

TAPE OP

The Creative Music Recording Magazine

DAVID BIANCO

Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, LL Cool J

CHRIS MARA &

CAMERON HENRY

Nashville's Welcome to 1979

JORGE EXPLOSION

Estudios Circo Perrotti

OLIVER ACKERMANN

Death by Audio

BILL WHITLOCK

of Jensen Transformers in Behind the Gear

MUSIC REVIEWS

w/ Deerhoof

GEAR REVIEWS

Issue No. 104

Nov/Dec 2014



estudio DE GRABACIÓN!



**chris mara and
cameron henry**
welcome to 1979

interview by **stephen allbritten**
sidebars by **larry crane**
photos by **derek porter and larry crane**

in an industry that has become more and more digitized, nashville's welcome to 1979 and its owner, chris mara, are offering clients an opportunity to step back in time. with a recent purchase of a vinyl cutting lathe, chris, along with his vinyl mastering engineer cameron henry, is continuing the analog tradition, giving bands a chance to cut masters directly to vinyl. i talked with chris and cameron about what it's like learning a forgotten craft and about the different ways chris may be a leader in a resurging analog revolution.

You've had the lathe for a little while now?

Chris Mara: It was already restored when we got it, but it took a while to get it up and running.

I know you've been doing some mastering with the lathe, but you have been advertising cutting bands live to the lathe?

Cameron Henry: We've done it a few times. We did one as a trial to see what it sounded like, and it sounded so great that we thought, "We need to start doing this."

CM: The guy that restored it, Chris Muth (he designs Dangerous [Music] gear), knew I had a studio. He said, "The first chance you get, cut directly to it. It sounds phenomenal." I think we are the only studio in the country that can cut directly to disc.

CH: There are a couple of live venues and places that do it, like Jack White's [Third Man Records, *Tape Op* #82] in town does it.

CM: It's a live performance though.

CH: And it's private. It's not like you can book it.

Do you cut a whole record?

Everybody's laying it down, all together?

CM: They have to.

CH: There're no overdubs. The sequence of the songs has to be performed live. You can't stop, so they have to get through every song in a way that doesn't have mistakes, or the whole side has to be started over.

CM: We encourage them to rehearse side A and rehearse side B separately. We're talking to bands about coming in for a weekend, working one day on side A, and one day on side B. We're gonna take a mult from the console and record it to Pro Tools so we can listen to it, because we can't listen back to our master. We record straight to the disc. The band comes up, we listen to the take on Pro Tools; once we get one we like we label it and then do another pass as an alternate.

CH: As a safety backup, in case there's some manufacturing problem.

CM: So we've got another ready to go. They'll come out of here with two versions of it.

How long did it take you guys to learn this?

CH: We were somewhat in a vacuum, but we had some mentorship. Chris and I both tracked a lot of records that came out on vinyl, but we didn't cut the



CH: It can be anything.

Whatever the artist is comfortable with.

CM: I'm trying to get into the band's mindset that they could come in for a day and do an LP. An A and B side in a day; it's recorded, mixed, and mastered. It's really affordable and sounds awesome, and those two words usually aren't [used] in the same sentence.

CH: Yeah, we usually cut acetates [test lacquers]. Throughout the day the band will be rehearsing their LP side, or their single. Chris will be mixing upstairs; I'll be down here cutting acetates and, in between takes, I listen to what's going down to the disc. I make adjustments as we go. As the band is rehearsing, I'm rehearsing, and Chris is rehearsing, so at the end of the day everybody's on and it's all dialed in.

masters. So we had the masters, either digital or tape recordings, and the finished product. We could put the masters on and cut our version of those records, and then see how we sized up to whatever the other guy did. We learned backwards that way. We figured out people's processes by analyzing their work.

Reverse engineering.

CH: Exactly.

CM: A gentleman by the name of Hank Williams offered us his time. He owns MasterMix and he used to cut on a daily basis. He came over, and it was like a *Karate Kid* movie. We spent an entire day without even turning [the lathe] on, and instead talked about what we were going to do tomorrow. He spent a week with us; then he let us go play and we fucked it all up. Then he came back and got it back straight. He kept coming

around; he took us from 0 to 60. So, we're not just doing it; we're *doing* it because of him, Cameron, and Chris [Muth]. All those pieces really came together. We're already beating the lacquers that Cameron and I had other people do, no doubt. It's been fun to learn a whole other process.

