



Alchemy

Take established mastering and postproduction operations, double the capacity and move the lot to the 29th floor of one of London's landmark buildings and you have a recipe for an interesting setup.

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THE FACILITY IN question is Alchemy and the building is Centre Point, which when it was built in the 1960s towered out of place of New Oxford Street and Charing Cross Road but now appears pleasingly retro and right on the London skyline.

The move to these new premises was necessitated by the growth of Alchemy's business and coincided with some major shifts in the London mastering and post scenes and created a timely home for some heavyweight engineers. Ray Staff, John Davis, and Chris Potter (all ex-Sony Whitfield Street) joined Alchemy mastering engineers Martin Giles (ex-CTS) and Alchemy co-founder Barry Grint; Tim Lofts (ex-Saunders & Gordon) headed up the postproduction wing with Alchemy co-founder Rowan Laxton. The new site has two mastering rooms with lathes, two post rooms, CD duplication, a digital transfer room, an e-copy room, a machine room, plus a kitchen and a reception area not far off the size of many small Soho post facilities.

I feel I need to get the issue of Alchemy's panoramic view of London out of the way now so I don't keep referring to it later. It is truly incredible. Perched at the North West corner of the Soho boundary you get uninterrupted views across the city in all directions — Alchemy has the whole of the 29th floor — and control rooms have vistas that rival those of any studio in the world. Certainly beats a Soho basement.

Master mastering engineer Ray Staff had taught Barry Grint to cut records at Trident and when Trident was bought by Tape One and became Audio One, Rowan Laxton was recruited for his background in commercials and music mixing. Barry and Rowan started Alchemy eight years ago on £15,000 in a little building in Goodge Place. During the day Rowan was doing his voice work with Barry as teaboy and in the evenings Barry mastered CDs with Rowan as teaboy. One control room, one voice booth, one reception, 450sqft and two client bases.

They borrowed £30,000 for a cutting lathe to build on Barry's mastering work and got the use of the Hidley mastering room at the old Tape One building, which was not being used by its new owners but was still fully functional. They were a successful 'two-centre' operation but 'a logistical nightmare', according to Rowan, and were soon on the look out for premises that would allow them to combine it under one roof.

'We started looking around Soho about four years ago, we wanted something with a Wow factor and if we did find a nice building it wasn't suitable enough to put mastering and recording studios in next to each other, and there were generally pillars all over the place,' says Rowan. 'Barry had this bright idea about Centre Point but I thought it would be way out of our league. We looked at it and at the time they were trying to encourage media associated companies into the building. We were looking at the 16th floor — it gets more expensive the higher you go. We managed to do a good deal on the rent but then realised that we wouldn't be able to run the air conditioning from the top or the bottom so we went back to the landlords and cut the same deal with them for the 29th floor, which we knew was available.'

After all the glitz and glory of its opening as a new London landmark that typified the era that saw it built, Centre Point went from flash and brash to trash as the building stood empty for a good many years and its environs became popular with down and outs and

winos. Today it is imposingly plush with masses spent on smartening up the building and its surroundings.

'There were always plans to have two mastering and two recording areas,' explains Rowan. 'What changed was that we became aware that Sony (Whitfield Street) studios was closing [Now fully operational again as Whitfield Street under the auspices of Robin Millar, *Resolution* V3.4]. We had already been speaking to Ray (Staff) who looked like he would come and join us, and when Sony pulled the plug we approached the mastering engineers and John Davis and Chris Potter said they would come over too. We also took on Emily for bookings.

'We were still looking for an engineer to run the recording side, I'd done it in the past but knew I needed time to run the business,' he continues. 'We approached Tim (Lofts) who was at Saunders & Gordon [now closed] who said he was interested.

'We thought that we would only be able get a No. 2 engineer but Tim joining changed things because we'd actually managed to get a No.1 engineer and that upped things because he has serious clients — it all had to look nice, we were now going for the top clients, not a lower price bracket.'

Just as developers' plans to build a piazza type area outside Centre Point were scuppered by the revelation that the awful fountain outside the building (once a premium-dare place for drunk males to empty their bladders 'of a night out') was Grade 2 listed, so were Alchemy's need-for-speed building plans.

