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Recording the dream

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Music is everywhere in our lives. Whether it's on the radio, a CD or on your MP3 player, recorded music has become a part of us.

From Elvis to the Beatles to the latest pop hits blasting out of the radio or car stereos, you can't go anywhere without hearing it. But songs don't just happen out of nowhere and end up making their way to our ears – somebody has to write them and then they are recorded and preserved so we can all enjoy.

In McKinley Landing, on a secluded laneway that's impossible to find without a good map, some musical magic is being captured by a few people who have a burning desire to conjure and create what their inspiration creates.

The brainchild of music industry veteran Bob Gabelhouse, who also runs the recording arts program at Okanagan College, B.i.G. Audio Productions studio is a purpose-built addition to a house looking out over Okanagan Lake.

eVent! spent some time there recently to watch some musical magic being captured.

The Singer: With earphones perched on top of her head, and without any other musicians around, Cynthia Leigh-Ann of Kelowna runs through vocals for a song on her 10-song debut CD. With a definite country feel, this is the 18-year-old's first foray into a full-length CD and she wants to get it right. "In most of the other recording studios I've been, it's more stressful. But here, it's very easy-going, it's very free and it's more fun. With Bob, if I mess up, I don't stress about it."

The Musician: To say Scott Gamble has a little studio experience is like saying Elvis was an OK singer. The veteran drummer, now 44, has been playing since the age of four, and has recorded some 45 albums with other musicians in the Okanagan. So it goes without saying that he feels at home in a studio setting.

While he also plays in everything from a KISS tribute band to a cool jazz combo, he said he finds the job of playing on somebody else's songs in the studio especially rewarding.

"It's ultimately very creative, taking someone's idea and adding your own to it," he said. "It's really the challenge of getting the perfect 'take.'"

One day when eVent! visited the studio, Gamble was laying down drums on a pop/rock song penned by Gabelhouse, himself a guitarist, bass player and vocalist who 'dabbles' in keyboards as well. With a working title Perfect Now, it had only 'scratch' tracks when Gamble came in to record his drums.

It takes a few minutes for Gabelhouse to set up what looks like a forest of microphone stands and cables around the drum kit, but eventually it gets done. As Gamble runs through a rough take in the main room, Gabelhouse makes a few adjustments in the control room on the other side of a big glass window.

When it comes time to actually record the drums, the foundation of most recordings, Gamble can only hear the rough scratch instruments and the 'click track', but he plays with plenty of energy nevertheless.

The four-minute song has several tricky parts to it, but the experienced Gamble nails it the first time around.

The engineer/producer: Terms like soft-knee compression, digital delay, reverb, pitch processor or noise gate may not mean much to the average person, but to Gabelhouse, they're his stock in trade. The man behind B.i.G. Audio Productions has been in the music business for some 33 years, and has seen his share of musicians and singers come into his studio.

Since getting his start in the field at the age of 14, Gabelhouse has seen all sides of the business. Since opening B.i.G. he has recorded the likes of local acts Trinity's Tattoo, Helcion and Ryan Donn, among others.

"For me, it's about the song, the performance, the environment and the equipment (in that order)," he said, sitting behind the huge mixing desk in the control room of the studio. "If all that stuff is good, and you have a good engineer and producer, it all makes it great."

Looking like something out of Star Trek and covered with hundreds of tiny knobs and glowing lights, the four-meter long desk is where Gabelhouse tweaks the music until it's perfect.

The desk itself has an interesting story, explained Gabelhouse. Custom made, it was previously used in Hollywood to mix surround sound on updated versions of movies like the Ten Commandments, the Wizard of Oz and Stanley Kubrick's 2001, before he bought it and personally trucked it all the way back from California. With 60 channels, it's worth into the six figure range, and sits at the centre of the control room, surrounded by speakers and racks of outboard gear. With many glowing and blinking lights, those racks hold various electronic effects and sound-shaping devices, all designed to take the raw recorded sounds and massage them every which way.

Things were just a bit simpler in the old days, back when Elvis first walked into Sun Records in Memphis in 1954 to record 'That's All Right' and make history. They had only basic equipment and a limited ability to overdub instruments or tracks onto bulky reel-to-reel tape, but these days computers have largely replaced tape, and the advanced programs they utilize can record an infinite number of tracks.

But that's not necessarily the answer for everything, said Gabelhouse, pointing out that for him the pinnacle of the studio craft is Pink Floyd's 1973 creative masterpiece, Dark Side of the Moon.

"I listen to some modern recordings where they've taken out all the drums, for example, and replaced them," he said. "To me, that's just a lack of engineering."

As Gamble, headphones on, sits behind his drum kit and lays down a funky, hard-driving beat in the main room of B.i.G.studios, it's easy to get caught up in the sheer exuberance of the music.

Looking out the picture windows to the view of the setting sun as it falls behind the hills overlooking Okanagan Lake, you get the impression that a little magic has been captured – and maybe, just maybe, you've heard the next big hit song in the making.



Engineer and producer Bob Gabelhouse runs B.i.G. Audio Productions out of a spacious, purpose-built addition to his house just north of Kelowna. He has recorded everything from solo singers and instrumentalists to heavy metal bands over the course of his career.