

SREEJESH NAIR: THE SOUND ENGINEER WHO BECAME THE INDUSTRY'S CONNECTIVE TISSUE

From Rajkamal Studios to Gangs of Wasseypur to AVID—a career built on translating technology into craft, and craft into community

*From a mechanical engineering degree taken to dodge a second language to becoming a Solutions Specialist for Pro Audio, **Sreejesh Nair's** journey defies convention at every turn. Nair remains a passionate advocate for education and knowledge-sharing and **PALM Expo Magazine** reached out to him essentially to trace and discover how he became the industry's go-to voice for technical guidance. In this candid conversation, he reflects on the people, principles, and experiences that shaped his remarkable career.*

An Accidental Engineer

Audio engineering wasn't a career choice for Nair—it was an accident. A Mechanical Engineering graduate, he stumbled into the field when it was still largely unknown in India. The discovery proved transformative.

"The only reason I wanted to do Engineering was to avoid a second language! I was always interested in Electronics Engineering but ended up doing Mechanical. The transition to Audio Engineering was purely accidental. My interest in Mechanical wasn't deep, and I came across audio engineering as a career option. In 2002, this wasn't a well-known career, and convincing my parents wasn't easy. But they're understanding people and let me pursue my calling after B.Tech at **Chetana Institute** in Trichur, under **Fr. Paul Alengattukaran** and **Stanly Johnson**. That was my turning point—not just in career but in life. The most important lesson I learned: **Sound Engineering can't be taught. One can only be shown how to learn it.**"

Two Days' Notice, No Return Address

If Nair's introduction to audio engineering was accidental, his arrival in Mumbai was a leap into the unknown. Looking back, he recalls those early days as equal parts disorienting and transformative.

"Two days after my course at Chetana ended, I was told to go to Mumbai. No preparations, no timeline, nothing. I just knew I had to join **Rajkamal** since they were installing **Pro Tools**. This came via **Sreekumar** (who now works at **Avid**) from **Real Image**. So, I packed my bag and hopped on a train to Mumbai—not knowing Andheri had East and West, that Lokmanya Tilak station was far from Dadar, or where I'd live. I fell sick, started a small job for ₹1,500, and asked my parents for money for three months. Then one day, **Vijay Karpe** from Rajkamal called asking if I could dump a few MO (magneto optical) disks to Pro Tools. I went in. It was August, right after Independence Day. I hadn't even heard of an MO disk! They were installing Pro Tools on a brand-new Mac and thus it began."

What began as a simple assignment became an immersive education in professional audio. Rajkamal exposed Nair to cutting-edge technology, large-format consoles, Pro Tools workflows, and film mixing at a level few young engineers experience. More importantly, it introduced him to colleagues whose trust and generosity shaped his approach to collaboration and learning.

Fresh out of college and largely untested, Nair was given an opportunity at one of India's most respected post-production facilities—a vote of confidence he still attributes to the trust of those around him.

"I was the first student from Chetana to come to Mumbai in 2003. Transitioning to film mixing straight from being a student wasn't easy. The credit goes to **Gaurav Gupta**, CEO of **Futureworks**, then **Gaurav Digital** at Rajkamal. He let an unknown, inexperienced fresher explore film mixing in such a prestigious place. It made me realise that opportunities carry a lot of trust, luck and above all the need to constantly learn and be updated."

In 2003, Nair encountered a full-fledged **Neve Gemini**, multiple **Akai DD8+**, **Tascam Hi-8**, **Betacam**, and learned about **Biphase**, **RS422**, the **Colin Broad** controllers and others. He joined just a month after **Pro Tools V6** launched, witnessing the OS transition from **OS9** to **OSX**. For a curious mind, it was incredible—so much to absorb. Alongside the technology, he learned mixing in **Dolby Digital 5.1** and **SR**, optical transfers, and understanding the machines themselves.

"None of this would have been possible without **Debajit** and **Subir**, who were assisting **Hitendra Ghosh** and **Anup Dev** respectively. That phase taught me that teaching a colleague involves friendship, mistakes, frustration, patience, and most importantly, trust."