'Not only is the fountain Grade 2 listed, so is the external view of Centre Point,' explains Barry. 'That means you have to get listed building consent if you want to put up any partitions that are near the windows.' They couldn't take so much as a bag of nails into the empty shell of the 29th floor without the building consent and predictably it was very slow in coming. As it happened it's all worked out rather well; later than intended but the mastering rooms opened at the beginning of March with postproduction kicking in a month later.

Acoustic design was by Sean Davis. 'The biggest challenge was that they need to have roaring dance music here in a mastering room and voice overs across the corridor in post,' he says. 'That's been solved and the isolation is excellent. The other challenge was to avoid a "padded crash helmet" feeling in a room with a low ceiling structure. The rooms are floating but we were very constrained by the ceiling height.' The rooms sound light and comfortable and not in the slightest bit oppressive (maybe the view has something to do with that too).

The view is one thing but there is a downside if you need to build up there. The lift could take three sheets of plasterboard at a time and the build required 800 boards. The wooden joists were far too long for the lifts so these were hauled up the stairwell with rope.

A kit list had been combined for all four rooms from input of all the engineers and Total Audio Solutions got involved and became the principle supplier for the project. The mastering rooms run Sadie while the postproduction rooms run Merging Pyramix. No Pro Tools? 'It's a great system and I won't knock it but it originated as a music package and is a perfect tool for musicians,' states Rowan. 'Unfortunately it doesn't do mastering and that's the reason Alchemy adopted Sadie in the first place, it was a mastering tool and an audio postproduction tool. We've moved to Pyramix in the post here because it also is a mastering tool and post tool. They are the two systems that do both those things equally well.'



Both post rooms run Soundtracs DS-00 consoles and permit projects to move with demand. 'That's the whole point of having Soundtracs desks, we can interchange the data and as they're both running Pyramix that also helps,' says Tim Lofts. 'With commercials people it's all very last minute and very fast turnaround and we can use the same desk no matter which room the job goes in to. Clients won't wait a day or two just so they can come back into the same room when its empty, they'll wait an hour or two and we have to have that flexibility to move things around.'

Barry adds that they have paid particular attention to future expandability. All rooms are 5.1 ready and even the DK meters can be upgraded to surround when required.

While Tim concentrates on radio and TV commercials his previous experience says there's also the cinema trailers market to address. This will be accommodated in a proposed Phase 2 build, expected later next year, which will see the opening of a large multichannel Dolby room in the ample space of the massive reception area. This will allow cinema trailers to be done well while also doubling as a 5.1 mastering room.

The mastering engineers share rooms on a day on, day off rota. 'The Maselec is the heart of the control room for me, I used it at Sony and it's really good,' explains Ray. 'It's definitely the best mastering room I've ever had, you can always want more but I'm really happy with it and it's getting great results. The rooms sound good, Sean's done a great job on the acoustics, they're much better than the ones we had at Sony.'

Rumours of vinyl's demise are greatly exaggerated according to Ray who says that 80% of Alchemy's mastering output is vinyl. 'From the mastering point of view it has always been consistent business,' he says adding that he is cutting more vinyl now than he was ten years ago and that the UK remains something of a lathe capital of the world.

Ray doesn't believe that a generation has been lost to the importance of mastering with the empowerment of modern technology. 'I think we went through a slightly negative phase where the attitude was: why give it to a mastering engineer when you can do it yourself,' he says. 'It doesn't matter how many software tools they have at home, they can't get it right and now they are coming back to people who know what they're doing. And they can hear the difference.'

'Vinyl led that to a certain extent,' adds Barry. 'People thought they could do the mastering at home and then they decided to do it on vinyl so it had to come in somewhere where a guy has some experience. They then realise that the vinyl sounds better than what they've done. They come back for the CD too.'

'Clients find it relaxing up here because you are detached from all the hurly-burly,' explains Barry. It looks like London out of the window, but it doesn't feel like it. The two that started it all remain excited by the project but similarly realistic and cautious. 'The danger is that you try and take on too much and you don't quite deliver on anything,' says Barry. 'We're being sensible, we've got the rooms open and working well. Then we can think about 5.1 as the next stage.'

'We had to move because we were at full capacity,' adds Rowan. 'I'm really glad that we've done it because it really is a most prestigious setup and we want to encourage people to just come and look at it.'

I've seen it, you should too. Oh, that view... ■



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