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. 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 many don’t realize it is the same dream that Rosenberg is realizing.

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 II). 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 Schousil 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-
accurate, and not EQ'd. I suggested that perhaps he was taking the fun out of engineering? “No way. I am cutting the fun back in engineering! ... maybe just taking some of the dirt 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 Schousial International will be okay with that.

If you have never had a look, let me highly recommend a site to browse: www.pilchnerschousial.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 ask Doctor Evil “Do you know what it cost me to build this?”)

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 wisty 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 the studio 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! 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.

(Yes, well not too likely Jamie. I can tell 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 is the hallmark 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 favorite 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. 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 in Aspen?

Lots of classical and some film scoring in the summer – lots of jazz between Aspen and Vail, 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 box 2. The wall rack on the far right contains all the Digidesign and Mackie gear and also as well as the Digidesign switcher and hard drives. This left wall is isolated for noise control and has AC supply and return. The upper part of the rack contains the patch bays, Mackie Phantom Power system, follow spot Summer 4, Digidesign MultiMix 8, video projector interface, JBL 7 box, all the monitors, DAD and DVD players and a turntable. The wall racks are easily accessed from the desk.
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.

**Electric:** a wonderful vintage guitar collection including a 1960 Strat and a 1960 Gibson ES-355.

**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. Even went 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.”

Hmm, 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 trumpet’s (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 BUSSES 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 outboard 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.

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**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.”**