

# The Holistic Freelancer

An interview with Production Sound Recordist Mike Westgate that will intrigue, educate and inspire you.

Edited and introduction by Ande Schurr | [www.freelancebusinessblog.com](http://www.freelancebusinessblog.com) | January, 28<sup>th</sup> 2010

There is no avoiding affectionate language when describing one of New Zealand's most experienced film technicians, Sound Recordist Mike Westgate.

His calm and caring presence, candidness with all people, knowledge of his trade and the industry stand him in the league of film giants who become synonymous with their craft.

A conversation with Mike will leave you in no doubt that one's latter years are the best; a golden harvest of decades of effort, experience, wit, humour and good health.



Mike Westgate

His logical and calm way of thinking through a problem on set is testament to an attitude that Mike has carefully cultivated: to stay positive no matter what the circumstances.

This interview will help shed light on how Mike developed the particular attitude that led to, and continues to lead, a life of achievement.

Mike answers the conundrum of those who are unsure whether to specialise in one role in the industry or be a generalist. He discusses how to experience a full and holistic life outside of the industry. He explains how to attract and keep clients and exactly what is needed to build a lasting, positive attitude.

Even more than the benefit this will surely provide newer freelancers, Mike's candid story will give seasoned professionals on both sides of the camera a moment reflection of their own lives. It is so easy to work day in day out without a chance to contemplate. Mike offers a window into his own situation as to how he stays balanced.

This minimally edited interview, divided into five parts, shows what lies behind this unassuming gentleman of our industry; a man of reason and good sense; a mentor and friend to many.

## Part One: The feeling of achievement

**What is success in this industry and have you achieved some measure of it?**

I don't know what success is. I like the word achievement better because achievement means you've completed a job and hopefully it's been worthwhile.

Success is such an unknown. Did you survive a year on Shortland Street? Have you recorded a major feature film? So achievement applies better because it relates to a more personal feeling of when

you've done a job, finished it, feel you've got good results and in particular had a good rapport, friendship and working relationship with the rest of the crew. Then you feel a sense of achievement.

My career has been a success if you look at it holistically. It has shown me a lot of things, taken me to a lot of places, I've worked with a lot of remarkable people on both sides of the camera, earned a living, brought up a family, continued a marriage for over 44 years, and now have grandchildren. So really the success part of it is that holistic story in the sense of what a career is for. A career is not just for your own self aggrandisement or ego. A career should possibly be viewed in the sense that you've done good work, worked on worthwhile projects and used that to take care of other goals such as family. That is achievement in the fullest sense.

**As a past trainee of yours I recall your considerable patience with me despite numerous errors. What keeps you pleasant and stable with your trainees and indeed all people on set?**

I've rarely been an impatient or rude person. I like to treat everyone with a sense of humility and understanding. So even if you get a good student or a bad student you've got to understand where they're at, how they're doing and why they're doing what they should not be doing and to give guidance. That is part of what is being a teacher, a father, a grandfather. I recall telling one of my trainees one evening after dropping him off from a shoot - "slow down and listen" because that is what was needed. And as a sound man, if you can't listen you should be looking down a camera view finder!

*"As a sound man, if you can't listen you should be looking down a camera view finder!"*

**What one thing would you teach film school students who are specialising in sound?**

You've got to see the whole picture. You're part of a team even though sound is not immediately included because it's such a discreet art. Nobody is listening through quality headphones and knowing what you're getting. No one knows how you do it so they don't know necessarily the impacts of their roles on your work so you have to develop an understanding of their work and a relationship with them in order to get them to help you. Because if you can't get other people, with guidance, to consider what you need, then you're buggered.

Certainly with a crew I develop a friendship. With people who are, let's say, less positive and friendly – particularly actors, because they have their own focus and tasks and don't necessarily want you to make friends with them and be in their face all the time – if you need something say "can you help me". What are they going to say? No? They're not going to say no. They'll either say "yes" or listen. For example if they have a radio mic on and are scratching on their clothing as they're talking (assuming they need to show a scratching action) you could say "if you could cheat that scratching movement so we can still hear your dialogue I would be very grateful". Nothing accusative, just 'can you help me'.

