



Lucy Mitchell

Lucy Mitchell, Sound Editor, has a reputation for being one of the most versatile freelancers with a resume including titles such as computer game *Guitar Hero Live!*, *Eastenders*, *The Voice UK*, *Top Gear*, and *Death In Paradise*. Here she talks about her career and working remotely.

Mitchell started her early career as a cable basher (running behind the cameras holding the cables and making sure no-one trips up) for the Brits and BAFTAs, and did multiple work experience placements in post houses and sound studios in London until she took a permanent job at

Envy Post Production. “I started as a runner. I had zero training, no technical degree, and very little hands on experience except for the multiple work experience placements I had done. In fact, I was the only one in the ‘kitchen’ who didn’t have some sort of relevant degree! Everyone had either audio production, music production, film production bit I have a classical music degree! That was admittedly rather intimidating.”

“What I specifically liked about Envy was the fact that it was a large full post production house, not just audio only. Yes if I had worked at a smaller

company, or an audio only company, I may have moved up through the ranks quicker. But for me, I was grateful to learn as much about the industry as a whole from the people I worked with.

I have found that understanding the other roles in post production and of those you need to work with, makes communication a lot easier and will benefit you in the long term. I knew how the offline, online and grading departments worked and knew how to ask for what I actually needed!"

EastEnders was her first big freelance gig and she was contacted for an interview out of the blue. "I worked there for 6 months as their sole sound editor, and then have been freelancing on and off since, both editing and mixing. I love working there as the team up at Elstree are so nice, and it's nice to feel part of a community again. Something I have missed since leaving Envy and mostly working from home. Working on a soap is somewhere between documentaries and dramas in terms of times scales and what is expected creativity wise. I loved being able to build scenes from scratch and learnt a lot, sound effects wise while I was there."

Mitchell later found herself being contacted by American Director Christian Johanssen based in LA for the feature drama called Rising Free that ended up being shown in 500 cinemas across America. "They had a good enough budget for me to spend a significant amount of time on it, and to dry hire a dubbing theatre for my final 5.1 surround mix which was refreshing.

The film is a drama set in the mid 1800's, so of course has plenty of horses and guns, which was fun. I enjoyed the creative freedom I was given by Christian - he wanted the sound to be epic, so I really pushed the music (beautifully scored by Abel Hancock) where there was no dialogue, and spread the score a lot more evenly between the 5 speakers than I usually would in order to fully immerse the viewer. He had some specific ideas about the flashback scenes, so I got to do some creative sound design for these."

Working to time and budget constraints, she sometimes finds production or picture editing gets delayed. "Sometimes our audio deadline

stays the same so you feel rushed to get things done quicker. Sound often is the last thing productions think about, so there's either less money left for audio post than expected, or in the production stage they spend extra money elsewhere, so the first thing to go is a boom op, or

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a production sound mixer. 'Our runner can hold the boom' belittles the skill of the boom op/1st AS, and also creates MORE work for us in post. I've even had stories of productions ditching professional location sound teams completely, and then not even wearing headphones to monitor what is being recorded! The more time we have to spend "fixing" badly recorded audio, the less time we can spend making it sound good."

In her studio, LJ Studios, Mitchell hosts the Focusrite Scarlet 18i20 Audio Interface, Avid Artist Mix, Avid Dock, 46inch HD TV for Video Playback, PSI A17 Speakers (stereo) Genelec 8010 Speakers (stereo), 4 x Beyerdynamic DT 770 Headphones (Presonus H4 Headphone Splitter), Vanguard V13 Mic, Sennheiser 416 Mic, (AKG D660 S Mic, Audio Technica AT2020, Zoom H1 Handheld recorder), Axiom 65 Midi Controller, Korg Kronos 2 88 key Music Workstation and the Nord Stage 1. "I couldn't physically do my job without like speakers etc, but I also really love the Vanguard V13 Microphone. I've been doing a lot of voice over work with a local artist recently and it is good alternative to the U87, plus it looks so good! For the type of work that I do, "in the box", it's more about which plugins I couldn't live without and for me they are iZotope RX7 Advanced, Sound Radix Auto-Align Post, and Waves Q10."



“Going freelance was a big risk for me. I was a senior sound editor at one of the best post houses in the country working on really high profile shows so it seemed crazy to some to step out into the big bad world of freelancing with zero contacts, and to try to switch genres no less! I took the plunge whilst in the middle of a 6 month mid-career Mentor Scheme with Women in Film and Television and that helped me a lot. My

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mentor Helen Alexander (at the time, Director of Operations at Warner Brothers De Lane Lea) was fantastic; the CV workshops, and other seminars and workshops were great (Nicola Lees, who ran the scheme, pushed you hard but you loved her for it when it was all over!) and the camaraderie developed with the other Mentees are all invaluable. Even now, 5 years on, us Mentees chat and meet up, helping each other with as much career advice and contacts as we can.”

