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VOL. XX NO.1

PM0040069300



PRINTED IN CANADA \$3.95

PRODUCTS AND PROFILES FOR THE AUDIO PROFESSIONAL

THE SALTMINE

A Creative Oasis In The Desert

BY JEFF TOUZEAU
PHOTOS BY ROB CASTRO

They say location is everything. This certainly seems to be the case with The Saltmine Studio Oasis, a 20-year old business which five years ago moved into an extensively remodeled multi-room facility in the heart of Mesa, AZ. Not only does Mesa boast a year-round average temperature of 71 degrees, it is also a creative Mecca for visual and performance artists.

The Saltmine Studio Oasis, owned by producer and GM Don Salter, certainly lives up to its name. It is an enclave of state-of-the-art studios centred on an outdoor courtyard – complete with barbeque areas, palm trees, and an outdoor stage. The recording facility is just blocks away from the Mesa Arts Center, the city's brand-new, world-class performance facility which at 212,755 sq. ft. is by far the largest performing arts, visual arts, and arts education facility in Arizona.

Phoenix's Valley of the Sun is a gem of the southwestern US, with its beautiful deserts and canyons as well as the metroplex that includes Scottsdale, Tempe, and Phoenix, each of which is within a short driving distance from The Saltmine. Also, the studio is just 15 minutes away from a major international airport and five minutes away from Arizona State University, which lies at the core of the Valley's music scene.

The Saltmine grew in a very "grass roots" fashion and has been among Arizona's favoured regional studios for more than 15 years. While its relationship with local talent was fundamental to its early success, The Saltmine has since drawn an enormous amount of national and international talent – especially since its relocation. Salter says the current mix of in-state clients versus national or international acts is roughly 50/50, but that balance is shifting increasingly towards the national/international scale. Most of the music they record is rock- or hip hop-based.

Finding A New Home

The hunt for a more attractive location was a fundamental catalyst towards creating The Saltmine Studio Oasis. The studio was previously housed in an industrial park and lacked the immediate proximity to culture and other amenities Salter felt would be required to take the studio to the next step. "The renovations to our last facility were extensive, but we didn't have any of the amenities we wanted in terms of outdoor barbeque areas, patio areas, and so forth," he says. "Also, and more importantly, our studio was next to places that weren't related to the arts business that we have." Salter wanted the studio's immediate surroundings to be more reflective of what it really was: an integral element of the greater Mesa arts community.

This sparked the quest for something new. "We sought a piece of real estate that we could renovate to build our dream facility," Salter continues. "We got onboard with this downtown arts district idea, since the area has lots of

galleries, restaurants, and antique shops. We wanted to be next to all of that." The new performing arts facility next door has already hosted several international touring acts, including Seal.

Finally, in January of 2003, Salter came upon the 16,000 sq. ft. compound that would ultimately become called The Saltmine Studio Oasis. There was an immediate connection. "It had a great vibe to it," he remembers. "The building was not on a main road, but was on a side street of a downtown area, so there was no traffic noise." The compound's interior seemed perfectly suitable as well. "The building afforded more than enough space for us to do a combination of commercial studios and rehearsal spaces. Also, there was a 7,500 sq. ft. courtyard, which we have since zoned as a live venue where Wyclef Jean performed." Salter says that clients appreciate the privacy of the courtyard, which has already been host to several videos and movie productions.

Anatomy Of An Oasis

The Saltmine Studio Oasis is a creative compound consisting of three buildings centred on a dramatic performance courtyard. Each of the buildings, which comprise a total of roughly 8,000 sq. ft., is built with 1 ft.-thick walls. The perimeter of the grounds features a 9 ft.-high masonry wall; the entrance is equally dramatic, with dual custom-designed and built sliding gates that Salter had installed.

At the heart of the Saltmine compound is a 1914 building that was formerly a church. After Salter acquired the property five years ago, this building – and the rest of the property – underwent an exhaustive renovation that spanned the buildings' footings, to its interior floors, to everywhere in between. It was a labour of love, and Salter spared no expense: "I took every dime I had, even mortgaged my house," he recalls. "I put up all the money that was needed to contract the renovation of this recording studio."

