

BRINGING SOUND TO LIFE:

Ashish Saksena on his Love & Passion for Live Sound Mixing

In Conversation with Ashish Saksena, Live Sound Engineer for Shankar Ehsaan Loy & KK

*With more than 25 years of experience as a live sound engineer for musical stalwarts such as Shankar Ehsaan Loy and KK, **Ashish Saksena** has forged his craftsmanship with technical acumen in monitor mixing and Front of House mixing. But his expertise in sound engineering isn't restricted to the live stage. Even in the studio, Ashish knows how to make the mix dance to his own tunes. PALM + AV-ICN spoke to Ashish Saksena, who takes us down the memory lane at the beginning of his career in live sound engineering, why he didn't want to go back to live shows after trying his hand at a virtual sound mix, what the future holds for the art of monitor mixing, and why he prefers FOH mixing over monitor mixing.*



An Unexpected Kickstart to a Lifelong Career:

Diving into the finer details about when and how he took his first steps in the world of live sound engineering, **Ashish Saksena** recalls that it wasn't the live stage that he first put foot onto; rather, it was within the four walls of the studio where he first found his calling. He shares, "My mom, Pushpa Saksena, is a Hindi voiceover artist. I used to accompany her to her recordings. The studio environment fascinated me – the speakers, the big tapes, and all of that. My father knew Louis Banks quite well from his IIM Calcutta days. One day, my father and I went to Louis uncle's

recording studio, and he asked my father, "Who's this?" My father replied, "He's my son." Louis uncle replied, "Send him to my studio (4-D) from tomorrow. I will put him to work." That's how I started off in the studio - by fluke.

He adds, "Then I graduated to doing live sound for Colonial Cousins – Leslie Lewis and Hariharan. So, I did a few years of that, and I came back to the studio. Then, Shankar Ehsaan Loy approached me, and I stepped out of the studio and started doing live sound for them. I did Front of House and monitor mixing for this band for quite some time, until we got a dedicated monitoring engineer. After a few years, when this dedicated monitoring engineer decided to join another band,

I shifted to doing monitors, and we got someone else to do Front of House. I was involved in monitor mixing for at least four to five years. Now, I am back to Front of House, since we have someone else for monitor mixing now.”

But, Ashish Saksena was still not contemplating monitor mixing as a serious career pathway. He reminisces: “Initially, I took all of this very lightly, because I was focused on the studio side of the industry. But when I saw how vast and complex the live sound industry is, I turned more serious about it. Basically, it’s engineering that drew me towards the live sound field – and it’s a very different kind of engineering, different kind of equipment, and different kind of electronic applications being used in this industry.”

The Start of a Musical Journey with Shankar Ehsaan Loy:

Talking about how he began touring with the trio of musical maestros, Shankar Ehsaan Loy, Ashish Saksena shares that it’s his familiarity with the kind of sounds that Shankar Ehsaan Loy preferred that got him into the live sound industry in a full-fledged manner, “Basically, Shankar Ehsaan Loy worked in the same studio as me, so we met each other almost every day. That’s how it all started. I also worked with them on a few films where they composed music. So, there was a sort of a familiarity between us. So, when they decided about venturing into the live music event in a full-fledged manner, they started looking for a dedicated live sound engineer. I was right there, so they approached me. Because they wanted a familiar face, a medium to convey their instructions across the touring team, and a single point of contact, I started touring with the band as their live mix engineer.”

Sharing more about how the overall journey has been like as Shankar Ehsaan Loy’s live sound engineer, Saksena shares that technological advancements pro-



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elled them to deliver more and more outstanding live sound experiences to the audiences. “As my journey with Shankar Ehsaan Loy progressed, all of us witnessed several changes in terms of the technology being used in the live sound industry. When I joined them, we used to have analog consoles and speaker boxes, and now, he have digital consoles and line arrays coupled with other technological advances which are available to us now. The journey has been more technical, so to say. The craftsmanship has always been out of the world from day one, so I didn’t really have to work too hard from a creative standpoint.”

