

Eight Years Old

Rick O'Neil

Business is business... time to find a hobby.

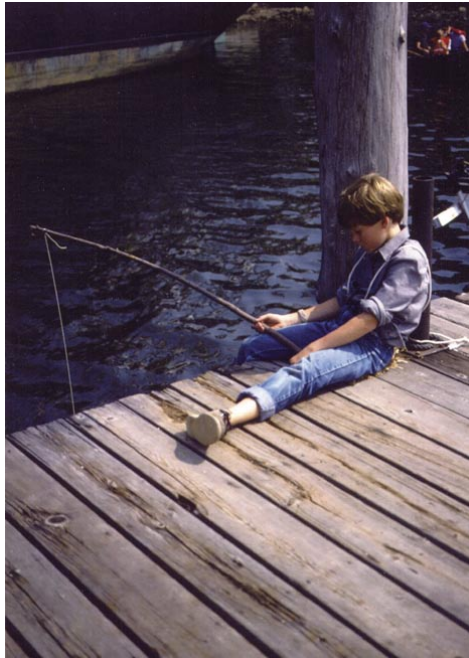
It's 1am: I'm driving home in my classic old '64 Futura; Tom Petty is in the seat next to me, and in the one behind, and spilling out the subwoofers onto the road for the whole of Sydney's eastern suburbs to hear. My new stereo is really loud; it's been a good night...

Tonight I went fishing for jewfish off my secret rock on Sydney Harbour with my mate Mick. We didn't actually catch any jewfish but between the two of us we landed several sharks – stropky little buggers they were too, and not happy about being dragged out of the water so we could salvage our two-dollar hooks from their bitey little mouths before chucking them back to swim away, only to hook them up again 10 minutes later! We cursed each one for not being a 'jew', but really, when you're standing by the shore looking at a city as pretty as Sydney is at night, it's pure champagne fishing. As I said, it's been a good night and I really need to crank up the car stereo on the way home. I feel like I'm eight years old.

This afternoon I shut up shop at about four o'clock in the afternoon. On the way out I passed our illustrious editor, Andy Stewart, as he was cooped up in one of the rooms in my studio, mixing a track for an album that seems to be going on forever... I asked him if he wanted to come fishing; as per usual he had that look in his eye that says, "you know Rick, I really want to but I can't". I anticipate his words as he makes his excuses – I've heard them before, I will hear them again. He's really busy making somebody else's life force sound better than it actually is... I know exactly how it gets. "Oh well," I think, "it's his loss." As I walk out I pass the singer in one of Australia's biggest bands and he looks absolutely shattered, more like a dead man walking than a real live celebrity in his prime...

"I'm going fishing," I say to him, "want to come?". I've known this guy a long time and for just an instant I think I might have him. I watch his eyes flicker with excitement momentarily and then grow dim again as the burden of a musical life hits him. "You know Rick, I'd really like to but I really must rehearse tonight... maybe next time."

Now both men are consummate professionals in this game, and way past their 'what the hell – why not?' carefree years (and for that matter so am I), but I'm the only fool downing tools and going fishing – it was such a beautiful Sydney afternoon...



If you didn't know already, I go fishing every week nowadays and I do it for good reason. Over the last eight years or so I've prattled on in various magazines about the things I do (mostly they're sound related), and anybody who's read my stuff often enough is probably aware that my articles often read more like a child's 'what I did on my holiday'-type essay than a tutorial designed to improve audio skills. I've rambled on about my hobbies so many times in the back pages of AT that I figured the method in my madness was clear, that the readers and editors of this guff would have discovered the hidden meaning by now. But in the last couple of weeks I've suddenly realised that I'm the only one rowing this boat. Up until now I had assumed I was in some kind of secret fleet, but the sad reality is that I'm just bobbing around in the water by myself. Why does it seem like tonight I'm the only clown in the audio business that actually has a life? It has absolutely

nothing to do with money either, let me assure you!

