

Upstairs Productions

By Blair Jackson

Ted Curtis was born and raised in Oklahoma City and has been part of the city's surprisingly vibrant music scene since his teens, when he played in various bands and then apprenticed as an engineer at one of the area's top recording studios, Media Sound. When the owner of that studio decided his heart was in broadcasting, he sold the studio to Curtis, who was just 19 at the time but the son of a well-heeled restaurant supply magnate. Curtis renamed the facility Studio 7, and at the 1981 AES show, went on a shopping spree to equip his studio with tons of quality gear.

During the decade Curtis ran Studio 7, it became the top recording room in town, but in 1990 he made an abrupt left turn: He sold the studio and went into the restaurant business, opening a Mexican place called Ted's Café Escondido. "I applied everything I learned in the record business about consistency and attention to detail to running the restaurant," he says. "It turned out to be a good match of skills. We've had the number one restaurant in Oklahoma City for the past seven years."

Curtis never left music entirely. He continued to play drums and run the audio for his church band, did occasional studio work, plus kept a lucrative sideline as a designer and installer of high-end home A/V systems. Then, a couple of years ago, he got the urge to own a studio again, so he had one built in the second story of his house. The aptly named Upstairs Productions was born. Curtis has hosted a succession of artists at the new studio, many from the contemporary Christian genre, and also kept his successful restaurant business thriving.

The studio took more than a year to construct, with top New York-based designer Francis Manzella spearheading the effort, which included raising the roof on certain sections of the studio, reinforcing load-bearing ceilings and installing plenty of isolation and soundproofing. In the end, Curtis had a good-sized studio with a superb 25x19x9 control room connected by a small hallway to a 34x16x11 live room, an only slightly smaller piano room and an iso booth. All rooms provide a high-res video feed to the control room.

"Ted gave me a free hand to do what I wanted with the acoustic spaces," Manzella



In the piano room: "concierge" Kara Curtis, owner Ted Curtis and guitarist Daniel Chrisman

comments. "I had this vision of four different acoustic environments, with one of them being a very live room, and I think they all turned out really well.

"Actually, one of the greatest challenges was how do you get a huge console up into the control room, which is a wraparound staircase from any doorway? What ended up happening is we built a set of double doors into the side of the control room wall out over the garage. So the doors just sort of lead to empty space, but they're perfect for equipment load-in and load-out. Overall, we had a great experience working with one of the guys 'in the trenches' out in America's heartland. Ted's making records, scoring movies and getting it done in Oklahoma City. You have to respect that."

The control room is based around a fully automated 72-channel Amek/Neve 9098i. "That was the first addition to this obsession," Curtis says with a laugh. "But I knew I was going to take a hybrid approach. So I've got the Pro Tools |HD and RADAR, but also an MCI JH-24 2-inch and a Mike Spitz ATR-102 1-inch analog. Digital was not a fix-all deal. It does what it does and it's great for editing and storage, but it isn't analog, and analog isn't digital, so why not do the hybrid approach? The important thing is that the chain be as pristine as possible."

Curtis also sings the praises of his ADAM S5A monitors, tuned by Bob Hodas. His control room is equipped with Genelec 1032As and a 7071 sub at the ready for 5.1 work. Additionally, there is large complement of

top-quality microphones (by Brauner, Neumann, AKG, Sony, Coles, Sennheiser, Soundfield, etc.) and outboard gear that includes GML and vintage favorites (LA-2A, LA-3A, 1176) and the latest cool boxes (Sony DRE-S 777, TC 6000).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of building Upstairs Productions was designing the video interface that links each room of the complex with the control room. Rather than relying on various small monitors, the A/V-savvy Curtis put together a system based around the JVC DILA Project, or RGB Spectrum Quadview Plus and a 7-foot Stewart Grayhawk screen. "What it basically allows you to do is take multiple inputs and display them on the same screen in any configuration you choose—so you can put RADAR and/or Pro Tools up there, and next to that, you've got a couple of composite cameras, maybe have the console automation up there, whatever you want to see. Then I use an AMX touchscreen to be able to control all the presets and be able to select which cameras I want to use, et cetera." Each of the rooms has a small, unobtrusive Canon pan-tilt-zoom camera, "and so far the artists seem to just forget about them immediately," Curtis says. "You can zoom in on the big room and see how the drummer is hitting the snare drum in ways you couldn't unless you were in there standing next to him. You can also monitor the DAC levels in the machine room. It's really been great so far."

For more information, visit www.upstairsproductions.com. ■