



The New York Times/Chester Higgins Jr.

Al Fierstein in his sound studio in Manhattan

# Recording Man Toils to Hear The Sweet Sound of Success

By LEONARD SLOANE

For almost as long as he can remember, Al Fierstein has been captivated by sound. "Sound is my life," he says.

It is also his bread and butter. As a one-man small business, the 25-year-old entrepreneur has devised three lines of work that harmonize with his love of sound. From his loft on the edge of Soho, he repairs and maintains the sensitive recording equipment that professional studios use. He also improvises sound equipment of his own design. Finally, Mr. Fierstein operates Sorcerer Sound, his own studio for recording the music of professionals and ambitious amateurs.

As one might expect, Mr. Fierstein's trio of small businesses have a long way to go before he can ease his 16-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week schedule.

"My goal," the young businessman said recently, "is not to have money for the sake of having money."

Thus far, the problems that come with having money—for whatever reason—have not been terribly pressing. Last year, his companies grossed \$18,000, but their expenses exceeded \$20,000, and Mr. Fierstein had to dip into savings. The year before, the first full year he had operated from a combined apartment-workshop-studio, he was also roughly \$2,000 in the red.

## For \$50,000, 'A Big Party'

"The way things are going now, I should gross at least \$25,000 this year and make a profit," he said. "If I make \$50,000, I'll have a big party."

For Mr. Fierstein, a short-bushy-haired man with great intensity in his voice, the world of sound has always been close. Growing up in Great Neck, L.I., he became a ham radio operator at age 9 after which his hobby became building burglar alarms and other electronic devices for neighbors.

"When I was 11 years old, I built a telephone answering machine for my family," he recalled. "The only problem was that the first time it was turned on, it set a fire in the house. But that didn't stop me."

After graduating from high school in 1969, Mr. Fierstein attended Cornell University for a year and a half, majoring in electrical engineering. But then he decided to take some time off to find himself and asked for a leave of absence. "I'm still on it," he added.

## One-Day Rotisserie Tester

He returned to New York City and got a job testing rotisseries for a manufacturer. That position lasted for one day, after which Mr. Fierstein quit to find another spot more directly connected with the field of acoustics. He heard of an opening at Media Sound, a large recording studio, and there found the type of work that led to the start of his own companies.

Mr. Fierstein became a maintenance man at the studio and learned how to repair, align and handle emergency situations dealing with the complex and expensive control boards, taping equipment and other electronic gear used by audio experts to tape music performed by singers and instrumentalists.

For a starting salary of \$75 a week, he discovered that a professional studio had "a different breed of equipment" than a home workshop, requiring an intimate knowledge and understanding of all the component parts to keep them functioning.

After 18 months there, Mr. Fierstein was ready to go out on his own. He did it gradually, first working for short periods or for part of the day for studios,

Continued on Page 27, Column 2

# Small Business: Waiting to Hear Sound of Success

## Continued From Page 23

while beginning to freelance on the side, handling maintenance and building test models.

When his freelance income became sufficient to support himself in 1975, Mr. Fierstein rented a floor of an old, high-ceiling loft building on Mercer Street at the edge of Soho as a base for his operations. Within his 2,500 square feet, he converted the factory space into a small, completely enclosed studio and a control room for making eight-channel recordings. He also set up Bohemian-style living quarters—including a pinball machine and a Kawasaki motorcycle in the living room and a bedroom on top of the studio with built-in stereo sound.

The cost of establishing studio facilities would have been at least \$25,000 if Mr. Fierstein had to purchase all of the necessary electronic equipment (such as a console, amplifiers and tape recorders), musical instruments (such

as an electric piano, organ and drums) and construction material for the studio (such as five tons of sand to soundproof the floor).

However, he didn't have \$25,000 nor did he want to try to borrow it, so Mr. Fierstein built what he could, bought component rather than finished products and traded his services to other recording studios in exchange for new and used equipment.

### Owens Three Businesses

As a fledgling entrepreneur, Mr. Fierstein owns three businesses and two corporations. One business consists of his electronic maintenance, repair and custom modification activities at and for studios, for which he charges \$15 an hour or a flat fee usually ranging between \$300 to \$2,500.

The second business—which operates under the same name as the first, Acoustilog Inc.—is his vehicle for inventing and manufacturing sound equipment for his own and other

studios. The only device thus far off the drawing boards is a reverberation timer that measures the acoustics of rooms where sound is significant, like studios, concert halls and arenas. A dozen of these timers developed when Mr. Fierstein refused to pay \$400 to buy such a device with fewer features, have been sold since the beginning of 1977 at a price of \$1,000 each.

Finally Mr. Fierstein has his recording studio, Sorcerer Sound, that makes musical tapes for professionals, amateurs and amateurs who would like to become professionals. A new rock music group might spend \$300 to perform at the studio for 10 hours in order to record a few songs and obtain a dozen demonstration tapes to send to record companies and impresarios.

### Just a Dream at the Moment

Mr. Fierstein's long-range goals are to own and operate a major recording studio and build on a production, rather than a custom, basis the kind of sophisticated equipment that goes into such studios. But he knows that this ambition is just a dream at the moment, as he struggles to pay his bills and keep his customers happy.

"A small studio has limited flexibility and doesn't have the 16-track and 24-track recording equipment that larger studios do and larger groups need," he admitted. As a result, Mr. Fierstein has to hustle for sales, with hope that word of mouth and limited advertising will bring him new business.

"I work every day at one thing or another from the time I get up until the time I go to sleep at night," he said. "But that's all right. I have my fun when I work."

**The New York Times**

Published: August 6, 1977

Copyright © The New York Times