What tape machine do you master from?

CH: It's a Studer A80.

CM: Those were made specifically for this process.

CH: It's strictly a playback machine. The lathe actually needs two instances of the audio. This tape machine actually has two headstacs on it. There's a preview head that will go to the [lathe's] computer. It goes through the obstacle course of rollers to the repro head and then feeds the cutterhead. There's no digital delay required. The machine creates the delay by having two headstacs on it. The preview computer analyzes the audio that's coming in (about a second ahead of time) and knows if there's going to be a big bass drum hit, or a big loud part that's going to make the groove sway. It will speed the pitch up so the groove will be further away from the previous one, so they don't run into each other while you're cutting.

CM: Not audio pitch.

CH: Yeah, sorry. Pitch as in speed across the lacquer. The trick is to get as much music as you can on the record without the grooves running into each other. You can be safe and spread them really far apart, but you're wasting a lot of real estate, which means your record would have to be cut quieter. It's always a battle of space versus time with the music, so having this computer allows us to not only separate the grooves when it gets loud, but when it gets quiet it will also cram them in together.

CM: Of course, cutting from Pro Tools is easier because you duplicate a track and slide it over [to create a preview track].

CH: If people want to bring us tape, we can cut records the right way with tape. If they bring us digital, we can cut records the right way with digital.

CM: And the Studer has both 1/4-inch and 1/2-inch heads.

CH: We have to monitor certain frequencies that freak out the cutter head: harmonicas, canned air sounds, and bagpipes.

CM: Sibillance on singers. Real tight harmonies.

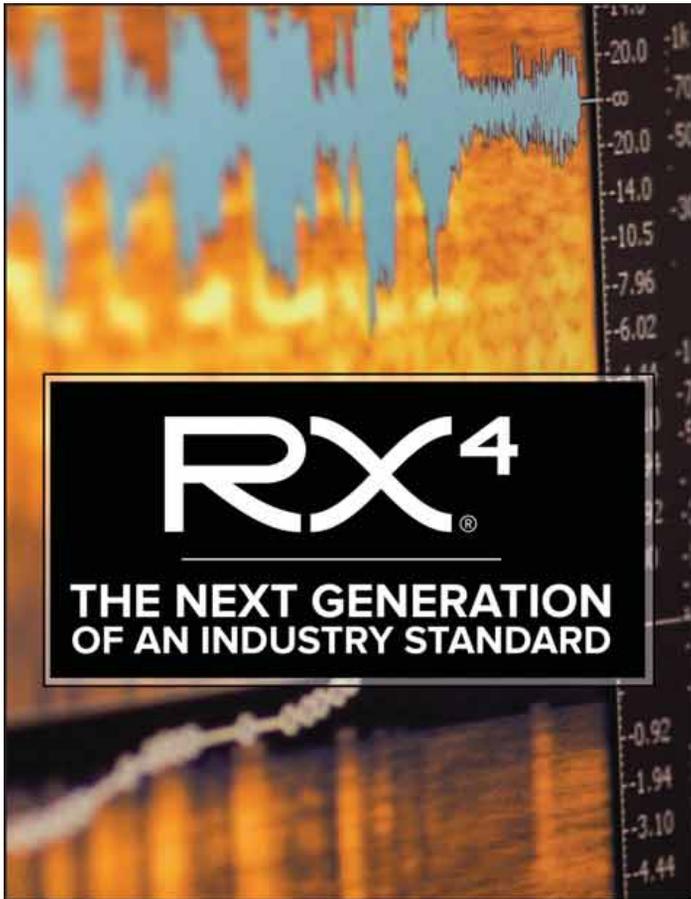
CH: Cutting a loud scream in a metal band is fine, but when you get a Bob Dylan-type song with a lot of harmonica it takes a little bit of work. Sometimes it will get distorted because the cutter head is so sensitive that it's cutting grooves that are hard for any playback system to trace back.

CM: We can cut it, but the playback...

CH: Doesn't always play nice.

