

# New studio, old style

Paul Waring concludes his time spent at Sugar Ray's Vintage Recording Studio...

## Arrangers and producers

The drive of the producer to get that little extra out of the artists is worth mentioning, whether it was the persistence of Sam Phillips at Sun, the insistence on rehearsal and the recording ingenuity of Art Rupe at Specialty, the diverse production skills of Henry Glover at King, or Ralph Bass at Federal, or the sheer enthusiasm of Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Wexler at Atlantic. Many of the records, especially those with horns, had arrangers who knew just what to do to get a cool sound or a hot riff. Arrangers like Leroy Kirkland on the east coast of the USA and Maxwell Davis on the west. Most rock 'n' roll bands today are likely to self-produce and arrange, but it is worth thinking about the importance of arranging when you come to Sugar Ray's to record live.

## Microphones

All this effort to create a fabulous sound is worth nothing unless it is captured by the microphone. At this point Penny comes out from the sitting room behind the control console wearing a beautiful black dress from Vivien of Holloway, and long gloves, ready to sing into the best microphone the guys have in the studio. Dean's eyes light up as he swings the microphone boom into position and unclips the padded box containing the microphone, ready to attach it to the boom. This microphone is never left in the studio, and is clearly Dean's pride and joy.

Dean introduces it as the amazing, iconic RCA 44 BX. And the guys can't wait to tell me the story behind it. This mic came from Scottsdale, Arizona, where it was owned by a private collector, an old boy who had had it since 1958, bearing in mind that RCA stopped making these in 1995. According to Dean, the RCA 44 range was made from 1938 to 1955 and the BX was the last model in the range.

It has the longest ribbon of any ribbon microphone – about four inches as Dean shows me with his fingers against the mic. This means you get a maximum amount of vibration or resonance as the ribbon is set in motion by the sound aimed at it. The movement is translated into an electronic signal. RCA 44 microphones were used by everyone in the 1940s and 1950s, from Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley to Hank Williams and Roy Brown, in studios, at radio stations and on stage. Their distinctive appearance is often seen and easily recognised in photos of the period. Dean has a whole series of such photos on the walls of the studio. In addition to the above, there is Eddie Cochran with a 44 at Goldstar studio in California. I recall a well-known photo of Sam Butera honking his sax into one at the Capitol studios in Los Angeles, where Gene Vincent also recorded. Pat points out that this 44 is immaculate and had never been used until it came to Sugar Ray's. When Dean received it the mic still had the sales tag on. The ribbon was checked and found to be in brand new condition. As a bit of trivia, Pat told us that the first person ever to record using this mic was the lead singer of the Black Caps who recorded at Ray's a couple of months before our visit. He sang "Wild One" and "High School Confidential".

After the BX RCA kept on making ribbon mics in the form of the 74s and 77s, but worked towards reducing the size of the unit. Then condensing microphones came in and changed the whole shape and appearance of mics. Pat then talked about microphone technique and the distance from the mic. Obviously

if you have a loud powerful voice like Wynonie Harris, the engineer would have you sing further from the mic. Closer with a soft voice. But being close to the mic also gives you a more bassy, deeper sound and it means you can also sing more intimately. Elvis was a master of this. I remember standing at the Sun studio with a tour guide jokingly telling me not to lick the microphone like Elvis did! See-through shields were often used to stop spit getting on the mic!



Pat and I then drift into a talk about how microphones got really tiny in the 1950s for television work, so as not to obscure the face of the performer.

## Lighting

As I cast my eye round the studio, trying to spot anything we had not yet covered, Pat mentioned the lighting! I hadn't thought of that. Well, at Sugar Ray's they have the lighting organised so that it can be dimmed down to just one or two small lights. As Pat notes, this is very important for setting the mood, especially for the singer(s)...





