

A Quick Chat with John J. Volanski

Q: Tell us a little about yourself.

A: I am originally from North East Ohio. I moved to Southern California after I graduated from college and began working in the Aerospace and Defense industries. On the side, I began pursuing my interest in music and audio recording (now that I had some money to fund those efforts). I eventually began to amass the equipment and the expertise to establish a home recording studio. I had taken piano lessons as a child, so I started buying various keyboard instruments as my instrument of choice. Recording my friends and myself became a hobby that I enjoyed. Other hobbies that I enjoy are 2-man sand volleyball, 6-man competitive indoor volleyball, martial arts, snow skiing, mountain biking, and rollerblading. I have a fantastic wife named Christie and stepsons Mitch and Josh (both of whom are musicians).

Q: When and why did you start writing?

A: For many years, most all of my writing was technical writing associated with electrical engineering, systems engineering and product development. It was a job requirement! In the late '80s, I started to write a few articles for magazines such as *Electronics Musician* (reflecting my interest in music and audio) and also for *Avionics Magazine* (reflecting my background in avionics integration and cockpit simulators). I enjoy writing, and for me it is not a chore.

Q: Why did you write *Sound Recording Advice*?

A: I originally started it as a series of articles for *Electronic Musician* magazine. I wrote quite a bit of it, then lost interest and put it on the shelf for several years. Then I started thinking that I should link all these articles together and write a book on home studio recording. I have quite a few friends who are trying to establish home recording studios for themselves, and I found I was answering many of the same questions over and over again. In addition, there is so much low-cost, incredible equipment now available to make high-quality recordings, that anyone with any musical talent at all could easily establish a very rewarding hobby, if not career. All these people need is a little encouragement and a path to show them what to do. I finally decided to put together a instruction manual that discusses all of the basic aspects of home recording studios, including what equipment to buy and where to get it.

Q: What are your qualifications to write a book about audio recording?

A: I am an electrical engineer with additional training in audio engineering. I have operated my own home recording studio for over 20 years where I have gained a fair amount of expertise in how to set up and operate a home recording studio. I have done technical writing during most of my professional career, including writing articles for *Electronic Musician*, *Keyboard* and *AfterTouch* magazines. And as part of my engineering career, I have designed and developed many electrical and audio systems concerned with avionics, Virtual Reality, commercial entertainment, and surveillance.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish with this book that other similar books don't accomplish?

A: Being an electrical engineer with an audio engineering background, I approach the subject of home recording from the technical side, rather than the musician's side. The trick is to explain technical subjects such as grounding, power conditioning, acoustics, and other related issues in a factual yet simplified way so as to not turn off the musicians who are really only interested in

recording their own music. I wrote the book from a do-it-yourself viewpoint, so that the home studio owner would not just buy equipment off the shelf but also really be involved with the inner workings of the studio. In the book, I detail several do-it-yourself projects such as building a remote control for a reel/reel tape deck and installing headphone preamplifiers or power switches into other studio equipment. Many books just tell the reader what new equipment to buy, while *Sound Recording Advice* also discusses what used equipment is available, what to buy, where to buy, how to judge the condition of it, how much to pay for it, and what used equipment to avoid.

Q: Why all the interest in home recording these days?

A: Up until recently, it has been an expensive proposition to record high-quality multi-track audio in the home. Only rich recording stars or well-funded businesses could afford to buy all of the equipment required to establish a home studio that could output a recording which could be used in a commercial release. With the advent of low-cost digital recording and digital signal processing, the technology and means are now available to anyone with even a modest budget. In fact, there are now inexpensive units that have mixers, hard drive recorders, various digital signal processors, microphone preamps, headphone preamps, and CD-R burners integrated together in one box. All you do is add a microphone and a pair of self-powered speakers, and you have a self-contained recording studio. This is truly a godsend to musicians who have longed for a way to record their own high-quality music but have been unable to afford the technology to do so. Musicians can now record multiple tracks of their own musical creations directly to CD and send it to record producers, distribute it cheaply on the web as MP3 files, or sell the CDs directly from their own web sites. Personal computers have also now become powerful enough to host different software applications that perform recording, mixing and signal processing functions entirely within the software domain. Plus, all this interest in digital equipment has allowed some previously expensive analog equipment to become available on the used market for reasonable rates.

Q: Where can readers obtain your book?

A: The easiest place to buy it using a credit card is over the web from my web site at <http://www.johnvolanski.com>. If a check is to be used, it can be sent to my publisher at Pacific Beach Publishing, P.O. Box 90471, San Diego, CA 92169. There is an order form at my web site that can be printed out and mailed. The book is also available at Amazon.com.

Q: What do you do with and in your own home recording studio?

A: For the most part, I use it to record my own music and that of my friends. I rarely use it for commercial purposes, but there have been occasions when I have used it commercially. When I was working in the commercial entertainment industry, I used my studio to develop the sound effects that were integrated into Virtual Reality (VR) experiences. That was actually quite a bit of fun and it allowed my creative side to get some exercise! For example, one of the VR experiences allowed a person to ride on the back of a huge prehistoric Pteranodon (a bird-like dinosaur with a 25 foot wingspan). This Pteranodon also spit fireballs! So I had to develop sounds for the wing flaps (I recorded large bed sheets being flapped then processed the sound), the screech vocalizations of the bird (I used some sounds from howler monkeys and then stretched the sounds way out and deepened the pitch with signal processing), and the fireballs (I filled up my barbeque with propane, stuck a microphone next to it, and then threw a match into the barbeque!). In my studio, I have 10 keyboards, synthesizers and samplers that I use to generate various musical instrument sounds and sound effects.

Q: What is the best way for others to learn about setting up a home recording studio?

A: It really helps to have a technical understanding of the various aspects of the recording studio. I wrote my book so that people could go to one source and get a good basic understanding of what options are now available to them, what to do to the recording space to properly prepare it, what equipment to buy and how best to use that equipment. In the book, I also give dozens of other sources for information. Learning about recording audio and home studios should be an open-ended pursuit. There are many web sites, magazines and books available to help gain an understanding of owning and operating a home recording studio.

Q: What magazines do you read? What CDs are playing in your stereo now?

A: Many of the magazines I read are concerned with audio recording (big surprise there). I subscribe to *Electronic Musician*, *Keyboard*, *Recording*, *Pro Audio Review*, *Tape Op*, *Sound & Video Contractor*, and *Mix* magazines. I subscribe to other magazines that interest me such as *Mac Addict*, *Martial Art Training*, *Black Belt*, *National Geographic* and *Outdoor Photographer*. And I also need to keep up on the technical side, so I read *Electronic Design*, *Portable Design*, *Software Development* and *Electronic Design News*. (Yikes, where do I find the time for all of that?) The CDs playing in my car stereo right now are The Flower Kings (a Swedish progressive rock group) along with several CDs I made of downloaded MP3s from the Internet, and a CD I made of various songs from my home recording studio (to see how the songs sound in the car).

Q: If you could record with any musician, alive or dead, who would it be?

A: It would have to be Keith Emerson (of Emerson, Lake & Palmer). That guy has unbelievable keyboard chops.

Q: Which books are your favorites? Which authors do you admire?

A: Authors that I admire are Kurt Vonegut, Jr., Alistair MacLean, Carl Hiaasen, John Grisham, Tom Clancy and Dave Barry. Any books by those authors are some of my favorites.

Interview by Adolph Tree, Firesign Press