

# A Hard Day's Night: Long Hours In The Video Production World



It was the day after Christmas 1990 and Chris Crever was about to get the first big break of his production career. Still in his early 20s, he'd been working as a second assistant cameraman in Portland and Seattle.

But on this December 26 he would be working on a production in San Francisco. And it was going to be a big one.

M.C. Hammer, fresh off the best year of his career was shooting a music video for the first release of his new album.

Today, M.C. Hammer is little more than a punchline about gold lamé harem pants. But in 1990 he was one of the hottest performers in America. His previous album "Please Hammer, Don't Hurt 'Em" sold 22 million copies. He'd won a Grammy. And his music videos were in hot rotation on MTV (back when they played music videos).

Because most of the regular production crews were gone on vacation, Crever was going to get to work on Hammer's next big spectacle.

Call time was 7 AM at the studio in San Francisco. Crever got up around 5 AM to make the 45 minute drive from his parents' house to the shoot.

He recalls that it was going to be an elaborate production — typical of Hammer’s videos — with acrobats on trampolines and trapeze rigging.

As often happens with big stars, things got started late. Hammer and his entourage showed up about 10 and shooting started by about 11 AM. But Crever could tell right away that they were not going to be able to catch up.

The artist and the director couldn’t agree on what they should be shooting. Crever remembers lots of heated discussion while the cast and crew stood around.

With most of the day gone and much of the video still not shot, the production was showing all the signs of a disaster. But finally, about the time they should have been wrapping, things started coming together. They continued to work shot by shot past midnight.

At about 2 AM the director called the cast and crew together and told them that they could finish shooting the video if everyone agreed to work all night.

They did. And the production was completed.

Some time around 8 AM Crever walked out to his car. All he wanted to do was lay down somewhere and sleep. Unfortunately, the only place he could do that was back at his parents’ house, three quarters of an hour away.

Fighting to stay awake and in his lane, Crever made it home and lived to tell the tale.

But many people in our profession haven’t been as lucky. Several productions have ended in tragedy, including the widely publicized death of assistant cameraman Brent Hershman whose story was the impetus for Haskell Wexler’s excellent documentary “Who Needs Sleep?”.

## **LONG DAYS COME WITH THE TERRITORY**

It seems like some professions just have to endure long hours.

- Airline pilots flying non-stop international routes.
- Soldiers fighting an enemy attack.
- Surgeons performing complex operations.
- And everyone working on a production crew when the shoot is falling behind schedule.

It’s just part of being a professional.

Everybody, from PAs to producers, have stories about productions that demanded almost impossible hours.

Ian Jennings, a gaffer who's worked on everything from commercials to feature films, remembers one shoot for the TV series Northern Exposure that took 24 hours.

"It was near the end of the series," he says, "and the location and actors simply weren't going to be available later."

Erik Wallin a PA about two years into his career, has already worked several commercial shoots that have required a string of 18+ hour days in a row.

"It can be tough when you get stretches like that," he says, "but I love the work and the kind of people I get to collaborate with."

Juliana Lukasik, a producer and owner of [@Large Films](#), recalls one production early in her career that required a week of 22 hour days. Working as a PA, she was both driver and craft services for a car spot that called for shots at both sunrise and sunset.

"By the second day I just felt sick," she recalls. "It wasn't safe for me and it wasn't safe for the clients I was driving back and forth from the coast to Portland."

## **OVERTIME WORK WITHOUT OVERTIME PAY**

Long hours are tough. But they are even tougher when you don't make extra money for the extra time worked.

Jennings, who was under a union contract for the Northern Exposure shoot, saw his pay go from scale to time-and-a-half and even double for the final few hours.

But many of us working on non-union shoots for a flat day rate have been in the situation where we don't get extra money for extra time worked.

Crever had to fight to get any additional pay for his marathon Hammer shoot.

## **THE TWO-PRONG SOLUTION**

Like airline pilots and surgeons, we are working in a profession that sometimes is going to demand ungodly hours. There are times when the talent, location, equipment, and even weather simply won't be available

later.

We have to push through. We're professionals.

And unless the route to a production career changes radically, people starting out as PAs are going to have to pay their dues with lower pay and long hours as they learn their craft and work their way into a specialty.

Producers have the responsibility to see that vulnerable crew like PAs are taken care of.

As Lukasik says, "As an industry we need to treat every job on the crew like it's a profession."

But budgets often dictate otherwise. The option of hiring everyone on the crew as an independent contractor is often what allows small productions to exist. And it's also where crew can be worked overtime without overtime pay.

Unlike employees, they have no supervisor to appeal to. If an independent contractor complains to the producer who hired him, he might not get called to work next time.

However, as the state continues to tighten labor laws, it will be more and more difficult to hire a crew without treating them like employees. This makes production more expensive and may limit the chance for brand new crew to gain experience.

## **HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF**

For starters, always get clear information on the production schedule. Is it a day shoot or a night shoot? It's a bummer to work all night and then have to go work on a day shoot for a different client.

Before agreeing to work on a project, ask how overtime will be handled. Everybody wants to give more than they're required to. But if the shoot goes an extra half day (or half night), you should receive extra compensation.

If the producer is a poor planner, is it fair for you to be penalized?

Jennings, who works on both union and non-union shoots, says that he's learned to tell which jobs may go way overtime.

"If the director is relatively inexperienced and they have an ambitious production schedule," he says, "that's a red flag."

As long as there are creative people collaborating to bring an idea to the screen, it will sometimes require long hours. But you can go a long way to protecting yourself from dangerous fatigue by getting the exact schedule before you agree to work and avoiding productions that seem overly optimistic about what they can get shot in a day.