

# Inside Local Recording Studios

## MARK MARINOVICH

**T**HE MOMENT of truth had arrived. After years of preparation—piano lessons as a boy, Saturday night high school bands, progressive infatuations with Cat Stevens, Elton John and Bruce Springsteen—John was ready to put his own sound on a demo tape. "I've got great contacts," he announced confidently. "Juice Newton will love this!" John steadied himself at the Yamaha grand piano, adjusted his headphones and looked up at his vocalist, Maggie, to see if she was ready. Maggie took a deep breath and moved tentatively toward the microphone. "OK."

"I'll point to you when it's time," injected engineer and producer Fane Opperman over studio speakers from his soundproof control room. Opperman's fingers glided over an expansive control board, setting levels, turning dials. He spun around and inspected a bank of special effects equipment that blinked and reported numerical readings. Everything was set. Turning quickly toward John, he pointed his finger.

A lilting, graceful melody rose from the piano. Maggie entered and sang softly of a love unrequited. For several minutes, the studio's characteristic tangle of wires, speakers, complex computerized equipment, and futuristic soundproofing

material that covered the walls, were forgotten. In this place that suggested more a space shuttle than a recording studio, the purpose was making music.

John and Maggie joined Opperman for a playback of the song. To achieve a "peak" sound, Opperman told John he'd employed a number of high tech enhancing effects: an "aural exciter" to make Maggie sound like Juice Newton; "reverb" for an echo effect; and a "harmonizer." Additionally, Opperman "compressed and digitally delayed" Maggie's voice to highlight or tone down certain of her vocal traits. The playback substantiated Opperman's judgment. Maggie sounded like an angel and John's piano playing was an exhibition of raw emotionalism. "It's gonna be a smash hit," John said quietly. A couple of takes later, all agreed the first was the best. John was satisfied that he had the highest quality recording of his song possible. In just a matter of time, John is sure he will be rich and famous.

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"The days of a guy or girl and his or her friends getting together with their parents' tape recorder in a garage and coming up with a big hit are gone, with few exceptions," says Opperman. His 24-track recording studio, Fane Productions in Santa Cruz, is the most technologically sophisticated in the area. A first visit to his



Fane Opperman

studio induces a kind of future shock. But for Santa Cruz area musicians who annually schedule thousands of studio sessions like the one described above, 8-, 16- and 24-track recording facilities are essential in producing a demo tape of a quality impressive to major producers and publishers. And the recording engineer, who must negotiate the musicians' sounds through miles of cables, wires and machinery, is their guide. He or she is expected to help them reach a glossy finish they know they will never at-

tain on stage. The odds of a serious musician's becoming a top forty star are not favorable (1 in 200,000 by one industry estimate) and the life of a full-time performer frequently differs vastly from the public's image of "fun in the sun." Yet stardom has its own undeniable rewards.

"It's sort of like drilling for oil," says Noel Gott, dean of Santa Cruz recording engineers and owner of Harbor Records. His own efforts launched the remarkable career of local singer Jill Croston, aka Lacy J. Dalton. Gott, and a group of local

musicians and recording engineers, produced an album entitled *Jill Croston* in 1978. A country song on the album, "Burnin' Love," came to the attention of Columbia Records, and the rest is, shall we say, well documented. A stack of the original Jill Croston albums rests in a corner of Gott's studio, remnants of a dream that came true.

At least one local studio owner predicts that a series of stars of Croston's stature will emerge from Santa Cruz in the near future. Ken Capitanich, of Music Art Recording Studio (MARS) in Aptos, says, "The music in this town is like a sleeping giant that's slowly awakening." Capitanich is presently engineering a demo tape for the group Room With A View, which includes members Ken Kraft, formerly of Snail, and Tiran Porter of Doobie Brothers fame. Capitanich thinks the group may achieve national prominence.

Opperman is also busy with a high profile project, engineering a new album for The Rastafarians. Not to be outdone, Pacific Garden Mall country singer California Slim has recorded two album demos at Harbor Records. Over the last ten years, Capitanich says local music has made great strides, in terms of both talent and reputation. Of the next few years, he is emphatic: "People are going to be surprised!"

