

LONDON SESSION MUSCIANS PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE	Isobel Griffiths
YEAR OF BIRTH	1953 Lincolnshire
PARENTS OCCUPATION	Father was in the oil business and Mother was a secretary
INTERVIEWER	Chris Conway
LOCATION	City of Westminster Archive
DATE OF INTERVIEW	6 th February 2023

This interview is about Isobel's life as a Fixer. It covers her early life and how she got into the business and describes in detail the work and life of a fixer. The interview is peppered with stories about her time in the business and gives a rare insight into the life of a Fixer.

The interview starts with Isobel explaining the role of a fixer, the formal title of which is a Union approved orchestral contractor. Without Musicians Union approval her business cannot operate and key to that is an encyclopaedic knowledge of the voluminous union rules and pay rates.

Isobel started her life in the music business as secretary to Jeff Wayne (War of the Worlds) who at the time was a prolific jingle writer. Eventually his fixer, who organised the musicians for the recording of his jingles, left and Isobel took over. After several years Isobel decided to set up her own business which she runs to this day.

She talks about establishing herself in a very male dominated business and the resistance she met from male fixers and the lengths that they would go to in order to make life difficult. She explains how she established a reputation for ensuring that her musicians were paid fairly and treated properly which historically had not always been the case. As a consequence, her company is now the leading company for fixing orchestral sessions.

Isobel discusses the role of a fixer during recording sessions where procuring up to 90 musicians for an orchestra is just the beginning. Many of the sessions relate to music for films and Isobel takes the listener through such a session and the difficulties that can be encountered, particularly as recording film music can be very dynamic with the composer /arranger having to re write some of the music during the session. She explains the pressure faced by the musicians as normally they will not have seen the score until a couple of minutes before they play it and they will be expected to play it perfectly, which they do thanks to phenomenal sight reading skills. Isobel then goes on to describe the complexities in keeping track of the pay of each musician during the session and the overall budget that has been agreed with the client. Isobel also explains the practicalities of paying the musicians on the day and how this frequently involved a long queue in the studio canteen late into the evening.

In one of a number of amusing stories Isobel explains the recording process for Top of the Pops and how, back in the day musicians were required to record the backing track which the artists would perform to as they were not allowed to use the original backing track. This inevitably could be problematic and Isobel explains how this was frequently circumvented.

During the interview Isobel explains how she is able to source musicians and the skills that they need to be successful as a session musician in addition to the obvious skills of playing and sight reading. She describes the different personalities that tend to exist within orchestral musicians and illustrates this with tales of a number of amusing incidents that have occurred during recording sessions.

Isobel also talks about some of the characters that she has met during her career, including a very famous musician whose family business was a café and she would book him for sessions by phoning and leave messages at the café!

She explains the key qualities needed to be successful as a fixer which in addition to the technical knowledge is the ability not to get flustered and have nerves of steel to deal with the difficulties that can arise at very short notice.

The relationship with the commissioning clients is critical and Isobel explains the different relationships that exist between all of those persons involved in the recording process including film directors, composers, arrangers, orchestrators and also explains the hierarchy that exists.

Towards the end of the interview Isobel talks about changes in the industry particularly with regard to technology and how in a number of cases musicians will receive an electronic sample of the music that they are to perform in advance of the session or examples where musicians can record at home and send their part electronically to the studio. She also reflects on how although busy there are fewer and shorter sessions and how the number of musicians required tends to be focussed around an elite core making it increasingly difficult for orchestral musicians to break into session work.

The interview ends with Isobel recounting a memorable moment from a Joni Mitchell recording session.