

This month, we meet a very sound bloke indeed, John Harding. John is a graduate of the Freelance Success workshop, and has transformed himself from a construction site manager to a professional sound recordist with an impressive list of clients in the space of a few years. John settles in with a beer and talks to Monica Davidson.

John started in the building trade for the same reason as every other job he'd had, which included barman, motorbike courier and overland expedition leader. "There was no entry criteria. You could just go into them and earn money, and that's what I needed to do." Growing up in the UK, he hadn't yet found his life's dream, even into his twenties. "I've never really planned on what I wanted to do, at all. Never even thought about it."

The building industry provided a secure income for many years, especially after his move to Australia to make a life with his Australian partner Lisa, but a crisis of faith was looming. Around his thirtieth birthday, he realised how unhappy he was in his work. Without official qualifications, he was stuck. "There was no real structure for me to go up in my career. All I could do was work harder and hopefully get slightly better jobs doing the same thing."

He looked around for courses to help guide him toward a different career, but with the commitments of a mortgage and a relationship he didn't feel he could throw himself into years of full-time study at university or TAFE. He and Lisa took an extended overseas trip, in the hope that a break would rejuvenate him. No such luck. "I kept doing the building thing, and it was getting harder and harder to get up and go to work. I was getting more and more miserable. I'd had a break, but it got too much."

John eventually found a short course at a private college that he liked the look of, dealing in sound, and was reminded of an earlier passion. At eighteen, he had been in a band called Mr Sneaker. He laughs as he remembers. "The band was supposed to be called Badgers in Space Suits, or Badgers in Wetsuits, but we could never agree." They had a few gigs, and disbanded, but music was still a passion.

A welcome but unexpected financial windfall at the end of 2005 changed everything. John sips his beer and smiles. "That gave us enough money to pay my tuition fees. Lisa was working, and we agreed that she would support me." The course, an Advanced Diploma in Music Technical Production, would only take a year. He started in early 2006.

At this point I unwittingly made myself a part of John's career story. We live close to each other and share a bus route. Travelling to a Green Day gig with John and Lisa at the end of 2006, I complained that my sound recordist had dropped out unexpectedly, just before an important shoot for my production company Twoshotmedia. As John was studying music production, I didn't think he would be interested, it was just a wayward complaint. After a short conversation, though, it became apparent that he would know what to do. I hired him instantly. John was forced to delay his final exams in order to work on that shoot. He was also brilliant at the work, and became my new favourite sound bloke. After we completed shooting he finished his exams and graduated with the highest marks in his year.

At the start of 2007 John had one professional shoot under his belt and his diploma. Now what? John laughs and says "Uh oh!". Lisa works in television, and at the time was working on a home show for a major network. John became the TV handyman. "My on-screen stuff was very limited, my actual stuff was building, painting, occasionally having to do it really slowly for cameras. That was once a week or so."

John honed his networking skills by chatting to the professional soundies on the show, watching and asking questions when he could. "They all knew who I was, but I was introducing myself and giving them my card, and they were saying 'But you're the handyman.' John throws his hands up. 'No I'm not, I'm the sound guy!'" While working on the show, John also completed another shoot for Twoshotmedia, as well as short films and other projects. He soon realised he needed to buy his own equipment. It was a massive, but worthwhile, expense. "People basically said they wouldn't call me if I didn't have my own gear, because you can't rent stuff at short notice."



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Despite the dribble of gigs, nothing much was happening for his career. "I was sending emails, but getting nowhere really. Lisa was helping, and friends were helping, and meeting more people and being introduced was helping, but really Lisa was paying the bills and I was just trying." It was disheartening, especially since he had hoped to be bringing in steady work by mid-2007. He spent whatever spare time he had working on his business, and renovating the house.

Unlike most soundies, who record under their own name, John had dreams of a bigger business. "When I wasn't getting enough work, I had a lot of time to mull over where I wanted it to go. For that reason I was trying to think of ways, without spending any money, to advertise the business better. The first thing I thought was that I didn't want it to be just my name. I wanted it to be bigger than me, some day, and why not start with now? I hate doing things twice. I'd rather to it once, get it set up, and it's almost a system for the future."

As a result, Soundbloke was born. Although just John at this stage, he hopes to one day have a selection of sound professionals who can work in any field on his books. Aware of the potential prejudice in his business name, he also has plans for a women-only offshoot of the company called Soundbirds, another reflection of his combined Londoner-Aussie attitude.

I mention to John that I think Soundbloke is one of the best names for a new business that I've ever encountered. John is, as usual, modest. "There's no point in getting the name John out there," he laughs. "I'm getting a unique name out there, and a unique sales perspective, which is that me and people like me are the company. It's not about getting the most spectacular sound ever, it's more about getting people who are easy to work with and damn good sound."



John has a fine appreciation for branding, and has built up his business brand based on his personality and work ethic. "I won't be awkward, or testy, I'll be clean, everything will work, I won't run out of batteries. Organised, controlled, you know what you're going to get." Everyone who works for Soundbloke in the future will represent the same attitude.

John's natural business acumen and dogged pursuit of his new career has resulted in what can only be described as a coup. Less than one year after graduating, John scored a job working on a three-month documentary touring Europe. The film, entitled *How Much is Enough?*, is about the cost of player transfers in English Premiership League soccer. I giggle. Despite his London heritage, John is hardly a football devotee. He got the job based somewhat on his experience, but mostly on his personality. "And I said I really liked football. Which I do, I just don't follow it very much."

I wonder aloud if he'd ever have thought this would happen to him after so short a time. His previous months of unemployment have obviously taken their toll. "Six months ago it was an impossible dream, but a year ago I was thinking - why can't it happen?" His tough times have also made him realistic about the vagaries of a freelance life, and the importance of cashflow.

"You've got to look three to six months ahead. If the last payment is coming in December, what happens in February? That's an interesting thing that I've never had to deal with so much before. It's a little bit scary, but it's better to know now than not know, rock up in February and wonder where all the money went."

As a man about to step into a new phase of his career, I ask John if he considers himself successful. After pausing to wait for an aeroplane to fly overhead, a typical sound recordist, his answer is touching. "Success for me is to live well, and we always have and we always will live well. By living well I mean happiness, not in terms of finances. Finances just make it easier to buy groceries. For us to live well, that's a me and Lisa thing. So I'm already successful."

He continues. "Success for the business is different. For Soundbloke to be a success, it's for me not to be there anymore, and for there to still be sound blokes. For it to be self-sustaining, for the Soundbloke name to live on when I'm dead and gone."

He drains his beer, ready to go back to his continuing renovations. "John the man is successful. Soundbloke is on it's way." I, for one, defy anyone to argue with that.

** Since this article was written John and Lisa have welcomed son Dexter into the world. Congratulations!*

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