Well that's the nice part about having all of this set up right here. "We need to change those cymbals out; we're getting something that's a little too much for the machine."

CM: Even yesterday I cut a 45, and I cut it too hot. I listened to it, and it sounded awesome. But on the inside [grooves] it started skipping, because there was too much going on. I had to drop the volume so that everyone could play it. We have our turntable set up to be middle of the road. It's not the worst, but it's not the best.



RX⁴

**THE NEXT GENERATION
OF AN INDUSTRY STANDARD**

RX 4 and RX 4 Advanced

Complete Audio Repair & Enhancement

Rapidly deliver professional-quality results with iZotope's 2013 Emmy Award-winning audio repair and enhancement software. Updates include new intelligent modules, time-saving features, and deeper integration with your host.

Learn more about the new RX 4 at
www.izotope.com/rx4



CH: We encourage bands, or producers, to come in here when we cut their masters. They can hear what I'm doing so we can make adjustments on the fly. We did one the other day where I cut it two different ways. It's better that they are involved with that choice when we're here and we can make adjustments, as opposed to waiting until there are plates and everything made. It gets to be expensive and time costly.

CM: And they know they made the correct decision without any pressure.

CH: Because it is the last creative step in the process of putting a record out; the last stage where you can make adjustments, for better or worse.

What model lathe is here?

CM: It's a Neumann VMS 70.

How many of them are still on the market?

CH: They made about 300 of them, so it's pretty rare.

CM: This one was made in '73.

CH: I can probably count on both hands the people I know that are cutting on one.

CM: Well, in the two years I was looking for it, I only had the opportunity to buy four. That was having everyone I know looking for them, worldwide. I turned one down in Switzerland; I turned one down in London; I turned one down in Jamaica. Hank was really instrumental. He helped guide me into which lathe to buy. He helped me turn down purchases. They're hard to come by, but you don't want to buy a shitty one.

Where did you end up buying that one?

CM: It came out of New York, and it was restored there.

You've been promoting the vinyl cutting aspect of the studio, but you keep busy promoting the studio in general. There's the *Upstairs at United* series. You're recording at United Record Pressing then directly pressing it there. You've got some big names like Keane and JEFF the Brotherhood. How did that come about?

CM: It sounds corny, but do what you like to do. I wanted to learn more about mixing live to 2-track, so I started a label (I'm using the term very loosely), where I said, "Come here [Welcome to 1979] and record. You pay for the pressing and I'll get a percentage of that." It's just one day, not a big deal, and they pay my assistant or whatever. We did four or five of those, and pressed them at United. Then the owner of United, Mark Michaels, wanted to use his space upstairs as a musical venture to scratch a creative itch he had. He called his marketing director, Jay Millar, and said, "I want to record live on tape up here. Do you know anyone we could talk to?" And Jay said, "Talk to Chris Mara!" We called a meeting, and he asked, "Is this something you can do?" I said, "Yeah! I've got the chops. I've got the gear. Who are you thinking to do it?" And he said, "I'd like to start the series with people like Brendan Benson [*Tape Op* #89] and Cory Chisel." I said, "Well, I'm working on both of their records right now."

"I'll call them!"

CM: We started the series with those guys, and we did our tenth and eleventh last week. Now that we have a lathe I'll record a mix live to tape. We do that, one song at a time, in the order that they are going to be on the EP. We record over it as many times as we want and move on to the next song. I bring the tape to Cameron that night, cut the lacquer, and bring it to United the next morning.

Do you have a rig that you've left over there, ready to go all the time?

CM: Yeah, I've got a console over there that a friend of mine lent me, and two tape machines that he bought from me. He needed a place to store them so I said, "I'll upgrade your machines and recap your console if I get to use it." I used to bring both racks, but it's upstairs. Now I'm like, "I'm gonna bring four channels of compressors." I've slowly been buying gear to leave over there, like [Yamaha] NS-10s and another power amp.

How many inputs do you have there?

CM: Fourteen, and we use a real chamber there. I set up an echo chamber in a stairwell, and I have a tape delay. Everything we do is captured there. There's no digital delays or reverbs. They're all in one room. It's tricky. We did Cults last Monday; it's drums, bass, guitar, keys, and everyone sings. They were singing quietly. It was like, "Alright, this is our drum sound, because it's everywhere."

