

GREAT DIVIDE STUDIOS

BY ALEC WATSON



JOINING THE MILE HIGH
(RECORDING) CLUB

A ghostly little voice (with just the right amount of reverse reverb) whispers: "build a studio ... they will come."

I recently had the pleasure of chatting with Jamie Rosenberg, owner/producer/engineer of Great Divide Studios in Aspen CO. I, of course, offered to make the arduous journey to the cold wintry destination; heck, I could have even joined the "more than a mile high" recording club, but alas it was not to be my destiny for this article.

Every once in a while, you get the opportunity to speak with someone that has taken a similar journey as you have, only they took that left at the fork where you took the right (or wrong). This was the case with Rosenberg. See, at one time I had this dream of building a world-class destination recording studio in Whistler, BC. For me, it was always a pipe dream. No, I never looked into feasibility, rent, transportation, etc. Without really thinking about how to actually deal with building a little recording empire in a resort town, I just thought it sounded like a whole lot of fun. There is little doubt about the serious work that goes on at Great Divide Studios, but man, doesn't recording in a brand new facility in Aspen just sound like a great time?! Of course in a studio where the owner is the engineer, producer, and assistant it becomes difficult to separate the studio from the owner – they become extensions of one another. So if the lines blur between a feature on Great Divide Studios what sounds like a biography on owner/engineer Jamie Rosenberg, it's probably because the heart and soul of a self-owned residential production facility comes from the pulse of the owner. The opportunity to have a chat with someone that has not only taken the leap of faith in building a fantastic studio in a world-class destination resort, but who has also successfully managed to grow a career, a recording studio, and an enviable client list while doing what they love ... well who wouldn't want to find out the story behind all that?

SETTING THE SCENE: SO JAMIE ... ASPEN – WHY ASPEN?

I asked Rosenberg about his musical background. "I used to live in Hollywood and went to the Guitar Institute of Technology in 1984," he said. I was waiting for the punch line. No offense to the G.I. of T., but as a Canadian kid, I was viewed with suspicion at the sheer mention of wanting to become a record producer and/or photographer. The idea that you can put the words Guitar, Institute, and Technology in the same title really sounds like a dream come true – that or something very dangerous. And then there was that mention about Rosenberg growing up in Hollywood, CA. After a brief silence (with no punch line) I suggested: "So you ended up in Aspen to become a ski bum?" Thankfully, Rosenberg answered with a laugh: "yeah! Phew, common ground!"

Rosenberg took a job working at a music store after moving to Aspen in '87. The skiing was great, there was a good music scene and needless to say, there were a lot of guitars that needed repair. Okay, that might not be needless to say, but if you think about it for a

second or two, it does become completely obvious! Hey, here's a problem that you don't come across everyday, but interesting never the less – according to Rosenberg, the problem for wood, in terms of guitar maintenance in Aspen's climate, isn't so much the elevation but the relative humidity: "Some people try to keep their guitars in humidified rooms, but guitars sound better when the wood is more brittle. With the low humidity, we let the wood dry and then glue the guitar back up when [if] it cracks." Hey, I am no expert, but who knew?

While working at the Great Divide music store, the advent of the ADAT found Rosenberg sitting in front of a collection of five of the black faced beasts and recording local acts. The pastime soon took on a life of its own and Great Divide Studio (Mk I) was created. Today, eight years after leaving the music store, Rosenberg is sitting in Aspen talking to me from the freshly built Great Divide Studios (Mk IV). Situated on the golf course just out of town, the new purpose-built, 2200 sq. ft. recording facility is in the basement of his residence; it has 16-foot ceilings (dude, nice basement studio!), a fantastic collection of instruments and recording hardware, and was designed and overseen by Martin Pilchner of Pilchner Schoustal Toronto.

A studio in a high-end resort town was a bit of an unusual site for Martin to work. I spoke with Martin Pilchner regarding his work on Great Divide Studios and found him exceedingly helpful and personable; so for the rest of the article, we'll keep on a first name basis. Accord-



Control Room looking into Iso 1. Guitar amp rack on the far left. This features Marshall, Two-Rock, Ampeg, Fender, Vox, and Rockman amps that can be patched into cabinets in any room. Also contained is a Radial JD7 splitter, Demeter Spring Reverb, Korg Rack Tuner, and assorted guitar effects. This allows guitar and bass players to play in the control room with full control over the amps while the cabinet is blasting away in the other room. Digidesign ICON D – Control for Pro Tools HD4 Accel, Version 7.3.

ing to Martin, Jamie researched several design firms for the "right" fit for the new studio before deciding on his firm. I asked Martin whether the environment, extreme cold in winter, and high elevation was a consideration in the construction of the facility: "No, the envelope of the building was outside the considerations of the acoustic environment ... we did [however] work a lot with the architect in designing the studio to work within the confines of a living space." There was apparently a lot of work involved in acoustically isolating the residence from the studio. Great Divide Studios is actually most producer/engineers' dream as far as a "home studio" goes – and yes, "home studio" in this case really does deserve to be placed in quotations. Great Divide Studios is only a home studio because it is found at a home.

