

# New studio, old style

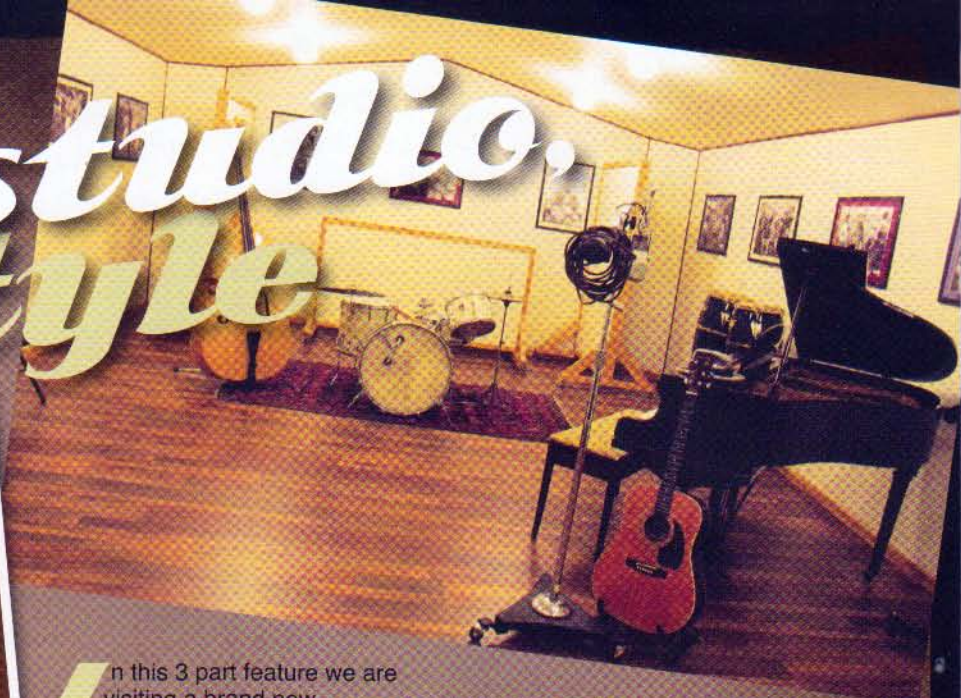


In this 3 part feature we are visiting a brand new recording studio, created in 2012 & 2013, which aims to record live music using old methods! The studio is Sugar Ray's in Wickford, Essex in the east of England, just north of London. This being P&KG mag, we are interested in anything which contributes to our kustom culture and life-style, and we want to examine it in depth and in a hands on way. We know us kustom culture obsessives are particular about our music but why would the three guys behind Sugar Ray's studio hunt around the USA for sixty year old tape recorders, valve amplifiers and ribbon microphones, when the rest of the world has moved on to solid state units with transistors and records with multi-tracking direct to a hard drive!

The answer is actually quite simple. Pat Reyford (of Sugar Ray Ford and the Hotshots, The Big Six, and Flying Fortress) and his two long-time friends Dean Amos (studio builder and double bass player) and Dave Privet (technician) have spent years struggling to capture the big, bright, energetic, exciting, vibrant and heart-felt intense sounds of late 1940s and 1950s small group rock 'n' roll music, including old-school rhythm & blues and rockabilly, using modern

studios, recording techniques and instruments. They have often felt either dissatisfied with the results or that there must be an easier way to achieve the best. So they decided to stop compromising and build an old-style studio with only vintage equipment and do things in the old ways and see how it turned out. Knowing the rockin' scene since the 1970s, they had a pretty good idea that sufficient numbers of other people felt the same way, such that a vintage studio might prove a viable commercial option. So, just what are they after and why can't modern studios and modern techniques seem to produce the goods? This is going to be a hard feature to write because a lot of the time we are going to be talking about sounds, using only words. But I am going to try. Along the way I will mention some particularly iconic performers and recordings. If any of these recordings are unfamiliar to you, I suggest you try and hear some of the tracks on good equipment. But even finding and listening to them on You-tube should help you understand what drove these guys to build Sugar Ray's Studio. What Sugar Ray's has now achieved is to provide everyone with a studio capable of capturing that big, full, warm, atmospheric and live sound of the 1950s more easily than elsewhere, in a relaxed and inspirational environment, with engineers who understand the music and know how to achieve it. If you go to any rock 'n' roll record hop or band night, you will often hear a stark difference between the original discs our deejays play on the rockin' scene and the sound of the

both the newer recordings and the stage performances of the current bands which play in a rock 'n' roll style. That is the gap the folks at Sugar Ray's are trying to close.





