

5 live sound lessons with audio engineer, Ciaran de Chaud

Ciaran de Chaud started out in live music in Johannesburg South Africa working underground gigs. De Chaud was the go-to-guy for emerging bands in bars, clubs and independent festivals in a city where formal music venues were few and far between. At the time, he viewed these gigs as a means to pay the bills, but in retrospect, he says, these experiences had a profound effect on his journey in the music industry.



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De Chaud is a multi-talented and versatile musician and has embraced many roles across the music sector. From his roots as a jazz drummer, to a stint composing music for big budget commercials to his eventual sweet spot in production and recording, de Chaud credits his time in the live scene, with giving him the edge.

After winning a scholarship to Berklee College for composition, he believed he had put his live sound days behind him. However, he soon hankered for time behind the console. Reflecting on his experience navigating the live music scene, he realised that was where he felt most alive, where he most wanted to be. His live sound days proved to be invaluable, giving him a deep understanding of sonic principles and interpersonal skills and eventually positioning him as a frontrunner in the industry.

De Chaud worked under many industry icons, including Grammy winners Prince Charles Alexander (Notorious B.I.G, P Diddy), Leanne Ungar (Leonard Cohen) and Susan Rogers (Prince). He soon established collegial relationships with these leading industry figures and was entrusted with teaching and mentoring for Berklee College. De Chaud developed and managed a successful engineering mentoring initiative and established himself as an integral team member. He was first among a group of students hosted by Abbey Road and Real World Studios in the UK.

While in the US, de Chaud worked alongside multiple Grammy winner Larry Klein, known for his work with Joni Mitchell, Herbie Hancock, Tracy Chapman and many others. De Chaud and Larry Klein co-produced the debut album *The Space Between* with Norwegian artist Ingrid Saga.

De Chaud believes the lessons he learned in live sound engineering, from problem-solving to mastering signal flow, continue to shape his career as a recording engineer. De Chaud has since become an accomplished recording engineer working in LA. He has had the privilege of working at some of the world's most prestigious recording studios including Abbey Road, Real World, and Henson Recording Studios (formerly A&M Studios).

De Chaud's top 5 lessons learned from live sound

- **Lesson 1: Making limitations work for you**

"As a live engineer, especially in the underground scene, conditions are never perfect. Spaces present challenges. They might be too small, too large, too roomy. You might find yourself engineering a EDM show with a pair of 10-inch speakers, or a 6-piece rock band with an eight channel mixer and four microphones. And the stakes are high. There's a downbeat, and an audience, and one shot at getting it right. There are no second chances, no excuses, and a crowd demanding their return.

The recording studio offers a softer landing. While the pressure is on, there's always another take, and nobody's watching. However, I've learnt to work as if I'm on the edges of a live gig. This approach serves me well and sets me apart as a recording engineer. The band arrives, and everything is always ready to go.

I prioritise simplicity and efficiency. I try not to fuss over countless microphones and endless takes. I focus on capturing the essence of the music and finding the performance. I am convinced that engineer should never get in the way of that. Just get on with it and work within limits of the moment. Keep it simple, keep it flowing and keep it real."

- **Lesson 2. Navigating people and pressure**

"Nothing beats the pressure of arriving at a venue to face technical issues while an impatient crowd hangs out at the door. Technical know-how is a given, it's the ability to calmly manage volatile people and diffuse crisis that sets you apart. It's about figuring out what to prioritise and getting it done methodically and calmly."

This principle applies equally in a recording studio, where although the stresses may not be as overt, they're still very much there. Learning to prioritise effectively under pressure is a valuable lesson to transfer from the live music scene. Figure out what's most important and just do it."

- **Lesson 3: Dealing with gremlins**

"When things go wrong it's all on you! In the live space, the show will go on and it's up to you make sure that nothing stands in its way. As a live sound engineer, I developed a systemised approach to troubleshooting in the heat of the moment, and those lessons still guide me in the studio today."

Be prepared to tackle any issue that comes your way. From experience, I've learned to anticipate the usual suspects. Whether it's on stage or in the studio, gremlins tend to rear their heads in similar ways. I take a methodical step-by-step approach. And I always make sure I have a ground lift handy!"

- **Lesson 4: Signal flow mastery**

My time as a live engineer taught me that signal flow isn't scary. For budding recording engineers, the world of large format analog recording consoles may seem daunting. Working with live analog and digital consoles ingrained the fundamentals of audio and signal flow for me. While the complexity of large-format in-line SSL or Neve consoles may be higher, the principles remain the same. Live engineers excel in grasping the concept of auxiliary sends, thanks to their experience creating monitor mixes.

In contrast, many recording engineers struggle with this concept, especially those accustomed to working solely in digital environments. Without practical experience, understanding the underlying concept can be challenging.

- **Lesson 5: Arranging the room**

"Arranging the room may seem like a simple task, but it's surprising how often recording engineers overlook key spatial considerations, like a vocal mic behind a pillar or the drummer positioned facing away from the bass player."

In the live arena engineers are acutely aware of the importance of stage layout. It's obvious that every band member must be visible to the audience and to each other. As an engineer schooled the live space, there is simply no other way to do it.

However, even in top-tier recording sessions with seasoned engineers, I've observed these fundamental considerations being ignored. This oversight can lead to awkward interactions between musicians and a stifled workflow."

De Chaud is an accomplished audio engineer renowned for his exceptional work in composing, producing, and engineering diverse projects. His notable career highlights encompass composing, producing, and engineering the culturally impactful Gillette - Nosizwe Commercial, which amassed over 508,000 views on YouTube and earned a commendation from South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Additionally, he has collaborated with prominent brands such as Globacom, White Star Super Maize Meal, and Checkers, contributing to impactful advertising campaigns that underscore his talent and expertise.

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