## **Part Two: The influence of the BBC and Africa**

**Did you have any strong influences or mentors in your early years that helped shape you?**

I had a family friend who was very patient and introduced me to electronics and that mentorship put me in a mind space to develop a love, feel and understanding of electronics. But I've always continued that because once you develop a rapport with a skill or art form you, in many ways, fall in

love with it, and almost need it, so you develop that interest. If you have an interest or a love of something you want more of it - like food or music, you just keep improving your relationship with the topic because you want more and more.

Next was ATV Network where I was studio boom operating, working on large TV dramas. I was part of a sound crew that consisted of 6 or more people. The sound mixers were various - they all had their particular temperaments and skills. One was good at drama but hopeless at music shows, another was an ace at big music shows but a bit picky, another was a very grumpy man who you feared if you worked the boom on a drama show but ultimately if he says "your boom operating was remarkable" you really thought you had seen the face of God.

I owe a lot to these people because they treated it as a job but it was not as serious as I see in the film world. I suppose because people are freelance and take their task more to heart but all these people were on staff, we were all very well paid and it was good fun and quite a vital experience.

### **What about the BBC?**

The BBC was good in some ways but a bit of let down because it was such a large organisation you were just an ant in an ant hill. And it was therefore less personal. It was good to have a training in the formalities of the BBC and its strange equipment and to move into the film world which was really seeded into me by a New Zealander called Martin Campbell who I worked with at ATV. As a New Zealander he went on to become one of the most recognised English TV drama directors with "Reilly: Ace of Spies", "Bergerac" along with many others and went on to direct several Bond films, Vertical Limit and the Legend of Zero.

In those days at the BBC, sound was on magnetic film and you monitored it off the replay head to confirm there were no drop outs or clogs. It was about listening. So I spent the best part of two years monitoring. Sitting in a small room with a BBC monitor speaker and listening. Yes, you were listening for defects but you were in a position where you could judge quality as well and listen to people's results which is what any sound person should do. Like a chef, you have to taste your results as well, you can't just cook something and put it on a table and say 'that should be good'.

*"Like a chef, you have to taste your results as well, you can't just cook something and put it on a table and say 'that should be good'".*

You've got to listen when you're doing it and have a taste of it after as well. This was a very valuable experience.

The brain-ear combination is a very clever computer with two microphones. As with any computer you have to get used to it so that you know how to focus and what to focus on. It always surprises me that I can hear an aircraft before anyone else has thought about it and I can tell what it is doing. Just at the point where the 1<sup>st</sup> AD is saying "turn-over" I say "Hold on, there's a plane, it just taken off, it won't be long". It's about learning to use your ears.

### **How did you end up in Africa, in Malawi?**

After three years with the BBC I realised I was not having a brilliant time. Promotion was not imminent and I had financial constraints supporting a family with two young children and a mortgage. There was no joy in my life in the sense that we were just surviving on a low income. We couldn't afford holidays, restaurants, and you get times in your life when life is like that and it is intended because it teaches you how to manage those situations – and the fact that many people have to live in such situations all their lives.

But occasionally the sun does shine on you and although I was thinking of going into partnership with an old boss recording sound effects and doing electronic work at the same time I had noticed on a union notice board a job which the British Foreign office was trying to fill which was a role as an aid officer on secondment to an African government as a chief technical officer. The terms were very good, UN conditions in both what the contract offered and also the salary which was partly tax-free. I could buy a vehicle tax -free and have that shipped out. I was provided with a large modern house and I looked at the job description and I just knew the job was mine. It just described me and what I'd done in my recent past life and I suddenly found that within three months there I was on a British airways aircraft flying with my wife and two boys to the continent of Africa which was both a joy and a shock to a slightly nerdy guy growing up in East London and a big learning curve.

Despite what I had and didn't have I was thrust into a senior management post in government in charge of at least a dozen people, 7-8 vehicles, responsible to a cabinet minister.

