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PRODUCTS AND PROFILES FOR THE AUDIO PROFESSIONAL

Noble Street Studios & Revolution Recording

Re-Establishing Downtown Toronto As A Recording Destination

BY ANDREW KING

Since first emerging – or rather exploding – onto the international landscape as a recording hotbed in the '70s, the Toronto studio community has undergone its well-documented share of ebb and flow. First born to capture the Toronto Sound established in live music venues lining Yonge St. and loaded throughout Yorkville during the '60s and, perhaps more significantly, the next wave of artistic activity that it beckoned, the city's recording core was once an international epicentre for artists and engineers alike. Over the next couple of decades, room after revered room was erected and gold and platinum records flowed through the city like the Don and Humber rivers.

Over the last two decades, however, the trend in audio recording – smaller, faster, cheaper – coupled with that of the city's rapidly-rising downtown property values saw many of Toronto's elite spaces scaling back operations or closing their doors completely.

While the city and its surrounding area are by no means void of quality studios of various scales, large-format options in the heart of Hogtown have been relatively minimal of late; the amount of artistic talent and music being produced and recorded there, however, has not.

Recognizing an opportunity, two separate groups of seasoned

industry professionals came together midway through the first decade of the new millennium and spawned early ideas for what would become Noble Street Studios and Revolution Recording – high-end, multi-studio spaces able to cater to the upper echelon of engineers, producers, and recording artists that opened in 2011. Now a year into operations and having each earned their share of accolades, both are poised to continue building their profiles within the city and outside of it in hopes of once again making Toronto a beacon for musical projects from far and wide.

A NOBLE CALLING

"I just saw a need," states Henry Gooderham, Noble Street Studios Owner and Founder, about what informed his decision to build a high-end recording space during a rather tumultuous economical time. Having run Red Line Recorders on Yonge St. for over 25 years, Gooderham had been drawing up plans for his dream facility for years and, later in his last stint, began scouting a suitable location in the heart of the city where such a room could be realized.

A lack of options led to one of the studio's most notable selling features: it was purpose-built as a recording studio from the ground up with construction starting the summer of

2007. Realized by architects Athos Zaghi of Theatre Consultants Collaborative and Robert Kastelic of AKB, the 8,000 sq. ft. building proper is an ultra-modern marvel both outside and in. Lending his expertise to the development of the interior and working in tandem with Gooderham and the architects was acoustics engineer and designer Terry Medwedek of Group One Acoustics.

The resulting facility is a fluid space void of any corridors and comprised of two separate studios – Studio A and Studio B – which offer clients complementing options for projects of different scales and magnitudes.

Studio A is hinged around a beautiful 1,200 sq. ft. live room with a large skylight loaded into the 19-ft. ceiling to bathe the space in natural light. The room is built atop two 8" concrete pads separated by 430 custom-designed springs for total isolation from any external sources and has a very natural character that carries hints of its size, but with a tight overall response that any genre of music could appreciate.

"One of Henry's main focuses was a stellar live room for orchestral recordings," explains Studio Manager Donny DaSilva. "There aren't many in the city, and fewer with high ceilings that can accommodate a large volume for large orchestras or even stellar drum tracks."

While its aesthetic benefits from a naturally toned hardwood floor and wall panels and warm ambient lighting, what anchors the eye is the 7-ft. Fazioli grand piano sitting in the room's centre, selected for the studio by namesake designer Paolo Fazioli and

jazz legend Herbie Hancock. "Any time I mention it to pianists, their eyes just light up," shares DaSilva, going on to note that instrument selection gets as much attention as that put into recording gear at Noble Street. "There are a lot of tools here to get the creative juices flowing on top of the wonderful facility."

Studio A's control room shares carefully designed sightlines with the live floor and twin iso booths. Its central component is a Solid State Logic (SSL) 4056 E/G console with 60 inputs, automation, and total recall. "We're in a service industry, and ultimately have to give our clients what they want," DaSilva says about opting for the SSL, noting that there are 22 Neve outboard preamps available for those who might seek an alternate sound. The control room is also on a slab isolated from the building and its walls on isolation pads separate from the slab.