There isn't a stipulation to this. Bands come in as they are.

CM: Yeah, one of my goals is to make sure it doesn't turn into some "acoustic only" series. JEFF the Brotherhood are fucking balls to the wall.

CH: Play what you play. It should be the way you sound. That's the idea. There's no overdubs, no nothing. It's exactly what they sound like in that room.

CM: Cults' Madeline [Follin] said, "This sounds like our record." She was paying me a huge compliment, but she's like, "I can't believe this sounds like a record, and we've been here an hour." I was like, "Well, you guys honed your sound."

It's not like they woke up that day and decided to do this.

CM: Yeah, so that's fun. I figured most artists wouldn't want to release it, because it's not "perfect," but all of them are like, "This is awesome!"

I've heard the Cory Chisel and the Wandering Sons one; it's really beautiful.

CM: That's one of my favorites. I didn't know it at the time, but I was booked to do his record [*Old Believers*]. He told me later that they were going to do it somewhere else, like New York. After United, he said, "I want to do it like this, with Chris." They set up downstairs [at 1979] in a big circle and spent a month [working on it]. His record is one of my favorites to listen to. You know, you don't listen to the stuff you work on very often, but I listen to his a lot. It's a cool record.

You mentioned your assistants. Where do you get your help?

CM: We grow our own. We don't have an internship program here. We have one intern at a time, for three months. At the end of three months they are either hireable or I never want to see them again. There's no in between. We have three people who work here regularly that have all been ex-interns. They know how to align tape machines, assist Cameron, understand the basics of record making, and are fluent in Pro Tools. They come in with a wide variety of skill sets from schools. We help them get to where I can use them. [laughs]

Expanding on a craft that isn't around as it used to be.

CM: Assisting on its own is a lost art, and I hear that from other engineers that I know as well. Every session here has an assistant on it as part of the rate. That's how I feel sessions *should* be. An engineer should have an assistant; the band should have someone else there to help. There's stuff to do. That's how you start engineering. It's midnight and the band wants to do tambourine on three songs. "I'm outta here. Take over." They should be able to do that, and if they fuck up a tambourine take, the world will still be here tomorrow. It's a nice way to start recording, and not abuse them, as work.

It builds camaraderie with the band.

CM: Totally, and they get a credit. Then I ask the band how it worked out; if a vocal session pops up, I know that I can book an assistant as an engineer, and increase their pay grade through that process.

Your rates are very reasonable. For one rate the band gets you; for another rate they can bring in an engineer and the assistant's ready to go.

CM: Yeah, and I get a thrill at the end of the year. I love it when we spent tens of thousands of dollars on assistants, because that's paying it forward.

When I came over here for your very first studio party, it was a big warehouse. You had a reverb room off [in another part of the building]. Is that space still available?

CM: Yes and no. We put a wall there, so this is our echo chamber now [points to hallway outside the control room], as well as another tracking space. This year I rented another 800 square feet to expand Mara Machines into that warehouse space.

What is Mara Machines?

CM: I restore analog MCI tape machines. That has gone bananas. I've been doing it for five years. The first year I restored and sold six machines. The next year, it was 15. The next year, it was 25. Last year, it was 30. They're going all over the world, to Pete Townshend, Ryan Adams, and Chris Lord-Alge, and it's awesome. That's just from fixing *my* shit. People will call and say, "I'd like to get a machine." After a while, I was like, "I'll sell you one!" Vintage King sells them for me. I have three assistants we use here on a regular basis. If one's in session, I have another one, or two, in the shop working on machines. If something happens to break during a session, they know tape machines in and out. So I still have access to that side; it's just a different venture.

Before Mara Machines

"I used to work for Randy Blevins [Blevins Audio], aligning machines and fixing stuff for him in exchange for gear. That's why I have the MCI gear because it sounds good and I know how to work on it. And if I don't, Randy does!" -Chris Mara

You've also been doing Tape Camps. People come in for a weekend, and it's a whole process of learning the aspects of tape. Have you had a good response to those?

