



Mixing Rooms

It's a showcase venue for musicians, it's an SSL-equipped recording studio, it's a mini-Motown and it's in Scotland. **NIGEL JOPSON** goes north of the border to find out what the fuss is all about.

I F THERE'S ANYWHERE in the world where it should be legitimate to enter a recording studio by walking through a bar, it must be Scotland. And in case the thought of a Glasgow bar conjures up the wrong mental image, we can assure you this is a watering-hole of the go-to-destination, glass-fronted, city-regeneration, bistro variety ... and it's right opposite the police station! The facility is the brainchild of Stuart McCredie who has run (and still owns) Eldon Street Studios in Glasgow, and Westlife, Liberty X and Blue songwriter John McLaughlin. 'I think the days are gone where a studio could just sit back and wait for the phone to ring from a major record company saying: we are going to send our band in, here's 50 grand,' explains John, 'it's the Motown/Factory Records/Rough Trade model that works today. While you are helping the artist, creating songwriters,

creating new producers, you are also creating work for your studio.' Hence the well appointed bar, which hosts acoustic showcases for new acts and 'open stage' sessions for local talent. 'We've already signed an 18-year-old singer-songwriter called Maeve O'Boyle who has won the Celtic Connections festival Danny awards,' McLaughlin reveals, 'and we've found two artists we are considering for development.'

The Mixing Rooms represent the culmination of several years of searching by Stuart for suitable premises in Glasgow. When he eventually found the site, a modern building in West Regent Street adjacent to the Ibis Hotel, he rushed to put a deposit on it. A significant part of the plan mandated actual ownership of the studio premises, to avoid running foul of the lease-renewal trap that has nailed the coffin shut on so many famous recording spaces. 'Finding a bank that would buy the whole idea, and having it underpinned with value in property, was key,' explains McCredie. 'I've run studios commercially for 10 years, if they are run correctly they can make money. We went to five banks with the project, got four really good responses and went with the Royal Bank of Scotland, whose support has been fantastic, they really see the value in it.'

Fronted by the bar and bistro area, the ground floor accommodates control rooms A and B, their recording areas, and a small office. Upstairs are the management company offices and preproduction rooms. Control room A houses a magnificent SSL G+48-channel console — a few test presses of the routing buttons confirm that this particular model must have inhabited a Tardis-like time-machine for much of its

career. 'We were very lucky to find such a low-use 4000 series in such great condition,' confirmed Stuart. 'I originally had the genius idea of buying a 144 moving-fader, winged Amek 9098i from a private studio in Oregon, Ohio, but logic prevailed and I got the SSL! We're selling ourselves to major labels, so it was an important decision.'

The pleasantly large control room has a vocal/instrument overdub booth to the left, and a live space to the right, with windows giving line-of-sight contact through the control room for band recordings. The outboard racks are equipped with a compact but A-list selection of outboard including Neve 33609 compressors, GML and Amek 9098 mic amps, Urei 1176s and a Lexicon 960. As *Resolution* visited, a classic Fairchild 670 valve compressor had recently arrived and was immediately pressed into service by producer Calum Malcolm. 'Stuart has done it really simply but highly professionally,' he comments. 'I was at great pains to warn him not to buy too much equipment! All the best studios I've been in don't have that much outboard equipment, but what they do have are classics, which is just what you want.'

The studio opened in November with a full-on acoustic recording session by Scottish legends The Whistle Binkies, since then The Dykeenes, Antony Costa, Belle and Sebastian, The Dirty Pretty Things and Kelly Clarkson have been in to record and mix tracks. 'In Scotland I've felt we always lacked the finishing aspect of making records. We've been able to find new artists and write material, but we've had to then go that extra step further and take projects to London for mixing,' explains John McLaughlin. 'We did Busted, Mark Owen and Blue at Stuart's previous studio, but then we could never finish the record here in Scotland.' Main monitors are the superlatively neutral-sounding Linn Professional 328As, using Linn's revolutionary new servo-bass driver system. Acoustic design for Mixing Rooms was by former Recording Architecture partner Nick Whitaker: 'The interesting approach with the monitors is that they have to be completely free standing, they have a very wide and even dispersion and you have to be quite sure that there's also a very even reverberation time and frequency response throughout the room, otherwise you won't be able to exploit the good aspects of the Linn design.'

There is a noticeably larger sweet spot behind the console than in many more conventionally-equipped rooms, with a very smooth top end. 'It was an interesting range of spaces that was asked for,' adds Nick, 'I'm very pleased with the way the live room and booth have worked out. Stuart wanted to have quite a lot of variability, so I've left as much of the height of the room as I could.'

Recording duties in both rooms are handled by Pro Tools HD systems with all the trimmings, driven from dual-processor G5 Macs housed in some very neat-looking cooling and isolation racks from Kell Systems. Drives are shared using an Ardis Technologies Dynamic Drive Pool, an Ethernet-based storage area network (IP-SAN) using iSCSI protocol. Stuart has had a four-user system installed, which offers expansion possibilities for the future of two further Digidesign studios running virtual disks on the shared high-performance SATA storage system. A journey to Studio B passes the office of studio manager Helen Clark — a key member of the team — and a very well known figure on the Scottish music scene, after many years managing Ca Va studios. Throughout the facility, there's a noticeably superior finish to the fabric of the building than might be expected in a regular recording studio, it transpires this is thanks to a builder friend of Stuart, more normally occupied with



the construction of upmarket night clubs and dining establishments.

When we visited, mixing duties in Control B were handled by an SSL AWS 900, which was highly praised for its flexibility and capabilities as a worksurface controller for Pro Tools. However, in the short period of time the Rooms have been open, there have been so many projects running concurrently at the facility that Stuart admitted an instant-reset board would be of huge advantage. By the time *Resolution* readers are perusing these pages, a brand new C300 console will have been installed and commissioned in the B room by Bill Ward, who took care of the installation at the facility. This mixer has the DAW control features and surround monitoring admired on the AWS, but also includes full digital mixing, up to 64 4-band EQ/dynamics per DSP card, instant reset from session to session, and SSL's TimeFreeze automation — which has no requirement for external timecode. Monitoring in Control B is also handled by Linn 328As and, unusually for a smallish rectangular room, the console and monitors are arranged on the long side. 'The Linns do have excellent horizontal dispersion and the lateral early reflections are very low level with this layout,' explains Nick Whitaker, 'so we have a reasonably wide listening field for a small room.'

Mixing Rooms is a great example of a modern facility, but the business model backing it up is not dissimilar from that which Leonard and Phil Chess mapped out in 1957, when they converted a former automobile parts factory into the Chess Records' office and recording studio in Chicago. 'I think you need it all, there's no use just having a studio,' McLaughlin observes. 'Just having a studio is the kiss of death. Very rarely have I walked into a record company with an artist and they've given me a big giant cheque



— and when it has happened it usually messes up! I've learned from that: what we like to do now is take the record as far as we can, then if a label comes in the ball is already rolling. As long as you bring a great group of people together, and you can be honest with yourself and make great records, there's no reason why you cannot compete.'

Stuart points out that, in contrast to the situation a decade ago, the record industry is now much more accepting of productions from regional non-traditional music centres — whether from Malmö, Munich, or Glasgow. 'We've got a good skills overlap — John

is very astute on the writing and publishing and management side — I concentrate on the facility and we obviously still write together. I think the only model these days for a studio is as a production house, the mini-Motown set-up still works if you can be successful with your product.' ■

Contact

THE MIXING ROOMS, UK
Website: www.mixingrooms.co.uk
Tel: +44 141 221 7795