



# MIXING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

BY MICHAEL RAINE

PHOTO: DMITRY DEMIDOV

**While** not affected to the same devastating degree as the live music sector, the recording industry has not been immune to the ongoing pandemic. Unique obstacles and uncertainty continue to challenge studios, and producers and engineers have been forced

to completely rethink how they approach their work with artists.

With this in mind, *Professional Sound* reached out to six acclaimed producers/engineers, some of whom also own studios, to find out how they have been affected and how they're adapting creatively and professionally.

PHOTO: HEATHER POLLOCK



**JASON DUFOUR**



**KAJ FALCH-NIELSEN**



**KR MOORE**

PHOTO: LILY FROST



**GUS VAN GO**



**RYAN WORSLEY**



**JILL ZIMMERMANN**

## OUR PANEL:

### **JASON DUFOUR**

is a Toronto-based, Juno Award-winning mix engineer known for his work with July Talk, The Trews, Donovan Woods, and more.

### **KAJ FALCH-NIELSEN**

is a producer, engineer, and the owner of Blue Light Studio in Vancouver, which has hosted artists like Anderson Paak, Said the Whale, Swollen Members, JP Maurice, and more.

### **KR MOORE**

is a producer and the senior engineer at Sandbox Studios in Toronto who has worked on acclaimed records by Snotty Nose Rez Kids, The Sorority, and others.

### **GUS VAN GO**

is a Toronto-based, Juno Award-nominated producer, engineer, and songwriter known for his work with Whitehorse, The Stills, Arkells, Terra Lightfoot, and others.

### **RYAN WORSLEY**

is a producer, engineer, and songwriter who owns Echoplant Recording Studios in Port Coquitlam, BC. He has won WCMA's for Producer and Engineer of the Year and was nominated for Engineer of the Year at the 2020 Juno Awards.

### **JILL ZIMMERMANN**

is a recording engineer working primarily out of Jukasa Studios in Oshweken, ON. She has collaborated with artists including Alice Cooper, Three Days Grace, Alexisonfire, and July Talk, as well as decorated producers like Bob Ezrin, Gavin Brown, and more.

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**PS: How have the necessary safety precautions that are mandated for studios (reduced capacity, social distancing, etc.) affected your work? Is it more or less of a hassle than you expected?**



**JASON DUFOUR:** I'm a mix engineer so I am working remotely now with no direct client interactions over the next while until the pandemic calms down. I did attend a mastering session with one of my artists recently and we were all masked up the whole time.



**KAJ FALCH-NIELSEN:** It has definitely changed our routines and what we can allow our clients to do during sessions. For routines, it is more cleanup time and disinfecting all the equipment after being used. We have to be more aware of how many people are in a room at one time, and how far apart everyone is. Also, of course, setting musicians up in a room and that kind of thing.

The other thing is clients who want to bring their crew with them to hang out in the studio while they record. We now ask clients to only bring people to the session that are part of the recording in order to keep numbers lower.



**KR MOORE:** To be honest, I personally haven't been back to the studio because I have family members who are very high-risk. My wife and my first-born and now my newborn children all have sickle cell disease. So, we're taking the extra time to make sure things look more sensible before we jump right back in, so a lot of my work I've been doing remotely. But honestly, the only thing that I've found has been really affected is being in the studio with the artist while they're recording to provide certain guidance or creative direction and things like that.



**GUS VAN GO:** It's moderately a hassle. It's not preventing us from working. In the early days of COVID, I simply had everyone postpone their sessions. So yeah, it hurt back then. But now people understand that if we all keep our masks on, keep the number of people in the room to two or three, max, and don't hover too close to each other, we can still get work done and be safe.



**RYAN WORSLEY:** Honestly, in B.C. at least, I feel like studios have sort of flown under the radar, which in some ways has been nice. Like, the movie industry got shut down and nightclubs and live concerts got shut down, but there was never anything in B.C. that specifically said that studios had to shut down.

So, what we did in the initial phase of the pandemic was we set up both studios to have two rooms completely quarantined. We had, basically, two mix rooms set up – one where the engineer was mixing and the other one where the artist could be – and then we would have talk backs set up back-and-forth and we'd be able to work through mixes together with lines of sight and be able to hear each other. That worked out really well.



**JILL ZIMMERMANN:** Since touring and live shows are not available in the near future, a lot of musicians still have the urge to be productive and, in many cases, that includes recording more material. The reduced capacity only impacted a few sessions that we at Jukasa, unfortunately, were not able to facilitate. They involved a full choir or a big band and those kinds of sessions usually happen live without social distancing being possible. Aside from that, I was able to still work normally, as the musicians are separated through isolation booths or socially distanced on the live floor. We are fairly used to these new protocols now, but they did take some getting used to.

**PS: From your recent experience, what's the key to getting clients comfortable and recording/mixing work done efficiently during the current situation?**



**FALCH-NIELSEN:** For the most part, when we tell our clients our safety plan, they are good with it. Sometimes they will bring their own microphone, and some are not comfortable coming in yet, but for the most part, if they book time, they are comfortable with our level of safety precautions.