So, at the request of our editor, and grabbing my friend Penny Lane, a professional singer and band-leader, by the hand on the way, I set off to 238 London Road, Wicklow, Essex, SS12 0JX (by the Alpha Garden Centre), to discover exactly what the guys have built and how they use it to get the sounds of the 1950s, including a few tricks of the trade. This being the 21st century you can prime yourself for this article by viewing videos on Youtube of Sugar Ray's in operation doing a test recording of "Blues Stop Knocking", some great Elvis numbers and some performances by new talent Dainie Jane and others.

### *The studio itself*

Walking through the door of the single storey building that is Sugar Ray's Studio, the first things you notice are the uncluttered space, the mobile baffles and the peg-board cladding of the walls and ceiling. There are also many framed photographs of our musical heroes, such as Elvis, Little Richard, Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran. You hear a lot about the magic of the original Sun recording studio at 706 Union Street in Memphis, Tennessee, where Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and many of the rockabillys first recorded. People will tell you about the un-matched acoustics of the room, making Elvis Presley's original little trio of his rhythm guitar, Scotty Moore's lead guitar and Bill Black's dog-house bass sound big and full. So much so that there have been pilgrimages by bands such as U2 to record there, hoping a little of the magic will rub off on them! Well, Sugar Ray's is almost exactly the same size. Dean greets us warmly on our arrival and explains to me that the peg-board cladding is 6mm board with 4mm holes which just happens to give the right level of sound reflection. The aim back in the 1950s, and now at Rays, is not to deaden the room too much, but to have a certain amount of absorption by the holes, and a certain amount of reflection back. This arrangement gives you just enough for what is known as a "semi-live" sound. It results in a compression of the sound around the microphones, which pick up a combination of the direct sound and the weaker reflected sound. In contrast, in a modern studio the aim is generally to absorb everything and have no reflection. To do this they use felt walls and other materials which absorb sound totally. That is one reason recordings from these studios often sound cold to us guys used to listening to 1950s recordings. Echo can be added back electronically but again, this can contribute to the sound sounding "false" and "artificial" – these are my words to explain the difference from what you hear during a live performance on stage or in a club. I notice that the roof of the studio is also angled to a central ridge, but that it is not covered in the complex angled acoustic tiles that I had noticed at the Sun Studio in Memphis.

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Dean explains that at Sun, Sam Phillips installed what is known as a vortex ceiling, with tiles angled up and down. These acoustic tiles are about twelve inches by twelve, but are unavailable now because they contain asbestos. However, the peg-board at Sugar Ray's was a feature of many of the other old studios which produced the recordings we like.

I also notice that the corners of the studio are cut off into 45 degree angles using pegboard to clip them. Dean explains that the guys don't want to have the sound getting lost in the corners of the room. Pat adds that the aim is to have it circulating, and also to concentrate it around the players and the mics. Dean says that the space in which recordings are made, and the materials present, are as important as the equipment used. This is also where the mobile baffles come into use. Dave demonstrates the standing height baffle and the sitting height baffle, which is half the size. These baffles can be used to hold the sound around the group or to give separation of the vocalist or the drums from the rest of the group.

Another factor in the sound is the position of the band within the studio. A small rockabilly band of three or four people can be recorded in the centre, but if it is placed at one end, you get a longer effect on the sound as it travels further down the room. For a bigger rhythm & blues band, the saxes and trumpet can be placed in one part of the room, the rhythm section in another around the piano so they can see the piano-players hands working the keyboard. They have even used blankets over the piano to trap that sound around the piano mike. The guys have been experimenting a lot with the way the sound moves around their studio, to get different effects. Dean points out that the large plate glass window into the control room is not vertical but is set at a slight but precise angle to deflect the



sound downwards back into the centre of the studio.

Dave goes over to the mid-1950s Premier drum kit that Sugar Ray's offer for use, to make the point about the characteristics and quality of the sound in this studio. He points out that frequently you will see and hear the drummer in a modern studio banging away repeatedly on each drum until the sound man has adjusted the sound to the way they both want it. Then they start on the next drum. At Sugar Ray's he has observed that the drummers settle down straight away with a just few taps around on the skins and cymbals – because they like the natural sound of the kit and the studio. This leaves more time to actually play.

