



By Heather Johnson

SF Soundworks

**A NEW STUDIO THAT WORKS
FOR A NEW S.F. SOUND**

It seems like dot.com wunderkind Tony Espinoza came out of nowhere last year to launch SF Soundworks; at least, nowhere in the recording industry, anyway. But in reality, the sharp 32-year-old who helped build the first PDA, the Apple Newton; who designed the first MP3 player called Rio; who co-founded When.com and helped build and launch Web calendars for AOL, Netscape and CompuServe; who sold said company to AOL for a reported \$200 million and became VP of AOL Music Services; and who invested a few bucks in a little startup called Napster played in bands and ran studios out of his bedroom long before the Web dominated his career.

Now, with a successful 10 years of bit-and-byte maneuvering behind him, Espinoza turns his attention to another kind of high-tech—the kind that's involved in manning a console, navigating a Pro Tools rig and running and maintaining a full-service, multiroom studio. At the same time, he's rekindling an old flame—music—by engineering sessions for Alanis Morissette, The Cardigans, John Cale and Vanessa Carlton, and by nurturing local and independent acts to revive San Francisco's local music scene.

Espinoza, a Texas native who arrived to the Bay Area via Stanford University, and who participated in their prestigious Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) program, found the South of Market space, which formerly housed Focused Audio (provider of audio for the *Gumby* television shows) in 2000. "When I first looked at the space, it was pretty clear that all my ideas would fit nicely here," he says from the studio's sleek chrome kitchen table. "It had concurrency, multiple rooms and a machine room that could be accessed from all the studios. It was built in the high '80s and was really well done."

Espinoza promptly purchased the building with earnings accrued from the When.com sale and set about turning the one-level post house into a four-story structure with four control rooms, five recording spaces (one of which doubles as an edit bay), a lounge/edit suite, one guest apartment and Espinoza's adjoining flat. "First, we had to build the infrastructure that would allow us

to build up three stories and then get the studios wired and tuned and add live spaces to record things like drums and strings."

With the three-year construction phase nearly complete, Espinoza installed an SSL 9072 J Series in Studio A. The SSL and a hot-rodged Pro Tools|HD3 workstation (one of five in the building) make up Studio A's "common operating system," as Espinoza calls it, with vintage gear from Neve, API, Pultec, GML, Tube-Tech and UREI, as well as additional pieces from Chandler, Pendulum, Thermionic Culture and Crane Song brought in for warmth. Clients can listen on Dynaudio BM15A near-fields, Tannoy Eclipse 8 and 10s, Mackie HRM824s and the popular Yamaha NS10 monitors, as well as a pair of soffit-mounted dual 18-inch JBLs. A 19x14-foot live room containing a Yamaha C7 Grand Piano brought over from Different Fur sits to the engineer's left.

Studio B contains a Digidesign Pro-Control, another HD3 rig, Apple Logic 6 Platinum, Digidesign 192 and Apogee AD8000 digital converters, and such accessories as a pair of Neve 1095 (1081) mic pre/EQs, an Avalon 2022 stereo and Telefunken V72 dual-tube mic pre's, and a laundry list of other EQs and effects. A loudspeaker system courtesy of Dynaudio, JBL, Mackie and Yamaha brings volume to the small overdub/single instrument-tracking room. The control room connects to a 20x17-foot, ultrareverberant concrete drum room designed by Charles Salter and Associates, as well as the two other isolated spaces on the main floor.

Studio C features another Pro Tools system and iso booth, not to mention access to Soundworks' extensive mic



PHOTO: TONY ESPINOZA

Studio A offers a wealth of new, old and rare vintage outboard gear in addition to the SSL 9000 J.

collection, which includes several AKG and Neumann tube mics, Royer R121 and SF12 ribbon mics and others from Sennheiser, Shure, Schoeps and Soundelux. Studio D, a bare-bones room that can be used as either an iso booth or an edit station, rounds out Soundworks' lower level.