### **Recording times and relaxed approach**

Another point about this studio is that they are very flexible on recording times. In the 1950s a standard studio slot at the big commercial studios was three hours, during which label bosses expected four songs to be cut – enough for both sides of a single and a follow-up. Art Rupe of Specialty records would rehearse his groups meticulously before taking them to the studio to make sure to get those four numbers in three hours. And he says he usually got that fourth side, which is incredible when you consider the quality of what he recorded and that his bands were often eight piece combos plus vocalists, all recording live! The likes of Sam Phillips at Sun, with his own studio and no boss to answer to, would frequently record long into the night if the feel was there, without worrying too much about the clock. A lot of small studios would record bands after they got off stage from their regular club date. By this time they were hot and exciting. Also, traffic outdoors was quieter – important when your sound-proofing was not 100% as was often the case in little makeshift studios and converted garages! The studios of radio stations were often available at that time too. At Sugar Ray's there has not been much call for such night hours yet! But they generally do not start till mid-day. According to Dean, singers and instrumentalists generally play better from lunch-time onwards. A singer's voice can be gruff in the morning. He says if you snore, the vocal chords can get tightened up and need a while to relax. But you don't want anyone to be tired either. So a typical slot at Sugar Ray's is an eight hour day from noon to 8pm with an hour break for a meal in the middle and to relax. Pat adds that also their tube equipment appreciates being turned off for an hour mid-session to cool down! This makes the gear last longer. It is not often that valves fail, especially because the gear is serviced once or twice a year, but this rest helps. I was pleased to hear

that replacement valves are not difficult to obtain. There are still suppliers and importers in the UK. We are all aware that some guitar amps being manufactured by Premier, Peavey and Fender, are still using valves today, because of the quality of sound they produce. Quality valves are still produced in China and Russia where radio stations and other businesses are sometimes still using them.

### **The number of songs in a session**

Some bands are able to record a dozen or sixteen tunes in an eight hour session if they are well prepared, though Pat recommends that the best results are obtained by working on five or six good songs. This high-lights another difference between today and the 1950s. Back then the aim was to record one or two killer singles which might have a chance at the local or national charts or at least be popular on the neighbourhood jukeboxes. Now bands come in expecting to record enough material for a CD. And today, with CDs of 1950s reissues often running to thirty tracks, a meagre twelve which might have filled a vinyl album looks bad on a CD, as if you are short-changing the customer by four or five tracks. Trying to do this number

in one session at any studio is likely to result in a rush and to have all the tracks sounding samey. At this point Dean jumps in with a plea for bands to record more ballads. He says that today all they want to record are up-tempo numbers. Dean evidently loves ballads. Pat says that when Leanne of the Rockeros came in and sang "Your Cheatin' Heart" at a recent session she had a fabulous voice and a great take on it and everyone in the studio was relieved to hear a ballad because it happens so rarely!

We spin off into another discussion about the importance of slow numbers and smoochers in live sets and how the bands forget that there are romances in the audience that are just starting up, and also that jivers like us might also be grateful for a break to slow-dance the lady we are with that evening!

The results and how they compare with the sound the bands are looking for. Ultimately Sugar Ray's studio is going to work because enough people care about all the stuff we have discussed above to come to the studio and feel they are amongst like-minded people who know what they are doing. Many of the original artists of the 1950s cared a lot about their sound. I have watched how carefully Jack Scott has conducted a sound check to achieve the amazing sound he got on those big hits like "Leroy", "The Way I Walk" and "Go Wild Little Sadie". I have seen Big Jay McNeely badgering a sound man to give him more delay, in other words a longer time length before the echo, when the sound man could not believe his request, and seen Jay showing him how he wanted it by working the sound desk. Lloyd Price employed a particular musical director for several decades to ensure the sound he wanted was achieved on stage night after night. The bands of today are becoming more aware than ever of these details because of the wide availability of the original recordings and they want theirs to sound as good.





Dave mentioned how several bands that have recorded here recently have been blown away by the sound when they go into the control room to hear the playbacks. They almost can't believe it!