The SSL's complementing array of equipment, amassed over a 15-year period, includes a Studer A-827 Gold tape machine with 16- and 24-track headblocks, a 2-track A-820 with ½" and ¼" headblocks, a complete Pro Tools 10 system with Mytek I/Os, plenty of plug-ins, and a number of staple outboard pieces. Monitoring is handled via an army of PMC boxes with additional options from Event, Genelec, Yamaha, and Auratone. Sound is also routed to a PMC surround sound system in Studio A's massive lounge.

As for Studio B, it's comprised of three rooms: its control room, with an SSL 6040 console, separate DAW controller, and four floating rack bays with an assortment of analog and digital gear;

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Noble Street Studios - Studio A Live Room



Revolution Recording - Studio A Live Room

a neutral-sounding 100-sq. ft. iso booth; and a nearly 400 sq. ft. lounge/live room with its own PMC stereo system. As it's situated on the second floor of the facility, an installed incline platform lift offers accessibility for heavy equipment or less mobile clients. The second storey also holds The Tower, a two-storey open area pre-wired to both control rooms and offering a reverberant space that can be manipulated through various means.

The control room for Studio B is especially well suited to mixing, overdubbing, and ADR work with monitoring coming via Quedstedt 3-way monitors and subs, several PMC options, and other mobile enclosures shared with Studio A.

Analog equipment still delivers sound better than its digital counterparts, according to Gooderham. "We're so music-specific here that sound is paramount." Client demands have driven the gear decisions wherever possible, resulting in a fair collection of vintage equipment requiring regular maintenance and gentle handling. In-house Head Technician Chris Simon maintains the equipment and oversees the building's wiring and patching configurations. Radiant Sound's Brian Lepine has been integrally involved in the studios' design, construction, and equipment implementation. He was the construction manager of the facility and continues to be closely involved in the systems' ongoing maintenance on top of supervising the technical work at Noble Street.

The facility's Chief Engineer is 2012 JUNO-winning Recording Engineer of the Year George Seara, and other staff members include Senior Assistant Engineer Kevin O'Leary, Assistant Alex Krotz, Junior Assistant Luke Leveille, a graphics and web designer working as a separate leg of the company, and a cast of interns from recording institutions benefiting from on-the-job training.

Gooderham explains that his intention with Noble Street was to keep as much of the available work as possible stemming from Toronto, in Toronto. "Our target market is producers and engineers," he says. "Some studios are set up to do things economically with a number of corners cut. That's great, but experienced acts want creature comforts and want to be able to move through their creative ideas quickly, and that requires a lot of space."

Comfort was one of the cornerstones of the entire undertaking. Gooderham continues, as he didn't want clients to have to make any compromises in his space – before, during, or after any session. The "people-to-space ratio" is intentionally high at Noble Street and little expense was spared to offer the utmost in amenities and striking décor. The lounges occupying each floor are particularly telling of this.

Another fundamental aspect, as Seara notes, is the care that was taken to future-proof the facility. "What I appreciate about Henry and Donny is that they're both still excited about this industry and are very future-minded," he says. "By thinking that way, they're able to anticipate certain situations and have the right people and resources onboard to handle any curveball that might be thrown their way."

Examples he cites include the talent pool from which the studio can draw skills and experience, along with the forethought that went into the wiring and layout of the facility and the attention to detail that makes it suitable for related projects like video work. Adds Seara: "I think they were very mindful not just of the engineer's needs, but of the artists' potential needs beyond the recording process, and that kind of thinking will go a long way."

It seemingly already has, as since officially opening in September of 2011, the studio has welcomed a wide range of clients including The Tragically Hip, Danko Jones, The Trews, Billy Talent, Barenaked Ladies, Jill Barber, several large orchestras scoring for television, and big-name producers and engineers like Darren Grahm, Jonathan Goldsmith, Gavin Brown, and Alan Parsons.

To keep on their impressive tangent, Gooderham says the focus for his team is to "continue forging local alliances while also making it attractive for people to come in from out of town." Thus far, he's pleased with the product coming out of both studios and, as demonstrated by the number of repeat clients returning within such a short period, it seems many share the sentiment.

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Revolution Recording, located on Laing St. in the trendy Leslieville area of T.O., may be brand new to the city's recording-making community, but its four founding partners certainly aren't.

"It's really a five-year story," begins Revolution partner and Pheromone Recordings label head Kim Cooke with a laugh about how he, Midas-touched mastering engineer Joao Carvalho; engineer and former Monumental Sound Owner Joe Dunphy; and John MacDonald, head of recent SK-based upstart Soccer Mom Records, came together to open Toronto's newest three-studio space.

