



The Bridge

Some of the biggest commercials rooms in London's Soho have been refurbished and now they're even bigger. **ZENON SCHOEPE** talks to Robbie and Rick about Fairlights, pianos and neurosurgery.

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about London's Soho audio post community is that it is still full of characters. Among these, Robbie Weston is among the most quotable with his irreverent and humorous comments about the state of technology and business. But then he's had more practice than most and, together with technical director Rick Dzendera, has created a Group of facilities that includes Silk Sound, Space and The Bridge.

The Bridge has finally been refurbished. Following the ground-up Space build in the mid-1990s, the two turned their attention to Silk Sound and brought it up to date. The Bridge plodded along happily and while it has been their intention to address it for some time, uncertainty over the lease delayed things. They admit that the old place was beginning to look a little grey around the edges.

With all matters resolved, the refit is total and extremely impressive. The three rooms have been expanded and improved. There's been a full rewire and the rooms were refitted one at a time, a testament to good isolation. There's also some extremely tasteful Guy Wilson (AKA Design) furniture and fittings — described by Robbie as 'a type of Japanese calm, because The Bridge has always been a big calm place.'

The key word here is 'big' because The Bridge's two main rooms are enormous by normal Soho standards. It was built originally for advertising post but with a music studio mentality in terms of structure and size.

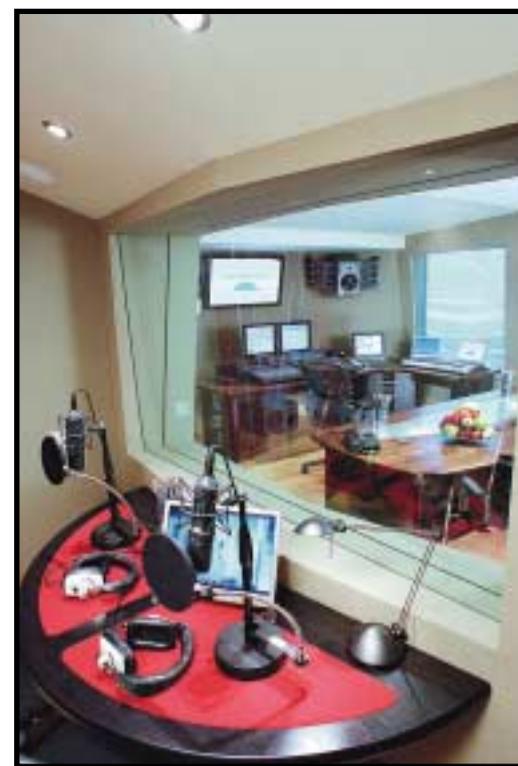
The thing is that the rooms are even bigger than they were as they've realised the space formerly occupied by back-of-the-room machine rooms (no longer required) and enormous Mitsubishi monitors in the front walls (replaced by plasmas). While they were at it, they improved the air conditioning and altered the ceilings. The replacement of the original SSL 6000s and their patchbays with more compact Fairlight systems also realised a lot of leg room.

Each room has a live area for voice recording and these are again surprisingly spacious. Weren't they tempted to cram in another control room?

'We thought of that but there are so few rooms of this size that they do appeal to a type of work. It gives us an edge,' says Robbie. 'We do get a lot of agencies coming in here mob-handed and now we have the space. Different places attract different clients and in these rooms it's not unusual to have 12 or 15 people.'

He explains that all three facilities essentially address the same commercials market in different ways. Space draws the younger creatives, producers and agencies; Silk handles a broad range of work but usually for times when only two or three people come to the session; while The Bridge appeals to clients who approach a commercial like a drama.

What has always characterised Weston and Dzendera refurbishes is that they are technology driven from the standpoint of the operators. Silk Sound was originally a classic analogue radio studio with



turntables, 1/4-inch machines and carts. Space, like The Bridge before it, was built as new technology became available.

'If you've got stuff that is working perfectly well, there is no point in ripping it all out and spending a lot of money on some new stuff and expecting people to suddenly pay more for what they perceive as pretty much the same thing,' says Robbie. 'We've always thought that the new stuff should be put in to a new place and we can introduce people to it while the old place is still working.'



It's the opposite approach to one that buys technology in order to attract the client. 'When we took Silk totally digital with the Lexicon Opuses, not only did three or four members of staff walk out, but I was told categorically by numerous clients that this digital stuff would never catch on, that we were completely wasting our time, and that it was the kiss of death,' he continues. 'They said that if we seriously thought that clients would sit and watch somebody pressing buttons, instead of getting out the chinagraph and razor blade, then we were barking mad. Far from introducing it by saying "Hey client, look at this new stuff we've got", we were saying "You have to believe us, it will give you benefits." We were evangelists.'