**VAN GO:** You just have to show that you're respecting people's different comfort levels, which so far, luckily, everyone I've been working with has. I keep extra masks around and lots of sanitizer!



**WORSLEY:** Just in general, my first goal is to remove all the distractions possible from the recording situation. So, when you take COVID into play for this, you kind of have to work with the artist and find out what's making them the most uncomfortable. I know some artists find wearing masks really restrictive and if it's a case of keeping them as comfortable as possible, sometimes I have to make the call as to whether to wear masks and be in the same room, or to separate into different rooms so that there's not the restrictions that come with wearing masks.

The first few sessions we had where I was wearing a mask I felt super uncomfortable and felt like the vibe was really difficult because you realize that when you can't see someone's mouth, it's hard to see what they're expressing. So much of communication is visual and seeing people's body language. But once I got used to it and once clients got used to it, it became just a little bit more of a way of life for the next little while.



**ZIMMERMANN:** I feel like, aside from wearing a mask and not getting too close when greeting or saying goodbyes, not much changed. All musicians I worked with seemed happy to be around people and relieved to have some sense of normalcy during this time of uncertainty for their career.

**PS: Some studio owners, producers, and engineers have said the pandemic has helped them streamline their processes. What are the pros and cons that you've experienced in this regard?**



**DUFOUR:** I think the ability to have Zoom sessions and video chats along with streaming audio is a huge plus in this current situation. I'm not sure this would have been doable or accessible for everyone, say, 10 or 15 years ago.

My good friend, producer/writer Michael Sonier (Noah Cyrus, Maggie Rogers) recently had some great things to say on this topic: "You keep it moving. Zoom is not my favourite way of making music but you do what you gotta do and make it work. And it has its ups, like it's much easier to connect with a lot of artists across many different areas and time zones. It makes for some cool combos. I'm here in Toronto, someone is in L.A. or New York, and the artist is in London, U.K. But what is missing is the energy and vibe of the room. For me, I feed off of the energy of the room. You still get a version of that from Zoom, but it doesn't compare."



**FALCH-NIELSEN:** I don't think I've experienced this. We took a big hit in our bookings in the first three months, and it's only really in the past couple months that we are getting back to regular numbers, although we aren't there yet. Our process has always been fairly streamlined, and the only pro I can really see is that we don't have people coming in wanting to party more than actually record music.



**MOORE:** Definitely the pro that I've found is being able to work more around my own timeline. When I'm in the studio, the session is happening right then and there. Right now, people just send me their files or their songs to get mixed and mastered and I can kind of just lay out my day the way I want to... Also, it gives me more time to really sit down and tweak things a little more so there's a lot less back-and-forth when I do send the final files over. I've also found a couple of ways to actually stream high-quality audio. So, there's times when I will actually do a live mix remotely and that has opened up a whole new world for me.



**VAN GO:** I've learned to trust my own playing! Since I can't hire as many extra session musicians to play on stuff, I've had to quickly get better at playing instruments I don't normally play, like drums and keys. I've also done a lot more hiring of session players remotely – sending them a two-track and they send me back takes of their parts.



**WORSLEY:** The cons are definitely that people aren't travelling. I was so used to working with artists from all over the country and even North America. The pros are that people are way more interested in setting up remote sessions. So, you've got people from New York, Toronto, Halifax, Paris, and all over the world that are wanting to set up these remote sessions. Before the pandemic, there was a lot less of that. So, that's definitely been nice.



**ZIMMERMANN:** The pandemic has shown me that certain aspects of the production and recording process can indeed be done remotely. For remote sessions to work and ensure the outcome is what you expect out of it, clear and proper communication is definitely key, especially if a live video call is not possible.

On the other hand, the pandemic has shown me that there is a certain element that just can't be

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replaced. For some music, the remote recording process just doesn't work – for example, a bluegrass band that I had to record recently. There is still lots of music out there that benefits from musicians getting into the same room and having that magic moment where everything just fits and that can't be done without the presence of everyone in the same room.

## **PS: What's the biggest lesson(s) you've learned through this experience, whether it's on the business or creative end, that you think will carry over into the post-COVID world when things are eventually "back to normal"?**



**DUFOUR:** I think the biggest thing I learned through all this is the importance of being able to deliver a top-notch product with whatever you have, wherever you are! Yeah, it's nice being in a proper studio with great acoustics and very accurate monitoring, but the reality of this pandemic has shown that you have to adjust and be able to work mobile, too, and still get the same sonic results.

My brain started thinking about this a couple years ago. I was en route to Europe for a vacation with my partner but I was still finishing up some mixes for The Trews' last album. I brought a small portable mix rig with me and finished mixing the album while on trains to our next destination and in hotel rooms! It was nominated for Rock Album of the Year at the 2019 Junos and had multiple radio-charting singles on it!



**FALCH-NIELSEN:** I think the sanitization that is happening now with equipment and common spaces is probably something that will continue beyond COVID. It's something that wasn't thought about as much before but is also just good practice with many people using the same microphone and things like that. Not to say we didn't clean the equipment before, but it has become a regular practice now after each use and I think that is a good thing.