Since building LJ Studios, Mitchell has been working remotely for some time so when the pandemic hit she was already ahead of the game “Admittedly I haven’t had a huge amount of work during the pandemic but 2 of the jobs I’ve done have been completely different because of the pandemic. One of the jobs that stands out as being completely different due to the pandemic and that was ADR Supervisor for the swear track of a recent feature drama. This was when some studios were starting to open up, so the recording engineer, artists and one of the producers were at the studio in soho, and another producer and I were both at our own homes.

The producers were happy for me to have eyes on the artist and direct through zoom, but of course when it comes to ADR, even if you are changing the script, sync is key so I needed to see their ADR alongside the picture. It just so

happens that I had purchased Source Connect a year previously so the engineer so we opted to use a combination of SC and zoom. We synced up our protocols sessions with me chasing his time code which meant I could hear the ADR lines in sync with the picture on my timeline. I also recorded the audio my end - not to deliver, but so I could see if any lines that seemed borderline sync wise could be edited to work.”

With budgets being driven down even more we asked her how can we ensure it’s not a race to the bottom? “Budgets have always been a huge topic of contention. Audio post production is often the last thing producers think about and therefore they have run out of money by the time they get to us. With the pandemic, budgets are likely to be smaller for a while, however our quality of work as engineers has not diminished and therefore we should, still have the same day rates as pre-pandemic.

Unfortunately, more sound engineers will be fighting for each job, (and likely fewer jobs) for a while, so there is a worry that people will undercut you to get that job more than ever. From being part of sound Facebook groups, I have noticed that production sound people are much better at sticking to their guns, not undercutting each other and turning down jobs/calling clients out when they offer low rates.

I think production companies know that post engineers are more likely to budge on their rates, and take advantage of that. I still get producers contacting me through my website (so obviously have seen my credits and experience) and offer me work for peanuts. Sometimes even just offering the promise of future work or the famous EXPOSURE. It’s actually insulting!”

Rough Assembly, a relatively new post production side to BECTU, have been working hard at putting together post production sound rates cards, (something that did not exist in any capacity in the UK, despite existing for production sound and picture editing) and more recently have been putting together template contracts for people to use with further working conditions, not just pay. “Hopefully this will help people not only realise what they themselves are

worth, but encourage production companies not to undermine our worth. Maybe it will embarrass them into paying proper rates?! It is certainly going to be difficult over the next year or so to stick to our guns because so many of us have had little to no work since March and would hate to turn down work because of rates. But if we all put our feet down, production companies will have no choice but to pay us fairly.”

“Coronavirus has turned this industry (and many others) upside down. Many have had to adjust their working style dramatically, and step out of their comfort zones on occasion to get the job done. Seven months on and people have found efficient ways to work remotely and things are starting to look brighter.

Of course there are many jobs that simply need to be done in person, like ADR (especially crowds) but it is good to know that there are now ways to do these remotely (albeit at a lower standard in most cases) should we absolutely have to. As with many industries, companies and clients are realising how much can be done remotely and I expect to see this continuing in some shape or form regardless of whether Covid “goes away” or not.

Online reviews, for example, don’t just have to be “send a QT and type up/call me with time codes to fix”. People have developed excellent methods for collaborative real-time reviews and I hope to use these myself if clients cannot come to me. Producers have seen top quality work from people working in their new “home Studios”, so for smaller budget telly they may not see the need to hire a Soho facility. Freelance sound editors have worked from home on most jobs for a long time, but perhaps some facilities with in-house editors may try to cut their costs and have their editors work at home.

Because of Covid redundancies, big facilities may not re-build their in-house teams for cost reasons, especially in the first few years. Depending on how much work they get through their doors, it may be cheaper for them to hire freelancers for most of their work (especially editing) than to pay staff members a full salary who may often have nothing to do. This is

all speculation of course, but with months of missed income, furloughing and redundancies, I wouldn’t be surprised if this were the case. On a selfish note, I’m hoping LJ Studios will be seen as a viable alternative to Soho for mixing, voice over and Foley recording and reviewing with production companies inevitably having less money to spend off the back of lockdown.”

“The next 5 years will certainly be interesting. Every man and his dog will be fighting for every job, and I think it will take a very long time for us all to be working at full capacity compared

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to previous years. I don’t imagine my 2021 will look anything like my 2019 and that is a shame. I know some freelancers have struggled and may never return to the industry because of the financial difficulties they have faced. Some people have had to move away from London, but hopefully this may push work out to quieter areas of the county for post production. We are all good at our jobs - we shouldn’t have to travel to a studio in town to prove that.

On a more positive note, I think a lot of people have enjoyed the quiet time, appreciated spending time with their families, and seen what a positive impact that has had on their mental wellbeing. As a freelancer this has always been important to me, so now that clients have experienced first hand the benefits of flexible working (maybe eating dinner with their family, putting the kids to bed, taking the dog for a walk) hopefully this will continue and working in post could become a little less stressful!”

www.LJstudios.co.uk



behind the glass

Editor: Deborah Skeldon

Editorial and Advertising opportunities contact - debs@behindtheglass.uk

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