The learning extended beyond sound itself. Rajkamal was embracing cutting-edge technologies, exposing Nair to digital workflows and infrastructure he'd never encountered. "I spent time reading every manual I could find in the studio. Anything I couldn't get, Gaurav would help me find. We were the first studio to have an **Apple Xserve RAID** running on optical fibre as storage in a mix facility, and the first to have a satellite-based secure download system called SmartJog in India." The pace at which he absorbed those lessons still surprises him. "I had a month to learn this and still can't figure out how I managed!"

Standing Beside Sridhar: The Measure of a Mentor

Among those who influenced Nair's career, legendary re-recording engineer **H. Sridhar** stands out. His lessons extended beyond mixing to client relationships, professional conduct, and personal philosophy. One interaction stayed with Nair—not for what Sridhar encouraged, but for what he refused.

"I learnt life, philosophies, and client management from H. Sridhar sir. He was always someone I looked up to. He taught me that no matter how good we are at our craft, if we can't convince the client why we mixed a certain way, it's no good. I realized his greatness when he refused to take a picture with me. His reason: I had great reverence for him, and if he agreed, I would only reach where he is. He wanted me to go much further. He said when I stand beside him next time, he'll consider me a colleague, not a mentee. Unfortunately, he passed away before I could grow into that space. This is the kind of inspiration that lasts a lifetime."

Wasseyapur: Recognition, Reward Reinvention

For many, a National Award represents a career pinnacle. For Nair, it arrived

during a profound transition. After building his reputation as a re-recording mixer, he had just stepped away from full-time film work to join AVID. The recognition for *Gangs of Wasseyapur* came not at the height of his mixing career, but after he had chosen a different path.

"It's hard to put in words because the first award I ever won was the National Award! And I won it after deciding I wouldn't mix anymore. In 2012, I joined AVID and moved to Dubai—one of the most difficult decisions I had to make. It was a lifetime opportunity through **Nadiyam Ravisankar**, who was handling sales for the region. But taking the job meant I couldn't mix movies anymore. And mixing was everything to me. When the awards were announced in 2013, I was at a sales training and my phone started buzzing with congratulatory messages. I didn't understand what it was for until minutes later. The VP asked why my phone was ringing and if everything was okay. I said I won the National Award. That's when I realised what it was!"

The story behind *Gangs of Wasseyapur* is not one Nair frames around accolades or technical achievement. Instead, he sees it as a testament to friendships and professional trust that shape creative careers. He nearly turned down the project altogether, only agreeing after persistent encouragement from colleagues who recognised the film's potential. "The bigger story is one of friendship," he says.

When sound designer **Kunal Sharma** approached him, Nair was already deeply involved with **Rowdy Rathore**, being designed by **Parikshit Lalwani** and **Kunal Mehta**. The conflict was significant enough that he repeatedly declined. "I declined Kunal Sharma's project. Not once but 4 times!" he recalls.

"I told Parikshit I had to decline this and he said that if I decline because of his movie, he will help me find the time and space to do *Gangs* because he insisted it wasn't a film I should miss out on. His words were true. That is why friends make everything possible!"

The decision led to one of the most demanding mixes of his career. Capturing the film's rough-hewn aesthetic required resisting the instinct to clean everything up.

One thing I learnt was it was extremely difficult to mix dirty," Nair says. "I don't mean a bad mix, but one where imperfections were purposeful and calculated. One where we looked at it as life itself, with unexpected ups and downs."

"Working under tight deadlines, we invented some techniques for the film, had completely radical mix approaches and very little time," he adds.

Where Craft Meets Recognition

While *Gangs of Wasseyapur* remains a defining milestone of Nair's career, he holds close to his heart the four **IRAA Awards** he received in 2020 for the documentary *A Few Sound Men*. The significance, he explains, lies not in the trophy itself, but in the people deciding who receives it.

"When IRAA was first announced, I was ambitious and wanted to win one. But IRAA is not easy to win. I don't know of another award in the country decided by engineers and producers from the same industry." This peer-driven evaluation process is what sets the recognition apart for him.

"It is heavily debated, extremely diligent to the point where if nothing met a standard, there wouldn't even be a winner no matter how many applications there are. For me, winning one was all about the recognition that my peers too accept my work. It is one thing to win a popular award, but it is completely different, getting one from colleagues."

Years later, another IRAA for immersive mixing on *Mohabbat – Love with Pride* drew him deeper into a discipline that operates by different rules. Unlike cinema, where visuals provide a fixed reference, music places the storytelling burden entirely on sound.

