



Whitfield Street Studios

Robin Millar, producer and man-about-the-music-business, has bought Whitfield Street Studios and has grand plans to run it as a five-star facility. JIM EVANS reports on the recreation of a standard.

MUSIC HAS BEEN RECORDED, engineered, edited, mixed, mastered and overdubbed at London's Whitfield Street Studios since 1972 and more than a few famous names and an eclectic spread of artists and producers have made use of the facilities there. Among the first to work there were The Byrds, Kevin Coyne, Iggy Pop, Mott The Hoople, Vinegar Joe and The Wombles. The most recent clients have included The Prodigy.

In between those heady days and now, the studios have seen numerous management changes, refurbishments and changes of ownership and indeed, changes of name. It has been known variously as CBS Studios, Whitfield Street Studios and Sony Music Studios and The Hit Factory, London. At times, the ownership/management side of things was likened to a tangled web, but even the most ham-fisted corporate interference did not stop the flow of rock and pop hits, classical recordings and film soundtracks emanating from Whitfield Street. That was until a couple of years ago when Sony appeared to be losing interest in its studio operations, even though it was continuing to attract a goodly wedge of film/orchestra related work.

Then, in October last year, following months of uncertainty and rumour, the studio closed. It had been 'on the market' for over a year with no takers. Roll on to February this year and after the briefest of absences, Whitfield Street is back in business. Not, as many had feared would happen, as an office complex, but up and running again as a multi-studio music making facility — all under the direction of new owner record producer and music industry maverick Robin Millar.

While his production credits include Sade, Big Country, Everything But The Girl and France's biggest ever female singer Patricia Kaas, he has also set up and

run businesses in management, publishing and luxury car hire. During the 1980s he acquired control of two major London studios, Morgan, which became the Power Plant, and Maison Rouge in Fulham. 'At that time I became over-ambitious and started my own record company so was forced to sell them on,' he reflects. 'I thought they were in safe hands, but sooner rather than later, they were both shut down because they had actually been bought as strategic property acquisitions.'

Millar's investment in Whitfield Street is a bold one in anybody's book, especially in these times when the future prospects for commercial recording studios are uncertain to say the least. Is he confident he can make it work and restore it to its former glories?

'I'm not driven by making it work,' asserts Millar who was registered blind at the age of 16. 'I'm not a brave individual, I'm a fearless individual. There's a big difference. I admire brave people; there's nothing particularly to admire about me. I think it's the way I was brought up. I'm a person who doesn't dwell very much on "what if, what can go wrong". I've always been part record producer and part charity worker



throughout my adult life. Dealing with people much more unfortunate than me allows me to put my own little disability into the right perspective. I'm not averse to taking risks. What's the worst that's going to happen? Remember, the worst has happened to me before. I've lost all my money — twice. Both from adventures and I have no regrets at all about either. Losing all your money and picking yourself up again is an adventure in itself.'

Sitting in the control room of Studio 2 in Whitfield Street, he reflects. 'This studio was doomed, condemned. Most of it was closed, the rest of it was about to close, it was going to be torn apart and turned into an office block. I look on the situation not as to how does this affect Robin Miller, but can Robin Miller keep Whitfield Street alive longer? Six months, three years, ten years, whatever I can do, I'll do. I've stuck all my available cash into buying it so that I don't have any equity partners despite what you might read elsewhere. It's just me. So the only person affected should it not succeed will be me. I know I can handle that.'

Millar says he appreciates how certain aspects of record making and production have changed. 'I have no axe to grind, no difficulty, no problem with the fact that software and hardware have made multitrack recording and special effects possible for under £1000. That's fine. I don't see, however, what it's got to do with professional world-class record making. I don't understand why anyone in their right mind thinks it has. I don't notice Spielberg, Universal and company using hand-held digital cameras in peoples' back gardens to make blockbuster movies with top actors, directors and so forth. To me, a great record is a great song, with a great person singing it, great people playing or programming, great engineering, great arrangement, great studio, great mics, great desk, great mic pres.'

Whitfield Street Studios was purpose-built and opened as CBS Studios in 1972, having transferred that company's existing business from a tiny facility above a fashion store in New Bond Street. A feature of Whitfield Street from the off was its size — Millar compares its dimensions to 'a small department store' — particularly the size of the largest recording room in Central London, Studio One, which is 2,400sqft and

capable of comfortably accommodating 80 musicians. This makes it a firm favourite in the orchestral and soundtrack communities.

'The room has fantastic clarity,' says Mike Ross Trevor who worked at CBS Studios when it was Levy Sound Studios in New Bond Street in the early 1960s and is now a key member of Millar's new team. 'You can have an 80-piece orchestra playing away and you'll actually hear everybody, each instrument playing and the solos coming in. Sonically it is very focused, the sound doesn't get lost in any way.'

And Studio One is a vital part of Millar's strategy. 'Back in the early 1990s,' he explains, 'Sony did a deal with Ed Germano who ran the Hit Factory in New York to replicate that business in London, at Whitfield Street. Major changes took place and a lot of money was spent, spent well, on the studios themselves, the infrastructure and the equipment. However, they orientated it towards rock and roll and announced that it was going to be the greatest rock'n'roll studio in the world.'

