ALTERNATIVE CAREERS FOR SOUND ENGINEERS

Each of these alternative audio pursuits has its own special needs in terms of gear and expertise. But each is attainable. Here's a nutshell:

Forensic Audio

Capital investment: Relatively small — a computer-based DAW and signal-processing plug-ins.

Expertise: Ability to digitise and then manipulate audio to isolate specific data; understanding of basic legal standards and events. Ability to approach audio obliquely — what does a gunshot sound like in a thunderstorm? — much as a sonar operator learns to identify ships by their acoustical signatures.

Marketing quotient: In the US at least, business can be built up by approaching local lawyers and private investigators, which can be easily researched in local phone directories.

Potential return on investment: Depends on country, region and level of work done, but lawyers are used to paying the asking fee for a range of technical forensic services.

Archive Audio

Capital investment: Relatively small — a computer-based DAW and signal processing plug-ins. An array of various tape formats to access sources. Portability preferred, since much of the work will be done on site.

Expertise: Ability to stabilise and restore decaying analogue audio formats, digitise them and then help maintain them through evolving digital format generations.

Marketing quotient: Approaching local academic institutions, as well as historical societies and large companies.

Potential return on investment: As a guide, archivists in US academia make between $25,000 and $50,000 per annum. However, as the need to digitize and manage large volumes of data increases, the potential can be considerably more.

Corporate Audio

Capital investment: Can be significant — in addition to enough equipment to outfit a capable studio, the facility will need aesthetic as well as acoustical design to make it acceptable to top-tier clients.

Expertise: As much creative as technical.

Marketing quotient: High. As much time needs to be spent on cultivating business in a narrow slice of the world as on creating content for it. Few people can operate as a one-person shop. A partnership between a creative type and a business type is common.

Potential return on investment: Very high. Successful corporate events audio professionals can earn into the low hundred-thousands — dollars or Sterling.
Sound Design

Capital investment: As little or as much as you can. The sector is moving towards an all-laptop environment.

Expertise: As much creative as technical.

Marketing quotient: Mostly networking, but also scanning the landscape for opportunities for sound design applications that potential clients aren't aware exist, such as local radio commercials and web sites.

Potential return on investment: Difficult to discern. Sound designers compete with musicians and particularly creative engineers in the perception of many. Revenue will likely be directly related to how well you create an identity for yourself and your sonic signature, as well finding niches for them that more traditional audio folks don't see.

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