**MOORE:** I think the biggest lesson is to always try to be one step ahead of whatever you're on. Before this happened, I never would've thought about actually streaming audio and working remotely on a live session. I think it was Crew Studios in Vancouver that told me about an event they had where they were

working on this program to stream live sound in high quality and record everything. I thought it was pretty cool but didn't think much of it until the pandemic hit, and then I was like, 'Whoa, maybe I should've been looking more into that technology!' So, I think once you stay one step ahead of the game, whether it's technology or creativity or in business, you'll still stumble but you'll always be able to catch your balance quickly.



**VAN GO:** You can always count on things to change. Nothing ever stays the same, and you just have to accept that life throws you unexpected curveballs sometimes and not let it get you too down.



**WORSLEY:** The biggest thing I've noticed and learned from this is the importance of running a lean recording business with as little overhead as possible. If you stretch yourself too thin and you run into a situation like this, there's a lot of studios that just can't handle the strain financially, and so they can't make it work.



**ZIMMERMANN:** I definitely learned that the music industry is known to change through tough times and the recording process will have to change with it. Being able to work through this tough time has been a real blessing and the ability to go with the flow is something that will carry over once things are "back to normal."

## **PS: How do you feel about the foreseeable future for the recording studio business? What impact do you think it will feel in the short and long terms?**



**DUFOUR:** I feel this pandemic has really changed things moving forward. Creative ways of working, the way we interact with each other, protocols at studios, etc. It has definitely changed my outlook on the way I work. I am currently setting up a more permanent mix studio at our new house and will continue to always have a great space to work out of at home, even when I start working out of a commercial studio again full-time. Sure, I love working out of a commercial space, interacting with other creatives and having clients by for some listens and a hang, but the reality of it is something like this could happen again and I want to make sure I'm more prepared to hunker down for the long haul if need be.



**FALCH-NIELSEN:** I think we don't really know how this will impact things going forward because we haven't seen the real effect of it yet. The reason for this is that in Canada, most musicians are just finishing up their CERB payments [in September]. What that means is, for the past six months, their income hasn't been completely destroyed. They also have had more spare time, so once they felt comfortable coming to the studio, they had the time and money to do so. Once CERB runs out and everyone is hunting for jobs, this might change. The hospitality industry was hit extremely hard, and this is often the industry that musicians first look to for extra work. The jobs simply aren't there for all the musicians to get. If musicians don't have the money to record, I think we could see a decline in business.

Furthermore, many companies are relying on the [government's] wage subsidy at this point to stay afloat. Right now, they can hire people, but when that runs out in December, we might see a further decline of jobs available, which could trickle down to musicians having less money to spend on things like recording.

All of this is dependent on what happens with COVID. Will the numbers increase or decrease? No one knows, but there are many businesses that are alive right now only because of the government subsidies and if numbers stay the way they are now or get worse and the subsidies do not continue, we could be looking at a huge amount of job loss.

With that being said, I am optimistic that these things will work out. Music isn't going anywhere and musicians want to record it. For the average client, I don't think they are recording their music to make lots of money; they are doing it because they want to, and I don't think they will stop wanting to record.



**MOORE:** To be honest, even pre-pandemic, I personally started to feel a huge paradigm shift in the way clients work in the studio. A lot of them were starting to move more towards recording themselves and then finding an engineer to finalize their project and do their mixing and things like that. I feel like this pandemic sped up the process and a lot of people got home setups once they were in lockdown so they could record as many songs as they could. Then, a lot of people out of the blue started hitting me up and trying to find if I'd mix some tracks remotely. I feel like that's where it's headed now.



**VAN GO:** I have no idea what's coming. That's the main thing I've learned. I've stopped trying to predict the future of the business and just focus on doing great creative work and find likeminded creatives to work with.



**WORSLEY:** I mean, there's no doubt that it's going to be tough and it's going to continue to get more competitive, I think. But we're really lucky to live in Canada where we have access to so many different streams of grant funding.

I definitely think it'll accelerate the trend [of artists recording at home and hiring engineers and studios to mix and finalize a project]. In a lot of ways, it's become a necessity for them to do some form of recording and production on their own. I also think it's probably going to shift the industry even more from a genre perspective because it will create more bedroom-based recordings, which people are already getting very used to. It's almost a genre in itself, these sort of lo-fi pop recordings. Depending on what genre you're working in, too – like indie rock and metal and stuff like that – it's been more difficult for those artists because it's a lot harder to do those sorts of things on your own. Those are the genres that still really do need studios to get it done the way they really want it to.



**ZIMMERMANN:** So far, I have seen a big increase in recording sessions as musicians need to find a way to bring their music out with live shows not happening at the moment. Aside from the increase in studio time demand, I also noticed that more sessions get filmed to have another way of bringing the music close to the fans with either livestreaming or in-studio footage.

Personally, I have a feeling that recording studios will stay busy for a long time as there is no known timeline of this pandemic that could describe when things go "back to normal." Having professional recording studios that can help artists stay busy creating and performing is a relief to many session musicians. It keeps their income going and a way for the artist themselves to produce content in the form of music and videos.

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