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Being the expert in the country, whatever was needed I had to deal with it. I couldn't phone up somebody. I couldn't go down to Dick Smith or Jaycar or Iris Components. I had to source every nut and bolt I needed from London. And I had to be available 366 days a year. I had to be at every event that the president of the country was at - be it at political rally, a state banquet, parliament, private audience, private film screening, I had to be there - and was technically responsible for the success of those events sound wise. I also had to be available to every other government department who wanted a report on something, or any diplomatic event.

#### **What an extraordinary experience. It must have trained you in the most extreme self-reliance?**

Yes. I suppose I've always had that. I've never really had self-doubts – and maybe that is very lucky. Some people are quite negative about themselves. I've always been positive in the sense that 'no I don't know everything but I bloody well will find out and it will improve me.' Like any job I do now. Working with Sam Peacock recently on a short film, he wanted me to record in a quadrasonic manner. I had never done that before. But we learned a hell of a lot from it. And I think when the production is eventually finished it will exhibit that experience by its results.

#### **What caused you to leave Malawi and become a production sound mixer?**

My opportunity to come to New Zealand came out of working in Africa. I saw it as another challenge. What were we going to do after three years in Africa? I wasn't going to go back and join the BBC.

Working in production sound was a bit more of a picnic than delivering facilities for the president of an African country because at time that was like being driven to be hanged in the morning. It was quite stressful. You were the sole expert in the country. The whole thing rested on your shoulders. There was no way you could fail. No rational understanding if you had a problem. At least one occasion I had the police and special branch around to my office in the morning to interrogate me.

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You were walking a tight rope in many ways. Operationally and technically, equipment can fail so you put in place backup facilities that hopefully fill in the cracks when you have a problem. My colleagues, who were less fortunate because they were Malawians working in broadcasting, if they had a problem they went straight to jail. I'd say "hold on, where's Donald Kwazumbi this week?" and I'd be told he had a bit of a problem with an outside broadcast last week and was in prison. So I dreamed of a day when I could be a production sound person sitting in the sun somewhere. It was all going to be so easy, laid back, such fun. It's never quite been like that but I hope it will one day!

### **What was your first NZ job?**

I was offered the job at Vidcom in New Zealand based on the skills I had acquired. My name and number had been delivered to two Americans who were setting up NZ's first broadcast capable facility. It was in fact only the twelfth in the world, so pretty pioneering days. I dealt with the sound engineering of the place, sorting out equipment, fixing it, making the wall points, originating sound on location and in the studio, post producing it, recording it, selecting music with the client, mixing it and laying it to video. When you listen to your own sound results and have to post produce them you learn how to do it better.

### **What was your first real opportunity as a freelancer?**

My first real drama opportunity arose when Roger Donaldson asked me to record Smash Palace in 1980. By then I had built myself a 6 channel mixer. I had 2-3 boom microphones and 2 radio mics, I knew I had enough equipment and judgment to do a good job. It wasn't an easy job because it was quite a vehicle-based job so there were people doing dialogue hopping into cars hopping and out of cars doing dialogue.

There was a lot of radio mic usage. I've always given great credence to the use of radio mics, enjoyed using them, realising they gave me, the actors and the camera a lot of freedom and beyond that, learned how to apply them. Because radio mics are not something you simply stick on someone and go 'I've got a radio mic on them' – it's a whole continuing curve, even now I'm learning about radio mic application. I was often castigated by people who thought that I was – as a well known director once said to me – 'covering my arse' by using radio mics. That person later realised that what I was doing was simply getting good results. I never cover my arse by using radio mics. I consciously choose to use them because I know they will do as good if not a better job, or an easier task of the job, by using them.

## **Part Three: How to make your own breaks**

### **How do you promote yourself?**

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**"I'm an old fashioned girl, I want to be courted. I want the man to knock on my door and say "we want to take you out for a day's shooting".**

It's a nicer feeling. If people want you for your skill or personality or whatever, it is a nicer feeling than standing on a street corner on K Road waiting for a client to turn up.

The industry is about people. It's about meeting people and developing a rapport with them. Whether it is a client you would like to work with or another sound or camera person, it's about hunting those people that you get to know about and politely knocking on their door, developing an understanding by being in frequent but not too frequent contact, by offering help and by reminding them gently. It's about communicating without bothering. I have half a dozen people do that each month. If the people you choose to communicate with are the right people then it will work for you and you will soon find out who will work for you and who won't based on their return of contact and use of you or the absence of.

