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## A Sound Investment

By RUSTY GRAHAM

Updated: 07.15.09

Gilbert Sedeno and Glenn Wheeler are busy at a panel of knobs, gauges and displays that would make a 747 blush.

"What's that noise?" asks Sedeno. "I'm hearing something. What is that?"

Sedeno is talking to musician Bryan Harkness, who's in an isolation studio and who's laying down some guitar parts for an upcoming single.

Harkness tells Sedeno that he's just put new strings on his guitar — maybe what he's hearing the "stiffness" of those strings.

Maybe, says Sedeno. Play it again.

So Harkness does. He plays it again. And again. And again, until the riff and the sound satifies Sedeno's experienced ear.

The three are in Tierra Studios, a relatively nondescript building on Shadyvilla in Spring Branch and that, from the outside, could be about anything.

A modest mid-century ranch house fronts a large, windowless two-story structure that would look out-of-place in most neighborhoods but somehow seems to fit here.

The converted rancher houses the studio's reception area and offices, lending a casual feel that belies what is a serious and complicated business.

"In Nashville, the trend is putting studios in houses," says Sierra's Traey Hatch. "There's a more comfortable feel. It's not sterile."

Tierra is more than just a recording studio — it's also a record label and a music publishing business. That's why Harkness is in the studio — he's been signed by Tierra to record music that it owns, in its studio, to be released on its label.

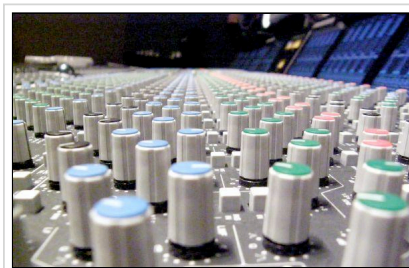
It's a throwback to the way the music business once operated, says Tierra's Aaron Morris, back when recording equipment was custom built in-place by engineers and out of reach except for the largest of players.

Studios such as Atlantic and Motown controlled every aspect of recording, from owning the music to distribution of the product.

Then along came multitrack recording, and that changed everything. No longer did musicians have to record together, at the same time. Instruments and sound could be recording separately, then mixed together for the end result.

Labels became more profitable and needed more space for business operations, and moved away from the studios.

But technology has once again intervened. The Internet largely eliminates the need for physical inventory, distributing music through online stores such as iTunes, Morris said, as well as formats such as midis and ringtones.



The SSL Duality board lets engineers work with sound both digitally and in analog.



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Product and artist promotion is also more Web-based. Tierra's Angela Grant builds and maintains Web sites and social networking sites for artists, recordings and the studio.

Labels like Tierra are able to once again control the entire process, from intellectual property through product creation and distribution.

"Without the confines of CDs, tapes or records, distribution becomes a matter of a few mouse clicks," says Morris.

Recording

And technology is redefining the studio too. That array of knobs and displays controlled by Wheeler and Sedeno belongs to a Solid State Logic Duality mixing console, the first of its kind in Houston.

The console, which "costs as much a house," says Morris, is on its maiden voyage as the studio records Harkness' album.

Harkness sits in an isolation studio, playing whatever guitar parts producer Sedeno wants to hear. There's still the matter of the new strings and the extra noise that Sedeno keeps hearing, but they're working through it.

The SSL Duality console takes advantage of both analog and digital technologies, allowing sound engineers to work in both formats simultaneously.

Sound engineers have long recorded music as analog waveforms, the natural waveform processed by the human ear. But recording digitally allows the producers to record unlimited numbers of tracks.

The SSL Duality integrates with Tierra's digital system while allowing engineers to work in the analog format — the best of both worlds.

Wheeler, the sound engineer, is excited about the prospects.

"I'm looking forward to the opportunity to really make (Harkness's) music pop," he said. "The console will add a lot of weight and strength to his music, and many shapes of tonal color."

Tierra's engineers and SSL reps spent several weeks in May custom-installing the console, the studio a tangle of wire. Grant says it was quite an experience to watch the engineers work, running cables, soldering connections and putting the studio back together.

History

Tierra opened for business in April 2005, but its roots go back to the late 1980s. Founder Kathryn Sherman was taking a Spanish course and she met a woman who'd written some public domain songs, in Spanish.

Sherman liked the songs but didn't like the quality of the recordings. She licensed the songs, intending to something better with them.

She set out on that quest in the late 1990s, once she and her husband's drilling fluids company was doing well enough that she could turn some attention elsewhere.

Sherman wanted quality across the board, so she had the songs she'd licensed re-arranged by professional musicians, including her ex-husband and jazz musician Bernie Hatch, Aubrey Tucker of Houston Community College and Sedeno. The first CD was recorded in the studios at HCC-Spring Branch.

Sedono was hired to write the music for the second one and during recording, Sherman realized that she was spending quite a bit of money for studio time.

She thought she could build and operate a studio to record not only her music but that of others as well. Sherman took the full plunge, adding the publishing and label arms.

"It took a while to learn the business," says Hatch, Sherman's son. "But we've got a really good group of people here, and we're working on developing artists in this area."

And the name? The company was first to be called One World Studios, Hatch said, because of the multiple aspects taking place under one roof, and that the company was confining itself to a specific genre.

But One World was taken, so the company settled on Tierra, Spanish for earth, or world. "It's an homage to our origins," he said.

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