"Mixing music is an absolutely different mindset from cinema. There are no visuals to reference, so the rules are completely different. A lot of it is creative freedom but it has to sound good and translate across mediums as well. Mixing in immersive is an even bigger ask because it's completely subjective to the listener. We can break traditions, but not just for the sake of it. It has the power to propel the song's story forward in a more expansive way."

The challenge lies in knowing where innovation enhances experience and where it becomes distraction.

"It's a fine line between artistry and gimmicks—navigating that is where the craft lies. There's also technical understanding: what objects do that channels don't, how it folds down in headphones, how decorrelation works, speed of panning, binaural rendering, achieving loudness specs, and more."

Experiments in Bending Space Between Art and Audio

One of the most formative projects of his career took place in Paris in 2009, where he collaborated with artist **Shilpa Gupta** on an installation called **Singing Cloud**.

"The piece was in 2009, before we had **Dolby Atmos** and immersive ideas. There was a French programmer named **Antoine Villeret**, and we created a panning system that could scale to 1500 points in any given shape and format." The project required solving problems with few precedents, building a system from first principles using Pure Data. "It was a 6-month project with incredibly complex technical hurdles. We had to think this up from scratch using Pure Data, a programming language great for procedural audio."

More than the technology, it was the mindset of the artists that left a lasting impression. "This taught me that art and craft aren't limited to one field. We can't be tunnel-visioned. I took a lot back to film mixing, how artists think, how to become inspired, how to think in terms of ideas first, not tools. Every idea is always an exploration."

His exploration wasn't limited to international projects. In Mumbai, he worked with sound artist **Rajivan Ayyappan** on installations pushing boundaries between technology, space, and audience participation.

One project arranged sixteen loudspeakers in a 4x4 grid, with sounds responding dynamically to audience movement, involving Japanese artist **Matsuo Kunihiro**.

"It was a clever integration of how technology and art fuse together to give an experience."

Sound as Art, Engineering as Craft

For someone widely recognised for his technical expertise, Nair is quick to challenge the assumption that sound engineering is primarily an engineering discipline. "My guiding principle is that sound engineering is not a technical thing that requires art. It is an art that requires technical skill. Even though we are called engineers, what we do is artistic expression. We just use a different toolset."

Technology, in his eyes, serves the creative process rather than defining it. That philosophy is also informed by the unique way he experiences the world. "I struggle with two conditions. One is Daltonism, colour blindness of the primary colours, and the other is synaesthesia where sound translate to colors for me. This is not the easiest thing in daily life, but I doubt I could have asked for a better defect for the craft I do!"

The experience has given rise to metaphors he frequently uses when explaining the relationship between sound design and mixing.

"I always say that designing sound is like painting. One adds layers to create a portrait. Mixing is like sculpting. One removes layers to reveal the sculpture. This is a clear distinction because ultimately both produce art."

Life at AVID: Bridge, Not Billboard

After years spent in studios and mixing rooms, Nair's move to AVID represented not just a career shift but a change in perspective. Rather than focusing exclusively on projects, he found himself operating at the intersection of product development, customer engagement, and industry advocacy. His role is less about selling technology and more about ensuring that technology serves the people using it.

"The job title is probably the most apt definition of what I do!" Nair says. "I make sure that I am the bridge between the user community and Avid. We make Pro Tools, which is one of the most loved and debated software in the Digital Audio Workstation space. Our products have been used in almost every film that has won an **Oscar**. This also means there is a lot of responsibility that comes along with it."

That responsibility extends beyond product knowledge. "I make sure the requirement that a user or customer has is met with the correct needs. What do they need to buy and more importantly what do they not need to buy. It's important to also make sure that when they work with our ecosystem, there always is a '**Return on Investment**', whether that investment is monetary or

artistic."

The position is unique in that it requires him to represent both sides of the conversation simultaneously. His years as a working engineer allow him to relate to users not as customers, but as peers. "What really helps me is that I am not just representing a company to the community, I am also the community back to the company. It is not easy to find companies where their employees are deep into the industry from a user point as well as a representation point."

When asked where the digital audio workstation is headed, Nair believes the industry has largely moved beyond debates about sonic superiority. Today's differentiators are increasingly defined by workflow, integration, and functionality.