After acquiring the property, Salter put his many other talents to work as well. "I designed the studio – I have architectural inclinations," he says. "I drafted out several working plans and refined them over time, then brought on an architect to formalize them and run them through the city." The original plan called for three state-of-the-art studios, all of which were constructed simultaneously.

Something For Everyone

Five years later, The Saltmine Studio Oasis has four studios including a tracking room, a mix room, a production room, and the most recent addition – a residential "villa" recording room (or Studio D). This approach makes sense – while each room is focused on a different discipline of the recording process, the studios can run concurrently, handling different phases of different projects. A rock n' roll act might



ABOVE: Studio B The Mixing Studio featuring SSL 6064 E G+ TR HD-3 with 64 outs @192, Custom Westlake Monitors, and ATR 102 1" Mixing deck.
 RIGHT: Studio A Control Room with Neve (discrete) Console with (36) 33114 EQ/pres (1081s) and (8) 33314A (2254) Neve Compressors, and Neve Melbourne 12-channel discrete sidecar with 3114 EQ/pres.

be tracking in Studio A, while a big name hip hop producer is mixing in Studio B. An edit session might be going on in Studio C, while a band is preparing for basic tracks in The Villa – there isn't much duplication.

While each room has a primary focus, Salter is quick to point out that each of the rooms can handle more than one task: "Very often, we'll call Studio A the tracking room, but you can mix there," he says. "Studio B is the mix room, but you can track there, too. Studio C is the production room, and you can do vocals, record, or do whatever you want there."

A significant part of The Saltmine's attraction lies in what is not in its recording areas. Its outdoor courtyard, for example, consists of a performance stage and a large gathering area that is suitable for record company release parties, evening soirees, and barbeques. When combined with the recording areas and other rehearsal spaces, this helps create a "production ecosystem" for clients, making them feel compelled to return after their first visit.

A Smooth Transition

As any studio that has moved can appreciate, relocating can present a major challenge since it creates the potential for an interruption in business. As soon as The Saltmine Studio Oasis was completed, however, it was off and running. As soon as it opened, the studio received a call from Soulfly, which was ready to record its fourth LP for Roadrunner Records. Soulfly ended up booking five weeks in Studio A, Saltmine's Neve tracking room.

A few years and hundreds of projects later, the Saltmine Studio Oasis is now Arizona's largest, most sophisticated recording studio complex. It regularly hosts acts of an impressive calibre such as the Jonas Brothers, Ministry, DMX, Soulfly, and many others. Additionally, the studio has become a popular hideaway for producers – among them, Timbaland, Swizz Beatz, and resident producer Che Vicious of Aftermath Records, who has made Saltmine the new home for his Kops and Robbers production outfit.

Creative Vibes & A Musical Staff

The Saltmine has four full-time production staff including Don Salter, along with four other additional engineers and assistants. John Gray is chief engi-



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neer and producer, while Jason Levine and Justin Salter (Don's son) are senior engineers. The entire staff is well versed both from a production and musical perspective. "We are very proud of our production skills, and all of the engineers who work at The Saltmine Studio are musicians and artists, myself included," says Salter. The team often lends its musical talents to a variety client projects.

Working at The Saltmine Studio Oasis, clients not only have access to high-end rooms and a talented staff, but also an astounding collection of amplifiers, guitars, and instruments of all types. "We have a lot of people that come for the instruments and the unique vaults stuffed full of every instrument you can imagine," Salter says. Such gear includes vintage Fender and Vox amplifiers as well as vintage keyboards and synthesizers. Most of the time, extra gear is included in package rates.

The vibe at The Saltmine is omnipresent. Inside, clients are treated to a décor that is reminiscent of ancient deserts: "The whole studio emanates this eclectic Egyptian feel, with papyrus, a sarcophagus, world art, tapestries, and rugs," says Salter, an avid collector of Egyptian art. Part of his collection, including photographs from his Egyptian travels, is on display throughout the Saltmine complex for clients to enjoy.

In addition to its rich art and décor, the studio has plenty of distractions to help its clients unwind while in the midst of an intense project. There is a full kitchen, satellite HDTV, DVD, XBOX 360, and Playstation 3. The front courtyard even includes basketball and a "metro" golf course. The "patio lounge" features a large, restaurant-style barbecue grill, which has been known to deliver a mean Southwestern cheese steak sandwich.