The seeds that would sprout Revolution Recording were planted in August 2006 when Dunphy's lease on his space was about to expire, leaving him with a rather monumental decision. Speaking with Carvalho and Cooke around the time, the three found themselves amidst a conversation that had started jokingly lighthearted but turned into something teasingly intriguing. Repeatedly revisiting the conversation, Carvalho recalls: "We were ready to bring something to the city that was lacking – at least in downtown Toronto proper. We established some criteria at the outset, though found it quite difficult during the process (of finding a facility) to ensure we met them all." Those criteria included a certain amount of space, ceiling height, a maximum distance from the city's main traffic arteries, and ideal price.

After years of scouring the city for potential locations, the foursome grew discouraged; however, aligned with the adage of it always being darkest before dawn, some friendly small talk with the proprietor of the building across from his mastering studio resulted in Carvalho landing the ideal location. Says Cooke, looking back: "There was a symmetry to it that I wouldn't trade for anything."

Construction on what would become Revolution Recording began in September 2009 and, after what's been dubbed some "beta recording," June 2011 saw the facility's "first actual session": the second disc of Pheromone artist Sarah Slean's *Land & Sea*, classically-influenced compositions recorded in Studio A with an accompanying orchestra.

The studio was designed with Martin Pilchner of revered acoustic design firm Pilchner-Schoustal International. In addition to Studio A, Revolution Recording boasts a Studio B and Studio C, each descending in size, amenities, and booking price. "We

had many, many meetings with Martin to come up with the right design," Dunphy explains. "We wanted something beautiful and modern, but also kind of timeless – something that welcomes creativity and puts people at ease."

Studio A's 2,200 sq. ft. floating live room is breathtaking in its design – a long, open space with contrasting natural wood finishes and plush velvet curtains that enhance its aesthetic as much as they do its acoustics. Whereas the Noble Street Studios team set out with the intention of creating a room fit for large-scale orchestral and symphonic recording, the Revolution team relished the dream of bringing back the days of Beatle-esque rock 'n' roll orchestra sessions along with the potential of offering a massive live recording floor.

"Orchestral recording was something we thought we would ease into," Dunphy admits, "but then the very first thing we did (Slean's album) was orchestral, so we had to put together the infrastructure." That infrastructure includes seating, monitoring headphones, and accessories for 70 musicians, recently put to use on a few other large-scale projects, including recording the new CTV Television nightly news theme music and orchestral sessions for television series *The Borgias*. "We'd love to get more of that kind of work," Dunphy adds, with Carvalho following: "If you can record orchestral sessions properly, you can pretty much record anything."

The room's wiring was carefully planned to maximize any session's efficiency. "I've come to learn that's one of the smartest things we've done," Cooke says, noting that the number of I/O available significantly increases the amount of what can be accomplished in a given period.



Noble Street Studios - Studio B Control Room



Noble Street Studios - Studio A Control Room



Revolution Recording - Studio A Control Room



Revolution Recording - Studio B Live Room

Captaining Studio A's control room is a custom 80 Series Neve desk with 40 channels and 32 track monitors. The board once occupied RCA Studios in New York and the voices of many legendary acts have flowed through it. Cooke tells of how, during the studio's construction, sections were closed off to refurbish the equipment. "The two main consoles were on their backsides for about a year," he says, adding that the pair was at times getting 90-100 hours of attention each week. "Our best guess," he says, "is that the Neve has something like 12,000 man hours put into it."

Carvalho adds that the idea was to have the Neve better-suited to today's recording environments while keeping its "vintage magic" intact – another fundamental general approach that Revolution's leaders share with their peers on Noble Street. "The problem with vintage gear is the downtime, so we went to great lengths in advance to prevent as much of that as possible."

Monitoring for Studio A is handled by SOTA CF150s and upgraded SOTA CF2000s, designed by Claude Fortier of Ottawa's State of the Art Acoustik. Other options include boxes from Adam, Hafler, KRK, Proac, Tannoy, and Yamaha. An Ampex ATR 102 with ½" and ¼" heads is stationed there with a Studer A820 2" 24-track available by request. The room's microphones and outboard equipment list is a mix of modern and vintage options, including a

during the construction phase, building custom modules for the equipment and taking part in the wiring of the facility. "We wanted everyone working here to know the whole space inside and out," Dunphy says. "If something ever isn't working, they have a clear picture of what could be happening."

