

Not Just a Fantasy: Fantasy Studios

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LEGENDARY STUDIO IS BACK FROM THE BRINK



Fantasy Studios' grand Studio A is equipped with an SSL 8056 G+ console, Pro Tools HD3 and Augspurger custom mains.

Photo: Steve Maruta

In the San Francisco Bay Area studio scene and beyond, Fantasy Studios (www.fantasystudios.com) and the Fantasy Records label are the stuff of legend. The facility has been situated in West Berkeley for more than three decades — part of an indie media mini-empire once owned by filmmaker Saul Zaentz. The studio most famously hosted recordings by the Fantasy label's biggest act, Creedence Clearwater Revival, as well as other national acts, including Santana and Green Day. Because the facility changed hands a couple of times in recent years, you may have heard through the grapevine that Fantasy Studios was going to close last year, or this year...

There was more than a grain of truth to those rumors. The studios, label and back catalog were taken over by Concord Records a few years ago, with Concord renting space in the building Zaentz still owned, but then Zaentz sold the building itself to a real estate developer, Wareham Development. When Concord's long-term lease on the building expired at the end of 2007, the label's management decided to move the label and catalog south to Concord's Beverly Hills headquarters and dismissed all of the Fantasy Studios staff. Longtime studio manager Nina Bombardier began making plans for a new life outside the music business, and all of her employees assumed the studios would close.

"But the Wareham principals were huge fans and wanted to keep the studios open," explains new studio manager Jeffrey Wood. "They stepped up to the plate in a big way. We talked with them about the importance of the studios to the Bay Area, not just historically but in terms of keeping these large rooms available."

In addition to hiring Wood, a producer with decades of experience in the control room and in artist management, and assistant manager Amanda Howell, Wareham re-hired engineers James Willetts and Jesse Nichols and chief technician James Gangwer. The developers and the streamlined staff decided to scale down from four studios to three; they plan to rent out the C room to a private client. They also replaced some decades-old wiring, finished upgrading their Pro Tools rigs to HD (two of three systems were done a couple of years ago), and added a Digidesign Control|24 board and Neve 8816 summing mixer in Studio B.

"Now we have two consoles in there," says Willetts, who joined Fantasy as a second engineer eight years ago. "We added the Digidesign console, but we still have the Trident [80B]. I've never seen this before!"

"Studio B will become a mix room, as well as a lower-cost independent band room," explains Wood. "We have a lot of clients who love the Trident and still want to work in analog, but we also have engineers who come in and want to mix inside the box. Now we can accommodate all of these projects."

"We've also made some cosmetic changes. But it's been important to respect the history of it as we continue to move the studio into the future. We also have people come in to Studio D, for example, which looks very '1980,' but when I talk to new clients or prospective clients about changing the appearance of it, they say, 'No, don't change a thing! It looks very modern!' It seems the aesthetic has ridden the wave back around!"

Wood worked with Bombardier to make the transition smooth for clients and staff. And since the changeover, he and his staff have been pushing hard to complete all of the renovations and book the rooms. Since December, the studio has hosted sessions with Counting Crows, Dolphin City, Peppermint James and local favorites Camper Van Beethoven. The facility, which retains all of its analog Studer machines, also continues to do frequent A/D transfer work for Concord Records and others.

"When I found out the studios might close, I booked a ticket to New York for the [October 2007] AES show," Willetts recalls. "But then Wareham stepped in and I ended up only taking a couple of weeks off. I think Jesse only took three days, and James Gangwer just plowed right through! We're all very excited to be here and have the opportunity to work with the mix of incredible talent who use Fantasy Studios."