**What advice do you have for freelancers who want to achieve yet lack the experience? Would you suggest take on the toughest jobs - get a feature film without any feature film experience if you are lucky enough to have that chance?**

You must be prepared for what you are letting yourself in for because you've got to go in firing all guns. You can't go in and say 'oh I haven't got one of those or I can't do this and no one told me about this...' You've got to face realities about firstly what you're letting yourself in for and clearly understanding what equipment you need because that is an essential part of being a freelance person; it's not just you - it's about you and equipment and hopefully experience however limited that might be. You've got to have some confidence in whatever skill that you have otherwise you will feel uncomfortable and get bad results and find you are off the job. You've got to break it all down into simple building blocks: What are we doing? How would I do that? What equipment do I need to do that?

Things are more complex these days. It's not like in the old days of analogue recording where you needed a recorder, a boom mic or two and maybe a radio mic or two. Now it's much more complex. You have to do more research into what a shoot needs. These are the digital days and nothing is the same.

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Never presume. Don't pretend you know it all. Pretend you know nothing and ask. It's better to find out what is needed and ask then fall into traps and fail.

In many ways it is better to progress through smaller types of work than jump in the deep end and fail. Certainly short films give you that opportunity to face a not too large a task and to achieve gracefully what is needed. I can risk doing things on a short film that I can't on a larger feature.

**What would you say to people who do not want to be boxed into one role in the industry?**

You've got to focus on a skill if it's going to be a career. I'm often slightly suspect of people who one minute they're this and one minute they're that and one minute the other. What are they going to be? It's very difficult to develop a profile in the industry if you're a generalist. You've got to be known as something.

## **Part Four: Outside the film industry, keeping creative**

**Is sound recording creatively satisfying or do you have other creative pursuits?**

Working on a set recording audio is productive. It is not creative. Whereas choosing music, voices, putting it altogether and mixing it is creative and that is a joyful experience. It's then when you feel achievement. You might do a day recording and you get good results but it's only achievement in

context. But if you put together a sound mix with all the elements that you've made decisions on, that is a really nice creative experience, and you feel you've achieved. It is very heart warming.

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Sound continues to challenge and delight me and always will. The other artistic area of my life that I enjoy is photography. In my years of servicing Cousteau expeditions I did indulge a great deal in photography and therefore I have a huge record of the places I've been to. I still enjoy it in a more family based way.

The other area that I've never completely satisfied yet is one of music which I've started as a child. I learned piano as a child but gave it away at grammar school when I had homework and sports. I then had the opportunity to play the double bass for ten years which really involved me but I couldn't keep it up with my film commitments. Now I've bought myself a number of bass guitars and I hope to have a spare moment to get back into music.

More recently on a trip to Nelson, I saw a wonderful piece of art by Doris Lusk, 1969 of a jetty done in charcoal crayon and watercolour. And I thought 'I could do that'. I have a mildly artistic taste which I've never used since I did art at grammar school and my appreciation for art is that sense of texture and colour and detail. I collect Stanley Palmer's works – they're simple and textured, gently coloured and that's what I'd like to do – get some charcoal, some water paints and see what a mess I could make of it.

One pursuit I've made a reasonable start on is recording music because I'm very musically based. When you add together a musical ear, an interest in music, a skill of sound recording and a wealth of equipment then you've got to say 'get your bum off the seat and do some music recording'. It's a thing I have been doing, there's more to do, it's just a case of fitting it in and having the right opportunities. I am also looking at producing radio documentaries.

## **Part Five: Building a lasting positive attitude**

### **What can freelancers do to build a self-reliance that makes them indispensable?**

It's about being positive about yourself, being very willing to learn, being very willing to accept you make mistakes but learn from them and of committing yourself to your work and being always positive about it. I've met people who are negative about things - 'I can't do this' and 'that's all wrong' and 'they don't like me' etc - but you don't get anywhere by accepting that attitude. You've got to be positive. It is so important as a freelance person to demonstrate that otherwise nobody will want you. You can get away with it when working for a company and they are paying your wage regularly – then you can get away worrying about all those negatives in your life while you still get a pay packet. You won't as a freelancer.