Aside from the four partners, the Revolutionaries include: engineers Stephen Koszler and Jason Dufour, who head-up a lot of the visiting sessions; Anthony Kuzub, who handles a lot of the electronic work; junior engineer Jack Clow, also well-versed in wiring and servicing; Amanda Pearl in Client Services; and Studio Manager Tanya Coghlan.

Dunphy says that fluidity and flexibility were at the forefront

downtown facilities had closed," he says, referencing rooms like McClear Digital and Manta Sound Studios as victims of a trend he calls the "Manhattanization" of Toronto, whereby spaces sitting on valuable real estate are eventually scooped up and converted into condos and other urban developments. The issue was that there still seemed to be a lot of work available that was then forced to leave the city. "Henry and the Noble folks had perceived the same problem and seemed to have set out to in the same spirit. Funny, we're kind of geographical bookends to the downtown area."

The spirit of camaraderie that exists between these two studios – essentially business competitors – spawns from the idea that a rising tide floats all boats; that what's good for the creative scene in

Adds Cooke: "There was also this entrepreneurial belief that if we just swung for the fences and built something really special, people would come."

And come they have, as both Noble Street Studios and Revolution Recording have benefitted from a steady stream of business since launching last year; however, as DaSilva notes, Noble Street will still work to accommodate bookings with short lead times – all in an effort to provide a service that may elicit repeat business. "I was discussing with a friend who's a session musician how, even a few years ago, if you needed to book studio space within a two-week period, it may not have been possible in Toronto. Now, it probably is, and I see that as a positive."

That accessibility and accommodation will only help transform Toronto back into an international recording destination – an opinion shared across the board. Says Dunphy: "There's still an enormous thirst for recorded music, and services have to be available to create that content." Doing so properly requires an environment that caters to the creative process – a space that won't interrupt ideas, a staff that's virtually invisible unless otherwise desired, and ergonomics that enhance the experience. These are all available in abundance at 17 Noble and 36 Laing.



Revolution Recording - Studio C Control Room



Noble Street Studios - Studio B Control Room



Revolution Recording - Studio B Control Room

pair of rare sequentially-numbered Fairchild 660 compressors, three Telefunken U47s, three Neumann M49s, and an AKG C24.

Studio B's live room is stunning though spartan in its design, much like its control room. Again, natural wood accents the aesthetic and brings welcoming warmth to sessions both aurally and visually. An SSL 4056 G Series console with G+ automation drives the room, which features the same monitors and also has many of the same outboard options as Studio A.

Studio C, dubbed "The Indie Room," is a cozy, cottage-like environment with a lesser but well-rounded array of equipment. Rounding out the trio of large-format consoles is a 24-channel custom Ward-Beck Systems L3262 console with 32 channels and 16 track monitors. Monitoring comes primarily via custom Urei/JBL monitors built by Dunphy and Plichner along with the familiar mobile options. The room offers a less expensive option for clients still wanting to benefit from the equipment, experience, and environment contained within Revolution Recording.

Revolution's staffers were brought into the studio early

of every stage of the studio's realization, particularly when it came to equipment selection. "Everything we have has been totally optimized for this facility," he says. "The idea was to make the studio as transparent, but also as flexible as possible. Whatever someone might request, we want to say, 'We can do that.'"

As with Noble Street, the décor at Revolution goes a long way in inspiring creativity and ensuring comfortable working conditions. Carvalho explains that a lot of time was spent choosing and sourcing out finishes and furniture, noting of the building materials: "Anything and everything in here was custom-ordered; nothing can be found on the shelf at, say, Home Depot."

Since opening, Revolution Recording has received its share of accolades – including a 2011 TEC Award nomination – and elite artists including Three Days Grace, Feist, B.o.B., and Big Wreck and engineers and producers including Nick Raskulinecz, Don Gilmore, Michael Phillip Wojewoda, and Jeff Wolpert alike have sung its praises on record. Adds Rush drummer Neil Peart of Studio A on behalf of the band: "This is the best-sounding room we've ever recorded in."

And while its four founders do relish in the pleasure of their clients and guests, it's their own that's most gratifying, with Carvalho saying: "Collectively, we couldn't be more proud of what we've been able to accomplish."