Not surprisingly, the actual film, postproduction and TV people, who provide 70 per cent of the income of this place, were frightened by what was happening and to a degree it put them off using the place and it took some while to get them back. When I took it over, I was very conscious that these alarm bells would start ringing again within that community.

'My first priority on taking over the reins was to talk to all the people involved in the big film sessions and major orchestral sessions, potential clients, fixers, engineers, conductors. I did nothing else for a week. I identified not only their fears, but their thanks and gratitude that the place was staying open. Many said there was under capacity for orchestras in London. Generally, their problems at Whitfield came down to some very simple issues like toilets, space for copyists, space for the musicians to relax in between sessions, Internet connections for the producers — some very fundamental stuff.'

The first phase of Millar's plans will see a complete revamp of the ground floor reception, recreation and office areas. 'There was a big office annex at the back of Studio One that Sony used for management offices. I don't really need management offices like they did. So we have a plan for a major six figure refit of that back area to provide lounge, refreshment facilities,



more toilets, big TV screens with Sky, very much orientated towards the orchestral clients. Mirroring that, we are going to open up the reception, which has become a rather small, cluttered affair. The rest of the place is fine, but the reception let it down.'

On the technical side, Millar and his team are conducting a complete appraisal of the gear in the various rooms. 'What we're doing right now is going through the three recording studios and the eight postproduction rooms and actually systematically eliminating every problem, great and small, from a tatty rug that people might trip over to a mixing desk that hasn't been properly taken apart and cleaned and reassembled in maybe 12 years. In Studio One, for example, the second of the three Neve desks is in pieces — every single channel has been taken out, every single pot taken out, cleaned, put back and tested again, then taken out again if necessary.'

He says that there will be no major changes to the core equipment, such as consoles. 'Money was no object to the Germanos and they installed a lot of excellent equipment and technology, much of which is still in place. I don't want to be rude about modern equipment because there are some bits of modern gear that I love. But...a great desk is a great desk, a great tape machine is a great tape machine, a great microphone is a great microphone.'

'We've got some fantastic kit here. Our agenda is more to maintain the existing classic gear. We have got the last generation of Neve VRs built in Cambridge, we've got the J Series SSL that really advanced the SSL from the G Plus. There's half a million pounds worth of microphones here, some of which go back to the 1940s.'

We've got compressors made by CBS, Fairchild, beautiful Studer tape machines, and we're just making sure these are expertly maintained and work beautifully.

And the monitoring? 'There's been a fair degree of "Millar tweaking" on the monitoring,' he says. 'The monitoring in all the rooms — which were designed and built by Neil Grant — is based on various types of Boxer speakers. I've indulged in a fair degree of pulling apart, changing crossovers, experimenting with different drivers and HF units, revoicing, moving desks around in the room. I am just so fussy about this sort of thing. Fortunately the rooms themselves are all beautifully built. I won't have people saying the main monitoring is crap. That happens too often. Here, I want them to say, "Wow, that's really good".'

'We have some radical ideas,' he continues. 'All the core recording and mastering activities themselves will continue and will operate as you would expect. But we want to reshape the way people think about working and make this an art house if you like. My company that bought this facility is called Arts Media. I chose that name very carefully. Everything that's even faintly arty, to do with media that's us really. We've got people who are strongly connected who have the range of skills from art direction to string arranging, programming, as well as recording, mastering and mixing. It does make it very flexible. We want people to use us as a one-stop shop; a five-star multimedia one-stop facility.'

'Really efficient studios tend to be soulless and corporate in an institutional way, which has always struck me as running in conflict to the artistry and creativity which is supposed to take place there,' he concludes. 'On the other hand, a friendly relaxed atmosphere too often means that they are papering over the cracks in the facility and don't have their minds on the job. Worst of all are the clique studios that discriminate against you if you are not "one of them". I just know you can have style, fun, friendliness and no formal stuffiness without compromising respect, service, efficiency and class. That's us.' ■

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There are three main recording studios within the Whitfield Street complex.

The large Studio One, which has been responsible for the recording of soundtracks for movies such as *Evita*, *The Fifth Element*, *Rambo*, and many more, features two isolation booths adjacent to the main recording area. Centre-piece of the control room is a 72-channel Neve VRP. Studio Two's large control room features a rebuilt Neve VR72 Cambridge console, while the self-contained Penthouse Studio Three has an SSL J-Series desk.

The first addition to the facilities under Millar's ownership is the first floor Classic programming suite. Says Millar, 'This room is aimed directly at top professionals who want to balance the costs of recording world class music without compromising quality, acoustic excellence and five-star studio backup. There is usually an element of current recording projects based around programming where a fully-blown multitrack studio is not needed. My solution was to provide a space that could fulfil this phase of the project economically for the client, but with all the continuity of quality facilities and engineering. I have designed the Whitfield Street Classic Room to meet these needs.'