'We did terribly clever things with editing tape but we were struggling against the inherent problems and limitations. We knew that digital would work but we had to persuade people and it was hard work. I think we've had to do that with all the technology; it's no good waiting until they're asking for it because they never will.'

Consequently, The Bridge now boasts Fairlight throughout. There are Dream Consoles in Studios 1 and 2, a Dream Station in Studio 3 and a Dream Satellite in the Engine Room. Sound effects are now centralised and Dynaudio AIR 15 monitoring is applied throughout with 5.1 configurations in the two main rooms.

The refit was needed. 'It got to the point where we couldn't keep the SSL desks going much longer,' says Rick. 'They were requiring almost daily attention but they'd done well as they'd been in service for 16 years.'

'And they had a value at the end of it, which is amazing,' adds Robbie. 'You can't say that about much digital equipment.'

It's interesting to note that Studio 3 was added a couple of years after the two other rooms at The Bridge were originally opened, and it housed their first Lexicon Opus. It's a piece of 'old' hardware that they have retained in each facility — The Bridge's lives in its Engine Room. It's not just about compatibility.

'It gives us the ability to restore an old job but they're also excellent at pitchchanging, EQ and varispeed,' explains Rick. 'Also, we needed a digital mixer in the transfer areas and, when we were redoing Silk, we looked around at what small digital mixers were available and there weren't that many then. So we kept and used the ones we already had.'

The mention of the Opus brings up a rather curious phenomenon that has dogged Weston and Dzendzera's DAW choices. They committed wholeheartedly to the Opus and then Lexicon discontinued them. Similar fate's befell their choice of SSL Omnimixs at Space and DAR Storms at the refitted Silk. It almost happened again, as their Dream order coincided unhappily with Fairlight's recent trading difficulties, a matter that is now fully resolved and has seen the manufacturer revitalised. Despite the problems at the time, they were still convinced that it was the product of choice.

'It started with the editor and we were very impressed

with that and found it fast, straightforward and with good facilities,' says Rick. 'At that stage we were still thinking about getting good editors and some separate digital consoles to go with them. Fairlight makes a console too and we were suitably impressed with that and the complete package; the fact it's integrated, networkable, and scalable and the integration of picture through Vmotion. We were very keen to get a video server and we went around various shows and asked video-based people about video servers for postproduction and they really didn't have a clue what we were talking about. We didn't want to stream video, we wanted multiple use video from hard drive. It exists but it was very expensive three years ago.'

'It's what came out of trying everything else,' adds Robbie. 'It's really about what systems are best suited to what is essentially a recording operation. I think a lot of people make the mistake of demonstrating a postproduction system, when really the first thing I need to do is talk to the actor and record him. It's not about a whole bunch of wild tracks that I've pulled in off my OMF. The fellow in there, I need to talk to him. Then it's about quickly editing things and putting it together. Our guys here definitely rated Fairlight.'

Robbie was once quoted, when singing the praises of dedicated hardware audio interfaces, that using a mouse in his line of work is as inappropriate as a pianist trying to play a grand piano with a mouse. He stands by it. 'The hardware interface is still important and when more than one person is operating it in a facility it's no good having an ultimately customisable interface that no one else knows how to operate. You want a button that says what it does on the label,' he says.

'It's interesting that Digidesign hasn't made quite such a big impact in our area whereas it has in others. For us it still requires too much keyboard work and the display is awful. It's an age thing and an expectation thing, I think a lot of people now don't question it. I think you'd still need a mixing console with a Pro Tools system just to get the talkback and the other things you need. As long as there are manufacturers like Fairlight that make this kind of stuff, I think there will be a market for it. It does the job.'

So, their decision process and mindset on re-equipping The Bridge is not that different from what it was when they first built it. 'It's not dramatically different but there have been so many business cycles since 1979,' says Robbie. 'There are so many broadcast channels and so many ways to deliver an advertising message to people, everything is spread out more thinly. When we opened The Bridge we had local radio stations and ITV. There are now so many different ways, even sound for websites. We also have more competitors.'

However, they are convinced that the audio-only facility remains the route for them and they are not tempted to branch into picture facilities as others have.

'If we can't give 100% to it then it's not our expertise,' states Rick. 'I still work on the basis that if I ever need neurosurgery then I will go to a neurosurgeon,' adds Robbie. 'And if he says to me "While I'm at it, shall I service your car and process your holiday snaps? I also do a damn good manicure," I'll be out of there. I want to go to somebody who utterly specialises and knows everything there is to know about it. It's the way it has to be. It's what we do.' ■



Robbie and Rick

Contact

THE BRIDGE, LONDON:
Tel: +44 207 434 9861