Perfect harmony

A one-time builder followed his passion into a career teaching audio engineering, writes Kristie Kellahan.

For as long as he could remember, Craig Herbert loved music. But when it came time to choose a career after high school, he decided to follow his father into the building trade. Eventually his first love won him over and Herbert quit construction for a career teaching and performing music.

"My father was a builder, so I grew up around building sites," he says. "I was really lucky: we had a great relationship and it was a privilege to have worked next to him. There's a lot of guys who can't work with their dads.

But when his dad went home at the end of the day, Herbert spent his evenings playing bass and guitar at gigs all over Sydney. "I've been a musician all my life, so it was playing and teaching privately while I was working in the building industry," he says.

The more guitar he played, the more interested Herbert became in sound recording and the acoustics of live performances.

While still working in construction, he studied for and obtained a degree in audio production from the School of Audio Engineering.

Building gradually went from a five day a week concern to four days and then three. Five years ago music took over and Herbert quit his trade to concentrate on making a living from music.

"I didn't wake up one morning and say, 'I'm not going to be a builder any more,'" he says. "It's been a gradual progression with lots of overlapping, but everything has come together in a way that just works."

He says the two fields are not as dissimilar as they seem at first glance. "You're developing and making something real of written plans, and whether that is music or architectural plans it really matters."

Today Herbert works as a full time lecturer in audio recording at the Sydney campus of SAE, the same learning institution where he obtained his qualifications.

His students, who range from school leavers to mature age enrolments, graduate from their two year studies with a bachelor of audio production.

"Basically we're teaching students to be sound engineers, and they could end up working in film, TV, theatre, post production or live concerts," he says. "It's all about the process of producing a recorded sound."

He says he enjoys working at SAE because it's an international college. This means qualifications earned there are recognised around the world and there is a large network of overseas affiliates with which to network. There are also the benefits of state of the art equipment and very high standards of teaching.

Surprisingly Herbert says many of the life skills he picked up as a builder translate seamlessly to his teaching role.

"I can teach the students about work ethics, professionalism and organisational and management skills as they apply equally to both industries and, in fact, across most jobs," he says. "Dad was a tremendously skilled manager and I learnt so much from him."

Practical skills are also important. Herbert still freelances as a sound engineer and musician in musical theatre.

"I teach the students about theory and curriculum but I find they respond best when I tell them about something I've tried at a gig during the week," he says. "They respect that I'm actually out there working in the field they want to make careers in."

"All of the teachers at SAE are working engineers, so we're teaching the skills we know rather than teaching from a textbook."

Herbert has no intention of returning to the building industry but he would happily pick up his tools to work on his own house or to help a mate build a deck.

"I could do it and quite enjoy it for a one-off project if there wasn't the pressure of deadlines," he says. "The way the building industry has gone, with the paperwork involved just to survive, my heart wouldn't be in doing it as a full time career."

Something he certainly doesn't miss are the early morning starts the building trade requires.

"Often Dad would be leaving for work in the morning at the same time as I was getting in from a gig," he says. "When it comes to his current job, Herbert says he could not be happier."

"From a teaching point of view, I really enjoy taking students and watching them develop and express their skills," he says. "I'm able to make my living from music, which is my passion, so working turns out to be a privilege instead of a chore. I know not many people have that luxury."