Deborah Fairchild went from studio engineer to music executive at one of the few companies tackling the most fundamental data and preservation issues for the music industry, VEVA Sound. From working with labels to archive important catalog and create global metadata standards, to creating tech tools for studio personnel, Fairchild has collaborated with all the major players in the business over a decades-long career, working with VEVA's teams in Nashville, New York, Los Angeles, and London.

How did you get into studio engineering?

Growing up I was interested in music, but never thought about the music business and recording behind the scenes of the music I loved. At Middle Tennessee State, (where I received my B.S. in the Recording Industry Production/Technology), I had to decide to major in either the music business or pro tech program. I went in the studio and said, "Yes, this is it!" The minute I started learning about recording and got involved in how it was created, I loved it. I loved the skillset behind capturing great sounds. I love the behind-the-scenes approach, facilitating great art.

It was definitely a male-driven program. There were only a few girls with a Pro Tech major in my graduating class!

What part of studio work or engineering did you enjoy the most?

Tracking for me was my favorite part. I love the initial tracking session. I love a great drum sound and miking drums in particular.

I love going into studios and hearing the rooms acoustics and going through the process of choosing your favorite mic for particular sound you're going for.

How did you make the transition from wanting to work in a studio to wanting to build tools for studios?

I started working part time at VEVA during college as an archival engineer. I was also working at House of Blues as an intern. When I graduated both companies offered me full-time jobs.

It was a difficult decision. The House of Blues meant being involved creatively on a day-to-day basis. But what VEVA was doing really fascinated me. It was unknown. I'd never heard anyone talk about it. I was intrigued by where it could go. I think it was the adventure of discovering something new, enhancing how people can create. I was the first hire at VEVA, outside of the guys who started it.

Metadata is a frequently cited problem in the music industry, one Veva has developed many products and initiatives to address. How did that problem first come to your attention?

The loss of metadata being captured during recording really became an issue when music went digital. With tape, someone would write down the performers on a track sheet, write names of the songs, the studios, the engineers, etc. on the box of the tape. There was a culture of keeping that information with the physical recording.

Our first client, Sony A&R administrator Alison Booth's insight really helped us. Instead of tapes, she had producers turning projects on hard drives, and the label would have no idea what was on it. That also meant they had to rely on the metadata within the DAW (digital audio workstation) session or in various formats.

Working with Alison was instrumental feedback in terms of really servicing labels with their verifications and archives. In New York, we worked with Karen Kwak and Leesa Brunson at UMG. They each had their own points of view and also were pioneers in this space. Working with different genres, different projects and different recording processes, really helped us refine our process.

On the other side, we all had engineering backgrounds, and we could talk to producers about their expectations. NARAS eventually put together producer delivery requirements that started in Nashville. Producers like Jeff Balding, Chuck Ainlay, and Maureen Droney from the Recording Academy were all instrumental in this, trying to codify things and get things working in a better way, which is a never-ending process.

We've tried to understand the different approaches and techniques. Various major labels have their own ways of doing things, but so do top producers. We've had to meld all those insights together.

VEVA has devoted a great deal of time and energy to developing uniform data standards for the music industry, called DDEX (Digital Data Exchange).

Why do standards like DDEX matter?

I think the beauty of DDEX was that it brought together dozens of companies that were outwardly competing with each other and got them all in the same room to really make decisions and improve the music industry's digital supply chain. Standards help with the interoperability, effectiveness, and efficiency of the many repeated interactions that occur in the industry. Having so many leading companies implement the DDEX standards is amazing. VEVA worked with the Library of Congress to create a schema that was later adopted in DDEX and is the underlying foundation of the RIN (Recording Information Notification) message. Metadata starts in the studio, after all.

How can better data stewardship lead to better musical creative outcomes and better revenue for, say, film composers or music supes?

Even when creatives don't own the content, being involved in the crediting is important and makes your work discoverable. No one can see who mixed, who engineered. But companies are bringing this info back to consumers: Spotify is incorporating more and more credits, and companies like JAXSTA are working hard to gain momentum in this area.

In the end, metadata is about payment, but over time, it's really about discoverability. We want users to be able to see every song that guitarist played on or that woman mixed. We're hoping that we can facilitate that by collecting this data easily and feeding into digital supply chain. No one who contributed in the studio should be left out.

You could find that info out easier when we had physical liner notes with credits. Once physical media went away and was replaced by files/downloads and streaming. All the years people would ask me why I cared. It's not going onto the digital service providers, so why bother?

Now it matters, and people see that. It starts with collecting the data, which is why we've built specific tools that do that, like our new plugin Studio Collect. Now people are increasingly wanting credit, providing it, and we believe this will lead to them getting more work, as people like music supervisors and festival bookers, say, find more about these performers and professionals.

You've lived for decades in Nashville, a city with strong musical roots and inclinations. How has that rubbed off on you, as a professional and as music problem solver?

I travel between our offices in several cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and London, and each has rubbed off on me, musically and professionally.

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Working in different musical cities, you get different perspectives. I moved to New York right after I started working for VEVA because we had an ongoing project with Def Jam. Then we opened our Los Angeles office. The different genres and labels and techniques, I wouldn't put one city or genre above another. I've learned from all of the cities, which has been extremely helpful.

I love being based in Nashville from a personal perspective. The speed of the city is great. You can do a lot of last-minute things, which feels impossible in places like New York and LA. The spontaneity is still here which breeds a lot of innovation. You can call someone and meet them them for coffee in fifteen minutes. My wife is a singer, and if someone calls her into a session, she can get to the studio in 20 minutes. It makes life much easier and livelier.

You're a member of ASCAP as a writer... what's your songwriting background?

That's what happens when you work in music. Sometimes you fall into the trap! I really enjoyed doing all the different sides of music. I don't consider myself a songwriter, but I dabbled in it and it's a lot of fun. It's hard to take my own work as seriously in this area, especially the older I've gotten, the more I look at all the amazing people. It was fun, though.

No matter what I think of my songwriting, the experience really helped me because I've been on the artist side. I've recorded and been recorded. It was fun to be exposed to all that. You can see how can you really build something that will enhance and not impede the process for both artists and engineers.

Musical tastes when you first got into recording/engineering? Now?

I have listened to and worked on a bunch of different projects, in almost every style except metal. There is just so much to listen to.

When I was younger, it was Madonna. It was the 80s, after all. Since then, I've gone through different phases. When I started playing guitar, I got into Led Zeppelin and the Indigo Girls, people who play their instruments well. I also got into hip hop because I love the lyrical side. I love Ryan Adams because he's got this prolific, almost Dylan-esque side. He's just a really cool artist. I even try to go to a musical in NYC every time I'm there. It's amazing to me, some of the remixes producers and electronic artists make, just by getting some stems. Basically, I love music of almost every style. ■