Evolution Of The Villa

The Saltmine's latest addition is The Villa, its residential Studio D. This unique addition has already become the home of producers like the aforementioned Che Vicious of Aftermath Records, who recently settled in to work on several projects. The SSL-equipped residential suite offers a full kitchen and living quarters for producers and other musicians working on long-term projects. Clients who book The Villa can come and go as they please and are also able to take advantage of the A, B, and C rooms, courtyard areas, as well as The Saltmine's extensive selection of rental gear.

Prior to its reincarnation, The Villa was comprised of three rehearsal rooms that have since been joined together. The main mixing space has been outfitted with an SSL 4056 G G+, sourced by Dave Malekpour of Professional Audio Design and installed by The Desk Doctor. Dave Malekpour, Owner and President of Professional Audio Design, recalls first hearing about The Saltmine's quest for a new SSL: "Don had called me and said he had three rooms



ABOVE: Studio A Cathedral Live Room with house DW 6-piece drumkit, Hallet and Davis Baby Grand, Fender Rhodes, and Prophet 5.

BELOW: Studio D The Villa Control Room with Che Vicious and Travis Von Cartier working. The room features an SSL 4056 G G+ TR, Pro Tools HD3, and Dynaudio M-3 monitors.



PAD & Desk Doctor - a Bi-Coastal Partnership

"Bruce [Millett, owner of The Desk Doctor] and I have been working on projects together for almost 15 years; he's actually one of the first 'techie' guys I ever met," says Dave Malekpour, Owner and President of Professional Audio Design. "He worked for SSL for a very long time and is now one of the top SSL technicians in the world. His firm focuses on console installation, wiring and maintenance, and they partner up and dovetail with Professional Audio Design's PADTech service group. If we need an extra hand, we'll hire one of their guys to come out and help us."

Working closely with Desk Doctor helps PAD deliver the best service to its clients, no matter where they might be: "We partner up with The Desk Doctor on a lot of projects and often share our labour forces. This allows us to do a lot of work we wouldn't otherwise do. Bruce had a close look at the console I wanted to sell to Don; then they picked it up, delivered, and installed it for us. For PAD, it's almost as if we installed it ourselves; we get all the technical notes and reports, and if we ever need a part on site we can have Bruce go on location to install it."

and wanted to get a fourth one going. He told me about The Saltmine Studio Oasis and I was just blown away by the concept of the facility.”

The Villa is a valuable addition to The Saltmine, says Malekpour: “Now a customer can move in, but still have access to the big tracking room, the Pro Tools suite, and the big mix room – as well as all the rental gear. Also, this residential aspect provides great appeal to producers, who can basically park there and get a few records done.”

Originally, Salter had wanted a 40-channel E Series SSL console because the control room seemed on the tight side; however, after consulting with PAD and taking some additional measurements, it was decided that The Villa could handle an SSL G Series. This G Series console measured 11' 7"; there was just over 12 ft. of space to get the console in.

A Mean (& Clean) Machine

One could say the SSL G Series desk has an illustrious history. Its previous owner was David Foster, and prior to that, it was owned by Dave Stewart of the Eurythmics. “When I went to buy that console originally, it was really pristine,” says Malekpour. “It didn’t have a lot of commercial-type use on it, which is always a good starting point. It was well cared for and had been well maintained. We did the upgrade and put in the G+ centre section modifications; this improved signal quality overall, particularly noise floor and headroom.”

In addition to sourcing the console, Professional Audio Design also lent its expertise to help define the overall purpose of The Villa. “What is it going to look like when we wake up and there is this new studio open?” asks Malekpour. “What are the angles and what are the selling advantages going to be for the client going into this new investment? I like people to think through all these questions as part of the decision-making process.”

Salter says that seeing The Villa come to fruition was particularly rewarding, and he attributes at least part of this success to his partners, Professional Audio Design and Desk Doctor. “Working with Dave Malekpour has been a joy,” Salter says. “He is very knowledgeable, helpful, patient, and meticulous and he offered us a level of flexibility that allowed our studio to evolve in a budget-conscious way over the course of the last two years.” Desk Doctor, with which Professional Audio Design partners for many west coast jobs, handled the installation under the direction of Malekpour.