## **Recording bands live**

I guess most people today realise that it is common practise to record the vocalist at a different time from the instrumental part of the record, and that even the band members may not meet up. Today each person can lay down their part of the record as a separate track and the engineer can then build up the tracks and "mix" them for volume and level in the final product. This means that if anyone makes a mistake, they can record it again without having the rest of the band repeat the number, which saves on studio time. It also means that the recordings of all the instruments can be well-separated and clear. And various sound effects can be added after the artists have left the building. That is of course, if there are any real instruments involved at all. Today music can easily be generated by one guy using a computer in his bedroom. We have synthetic drum and bass sounds, drum machines or programmes to generate them and your computer can generate any amount of bells and whistles!

That is all very well, but it can lead to the overall sound becoming very cold and clinical, like a laboratory. Preferences for particular sounds have changed with the eras. This is nothing new or surprising. In the latest 1940s and early 1950s the tenor sax replaced the clarinet as the lead instrument in jazz-based dance music, then as amplification of electric guitars became more effective, that instrument took over in much of popular music. Pianos have been replaced by electric pianos and then by all manner of keyboard driven effects.

In the 1950s bands recorded live. The aim was to get the excitement and groove of a band as if they were playing on stage and connecting with the audience and whipping them up into a frenzy or making them cry with the emotion of it all. In most cases the music was for dancing. Today that means either jiving, strolling bopping, or smoochers today.

We'll keep coming back to how best to satisfy dancers throughout this article, but in terms of the band playing live, we are after the excitement generated when everyone is playing together, the rhythm section have found a good groove and the lead instruments like the sax, piano and guitar are taking off on wild solos. And we like the band to blend together as a unit, rather than for every instrument to sound too distinct. At Sugar Ray's they believe that you need the whole band and the vocalist all in it together for the full excitement, emotional connection and energy that is generated as you all work together as a team. That is what reaches out and grabs the listeners.

We also like the music to sound warm, whether it is uptempo, or a ballad. Various factors contribute to a warm sound. The combination of the type of studio and an intrinsic quality of recording using valve or tube technology, an analogue signal and ribbon microphones is what produced that warm sound in the 1950s. And that in essence is why Sugar Ray's have sought out and bought up vintage recording equipment. We'll come back to the details of that equipment later.

## **Recording vocals**

For artists that want some separation of the vocalist from the sound of the band, Dave and Dean have made a screen on wheels, with a window in it, and this can be moved to any place round the studio – but all the time the singer can see and be with the band, and can feel the emotions and groove as they build and call for the band to adjust this or that. Frequently in rock 'n' roll we have a number of vocalists on a recording. Duets between a man and a woman, or talking blues between people are common. A group of backing vocalists are often required, and in doo wop music you have from three to six guys often singing different parts, from may be a high lead to a booming bass singer. In doo wop, the feel of singing TOGETHER is what it is all about!

Again readers may or may not be aware, but voices are altered hugely in modern recordings. The pitch or volume of the singer can be altered note by note. If they sing flat or off-key, the sound can be adjusted with an auto-tuner. We didn't do that in the 1950s. About all we did was add echo, which is kind of natural and familiar in the first place because you can find it in caves, subways or in your bathroom! Kenny Vance even composed a doo wop song about this called "Looking For An Echo"!

I have already said that the sounds that are preferred tend to vary with the eras and this is particularly true for vocalists. In rock 'n' roll the vocalist or vocal group are generally recorded on top, to stand out.



They are not buried in the mix. The best of the singers had years of experience from growing up singing in church or on street corners, or in clubs, before they ever went near a studio. And they knew how to establish an emotional connection with their listeners. They had soul. Others weren't perfect singers but had regional accents and integrity. Now so many vocalists sound to our ears cold and detached, and any emotion sounds false and contrived. Quite frankly, many vocals sound like robots, with weird distorting electronic effects and with no naturalness left at all. This is evidently the taste of some people today, but it sure isn't ours. At Sugar Ray's just as in the 1950s, the aim is to capture a natural real sound, with warmth and emotion.

When I said to the guys that I believed a priority in the 1950s was to make the records sound as direct as possible, almost as if there was no recording gear getting in the way, and to establish an emotional connection between the performer and the listener, like communicating with a lover during a ballad, or communicating excitement during a gathering, a positive murmur of agreement from the guys instantly went round the studio. The black Americans who first made this music brought soul into the performances like never before in mainstream music. They did not just sing the songs. They made you believe every word as if it had really happened to them and as if they were still affected by the experience, and as if their life depended on it. This came from both the gospel and blues traditions. We don't want to communicate with a machine or a puppet. We agreed we want to communicate with a real woman, or with a guy telling us his life-story!

Join me in issue 44 for the next instalment!