Local producers and engineers agree Santa Cruz is blessed with an abundance of great talent, but that Los Angeles is still the music world's Grand Central Station. "The quality of music in LA is pretty high," says Gott. "People that have the guts to go down there get pretty good before they go."

Large studios in Los Angeles employ producers and engineers for each specific role. Locally, engineers wear both hats because of the relatively small market and the high overhead of operating a recording studio. An engineer's primary function is that of technician. A producer, though, is generally responsible for the arrangement and emotional content of music.

"I like to specialize in groups that haven't been in the studio a lot," says Steve Loveless of Twilight Studios in Watsonville. "Anybody with studio experience knows pretty much about what they want and what they can do—then I'm just engineering. For a lot of projects though, I end up being a producer."

Opperman says his background as a musician helps him understand the artists' needs: "Musicians speak a certain language. If someone says, 'I want my sound to be more orange,' unless you're really tuned in, that's just going to be gibberish." Capitanich, however, feels a producer/musician can unconsciously imbue a performer's sound with his or her own: "The producer who is a musician is going to exhibit a bias in the production."

Patience is a quality all engineers and producers must exhibit. Musicians tend to be more emotional, studio operators say, than people who opt for the secure and predictable workaday world. Capitanich reasons that music is a process of self discovery. Sometimes that process is painful. "There's an incredible emotional scene going on in the studio in addition to the music," says Gott, "and both positive and negative attitudes show up on the final product."

Justin Mayer, Bear Creek Recording Studio owner, earned a BA in psychology before choosing a full time studio career. His training, he says, has been invaluable: "Here I am doing that (psychology) without a license!"

Adds Capitanich: "An artist must be in a relaxed atmosphere. It's hard for the artist to spill heart and soul out on tape."

In addition to the emotional pressure there is a financial kind. Studio time isn't cheap. An average three minute song usually takes a band over three hours to produce and can cost anywhere from \$60 to \$600, depending on the studio's capabilities and a variety of considerations worked out between engineer and artist beforehand. If a band wants to do several songs, studio time adds up quickly, and unexpected situations can lead to costly budget overruns. "There's no such thing as an average session," says Loveless. He and other studio owners offered these suggestions to help musicians avoid unanticipated snags.

1.) Rehearse songs well in advance of the session. Engineers say lack of preparation is a recurrent mistake. Gott suggests bands record their songs on a mono cassette, for example, to get a feel for the final sound before the session. Mayer advises artists who hire session players (free-lance musicians) to supply them with cassettes of their songs prior to the session. Loveless adds that bands shouldn't change their songs "at the last minute."

2.) Arrange a pre-production meeting with the engineer and/or producer. This way the engineer can be set up for your particular requirements ahead of time. "You're going to make friends with

everybody so it's important to develop a rapport," says Loveless.

3.) Be imaginative. "Usually people aren't imaginative enough," says Opperman. "They're afraid to take chances. Pop records are like a roller coaster ride, so you want to exaggerate emotionally. And there's a different standard for somebody trying to get a first hit. After you're established, you don't have to be as exaggerated."

4.) A band's drummer should arrive first. "I like the drummer to come in ahead of time because the drums take the longest," observed Loveless. A song is usually "built" on the drum track.

5.) Be prepared for lengthy overdubs. Vocal harmonies, for example, often take much longer than their role might portend.

6.) Calculate time for "setting up" and "taking down" equipment. The time between taking down—disconnecting and removing jacks, microphones, headphones, equipment, etc.—for a guitarist and setting up the same for a pianist is substantial. Assistants are useful.

7.) Cooperate during the "mixdown" or blending of the completed soundtracks. "Give and take" helps expedite the final step of the recording process.

8.) Beware of excessive partying which can impinge on the quality of musicianship.

The session completed, all that remains, of course, is fame and fortune. "The important thing is who hears you," says Loveless. "When you walk out of the studio with your master tape, that's just the beginning. •"