The point is I have a bunch of hobbies that occupy me on a regular basis because I work in a job that's otherwise all consuming, but very few of my co-workers seem to. In fact, I thought for the longest time that sound-smithing was actually my hobby *as well as* my job. I gave it everything: my daytime, my nighttime, my girlfriends, my flat-mates and my credit cards. I gave it my motorcars, my family functions, my holidays and my fashion sense. (I've worked Christmas day at least seven times and gone to work on a Monday and not come home until Friday more times than I care to remember.) I gave sound and music everything I had – and I would have given more – until one day about eight years ago, without asking me, this job took my health. I awoke in a hospital bed, unable to breathe; as close to death's door as I'd like to be for at least another 40 years. 'Pneumonia', the guys looking for sympathy call it. I told mum and dad I just had a bit of 'flu...

When you're stuck in some hospital room wanting to go home but unable to stand up, you start to wonder about things. How did this happen, why me?

While I lay there a lady came around from some government department and asked me to fill out a survey... apparently if you're under 30 and have pneumonia, people want to know why. So I filled in the forms and off she went. Half an hour later the survey woman is back with a bunch of pamphlets and some life-changing information.

“Rick, it says here you work 70 to 90 hours a week...”

“That’s impossible,” I stammer. “I get \$100 per hour. If that was the case I’d be a millionaire!”

She explains that the average Australian wage earner works 38 hours a week, not 90, a paltry 15 hours of which are spent performing tasks that can actually be accounted for. The rest of the time they’re off with their thoughts waiting for the next task to bump into them. While they’re at work they daydream about their families or their love life, their kids or their dog, and mostly about the things they’re going to do on the weekend to unwind and recharge the batteries. Normal people have a whole life of things they think about while they work! Normal people don’t ponder the tone of a snare drum for two hours without another distracting thought.

Now it seems that people who run their own businesses (particularly those fortunate enough to do something they love full time), tend to get a bit tunnel-visioned about it. Audio folk are among the worst offenders in this category, some of them spending every waking hour actually working... or listening to their favourite records... or off seeing a band at the pub, kidding themselves that they’re not actually working.

Are you one of them? Do you give the job everything you’ve got? How long is it since you last had enough money to take four weeks off? And did you actually take a holiday with the money or simply use it to buy another microphone...?

Hmmm, I thought so. Before I got sick I was the exactly the same. “My job is my hobby,” I would say, or “it’s just the way the job is...” or “if I stop working these long hours my clients will go away...” or “I’ll let everybody down”. Actually, if you work in a studio I’m sure you already have all the speeches down pat; you don’t need me reiterating them. But the cold hard truth is it took me a trip to hospital before I faced up to the fact that working six or seven days a week, 10 to 12 hours a day is really not living.

If you work in the sound game your job will not only test your health, if you let it, it will also test your family ties every day and if you don’t address the problem, it will take every semblance of a normal life away from you. Despite this sad state of affairs however, most of us will, at some point, wind up defending this unfortunate scenario as simply an unchangeable aspect of the job description.

Umm... bullshit!

While I was in hospital the survey woman explained to me: “Rick, you must have more in your life than work.” Like some kind of Indian guru, she distilled the solution to my health crisis into one very simple truth: you must have at least one day off every week, you must have a holiday every year and you must find, develop and nurture a new hobby that has nothing whatsoever to do with the way you earn money. “Otherwise, when you get sick again this year, or the next, you will die!” she added bluntly.

Heavy stuff, I thought. Too heavy to dismiss, but how could I do it? Not going to work, even when there was no job to do, was unheard of for me. Days off were when I worked on my unpaid stuff – my ‘Art’ – and this woman wants me to take a holiday? “I don’t have enough money to go skiing or scuba diving or travelling or whatever it is normal people do to relax.”

“Crazy talk,” I thought.