CM: We take ten people for a weekend. On Saturday, I'll pull reels off the wall. We'll mix some stuff, set up an echo chamber, tape delay, springs, plates, and all that. Then we walk them through what a DAW is trying to emulate and do some comparisons.

Show them that this is what digital is trying to recreate.

WHY
do you do
what you do?

"I have been emotionally and spiritually compelled to work with music since I was 5 years old."

HOW
does Aurora
help you do
what you do?

"The Lynx Aurora 16 sounds amazing. Their sonic performance is truly spectacular, as is their unrivaled customer support."



Ron Saint Germain
Saint's Place Studio
credits: Jimi Hendrix, 311, Living Colour,
Nels Cline, Whitney Houston, Soundgarden,
Creed and many more.

Photo: Karsten Staiger

AURORA 16

For over four decades, Ron Saint Germain has engineered, produced and mixed an eclectic range of performances, from Jimi Hendrix to 311 to Living Colour to Soundgarden, garnering 14 Grammy's* for the artists along the way. His converter of choice since 2008 at Saint's Place in northern New Jersey is a rack of Aurora 16HD converters. Aurora's clarity and transparent, open audio quality are a perfect match for his Neve Amek 9098i 128-channel mixing console and extensive vintage analog signal processing that are essential for Ron's exacting audio requirements.

To see and hear more about Ron Saint Germain and Saint's Place Studio, go to the LynxStudio YouTube channel.



converting the
masters of sound

Lynx
STUDIO
TECHNOLOGY



©2014 Lynx Studio Technology. Aurora is a trademark of Lynx Studio Technology

SERIOUSLY INTO AUDIO SINCE 1974



**The perfect gear.
Shipped free.
Supported forever.**

Crutchfield Goes Pro!

Live sound and recording gear from AKG, Crown, JBL, Mackie, PreSonus, Sennheiser, Shure, Yamaha, Zoom, and more.

crutchfield.com/TAP

1-888-802-7703

CRUTCHFIELD

Before Welcome to 1979

"I feel like I was one of the last to arrive in Nashville and grab an internship! That turned into a job as an assistant engineer. The owner would slide me over to his friends – it really helped me out so that I was working in other studios. His point was, 'The more you know, the better you're going to be for me.' I also got to make money and not have to have a second job. Through that, I knew a bunch of studio owners and I could use their studios when it was dark; I'd get good rates for my friends. The best advice I ever got, as far as work, was from Robin Crow who owns Dark Horse Recording. He said, 'My biggest sessions have come from the smallest start.' My biggest assisting gig was a one-day session that turned into two years of work. People don't pull up in a limousine and say, 'I want to book three months of work.' It starts with little things." -Chris Mara

CM: And that, "Guess what. You can do a chamber anywhere." If you're mixing, and you've got a guitar amp and a microphone sitting there, put them to work. Saturday afternoon I usually bring in a piano player and vocalist, or an acoustic guitarist and vocalist, and we record that on an 8-track machine. The next day we bring a band in and record them on a 24-track machine. We transfer from tape to Pro Tools, they get the files, and they can fuck with the sessions at home.

The name Welcome to 1979 is based on the average year of the equipment here. Is there a cut off point? Is everything prior to 1979?



Small Size
+
Isolation



IsoDI: NOISE SOLUTION

Transformerless main signal path coupled with an isolated power supply and an optional buffered isolated output for noisy amplifier grounds

www.avensonaudio.com

Austin, Texas
(512) 535-5353



Introducing the Mid-Side

A clean sounding matrix to allow Mid Side processing on stereo Left/Right material.

Widen the stereo field
Compress the middle
EQ the sides

Patch in your analog gear or just use the built in Width control and High Pass filter for the Side channel

(512) 535-5353
Austin, Texas

www.avensonaudio.com

CM: No, it's more of a state of mind. I haven't done the math lately, but I took an average of everything I own and it was 1978.4.

Very, very close!

CM: But it's more of a state of mind. Recently I purchased a tracking Pro Tools rig. I want more engineers to use the studio, and that is what's required. However, I don't want to be a Pro Tools studio that has a tape machine. I want to be a tape machine studio that has a Pro Tools rig. I think we've established ourselves as experts on recording analog. So many engineers were like, "Dude, I wish you had one." I thought, "It's time to get one." People were missing out on the experience because I'm being a little prickish. And it would be nice to have more people use the space. I don't have to engineer everyday.

