

**FREE
GUIDE**



How to Become an Audio Engineer

**Your step-by-step guide to recording, mixing,
and building a real career in music.**



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This guide is based on the same principles taught every day at Dark Horse Institute by professional audio engineers.

What does an audio engineer actually do?

Most people picture someone sitting behind a massive mixing board with headphones around their neck — and that's not wrong. But the role is far broader than one image can capture.

Audio engineers are the people responsible for capturing, shaping, and delivering sound. In a recording studio, that means setting up microphones, running signal chains, editing tracks, mixing multiple instruments into a cohesive record, and mastering the final product for release. On a live stage, it means controlling the sound the audience hears in real time. In post-production, it means syncing dialogue, sound effects, and music for film and TV.

What unites all of these roles is this: audio engineers make things sound professional. They're the difference between a demo and a record deal.

What the industry pays

**\$59K–
\$120K+**

Studio engineer
salary range (US)

**\$45K–
\$95K+**

Live sound engineer
salary range (US)

**\$52K–
\$110K+**

Post-production engineer
salary range (US)

Is this job for you?

- You have a deep love of music and sound — you notice things other people don't hear.
- You're technically curious. You enjoy understanding how things work, not just that they work.
- You're a collaborator. Audio engineering is a team sport — patience and communication matter.
- You're detail-oriented. A great mix lives and dies in the details.
- You're willing to put in the time. Mastery takes reps, not just classroom hours.

02

The 5 core skills every engineer must master

You don't need to know all of this on day one — that's what training is for. But these are the five pillars you'll be building toward.

1- Signal Flow

Understanding how audio travels from source to destination — microphone to preamp to interface to DAW to monitors. If you don't know signal flow, you can't troubleshoot a single problem in a session.

2- Recording Technique

Knowing which mic to use, where to place it, and why is one of the fastest ways to separate a beginner from a pro. Placement decisions made before you hit record can never be undone in post.

3- Digital Audio Workstations (DAW)

Pro Tools is the industry standard for studio and post-production work. Logic and Ableton dominate in electronic music production. You need to be fluent in at least one — and conversational in others.

4- Mixing Techniques

Mixing is equal parts technical and artistic. You'll learn to use editing, EQ, compression, reverb, and delays to create space, depth, and balance across dozens of tracks simultaneously.

5- Critical Listening & Ear Training

Your ears are your most important instrument. Developing the ability to identify frequencies, hear phase issues, and detect distortion is a skill built through deliberate, structured practice.

03

A day in the studio: what the job really looks like

Forget what you've seen in music videos. A professional studio session is organized, focused, and deadline-driven. Here's a realistic look at a typical tracking day

8:00AM - Session prep

You arrive before the artist. You check all cables, patch the signal chain, verify the DAW session is organized, and line check every channel. The studio must be ready before anyone else walks in the door.

9:00AM - Soundcheck & mic placement

The band arrives. You place microphones on the drum kit, discuss the sonic vision with the producer, and run test recordings to fine-tune placement. This can take 30 minutes to an hour for a full live setup.

11:00AM - Tracking begins

You're behind the glass running the session. You punch in takes, monitor levels, communicate with the producer and artist, and make real-time decisions about tone and performance.

1:00PM - Playback & editing

After tracking, you comp the best takes and do a rough edit. The artist hears the results. Feedback loops between you, the producer, and the artist are constant and collaborative.

3:00PM - Overdubs

Guitars, vocals, keys — additional parts are layered in. Each new element requires mic decisions, level matching, and fitting into the existing sonic picture.

5:00PM - Session wrap

You archive all files, back up to multiple locations, export multi-tracks for the mixing engineer, and leave detailed session notes. The engineer who touches this project next is counting on your documentation.

The gear & software you'll work with

One of the biggest advantages of training in a professional working studio — rather than a classroom — is that you learn on the same equipment you'll use on the job. At Dark Horse Institute, the studio is your classroom.