"I think we have crossed the point of whether a software sound different from another. At this point it is also about what does the DAW offer as features. For example, when Pro Tools opened up its SDK, we saw a huge boom in companies like Soundflow who have taken that to a massive scale."

That evolution has also brought new discussions around AI, an area where Nair emphasises practical implementation and responsible deployment over marketing buzzwords.

"And we are all about responsible AI. For example, we have transcription within Pro Tools that is done locally on the system without the data leaving the machine. We take a lot of feedback from our users and implement them. Track pinning, for example, is a feature where you can lock a track on view, something we took time to figure out the best way to do."

For Nair, AVID extends beyond software. "AVID is not just software. The S6, S4, S1 and the Avid Dock are all control surfaces that are pioneering in workflows. We didn't just stop at music and post. We also have flagship consoles in live sound as well."

For Nair, the role comes down to translation: understanding how engineers, mixers, producers, and creators work, and ensuring those realities shape the tools they use daily.

Explaining the Complex

One quality colleagues and students frequently associate with Nair is his ability to beautifully explain highly technical concepts. Ask him about his expertise, however, and he is far more likely to talk about curiosity than mastery. "I would

struggle to find a specific expertise to be honest! I love explaining things. And that's because by nature I am a curious person."

For Nair, the ability to explain a concept clearly is the best test of whether it has truly been understood. "I've always figured that if I can't explain a concept to a 10-year-old without using jargon, it means I haven't understood that. And to understand, I read. A lot. Not just books, but technical writings, patents, forums, anything and everything I can get my hand on."

The objective is never simply to accumulate information, but to understand concepts deeply enough that they can be transformed into stories others can relate to. "When we learn concepts, we understand it as a story we can tell. There is a 'why', 'how' and 'what if' involved. There are success and failures."

He is equally passionate about sharing what he learns. "I am happy to share all my thoughts and knowledge as well. I don't believe that a concept or idea has to be hidden."

Winning a National Award changed his relationship with communication. Recognition brought awareness that his opinions carried influence, whether he intended them to or not. "I realised that my words are taken with weight even if I didn't intend to. No matter if it's technical, artistic or even an opinion."

That responsibility pushed him to become more thoughtful not only in what he learned, but also in how he communicated it. "I believe that everyone can understand everything if there is a story attached to it. So maybe I tell good stories and people are able to remember the concepts in them."

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For Nair, technical expertise is only half the equation—the real challenge lies in making complex ideas understandable and useful. Perhaps that explains why so many in the industry turn to him for answers and explanations.

Technologies, Responsibility & Creativity in the Age of Algorithms

Having worked across film, music, education, product development, and technology, Nair observes industry shifts from multiple angles. Asked to identify the forces reshaping professional audio, he doesn't spend long weighing the options. "Immersive Audio, AI and Automation - all have a great impact. But if I was to order it, I would say AI, Immersive audio and Automation in that order."

His assessment of AI is nuanced rather than reactionary. While he acknowledges its potential, he is cautious about what happens when creative judgment is delegated too readily to machines. "AI is widely debated, often morally questioned and incredible and dangerous at the same time. The whole issue with handing the creative aspect of a job to AI is that the standards of acceptance will go down."

His concern is not that AI can generate outputs, but that creativity risks being reduced to selection rather than interpretation. "When I mix a reel and present it to a director, I want the best option from my point of view. It isn't always to make him happy but to interpret his ideas in a way that would serve the vision, story and make sure it is worthwhile. On a prompt, that is different. There is hardly an interpretation."

He believes AI can be useful when used correctly. "It's a great way to brainstorm for an idea. But taking what is offered as a final thing and a mark of quality, is where we will go wrong. AI isn't something we have to remain fearful of. What we have to be mindful of is the environment, the job displacement impacts because we see a short term and quick benefit."

If AI represents the most significant force reshaping the industry, immersive audio is less disruptive than inevitable. "Immersive audio has its changes too. We are seeing newer ideas come up and ways of getting that to the consumer."

The argument should not be framed as one format replacing another. "There will always remain a debate between is stereo enough vs what needs to be immersive. I personally believe that an expanded system always has a backward compatibility chance rather than the other way. And in that sense, immersive audio is here to stay."