According to Martin, smaller spaces are more difficult to work with when creating a neutral acoustic environment. Commenting on the studio as a commercial facility found within the confines of a residence, Martin describes Great Divide: "The layout of the studio spaces was based upon getting the most functional use out of the exterior shell. It was organized by locating the control room area where it could be dimensionally optimized, and then grouping the ancillary spaces around it. It yielded a design response which puts the control room perpendicular to the studio axis where the large iso booth flanks the left side and the studio proper and smaller iso booth flank the right. This solution allows full sightlines throughout all of the spaces."

The mid-sized control room also allowed for the installation of 5.1 surround in the far-field. Martin further explains: "We set up the control room for 5.1. We do this for most studios these days. It's a lot less expensive to set up 5.1 for the midfield environment and only soffit the mains ... in the case of Great Divide, the expense of soffit the ATCs in the far-field for 5.1 wasn't spared ... it's a lot more complex installation." Martin is proud to add that the sound is neutral,

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accurate, and not EQ'd. I suggested that perhaps he was taking the fun out of engineering?" "No way, I am putting the fun back in engineering! ... maybe just taking some of the sport out [laughs]." Jamie Rosenberg concurs. Of his first mixes, he says: "I really haven't had any need to use near-fields ... Martin has done an excellent job."

The biggest consideration in creating a working acoustic environment is often isolation; in the case of Great Divide it wasn't the isolation from city road noise, and certainly not the isolation necessary between the rooms, it was the isolation from trades – as in qualified builders, electricians, HVAC people, and plumbers. In a high-end resort area like Aspen one is likely to find craftsmen to cover all sorts of custom installations, but understanding construction methods for acoustics isn't often called for. Was the use of the same contractor that built Rosenberg's last studio an advantage in building the new Great Divide? "Yeah, that's not always a good thing, sometimes people have a lot of 'ideas,' though in this case he was pretty good, he was very meticulous," says Martin. "I took a couple of trips down there to talk to all the trades." Martin, an avid skier from Saskatchewan (sorry I couldn't resist adding that), was disappointed to admit that his time in Aspen was spent as a professional and there was no time for skiing. I guess he'll just have to offset the missed recreational opportunity with accolades from the client. I am pretty sure Pilchner Schoustal International will be okay with that.

If you have never had a look, let me highly recommend a site to browse: www.pilchner-schoustal.com. It is obvious that there are some gorgeous form as well as functional considerations in designing a fantastic looking, high-end acoustical working environment. When asked about the approach of form vs. function in Great Divide Studios, Martin remarked: "There is more function than form in a structure that has limitations on height, depth, and width before you start ... for smaller spaces there is more consideration on workflow, solving the problems you've created with geometry. It's a basement studio, but Jamie has ample space with a couple generous booths and medium [sized] control room."

A STUDIO WITH A CEILING AT 8016 FT ABOVE SEA LEVEL

So Jamie, what do you do for heat up there? "The studio is in a large basement, the temperature stays around 68 degrees – the gear keeps it warm. Cooling is actually more of an issue, we have a very well-designed cooling system for the gear," referring to the gear closets. "All the noisy gear [due to cooling fans] has its own air-conditioned enclosure."

Another big consideration when you are the only show in town and your environment isn't all that conducive to keeping un-acclimated instruments in optimal condition is having plenty of well-maintained instruments on hand. The instrument list at Great Divide Studios

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

So what kind of investment was involved in building Great Divide Studios?

A little under 1.5 million.

(Strangely, I feel like I want to hear Doctor Evil say that amount or just simply explode with the question: "DOLLARS!?!")

How about the impact of Aspen land prices?

Don't even go there!

How do you advertise?

Pretty much word of mouth, I think. Google does a lot of the work. I guess people just Google 'Aspen' and 'studio.'

(Again, there was that wispy voice blowing in the west coast storms while we talked over the phone ... build a studio and they will come)

So how does one decide on a price for a studio when you're the only show in town?

I have tried to get rid of the sliding scale, be more hard-nosed about the price and we have kept pretty busy. I prefer to try and work with one client at a time.

To what do you attribute Great Divide's constant state of booking and success?

Location, location, location! (Ha ha: a punch line!) I'd like to think it's me, but I'm the only studio in Aspen and probably the second biggest in Colorado. I get it [the client roster] by default.