What console do you use?

CM: It's a 1978 MCI JH-428. Super straightforward. Mic pre, EQ, fader, to tape. I've recapped it and I redid the cosmetics.

Are you promoting a hybrid approach? If you want to use Pro Tools, you can do drums and bass to tape?

Recording Summit

Every year, in early November, Welcome to 1979 hosts a Recording Summit. The weekend-long event is limited to 60 attendees, features multiple panels, recording sessions, and access to a wide array of recording professionals. I've hosted interviews with Ryan Freeland [*Tape Op* #101] and Jacquire King [#88] during the last few Summits and truly enjoy the whole experience. -LC

CM: It's pitched as: you can do tape; you can do Pro Tools. I have it wired where it's console, tape machine, Pro Tools. So, if you wanted, you can record on tape, and, as you listen back to it with the band, dump it to Pro Tools. But I think most people are going to do one or the other. We had CLASP [Tape Op #83] for a while. I enjoyed the concept, but, for me, it wasn't the workflow I was going for. It's designed perfectly; it's just trying to marry the two worlds. I felt like my Pro Tools tricks didn't work, and my tape tricks didn't work. There are two machines recording at once, so I felt I was focused on technology too much when I was working. I'm excited about the Pro Tools rig; I'm setting it up as a dual station, where the computer and the keyboard will be in one place. We'll have a wireless keyboard and monitor by the console, so that when the engineer wants the assistant to do something, they don't have to move. The assistant can do some crossfades, or whatever, and the engineer can still work. I'm pumped about that.

Vinyl Parties

"I don't have an advertising budget, so how do we get people over here? The studio tour doesn't work well. I'd invite bands and they wouldn't come. So every six weeks we started throwing these vinyl parties. It began with about 30 people, and they'd go until midnight. No DJ; everyone just grabs a record and plays it. I always tell the bands who record here to bring some friends over. It's financially feasible - \$50 of food and some cases of Miller High Life! What started to happen was that people were experiencing the space in a positive manner. They're literally dancing in the control room." -Chris Mara

It's really in-house here. You repair decks, you cut vinyl, you record, and mix. What's next?

CH: Wax cylinders!

CM: I want to build a mastering room here, much like the lathe room, where people fly in to be with Cameron when he cuts their record. I have the plans drawn and have the bids. I'm just trying to find the right person to put in there.

CH: Being all in-house makes a huge difference. The records that Chris mixes and cuts here, I can confidently know - without Chris in the room - what he was going for. Having a mastering person in the chain too would be awesome.

CM: There's an expert each step of the way. I've had tremendous joy popping in and seeing what Cameron's doing while I'm on a mix break. I would love to go from here with a song I've mixed to mastering down the hall, and ask, "How am I doing?" That would be the pinnacle.

Ⓢ

<www.welcometo1979.com>

Stephen Allbritten co-owns Best Friend Studio in Nashville.

TAPE OP is made possible by our advertisers.

Please support them and tell them you saw their ad in TAPE OP.

The m905 reference monitor controller

Don't just take our word for it.

"The audio path is absolutely pristine, and switching between sources and speakers is uncannily silent and instantaneous. It's also one of the **most intuitive, user-friendly interfaces** I've encountered in a long time."

- **Jon Thornton, Resolution**

"If you are in the market for a high-end, versatile, great-sounding monitor controller for both mixing and tracking, I think the Grace Design **m905 is really the only choice.**"

- **John Baccigaluppi, TapeOp**

"The Grace Design m905 exudes an air of build quality and professional competence that is matched by few other manufacturers, while **the sound quality is sublime** both technically and sonically."

- **Hugh Robjohns, Sound on Sound**

"And the sound? **Glorious, simply glorious.** If there's a stereo reference monitor solution out there that does more and sounds better, I'm not aware of it."

- **Mike Metlay, Recording**

"I am totally knocked out by the Grace m905. It has made its way onto the short list of the **most impressive pieces of audio gear I have ever evaluated.**"

- **John Marks, Stereophile**



www.gracedesign.com

GRACE
DESIGN