TORONTO THE GOOD

"Toronto has such a vibrant music community," DaSilva says about Noble Street Studios and Revolution Recording's host city, adding on behalf of both: "There's so much talent and aspiration and potential here and I love knowing we can facilitate what these people want to deliver."

Cooke goes back to midway through last decade when he and his partners had conceived their idea. "Most of the great

the city is good for the individual parts working within it. "It makes us all work harder and, ultimately, makes us stronger and better," DaSilva says, and that's true on both an individual and communal level.

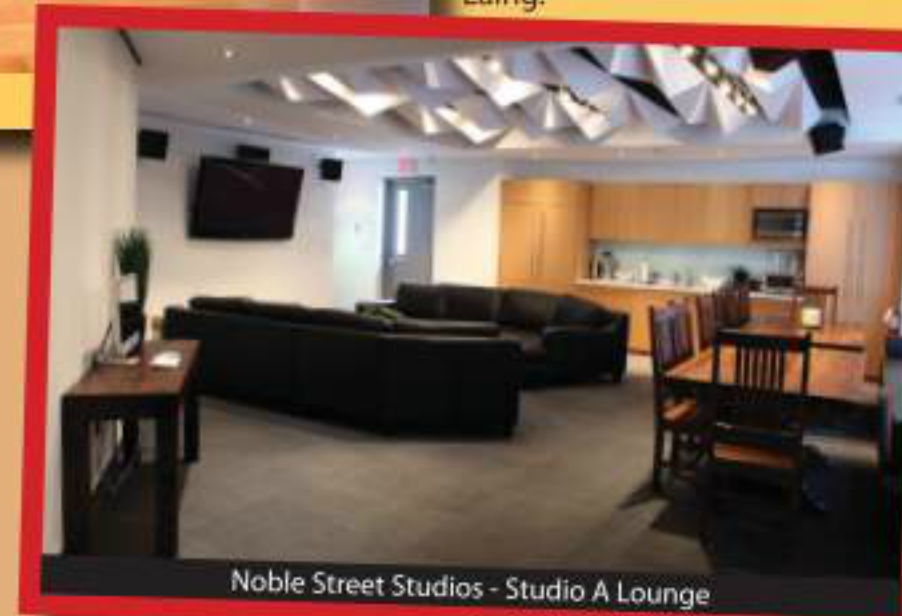
"Even though we've lost some studios and the major record companies aren't what they once were, the music didn't stop," he continues. "There's still a stack of people lining up outside of these venues, and if we come together to record these artists, it's only a matter of time before Toronto once again becomes a worldwide hub of talent."

While many would argue that, to a degree, it already is, there's no denying that having rooms of this calibre in the heart of the city will further nurture the progress, and both facilities have already shown a commitment to helping up-and-coming talent. "The average independent artist may not believe that this calibre of studio fits their budget," Seara says of Noble Street, "but Donny has shown a willingness to help make these types of projects work. The artist may have to be flexible in their scheduling or with which components they want to track in this kind of place, but we've shown we're willing to come up with creative means of making things work."

Revolution Recording showcases this concept in spades. "We're aimed at all strata of professional recording," Cooke claims. "We can accommodate the biggest orchestras to someone with a few dollars in their pocket wanting to do some nice acoustic tracks."

The goal is a noble one, though as both parties were well aware at the outset, Toronto hasn't been hospitable to some large-format recording rooms over the last few years. The question faced by these two teams preceding their quests was: How can we ensure the viability of this type of venture?

"The four of us have all been in the industry a long time, each with a solid client base we work with regularly," Carvalho says of his fellow stakeholders. "We did the math and found this would've worked even just with our own stables of clients to keep afloat."



Noble Street Studios - Studio A Lounge

"I'm thrilled that we can be a part of this community and help develop this talent," DaSilva shares. "I love the idea that there are more facilities opening in this city and that, together, we're unified in changing – and strengthening – the community here. I know we're playing a relatively small part, but it's an important one and I'd like to think it'll make a difference."

To make that difference and start bringing attention – local to international – back to Toronto's record-making community, the ethos embodied by both of these first-class facilities is that when the musician is behind the mic and the engineer's fingers are locked on the faders, each should be performing to the absolute best of their abilities without any compromises. That's what Revolution Recording and Noble Street Studios deliver – the ideal environment to capture those pure, pristine, unadulterated moments.



Andrew King is the Editor of Professional Sound.