(Yeah, well not too likely Jamie. I could tell by this point in our conversation that I was talking with a fairly humble well-rounded musician that takes a lot of pride in his work. I just thought I should go ahead and throw that in for him as he ducked the real answer with Canadianesque self-deprecating humour.)

So what is it like finding assistants and staff in Aspen?

[silence] I pretty much cover everything. I try to convince musicians to come in from 10am till 6pm and then I can do back-ups and archiving into the evenings ... and I can do that in my underwear.

(As a former full-time engineer myself, I'd like to pass along that I was impressed by the fact that Rosenberg takes the time to linearize and archive all the projects that come through Great Divide Studios. Finding the time to make projects compatible with future recording platforms is pretty tedious, but it really is one of the hallmarks of good engineering; alas, craftsmanship still exists in the digital era.)

What is the toughest part of being the owner of a destination studio?

It gets pretty stressful making records – dealing with people's dreams. You want to live up to their dreams whether they have the budget or not.

How about favourite studio or personal achievements?

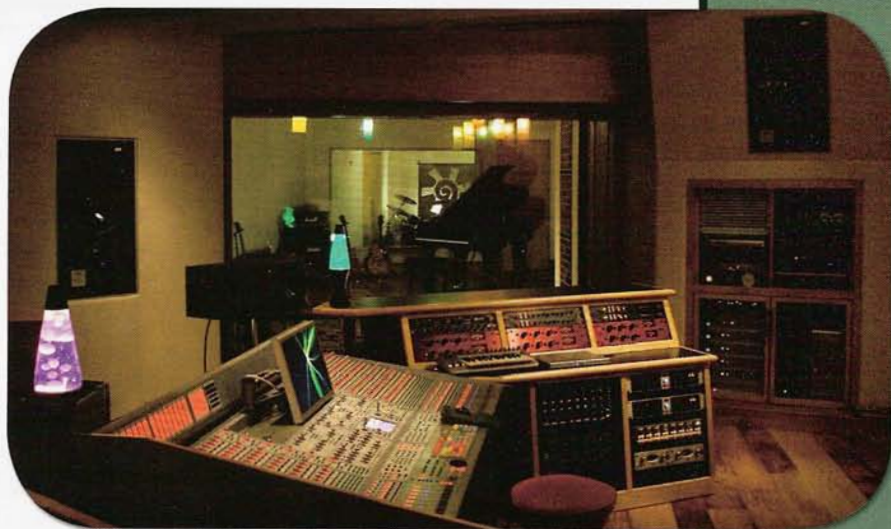
In the past I did John Oates' solo record, he's the client I've done the most with over the years, in fact the first project at the new studio was the Hall and Oates Christmas record; we did that back in July.

So where do you see yourself and the studio heading in the next five years?

I want to keep getting better at what I do, get bigger and better work. I love working with great artists, it would be good to get to the point where you pick and choose. Working on good music only. Audition people, but be open to everyone [and] not be elitist.

What does most of the work consist of up in Aspen?

Lots of classical and some film scoring in the summer – lots of jazz between Aspen and Vale, and a lot of classic rock – no hip hop. I always donate a day for battle of the bands; it's always some screaming high school thrash band.



Control room looking into studio and Iso 2. The wall rack on the far right contains all the Digidesign and Mytek converters/clocks as well as the Mac G5 Computer and hard drives. This lower rack is isolated for noise control and has AC supply and return. The upper part of the rack contains the patch bays, Hearback Headphone system, Folcrom Summing Box, Digidesign Midi I/O, Vidio projector interface, cable TV box, all the tape, DAT, and DVD players and a turntable. The wall racks are easily accessible from the back.

reads more like a rock star project studio than what I tend to think of as a normal recording facility. I won't go into to great detail here, as you can check the list out at www.greatdividestudios.com, but highlights include:

Keys: a '57 Hammond B3 with Leslie, and a 2005 model Steinway B in the main room.

Electrics: a wonderful vintage guitar collection including a 1960 Strat and a 1960 Gibson ES355.

Acoustics: 1937 Gibson J35, 1932 Martin 00-18.

There are also several nice basses, amps from standard to boutique and a nice Gretsch drumkit.

The vintage guitar collection wasn't wasted on Martin Pilchner, a guitarist himself: "Jamie has a wicked guitar collection. I even went

Knowles in the summer; she was in town and had to finish two songs – fast. I don't really know her music, but she's really talented. Man, can she sing." Apparently it took two days till they lost a line due to a flat note.

I should mention at this point that I was asked by the editor of *Professional Sound* to get "a few voices in this article, maybe get some clients..." I thought perhaps I should get in touch with Beyonce and Katherine Zeta Jones as they are both on the Great Divide Studios client list. Unfortunately, how do the tabloids like to put it – oh yeah, they haven't returned my calls at this time.