He adds, “The growth I experienced while working with Shankar Ehsaan Loy has been amazing, because the trio are brilliant musicians. So I hit the ground running with them. I didn’t have to really ‘fix’ their sound or acoustics, they are all genuinely phenomenal as artists. It all fell into place immediately.”

Reliable Equipment for a Fail-Proof Monitor Mix:

As a monitor mix engineer whose primary role involves relying on quality equipment in order to create a good mix, Ashish Saksena is very particular about the equipment brands that he trusts on the live stage, “I use a lot of Sennheiser equipment. I rely on it quite a lot since it has a good sound and it is simpler to use. Right now, we only have two prominent brands in India for the live sound industry – Shure and Sennheiser. However, until a year before KK passed away, I used an Audio-Technica microphone on him, which sounded beautiful and made him sound absolutely amazing. But for microphones and in-ear systems, I rely on Sennheiser. For the console, I use AVID. Not that I mind using DiGiCo or any other reputed brand, but my personal preference is to use an AVID console.”

A Live Sound Engineer’s Communication Skills:

What has monitor mixing got to do with a live sound engineer’s communication skills? Ashish reveals, “It’s very important. You have to build trust between you and the touring crew, and also between you and the musicians. In the absence of that trust, there will be a lot of problems. There are certain things which you may not be able to explain to the musicians due to their technical nature, but if you have a good rapport with them, you can just ask them to trust you, and they will. The artists need to know that you are capable of doing your job, and one more thing, as a live sound engineer, keep a policy of open communication. If something is glitchy, not working, do let them know.”

What is Ashish’s process of establishing a clear communication with artists he’s meeting for the first time? He shares, “When I am touring with artists I have never toured with before, I make it a point to meet up with them during rehearsals, and start talking to them to make both of us comfortable with one another. For instance, I was doing this festival in Jodhpur, and at the last minute, I was asked to mix for another artist. So I went to his room, met him and his touring crew, and hear his music to familiarize myself with the kind of music they were planning to perform at the show.”

Virtual Mixing in the Lockdown:

Ashish Saksena has a newfound love for virtual live mixing. He concedes, “I love virtual monitor mixing. It is just like studio mixing with a live band. It’s like, you are mixing in a studio, but with a live band. This allows you to perform finer detailing and catch the nuances. You can do things that you can’t do or can’t even make out

on a big PA. In a live setting, you sometimes do not even bother to correct these nuanced details because you know that it is a room mode, it is going to boom. But when I was doing virtual live mixing, I didn't want to go back to doing physical live shows. I liked this space – it has professional studio speakers, and the sound engineers are in an isolated environment. Virtual live mixing is fun.”

Switching to Front of House Mixing:

Despite an immensely successful career as a monitor mix engineer, why did Ashish Saksena decide to go back to Front of House mixing? He replies, “I think the switch has more to do with the creative aspect of FOH rather than the technical part. When you are performing a monitor mix, of course, to an extent, it is creative, like the part where you are processing the instruments that you are given and ensuring that the mix for the musicians sounds right. But, at the same time, it also demands a lot of technical acumen, because you are handling radio frequencies, several microphones, and numerous in-ear systems, musicians, monitor wedges, their placement – all of that, and more – which is also a collaborative effort with the FOH engineer. In the end, it is a synchronized role, the monitor mix engineer and the FOH engineer cannot function independent of one another. But, I started my career with FOH mixing, and that's what I love – mixing sounds on the big

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speakers. So, when I got the chance to return to FOH, I grabbed it with both hands. There were no two ways about it. I mix monitors even today, so it's not that monitor mixing has seeped out of my life. It's still very much a part of who I am and what I do.”

Asked if he prefers FOH over monitor mixing, Ashish Saksena is very prompt to respond. He replies, “I prefer FOH now. When I started with Shankar Ehsaan Loy, we had five auxes. We had a singer, we had percs, gtrs, keys, and drums. So, we had six mono auxes for analog and wedges, and I had the seventh and eight auxes for reverb and delay. So we used to have these Soundcraft analog consoles and Allen & Heath consoles, and eight auxes – six for the stage and two for me. Now, we have thirty-six auxes, just for the stage. It's just the tediousness of it which makes me prefer FOH mixing over monitor mixing.”