Another option that works especially well for the D.I.Y. artist funding an album with Mastercard is the upstairs Pro Tools Café (think Internet café for musicians), which is essentially an open lounge with comfy red sofas and chairs, a couple of Mac computers and two more Pro Tools rigs where artists can plug in and play for \$10 an hour. "A major artist can stay in Studio A and track, edit, overdub and mix their whole record," Es-



PHOTO: TONY ESPINOZA

SF Soundworks' mic collection, atop their Yamaha C7

pinoza says. "An indie artist might only get a few days in A, but do pre-production in C, overdub in D and might even come up [to the Pro Tools Café] to do editing."

Many studios can accommodate a wide range of budgets, but Soundworks naturally attracts the cream of the crop while actively recruiting bands still on the ground floor.



PHOTO: TONY ESPINOZA

The SF Soundworks kitchen and Pro Tools Café (above)

"The strongest areas for us to focus on in the market are the very top and the very bottom," Espinoza says, "which is contrary to most people's business ideas. If you were going to build a high-end place, you'd go all out and wouldn't want to charge low rates. But I've found that it is possible to build a really high-end facility and do both."

"If you want to make a crafted record you can do it there—hi-fi or low-fi," says producer/engineer Howard Johnston, an SF Soundworks client and former co-owner of Different Fur. "I have always felt that people are as important as equipment—of course, it doesn't hurt to have both—but I like that Soundworks is giving support to a fine group of local producers, engineers and artists and keeping them at home."

"The local musicians are part of what studios can draw on to differentiate what can be done in San Francisco," Espinoza continues. "So how do you embrace that community? You've got to help it with the whole range of products;

not just the big ones, but the independent ones, as well. In almost all cases, the successful independent ones grow up to be the big ones. We can charge market rates and be really good at high-end client services, but at the same time, we cultivate independent artists and give them a chance to move up the ladder. Big artists are naturally attracted to big studios, but being a part of establishing an artist's career is more challenging and important for San Francisco. It's the missing link for the city."

In addition to offering sliding-scale rates (an ongoing topic of debate in studio circles), the studio provides artists with a comfortable environment in which to work. There are no offices and no receptionist. The facility is ultra-modern and beautifully designed, but you can set down your drinking glass without a coaster and there won't be a studio manager chasing you with a bottle of Windex—or an invoice. "We were able to build a facility that has a lot of space to spread out and have multiple things happening at once," Espinoza says. "It's important to have a good control room and tracking space, but what allows the creative process to really work is to have a place to be creative that doesn't feel like you're on the clock—that doesn't feel like you're in an



A summer day in S.F.: The Cardigans chill out on the balcony with owner Tony Espinoza (right).

institution or you're in somebody else's idea of a studio. It's a little bit more like campus. The idea was to build an adaptable place that artists can make into their own super-studio without having to go through millions of dollars of investment."

That "superstudio" is equipped with more gear and instruments than most artists could ever get at home (and if they did, they wouldn't need a cut rate anyway) and Espinoza's own engineering services, often at no extra charge. He also takes his artist involvement one step further by setting up record label showcases, seeking promotion on iTunes, securing local radio airplay and even consulting on image and stage presence. As a result of his and his clients' hard work, acts such as Beth Waters, The Stratford 4, Elephone, Thistle, Jaccore Baptist and Jeff Black are either signed to or "in discussions" with major and top-notch independent labels.

Not only will Espinoza's efforts pay off for Soundworks if these acts return with label dollars behind them, but the local music community also benefits. "The independent acts are the real talent; they're the goldmine in the scene," he says. "We don't have enough of an industry here yet, but we do have the artists and a lot of them are stuck in probably 2,000 studios across the Bay Area, working in tiny little places and not talking to each other. But here, we have the same bass player showing up for different sessions. So there's a little connection happening, and that's starting to happen more and more. That's one of the functions that a studio can serve. There's not much of an exchange of ideas or techniques in the home studio environment—not much critique or input. A studio's a place where people spend a lot more time listening to music and to each other."

Mix assistant editor Heather Johnson and her kitten moved from Nashville to S.F. on April Fool's Day 2003. No joke.