Studio Consoles & Control Surfaces

- SSL, Trident, and Toft analog consoles
- Digital control surfaces (Avid C24 and Artist Mix)
- Hybrid analog/digital workflows

Microphones

- Large-diaphragm condensers (AKG C414b, CV-12, Hamburg 67, etc.)
- Dynamic mics (Shure SM7B, SM57)
- Ribbon mics for vintage tone and room capture

Digital Audio Workstations

- Pro Tools — industry standard for recording and post
- Recording, editing, MIDI production, mixing, and mastering
- Melodyne Editor for audio editing

Outboard Gear & Plugins

- Hardware compressors (Universal Audio, dbx, API)
- Analog EQ units (Pultec, API 550)
- Industry-standard plugin suites (Eventide, UAD, Slate Digital)

Studio Monitoring

- Near-field studio monitors (Mackie HR824, Emotiva, Genelec)
- Subwoofers and mid-field monitoring
- Headphone mixing and translation checking

Acoustics & Room Design

- Understanding live vs dead rooms
- Treating problems vs leveraging room character
- Isolation booths and live room mic strategy

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6 career paths for working audio engineers

The audio engineering credential is more versatile than most people realize. Here are six distinct career paths — all reachable from the same foundational skill set.

Recording Engineer - \$55K–\$120K+

Works in recording studios tracking artists, producing albums, and engineering singles. Nashville is one of the three top markets in the world for this role.

Live Sound Engineer - \$48K–\$95K+

Controls front-of-house or monitor sound at concerts, festivals, theatres, and corporate events. Touring engineers can earn significantly more with major artists.

Post-Production Engineer - \$52K–\$110K+

Edits, syncs, and mixes audio for film, television, video games, and podcasts. One of the fastest-growing sectors in audio, with remote work widely available.

Broadcast Engineer - \$50K–\$100K+

Manages audio for live TV, radio, streaming, and sporting events. Strong demand in markets with major sports teams or news operations.

Music Producer - \$45K–\$200K+

Oversees the creative and technical direction of a recording project. Audio engineering training is the most common path into production for working pros.

Studio Owner / Freelancer - Unlimited ceiling

Many DHI graduates launch their own studios or build freelance client rosters within 2–3 years. The 6 months of free post-grad studio access gives you a head start.

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Your 20-week roadmap to getting hired

Dark Horse Institute's Audio Engineering program is 500 hours over 20 weeks — taught by faculty with Grammy credits and decades of professional studio experience. Here's how the journey unfolds.

Module 1 - Intro to Audio

- Studio Equipment and Analog Audio
- Microphone types and polar patterns
- Signal Flow and Gain Staging
- Console and Headphone monitoring

Module 2 - Analog Recording Techniques

- Microphone techniques and Selections
- Recording techniques for live instruments
- Recording practice with drums, bass, guitar, keys, piano, vocals, etc.

Module 3 - Intro to Digital Audio

- Audio interfaces and digital conversion
- DAW fundamentals
- Pro Tools overview and workflows
- Post Production Audio (ADR and Foley recording for film)

Module 4 - Live Sound

- Translating studio skills into live sound skills
- Digital Consoles and workflow
- PA systems, amplifiers, and crossovers
- “Ringing out” speakers for feedback and building monitor mixes

Week 11 - Mid-Term Project

- Week long recording project in the Trident Studio
- A student-run recording session with an outside client
- Instructor guided, but student engineered
- Full studio session setups, live band tracking, overdubs, and vocals

Module 5 - Advanced Pro Tools

- Professional editing with Beat Detective, Elastic Audio, and Melodyne
- Mixing workflows and first principles
- Routing, gain staging, and positioning tracks within a mix
- MIDI production in Pro Tools
- Mastering techniques to create radio-ready songs

Week 18 - Final Project

- Week long recording project in the SSL Studio
- A student-run recording session with an outside client
- Instructor guided, but student engineered
- Full studio session setups, live band tracking, overdubs, and vocals

After graduation, every DHI student receives 6 months of free studio time — on campus or at Dark Horse Recording. You leave with two completed EP projects in your portfolio and a network of working professionals.



07

Your next step

Ready to see it for yourself?

Book a campus tour in Franklin, TN

Walk the same studios where 65+ gold and platinum albums have been made. Tours include a campus walkthrough, curriculum overview, and optional class sit-in on morning visits. Schedule online or call 615.791.7020

Request a virtual appointment

Our admissions advisors offer structured 45-minute Zoom sessions with a virtual studio walkthrough and personalized program recommendation. No pressure — just honest answers.

Book at darkhorseinstitute.com

Take the free Music Career quiz

Not sure which program fits your goals? Our 3-minute quiz delivers a personalized report on your strengths and best-fit roles.

darkhorseinstitute.com/quiz

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