On the way out of the hospital the next day the survey

woman cornered me one last time and asked if I'd thought of a new hobby yet to distract me from my work, and I said: "I was going to try drinking only with my left hand, and only talk to girls that were too good looking for me." She laughed and said that wasn't going to get me far, maybe I should try and remember what I liked doing when I was a kid – before I discovered music...

And that was the watershed moment folks; eight years ago I started taking days off, I never work Sundays any more and I now have a bunch of childish hobbies that you get stuck reading about in the back pages of AT.

How do you get into a hobby? Which one will suit you? How will you find the time? Well, as simple as it sounds, you just have to try some out and see how they fit. The whole point of them is to start on a course of not having a clue what you're doing and end up with another skill that keeps you distracted from the way you earn a living. It doesn't matter what you do, you just have to do something that precludes you from thinking about work for a little while each week. Oh yeah – and beer is not a hobby! And for those readers who might misconstrue my point here, don't let this article be yet *another* excuse to never see your family – the first place you should probably spend some quality time off is at home. Plan your newly designated hobby time around when your family's asleep or working on their own hobbies. Better still, include them in yours.

So just to be clear, let me list the variety of things I do to fill my time. Aside from running, working and growing a large commercial studio, I sleep (lots), tinker with my classic car, dig up creeks in search of gold and play in my woodshed with just about as many

hand tools as they ever made. I am the handyman/builder around the house, I fix a bunch of stuff at my wife's work, collect and restore audio junk, and frequent timber yards just to look at, smell and touch the really big slabs. I collect and repair vintage analogue watches, rummage through auction houses and antique stores for anything old and well made that amuses me. I have dinner with non audio friends where I can tell a good joke and a ridiculous tale that has nothing to do with work; I take holidays whenever my wife tells me she's booked them; I dream of owning a marlin boat but cannot conceive of how to ever manage it; so instead, I sit by the harbour one night a week by myself or with a mate waiting for a 36 kilo jewfish to get really tangled up in my life. That's my kind of complication and that's about the size of my world.

How do I find time to fit these hobbies into my audio career? I don't, I demand it! Hobbies are now an essential part of my life. They make me a better studio person, they make me a nicer studio person, they give my job a sense of purpose and provide a clear delineation between mucking about in the studio losing money and actually making a living, by giving me something better to do than sitting around the studio when there's no work to do. I urge everybody who has a full-time audio career to stop and reassess who and where they are, and what they are doing, both to themselves and for others. You hopefully won't have to take a trip to the hospital to figure this out, but maybe you just might be as dumb as I was... and if that's the case I hope you live through it!

You're never going to be a gazillionaire working in audio, but it can be a hugely satisfying lifestyle if you can learn how to punctuate every single week with some little ritual that costs next to nothing, like digging in the dirt or jogging along a beach.

And let's be straight here, studios are, comparatively, among the most expensive hobbies: an early 1960s Stratocaster will cost you upwards from \$15,000; you can easily spend \$6,000 on an old tube Neumann microphone and \$3,500 on another Neve preamp. The equivalent prize in vintage woodworking hand tools is a 1912 Norris a5 like the one in my wood shed at only \$340 on eBay! The really good fish hooks cost two bucks, and it costs nothing but sweat to dig up a creek. I cannot afford another very expensive hobby (err... career) but I *can* afford a bunch of cheap ones. Indeed, I cannot afford *not* to have them.

Nobody you know or respect enough to listen to is ever going to tell you this stuff, and frankly, I feel a little bit too high on my horse right now, but in the last month several pretty tragic events have come into play reminding me that life is just too short to spend 17 hours a day working on the same band three weeks in a row only to sign up to do it again after just one day off. None of us are as young or as bulletproof as we were yesterday.

Get busy living folks. Who knows how long you've got... make the most of it.

AT

Rick O'Neil runs Turtlerock Mastering in Camperdown and he feels enough about this subject for this to be the first article he has ever handed in ahead of time – it's time the editor had a few hours off.