

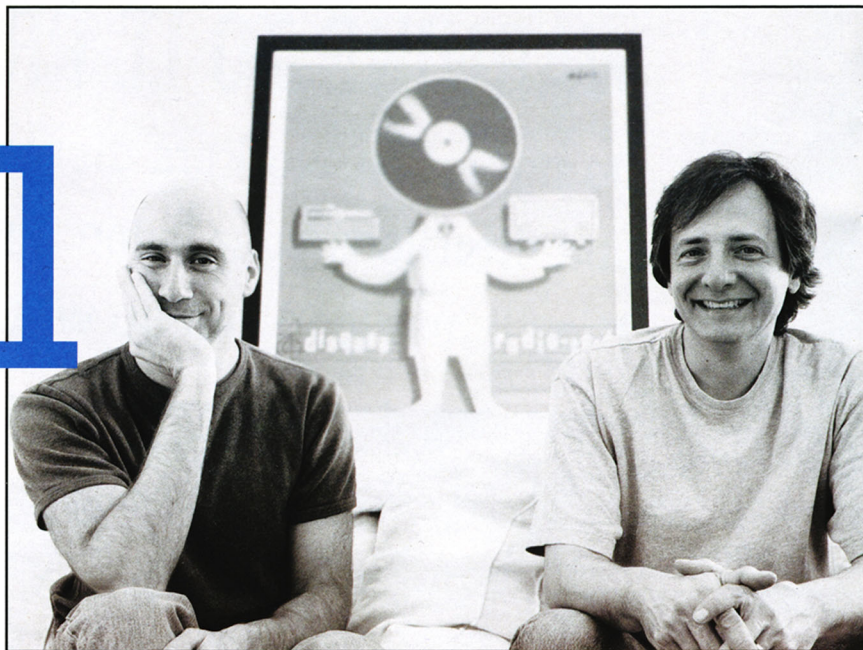
tv postproduction handbook

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# Get Real

For post, the buck stops right here — in reality TV

By Debra Kaufman



## Reality television is Hollywood's latest mastery in illusion.

The "reality" that unfolds during each weekly episode is a result of many an all-night shift at numerous Los Angeles postproduction houses, threaded through with challenges including strict secrecy, extraordinary amounts of content and shrinking schedules.

In the post world, the amazing race is to get each episode on the air — and the editors, colorists, sound mixers and composers who sweat to carve "real" episodes out of mounds of videotapes are the true survivors.

"The most obvious challenge is the volume of tapes we're dealing with," says West Post Digital president Kenny Fields, whose company works on ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" and "How'd They Do That?" and Fox's "The Next Great Champ," among other shows. "For 'Extreme Makeover,' we can be dealing with 300 tapes per episode, and that right there is huge."

PostWorks New York president Billy Baldwin says unscripted dramas put a great onus on post facilities to take charge of organization.

"How you log, digitize and manage the digital assets is crucial," he says.

Agrees PostWorks executive Hayli Halper, a former post associate producer on Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," "If you have less control in the field, then you want to get as much control as you can in post."

The reasons for that are many:

- The number of offline editors explodes in reality-show postproduction, which couples immense amounts of raw footage with looming airdates. At FotoKem, which counts among its credits the syndicated reality strip "The Mansion" and Fox's "The Swan," director of nonlinear services Michael Keenan notes that reality shows use as many as 12 editing systems, 24 editors and more than two-dozen assistants working two shifts, including a full graveyard shift devoted to digitizing tapes. In contrast, a scripted one-hour drama typically uses four editing systems and four editors.

- The unexpected is to be expected on unscripted dramas, which makes for a lot of surprises in the edit suite. "The editing can get really creative," Level 3 Post senior nonlinear editor Derek Herr says. "They might choose to speed up part of a shot or stretch it out, and there are flashbacks and revisiting past episodes." In addition, stringing together footage from various cameras and angles often requires effects and graphic transitions. "Dramatic narrative TV is mostly cuts and dissolves," Herr says. "Reality TV is anything but, and that includes heavy graphics and use of effects such as changing the color, dipping to white, going (slow-motion) and so on."

- The soundtrack requires special attention. "The dialogue tracks typically take a lot of cleaning up and (equalization)," Keenan says. Modern VideoFilm executive vp operations Bill Watt notes that while some reality TV shows finish their edits in-house, sound elements usually are sent to post houses or finishing houses, where they are worked on by editor/mixers like Modern's Peter Arata.

- Don't forget the music licensing. "Reality shows require tons of music content," MusicBox Music co-founder/composer Dan Stein says. "Many reality shows include wall-to-wall music, and it takes a lot of music to fill up a 30- or 60-minute show."

Detailed conversations with producers about pacing, emotional content and story line help to put composers on the right track. But that is not the only difference: Stein and MusicBox co-founder/composer Joel Goodman note that whereas most TV dramas are scored after the

picture has been edited, many reality producers like to cut pictures to music. Because that turnaround is so fast, there is no window for a "temp track."

Big-budget reality shows hire composers early, asking them to create customized libraries that can be tapped as needed throughout a season, but even the lowest-budget programs can now afford composers because desktop technology allows ambitious musicians to shop at home and offer cut-rate prices to gain TV credits.

Nonetheless, because reality shows are chock-full of musical cues, the need to license music from preexisting libraries is practically inevitable for all but the biggest-budget programs. Licensing is done on the basis of a "needle drop" (for a specific cue or sequence) or "blanker" (for an entire library).

Less expensive than original composition, licensing is quick and easy, says Stein, who bemoans the low quality of some original soundtracks.

"Most shows don't want to admit to using music libraries because they want a unique sound, sometimes at the expense of the quality of their score," he says.

Secrecy also differentiates reality-show posting from such work on episodic programs or sitcoms. The last episode of an episodic or sitcom might carry an aura of mystery, but reality shows — especially those featuring competitions and prizes — are all about the surprise ending.

Everyone at a post house who works on a reality show signs a nondisclosure agreement, and many facilities take extra precautions such as blacking out tape-room monitors or limiting the number of people who work on such projects. Thus far, there have been no security breaches on reality shows.

The future of postproduction might be even more hospitable to reality TV — and that future is tapeless, according to Level 3 Post vp Michael Koljan.

"It will be a tremendous savings for them in (terms of) sheer cost of tape stock and labor to digitize the material," he says.

And wherever reality shows go, post houses are sure to follow. ■

## Reality Check

From top left, MusicBox Music's Joel Goodman and Dan Stein; ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" being edited at West Post Digital