Great Divide Studios has a fairly enviable gear list. Again, I'll let you peruse the website for specifics, but as far as Rosenberg's favorites: the Digidesign D Control makes the hit list as well as the ATC mains set up



LEFT CONSOLE RACK. EQs and effect processors. Compressors are two Distressors and a Fatso Jr. by Empirical Labs, two tube Glory Comps, a pair of Neve Portico 5042 tape simulators, Smart Research C2 and a Neve 33609JD. EQs are two Empirical Labs Lil' Freq's, Dolby 740, Manley Massive Passive, and two DW Fearn VT4s. Effects are an Eventide H9000FW, Ensoniq DP Pro, and a Lexicon 300.



RIGHT CONSOLE RACK. Preamps are Great River MP2NV w/ EQ2NV, two Requisite Audio Pal Plus MkIII (Jamie's favourite!), two Chandler TG Channel's, two Chandler Germaniums, six Neve 1073s, two Neve 1084s, Shadow Hills GAMA 8, Grace 801, two UA 6176s, two Avalon US's, and a Requisite Audio L2M MkII Mastering Limiter. Mics in the other rooms can be hardwired to the preamps and then directly into the Mytek convertors, bypassing the patch bay. Jamie has custom Requisite audio cable for this purpose and although manual patching is required he says the quality gained is really stunning.

out with Jamie to the local music store where they sell outrageously expensive guitars. Aspen has a clientele with a lot of money."

Of his extensive guitar collection Rosenberg admits: "Yeah, even locals don't bring their instruments anymore." I have often worked at studios that take a lot of pride in their tracking gear, their monitoring, or their mic collection, but Great Divide seems to have covered all the bases. A lot of Canadian studios face similar issues – it's somewhat difficult to get rentals in isolated areas, sometimes it's just better to keep many choices in-house.

Hmmm, perhaps Jamie Rosenberg should be an honorary Canadian. Apart from the fact that he lives in a place that can get ridiculously cold, has great air, scenery, and is surrounded by people that love recreation, Jamie is also a wearer of many hats. Due to the sheer population of America, which often tends to command a certain degree of specialization for one to get ahead, a lot of Americans tend to wear fewer hats than us Northerners. Be it isolation from certain areas of the musical talent pool, or the satisfaction one gets from having their fingers in all sorts of aspects of the recording chain, to our benefit (and detriment) we Canadians tend to do all sorts of things like: engineer, produce, sing the backup vocals, play piano, guitar – sometimes at the same time – on every project! If you lived in an alpine village you'd probably have to take that one step further. I don't imagine Rosenberg wears lederhosen and plays one of those Ricola trumpets (often), but to keep the business moving ahead you'd better be exceedingly competent at everything you do, and like a lot of us in Canada, you simply have to be well rounded.

Rosenberg passed along a great story on working with great talent. We have all had to work with those marginal vocalists that for some reason (or other) just can't quite nail the pitch when the red light is on. Rosenberg has come across a fair few people that can't sing due to elevation (8000 ft), of these he suggests: "You know, they can't sing when they are not at 8000 feet either. I did some vocals for Beyonce

in 5.1. On whether great gear makes better recordings, he says: "Yeah, I have gone through waves of getting gear. Now I am in the music stage; when you have good talent you can use an SM whatever. With lesser talent you sometimes have to get creative with the sound."

SUMMING BUSES AND FADING OUT

Being the "digital audio columnist" for *Professional Sound* and *Canadian Musician* since 2000, it's been a real treat to get to talk to real people that are making a difference in the recording arts. Whether it's their individual approach, skill level, or marketing savvy, it's incredibly insightful to get the opportunity to speak with the real experts and then pass it along to you the reader. In the case of Great Divide Studios, it became less of a tech story on a new destination studio (Rosenberg added quickly that Great Divide is a destination without the hotel), and more a story about the success of a musician following his dreams. The cash investment in building and maintaining a professional recording facility the likes of Great Divide Studios is admittedly well beyond the means of most of us; the on-hand instrument collection, mics or onboard gear are enough to be worthy of a boutique studio itself, let alone having all those collections under one roof. Myself, I'd almost be a little green, but having spoken with Martin Pilchner about Rosenberg's work ethic and at some length with Rosenberg about his approach, it sounds like it has had a lot to do with hard work and talent – and gosh darn, you've always got to like a success story like that. ●



Writer/Photographer Alec Watson is a recovering gear-aholic and former victim of A&R abuse. He has greatly enjoyed his career change to the visual arts and enjoys photographing and writing about truly talented musicians ... of course he's really just traded his audio gear purchasing disease for an optical one.