Looking Toward The Future

After 20 years of being in the business, Salter still loves coming to work. “I’ve been doing recording for a long time, and I find that every project brings its own energy – its own hopes and dreams. We have an uncompromising quest for quality and very personalized service to help our clients achieve their goals.” He attributes at least part of the studio’s ongoing success to a reasonably aggressive pricing structure. “Whereas most studios have been forced to raise prices to keep pace with inflation, we have increased the number of our studios and maintained low pricing since 2000. In addition to increasing our studios, we’ve also been able to expand our services.”

Over the course of the studio’s history, Salter and his staff have basked in many remarkable moments, and are currently excited about a local rapper named Juice. “There is an extraordinary hip hop scene brewing here in Arizona, and we are very proud of Juice, who has just signed to a new label owned by basketball legend Amare Stoudemire.” Saltmine has been involved in both the tracking and mixing of Juice’s new album, which began over a year ago. The studio also worked on seven songs that appear on the latest Jonas Brothers album, with Don Salter’s son Justin assisting John Fields, the Jonas Brothers’ producer and engineer. The album has since gone platinum.

An Overview Of Studios A, B, & C

Studio A is the consummate Neve room, combining a 12-channel Neve Melbourne side car with a 36-channel 6235 console (which came from The Saltmine’s previous facility) – making for an impressive 48 channels of all-discrete classic Neve. For monitors, The Saltmine offers Mackie SA-1532z active mains for its mid-field monitors, which deliver 4,200 watts of playback power. Its near-field choices include KRK V6s, Genelec 1030As, and Yamaha NS-10s – each powered by Bryston amps. Salter is planning on installing a custom, large-format Augspurger system in the near future.

Saltmine is a big believer in combining classic vintage outboard gear, such as Pultec EQs and Universal Audio 1176 limiters, with proven modern-day performers such as the renowned Empirical Labs Distressor. Salter believes the combination of proven recording consoles and the best outboard gear – both vintage and modern – gives clients the best chance at achieving a stellar production.



ABOVE: Studio D The Villa ISO room with djembe, 1955 175 Gibson, 1970s SG, AKG C-12 VR.

Studio A also gives clients a choice as to their recording medium. While customers can expect Pro Tools HD3 systems with plenty of I/Os in all of Saltmine’s rooms (all of Saltmine’s rooms are networked enabling seamless file transfer among studios), there is a Studer A-827 2" recorder (which is often used in combination with its DW drumkit), as well as an Otari MTR ½" deck on-hand for those who insist on tape.

Studio B

Studio B, which is The Saltmine’s primary mixing room, contains a fully-restored, large-format, 64-input SSL 6064 E/G+ console, originally hailing from Los Angeles’ The Mix Room. The large-format, soffited monitors are custom Westlake BBSM-15Ts, powered by Bryston amps. In addition to the Westlakes, Studio B offers Genelec 1030As, Yamaha NS10s, Hafler TRM-8s, and KRK V6s and 7000s.

The Pro Tools HD3 Accel system found in Studio B runs on a Macintosh G5/dual 2 GHz with 64 Outputs, and the system is clocked with an Apogee Big Ben master clock and also includes an Apogee Rosetta 200 AD/DA interface. The studio also has a coveted ATR 1" 2-track deck for mixdown.

Not surprisingly, Studio B is loaded with EQ and processing options. These include a pair of vintage Neve 1064s, GML 8200 Parametric EQ, two API 500 series Lunchboxes, four vintage Pultec EQs, six Empirical Labs Distressors, a Lexicon 480L, an AMS RMX 16 with a remote, and even a Neve 5432 sidecar.

Studio C

Studio C, or The Saltmine’s “half-price room,” is the perfect environment to do programming, additional production work, overdubs, or rough mixes. As far as equipment, it features a dual 2.5 GHz Macintosh G5 with a Digidesign 003 interface, running Pro Tools 7.3 and Reason 4. In addition, it has a Mackie D8B Digital Mixer and two Focusrite ISA 430 “Producer Pack” channel strips.

Salter says that Studio C is often used by musicians or producers to refine tracks prior to laying them down or mixing them in the other rooms. Its small ISO booth also works well for adding additional vocal or guitar parts at the last minute. ■



Jeff Touzeau is a regular contributor to Professional Sound. His most recent books are *Artists On Recording Techniques and Careers In Audio*, both on Cengage (2008).