The Future of The Live Sound Industry:

Ashish Saksena is of the opinion that the live sound industry, especially the field of monitor mixing, is already on the precipice of a technological overhaul (KLANG Immersive is here already). He comments, “The technological advancement is already happening. We're already seeing a lot of iPad mixing, remote mixing, and more similar developments. As far as the actual concept of monitor mixing is concerned, I don't think that's going to change, because the basics have to be in place. The equipment and the technology will just become better and better. For instance, we are already using digital microphones, and I think digital in-ear sys-

tems are also arriving soon. But even then, the basic way of creating good sound isn't going to change anytime soon.”

But, is remote mixing the next big thing in monitor mixing? Ashish Saksena shares that overseas, it's already a commonplace occurrence, “What happens overseas is that a lot of bands move from one place to the other with their equipment, their gear, the stage sound is consistent. So, they set up a mixing console. When they rehearse in their space, they set up a proper monitor mix for the musicians and lock it. So, they travel with two mixing consoles, but one engineer. So, the pre-mixed console is switched on and loaded up with the show file on the stage. The musicians have these little remote pads, which helps them to create any minor changes on the spot.”

Saksena divulges the technology that is set to be a game-changer for the monitor mixing field in this country, “In India, we rely more on iPads now, because be it an AVID console, a Yamaha console, or a Soundcraft console, you can connect it to the iPads nowadays. You can give each an iPad to each musician and they can control their own mix. So, this is a more hybrid approach than remote mixing – there is a person who attends to the monitor console, but at the same time, the musician, via the WiFi, is able to control his/her own mix.”

The Most Unforgettable Live Concert:

Every live sound engineer has a live concert he'll never forget. Ashish Saksena is no exception. When asked about a live concert that left a mark on his memory, he proudly states, “I mixed The Wailers. The band was performing at a festival in the Kamala Mills Compound, and they needed a mix engineer at the last minute. So I got a call from their sound company and he said, “Listen, there's a small show that they need a mix engineer for. Are you up for it?” I said, “Yes, of course.” I reached the venue and I saw The Wailers. I was balled over. They sounded fantastic. I will never ever forget that show.”

Key Qualities of a Successful Live Sound Engineer:

No one better than Ashish Saksena can speak about the key qualities required to be successful in the ever-expanding live sound industry. To aspiring monitor mix engineers and FOH mix engineers, he advises, “It is vital to have basic musical knowledge. You are dealing with musicians, artists, and singers. I regret not learning any musical instrument. However, it wasn't a key requirement at the time when I entered the live sound industry. If I had learnt even a single musical instrument, it would help me speak the language of the musicians. For example, what happens often is that, in the studio, when you are recording something, and the musician says, “Can you go to that G-Major part?” I just look at him blankly, and then he clarifies, “Go to bar 140.” I understand bar 140, so I scroll to bar 140, which is the G-Major part. So, be a little musically inclined. It will make the path much easier for you.”

He further shares, “The other key quality required to succeed as a live sound engineer is patience. Effective communication and a pleasant demeanour is also very important to maintain. You can't be frowning and snarling all the time. Have a little aptitude towards sound and basic technical prowess, it is an advantage.”

Ashish Saksena also shares that there is a huge dissimilarity in the way Indian rental companies work with a technical rider as opposed to say, a western country, so to succeed in your efforts as a live sound engineer, particularly in the field of monitor mixing, it is a prerequisite to get your technical rider right. He adds, “The major difference between shows in India and overseas is that overseas, you have to flesh out your equipment requirements in detail in your technical rider. For example, we got stuck in Washington DC once, because in my technical rider, I wrote microphone stands, and I specified whether I needed small microphone stands or big microphone stands. But there was one word I missed to add in between, which was called ‘boom’. I forgot to specify that I needed a boom stand. The event company took it very literally, and gave me one big rod and one small rod with a clip on top and a base with no way to angle it. In India, there is more spontaneity and flexibility. The rental companies providing the equipment is poised to accommodate a lot of last-minute changes. It has never been an issue.”



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