Being a freelancer is not intended for everybody. Not everybody has got that certainly of nature and skill and the ability to carry on when there are no bookings and the bank manager is phoning you up.

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It's tough. It was tough when I started as a freelancer 34 years ago and it is tough now. It is not plain sailing; no one guarantees me a living.

A confidence helps you in difficult situations because it helps you manage it when you don't know how the hell you're going to do it but you have to find out how to do it.

I remember doing a TV drama some years ago directed by a women friend. It involved a radio talkback show. And she said “how are we going to do this? We've got somebody on camera and somebody off camera and we've got to shoot both sides but each side has to be talking to the other. How are we going to do this?” I said, “I don't know, but we'll find out”.

That is confidence and honesty which goes a long way. Because you have to be brave if you're going to do that job and you have to be honest if you don't know.

#### **Do you plan to retire?**

There are no plans to retire other than if I lose my mind and become physically infirm - that will probably be the moment where I have to bow out - because I enjoy what I do and there is no reason to not do it. I am not a millionaire and therefore money is a relevant resource. And I would certainly miss doing what I do. I enjoy problem solving and I enjoy people. And that is what on-set working is about: people and problem solving.

#### **What final comments do you have on the New Zealand film industry**

It is a larger industry than I saw 32 years ago when I started as a freelancer. It is an industry that concerns itself slightly more with the financial aspects of things than the task in hand. I think that is arse about face.

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As a practitioner, I have to consider the task at hand and then put a price against it. It has developed into a large industry. 25 years ago, if we got anything big here we got a flock of Australian technicians coming over. One stage they were the only source of boom operators. But now we have a good supply of skills at many levels

I would certainly also outline my own reality, that I've considered a long time, that the attitude of technicians is quite remarkable compared to anywhere else in the world. It is relaxed, practical, hard working, and now skilled and experienced. Whereas working with a lot of other nationalities I don't often see that set of attributes. I find New Zealanders to be exemplary because they are self-reliant and not up themselves. They want to do the job and do a good job and overcome problems themselves - they don't want to phone an expert in another state. They just want to get on with it.

### **What do you want to be remembered for?**

Being a sound guy who did a good job and had a good attitude.

### **Will you continue to take trainees?**

If you've had a successful career than you are foolish not to pass on the approach and skills that you have acquired on the journey. That's why I've taught at South Seas Film and TV School [as a guest lecturer] for the past 14 years and also helped and mentored people because there is an achievement in doing that. That is as creative as sound mixing itself. You are creating an experience, career and a life for other people. It's like being a father or grandfather. And that's what we're here on earth for. We're not here to line our own little nests and say "that's it guys, I've got my big house and big car and sod the rest of you". You don't do that.

You've got to have a laugh. You've got to enjoy people and have a laugh. It's not being a special person or any sort of awkward attribute; it's about being a human being.

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### **Does it ever get too much? You're not a young man anymore.**

I know. That is the problem. I was thinking today 'am I facing a brick wall?' Have I got too many things to achieve and not enough time or health to achieve it all?

I heard an African women singing on a radio program this afternoon. I have a collection of political, tribal and secular tribal recordings. I want to compile and master them and see them issued as a CD. That is just another thing.

I choose not to drive myself hard. I've done that in the past and I don't want to burn my hours up saying, "I've got to sit down this evening and do sound FX". I want to have glasses of wine, have a decent meal, play with my grandchildren, watch a DVD or some television or relax. I don't want to drive myself. I've worked very hard all my working life. I don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

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### **Any final words?**

When I was taking it all seriously in the mid-eighties, and not really having a lot of fun – I was too serious about working and working and going to bed and getting up and working - I was working in France with a very experienced English continuity women and she said, "Mike, you've got to get out and see the people you work with". I took the hint.

Fun comes when you can relax. It took me a bit of maturity to learn how to relax and how to switch off.

Maybe I'll get my bass guitar out of the garage this week and put it in my room and even get to play it.