today. Frank even suggests that economic restrictions might be a force for positive change within the industry. Competition forces people like himself to work harder and longer in order to survive, and while this might cast "a bad shadow on the work force in general... the truth is that some of the best people, technically-wise and creatively, are working in television."

In order to remain employed in such a challenging economic climate, you have to be innovative, flexible, and wholly committed to your work. "You adapt and wear a couple of different hats," he says matter-of-factly. A production company today isn't going to hire two people for two jobs when they can hire one person to do both. If you are too specialized, "either you may not work that much or you may be in a situation where you're over your head." Frank tells me how frustrating it is to see inexperienced sound personnel being asked by producers to perform complicated tasks, especially given the speed at which the audio world is changing from a technical perspective.

"All the audio needs for a live show: You need guys that have done that before," he says. "That's what we need out here doing this, because it's live and it's quick and you've got to be able to just make decisions to get something done."

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Frank respects professionals, and is eager to pay homage to the great audio mixers (and mentors) with whom he has had the opportunity to work. He has learned a variety of live sound techniques through his work on shows like *SNL* and *The Today Show*. It is this breadth of experience that allows him to be as flexible on set as he needs to be. On *Access Hollywood Live*, Frank not only mixes the show, but: "I'm also dialing the communications. I'm also making sure that the traffic control is going to where it's supposed to go... what feeds are going where..." And it's not just Frank. Everyone on the show "wears a couple of different hats." On most shoots, an A2 is primarily in charge of micing the talent and guests, but Frank's A2 is also responsible for communications setup and rundown changes. Everyone, including the sound department, is on location, ready to multitask in order to get live audio from New York to Burbank no matter what.

During a commercial break, a woman comes out to the roof, fretting about an audio channel which has apparently been disconnected in the middle of the shoot. She comes over the Frank at his table and asks him to solve the problem, but he can't find anything wrong with his set up. Finally, after a minute or so, someone realizes that one of the cameras has been turned off. Since the audio mix is embedded in the video feed which gets sent to Burbank, shutting down the camera caused a break in the signal path. Later in the shoot, Frank tells me, "This wasn't even a crazy day."

While some of the equipment is owned by the studio, Frank rents wireless and wireless IFB systems and antennae specifically for each shoot. "I tell [Gotham] I need RFs that are going to be specific frequencies because they only give us so many frequencies we can use out here... I need it to fit in a certain rack and I tell them, 'This is what I have to work with,' and they help me." Every day, Frank has to cope with more than a little chaos, and with the industry favoring efficiency and economy over all else, there's little room for error in his work. "Having guys like Peter and Jim, having a good

relationship with them and everyone else who works [at Gotham] makes a big difference in any climate, but especially in this one where you're being asked to do more, you're being asked to do it with not a lot of time to really think about the setup and how you're going to get it done..." I ask Frank to discuss a specific instance in which Gotham was forced to keep up with Frank's hectic and unpredictable work. "We were taking this show to London, and I was trying out a bunch of different microphones outside. One was too loud, one was too soft, one was better on the, you know, the talent, one was not good for the crowd. We decided on the Sennheiser MKE2 capsules, and they didn't have them there particularly, but when they knew I needed X amount of them they made sure they got them in for me within a day or two, changed the connections immediately, and got them to me for me to leave for London in like three days. And every time I have an issue with any type of gear, they're always available." He adds, "I'm very grateful to have them on, you know, on my side in whatever I do, here or elsewhere."

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