**♦♦ If you want to hear how the studio sounds, check out the new CD by Dainie Jane with Pat's band, the Lucky Strikes, just released on Sugar Ray's Sugar Beat label. ♦♦**

Some other rockin' outfits visiting the studio before us had included the Black Caps who have a Jerry Lee Lewis-styled piano player, Leanne and the Rockeros, who can also nail the Patsy Cline sound, and a rockabilly band called the Rhythm River Trio who have a guitarist who can play like Grady Martin. Pat smiles as he tells me that one hot evening last summer (2013) he was sitting in the control room with his tie and shirt collar undone, and he had the door open to the studio and he could hear this trio rehearsing and getting a good groove going. He walked into the studio and asked them what they were playing and suddenly realised that is exactly what Sam Phillips had done the night Elvis recorded his first commercial single – "That's All right, Mama!" For a moment, Pat really thought he'd gone back to 1954! It was so hot they had the fans going while they were practising. It was just like the Deep South would have been. As Pat said with his face glowing with enthusiasm "these little moments are like something you have borrowed out of history briefly, and then put back

again quickly". Another band, called Slim Jim, came over from Bournemouth, and just like so many others, when they listened to the playbacks they wondered "is that nowadays or did we just skip back to sixty years ago?" It really is like time-travel when you come to Sugar Ray's!

### **The lounge**

The guys have really added to that relaxed feeling by creating the most wonderful lounge at the end of the building, behind the control room. Inside Penny found a portable dancette record player with the Elvis album "Elvis is Back", loaded and ready to play. We started it up and while Elvis crooned "Soldier Boy", one of Dean's favourite ballads, everyone started swaying and we were all transported into our own world of thoughts and respect for the music. When Elvis moved on to "It Feels So Right", Penny's dancing racked up a notch in sexiness and all three of us guys started howling!! We staggered to the little cocktail bar, complete with one of those Britvic pineapple-shaped ice-cube holders, before sinking into the deep plush red arm chairs with the pleasure of it all!

Sugar Ray's have a website ([www.sugarraysvintage.com](http://www.sugarraysvintage.com)), a Facebook page, and can be contacted by phone +44 (0) 7590 659 369 (Pat) and +44 (0) 7976 308 260 (Dean). They can also make professional DVDs of your session. And while I was there Pat autographed my CDs by his Big Six and Flying Fortress! With many thanks to everyone above for their help, time and enthusiasm with both the photos and the text. **Paul Waring**

## **The Ampex**

Then Penny kept me on the ball by reminding me we still needed to discuss the recording gear in the control room! Pat showed me a mono Ampex 350 tape recorder and an Ampex 300 mono 1953 model. 10 inch reels of quarter inch tape are still available and the Ampex machines with their play, record and erase heads can reuse it if needed. Both machines are in really top condition. Apparently quite a few survive in the USA, but it is quite a business importing one, with the duty, the packing and the transportation, and wondering if it will make the journey undamaged. Next to these is an Ampex 300 stereo three track machine on loan from Ricky Brawn, who was founder and drummer of the Big Six, amongst many other incarnations. This particular machine came from an RCA studio in New York where it was used to record Elvis, Duke Ellington and Sonny Rollins, amongst many others.



**Sugar Ray's have produced the complete experience**

I can cheerfully reject and ignore any recording today almost from the first note, if I hear that cold studio sound, or an automated drum rhythm, or any other synthetic music. I want to hear real musicians, playing real instruments, together, as part of a band and delivering me a performance with believable and touching emotion, as if they had the most important message in the world, and with bags of style and cool! Sugar Ray has now provided us with the friendly and warm studio to capture that. Now it is up to the performers to see if they can deliver like the greats of the 1950s! There are no excuses any more. As Jerry Lee Lewis once said "You are either hot or you're cold. If you are lukewarm the Lord will spew you out of his mouth!" But taking a more caressing view, if you have got what it takes in terms of sounds, talent and creativity, you now have a sympathetic studio and engineer and technicians capable of bringing out the best in you, even if you have to work like Elvis did on his first sessions with Sun to nail it and trap lightning in a bottle! Good luck and I look forward to hearing some truly stunning recordings over the next few years.