His views on automation are pragmatic. He sees it as the natural progression of tasks that do not require creative intervention. "Whatever doesn't need a creative decision and can be automated will be automated with the availability of tools. Whether it is things like Skywalker's CODA system, or loudness compliance, stem deliverables, session setups, they will evolve in a very rapid manner now that AI has opened doors to technology everywhere."

The challenge is whether automation is being applied intelligently. "Now, it's not even about who gets there first. It's about how useful something is and to be mindful that one isn't using a jackhammer to drive a screw."

Returning to AI, Nair says, "AI entering the creative space is not something that is unexpected. In a way, AI has had no jurisdiction. And that fault rests entirely on us. If the value of art is in seconds, trends, likes and shares, the rat race is not about quality. It is about quantity. And in that everything that is mediocre becomes acceptable."

He is careful not to lump every technological advancement together. "We tend to have a blanket part of bracketing a lot of things under AI. Machine learning for example is an incredible thing when it comes to classification of noise, audio restoration, stem separation, and many more such things. They help move a lot of tasks that don't serve a creative purpose."

Where he sees genuine danger is in the long-term effect on the professional ecosystem. "The challenge always is that the barrier of entry for beginners then becomes narrower and the experienced space becomes wider. This is quite unfair and dangerous. This leads to the stunting of an industry and is a very shortsighted approach that should be addressed at all costs. This is

where we must stand responsibly as an industry. Where mentorship, time, quality, accountability and most importantly creativity becomes an important and uncompromising part."

The Next Dimension of Sound

Nair is reluctant to make grand forecasts. "Trying to extrapolate for anything beyond 3 years to me is quite futile. The challenge is that with technology becoming very democratic and accessible to everyone, industries turn and drift at a mindboggling speed."

If there is one certainty, he is willing to stand behind, it is that technology will continue to evolve while the fundamentals of creativity remain unchanged. "What I do know for a fact is that creativity, experience and ideas will never die out. So, to me, the earlier one begins to think of art and technology with emotion, the faster we will stop limiting our ideas to the tools we have."

It's a viewpoint that neatly encapsulates the larger philosophy running through both his career and this conversation: technology matters, but only in so far as it serves human expression.

What Comes Next

"At the moment I am writing a book on film mixing and hopefully it will be completed soon. But the most important part is the education market too. There is no industry that will last if we don't nurture the entrants."

For all the technological changes he has witnessed over the past two decades, Nair believes the fundamentals remain largely unchanged. What evolves are the challenges, the tools, and the opportunities to apply those lessons in new ways.

"My challenges have always kind of remained the same. But I think that the outcomes of the challenges gives me a new idea or creative space as time moves on. I realised that principles have always remained the same. And my mind is always racing on finding out new ways of combining those principles and fundamentals to get me to a new place, artistically or sonically." The process, he admits, is rarely straightforward. "It's not easy, and I fail more often than I succeed. But that's what keeps me going on."

Legacies of Learning: No Pedestals, Only People

Given his body of work, it would be easy to assume his advice centres on mastering technology. Instead, he emphasizes communication, visibility, and human connection.

"There are so many youngsters looking to enter the industry and to be fair, it's not the easiest one. But what works is networking, knowledge and communication. If you are very knowledgeable and no one knows about it, there is no point. This is a service industry. Knowing your craft is just one aspect of it."

Yet career success should never come at the expense of life itself. "Don't let any of this take a toll on you. Don't forget that the whole purpose of all this is to live a life worth living. Make sure you live a life with friends and laughter."

That perspective explains why Nair is uncomfortable with reverence. "I despise being put on a pedestal not because I don't value the respect given to me. But because somehow that builds a wall between an honest question or a criticism. My aim is to remove the pedestal and hold the respect mutually."

For someone who has spoken about the people who shaped him, the sentiment feels consistent. From his teachers at Chetana Institute to colleagues at Rajkamal, from **H. Sridhar's** mentorship to friendships that made projects like *Gangs of Wasseyapur* possible, Nair's understanding of success has always been collective.

"Mentorship, education and knowledge sharing is what keeps that going. We have an incredible industry. I learnt from many to become who I am. So, in a way all the good I carry in me is a reflection of the good I experienced from the people that shaped me." The industry, he believes, will always be defined by those who invest in others - "People make an industry and that is what I want to help and be a part of."

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