

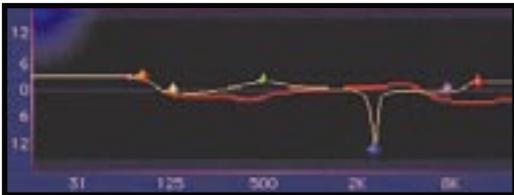
Commonly used words with interesting origins

One of the strongest indicators of community spirit is its use of specific and exclusive language. Pro audio suffers from its fair share of jargon but we also use words regularly with origins that are a little cloudy. **KEITH SPENCER-ALLEN** looks in on the derivation of some popular terms.



BUS — Our use of the word bus derives from the busbar, usually a copper rod used to connect a number of circuits or carry current/signals that was probably first employed by the early telephone companies. Bus, however, has very much earlier linguistic origins with a range of meanings relating to 'to carry'. So from the

same source comes an 'omnibus', which carries people; a restaurant's 'busboy' carries used plates to the kitchen; and a console's bus carries multiple audio signals or data. Some add a second 's', which is mentioned in the OED as acceptable, but 'buss' has the far more common listed meaning of 'to kiss'.



EQUALISER — Another term from the phone companies for a circuit used to 'equalise' (EQ) a signal so that both ends of a telephone line were 'equal' despite any losses in the line. A similar technique was used to overcome the deficiencies in recording and broadcast. Later there was also a school of thought that used a simple variable equaliser to correct for deficiencies prior to the microphone due to positioning, still with the intention of maintaining a hypothetically flat response. It was then only a generational switch in thinking to liberate the equaliser to create the very opposite — as far from equal treatment of all frequencies as was wished.



DUBBING — Early film studios had a room set aside for making copies (ordoubles) of recordings, referred to as 'doubling'. The suggestion is that that was c o n t r a c t e d to 'dubbing'

although it was probably encouraged by the fact that there was already a verb 'to dub', i.e. the creation of a knight by a monarch by dubbing, the conferring of rights from the monarch onto a commoner, which has a parallel in making a copy from a master to a blank medium. (*If you say so. Ed*).



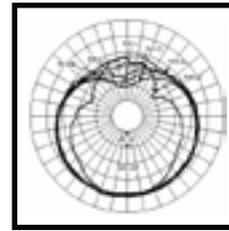
FLANGING — Until the late 1970s the only way to create a flanging effect was to very slightly vary the speed of two identical analogue tape recordings in relation to each other. When these were combined, the slight difference in signals caused a comb filter effect that was most pronounced when the speeds were changing. Creating this time/tape speed change was generally done by grasping the edge of the spool flange to slow movement. There are many tales of how this term came about but the most plausible suggest it originated at Abbey Road on Beatles' sessions — a question from John Lennon as to what effect they had added to his voice generated the name 'flanging'.



PAN — This was a knob unknown before we had something other than glorious mono to deal with. Early stereo consoles had quaintly labelled 'panoramic controls' but that took up so much console real estate that the contraction to pan was inevitable. It's derived from the Greek word for a picture of a landscape in relation to a static position. Clearly the audio application came via the film camera although while the visual side comprises a constantly changing image, its audio namesake is so frequently an illusion created by changing left/right levels. A true parallel to the camera would involve changing time delay and spectral change recreating, as far as panning can, a true analogy to physical positioning of a sound source.



FOLEY — The art of creating sound effects for on-screen filmed images has been around since the transition of silent film to the talkies in the 1920s. However, few realised what problems adding sound was going cause in terms of production techniques. Jack Foley, who was working at Universal Studios in LA as everything from a stuntman to director, single-handedly established many of the techniques still used today, but with a legendary productivity and a claimed ability to create three footstep tracks simultaneously! In the last decade Foley has become adopted as the accepted term worldwide replacing, in the UK, the less explanatory term of 'footsteps'.



CARDIOID — Microphone polar patterns are named after the shape created when the sensitivity of the mic is plotted at angles around it. In an ideal world most of the shapes are self-explanatory — omnidirectional mics have a circular polar pattern, Fig-8 response looks like the number 'eight' — but cardioid? A directional mic with a high level of sensitivity across the front decreasing towards the rear gives a heart-shaped response, hence cardioid.



WRAP — As in it's a 'wrap', one of the few film words that everyone knows but its origins may seem a little obscure. Most likely it is an acronym of 'Wind Roll And Print' originating in old Hollywood when at the end of shooting, the camera film (the roll) would have to be rewound before removal from the camera, and then taken off for processing — hence signifying the end of work.



WHITE NOISE — Just as white light contains all wavelengths of light, a similar definition is applied to sound that has all frequencies, within the range of human hearing, present in equal amounts. And it doesn't stop with white — 'pink' noise is white noise filtered at -3dB/octave to create equal energy across all the octave bands. And it goes on — 'blue' noise is +3dB/oct with rising frequency; and black noise is (again like light) basically silence. These are the noise types that there are recognised specifications for but name a colour and there is now a noise type using it. None of this should be confused with the apocryphal tale of the 'brown note', the supposed frequency that causes a human's bowels to evacuate!



PARAMETRIC — As in 'parametric' EQ would be an equaliser where the frequency, the amplitude and Q were continuously, independently variable parameters. With this number of variable parameters the equaliser can be referred to as being parametric. Although some manufacturers added Q controls to graphic EQs and referred to them as 'paragraphics' this is a misnomer — the 'para' prefix is part of parameter and can't be detached and still carry the meaning.

YOU CAN HELP US — I'm curious about a number of terms and haven't found where they came from. The origins of the word 'gobo' for acoustic screen; of 'jitter' (there are no English words beginning J-I-T before the creation of the word); and there's nothing definitive about 'glitch' other than a possible Yiddish connection. ■