



Black City Studio

Ghana's newest, finest and only international standard studio went live at the beginning of the year after a protracted and eventful incubation.

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STUDIO BUILDS TAKE time and they frequently run over deadlines and budget. However, few can claim the sort of lead time that Ghana's new flagship studio can. A labour of love that displays all the determination of vision over circumstance, Black City Studio in Accra has put the West African country on the international recording map with a world standard facility that positively gushes with unique character.

It's a story that started more than 15 years ago and is an intricately involved yarn that has worked around the fundamental problems of attempting such an ambitious project in the country. It is also peppered with example and lessons that those in more fortunate territories would do well to heed.

The start point is live sound and studio owner Ralph Casely-Hayford embarked on putting together the country's largest PA rig some 17 years ago, but the process of arriving at today's predominantly Peavey circa-260kW system has been a gradual one. 'This is Ghana and nothing happens quickly,' laughs Ralph. Growth was through the continual reinvestment of profits gleaned from establishing a position as the one and only big system provider for all visiting foreign acts and all national events in the country.

An experienced sound engineer, he had always wanted a studio and saw it as a natural adjunct to the live sound activities. A modest room was put together in the mid 1980s and served as the basis for all that was to follow.

'The first studio was a sort of test run type of place. We got ourselves a 40-channel Studiomaster board and we built the studio around it. Whenever we had a gig we unplugged it, put it back in its flight case, and went out with it. That was the way we did things for a long time - unplugging and shipping out, shipping back in and plugging it all back up again,' says Ralph.

This initial facility had humble box room beginnings but grew in sophistication, size and presentation. The requirement for a ground-up build, done properly rather than organically, was on the cards.

'When we hooked up the PA desk and got ourselves our first computer - a Mac SE30 - it was fun because, among other things, we were the first peo-

ple to use MIDI in this country,' explains Ralph. 'In the meantime, on the live side we had put up gigs for Dionne Warwick, Isaac Hayes, Jermaine Jackson, Public Enemy, basically anyone of note who played in Ghana used our rig. Plus we have our own Panafest music festival in Accra every two years which attracts black American acts, Jamaicans, even the British.

'The excitement had been so great with the little studio that we thought, man, let's just do it properly once and for all,' he continues. 'The thing is that since then, we've been at it! On and on, little by little. You can't get sponsorship in this country, the banks won't give you a loan, and it wasn't easy. We funded it out



of the PA side and that's why it's taken so long, that and the fact that we have built it from the ground up. And by hand, no machines. This is Ghana.'

Observers might be interested to note that while Ralph designed the whole facility, he has never been inside a studio outside of Ghana: 'Even in Ghana I can say that I've only been in about three because there aren't that many studios in this country.'

You can't even get him to pretend that he's a read a book or two about studio design. 'I relied entirely on my experiences with the old original studio and I didn't build that, they were rooms that we adapted,' he admits. 'Even so I learnt a lot acoustically and electronically from there. To tell you the truth I built this studio totally blind and relied on my education.'

Ralph's being professionally humble here because his common sense, experience and knowledge base (he has a mechanical engineering background) has created something that is not homespun, half-baked or DIY but is instead slick, over-engineered and full of character.

Built as it is on a large green (more scorched earth brown) field site, Ralph mapped out the plan by eye with lines of sand on the ground, with room dimensions always on the side of generous. Those who suspect that the actual building enjoyed a similarly empirical approach would be reassured by the sub-

stantial nature of the structure. Apparently there is a family Cement connection and there was no scrimping on the construction of the industrial cathedral thickness-like walls. The control room, in particular, is enormous by most standards.

'To tell the truth I had nothing to compare the size to so I wasn't aware if I was building something huge or just average,' he says. 'It was only after it was finished, and I was having thoughts that maybe it was too small, that people came over and commented on the size.'

The single live room has a large main area with an alcove on one side and three sizeable iso booths at the back. Ceiling height is about 15 feet at the highest point and slopes down

towards the back, and the floor steps up towards the back. There are no parallel surfaces anywhere, ceilings are false and the only visible trapping is at the back of the control room. Everywhere else it's bare walls and it sounds really nice.

Once the studio was built, Ralph enlisted the services of Steve Flood, former Master Rock studios, London founder, as all-round technical consultant to validate the facility to Western standards. 'I wanted to know that I had all the right stuff, that everything was hooked up correctly, and that there was a "Westerner" involved and that the job would therefore be done properly.'

Main monitoring is an interesting example of how the little by little, buy and accumulate, process can go wrong. 'The JBLs are brand new, I bought them just at the end of the original studio and at the time when they were the ones to have. That is a long time ago now and things change in some 15 years!' says Ralph. 'Steve walked in and laughed at them and that was it. We now have PMCs.'

Steve Flood is keen to counter Ralph's down-playing of his abilities and commends the quality of workmanship throughout the facility. 'What Ralph won't tell you is that he is a very, very experienced and seasoned engineer and he's steeped in engineering basics and discipline,' he states. 'The whole pro-



On Africa's Gold Coast, Ghana was the centre of the slave trade and still has the testament of some 40 forts and castles built from the 15th Century onwards, which are designated as world heritage sites.

What amounts to the 'town square' backs on to the sea and is the site for all concerts and major political events. Casely-Hayford's company supplies the PA system for all these events.

Ghana was the first British colony in Africa to achieve independence and is proud of the fact. It's the World's leading producer of cocoa. Conveniently, for its ambitions to internationalise its music, the official language is English.

ject was approached from a real first principles base. 'Coming in to such a situation challenged me and instead of doing what an outsider would usually do, which is say "No, but it really should be like this..."', I took what there was and saw it through to its logical conclusion. It's why this place comes out with a completely different atmosphere and feel. I wasn't here to add the Western bit to an African studio, I'm here to make sure that this African studio works to the same level as a top level European studio. I have to admit that it's not what most "consultants" normally do, they work to a formula.'

The foundations were dug 15 years ago and building is still continuing up top. 'It's gone up slowly,' says Ralph. 'We completed the studio ground floor, went up a little, went up a little more. We don't have the capital to finish it all off in one go so construction has stopped at certain important stages and then continued when we had more money. Same process as buying the equipment.'

Kit accumulation begs the question of how clear he was about what he needed and how he was making his decisions. 'I read the magazines and I get very excited about gear,' replies Ralph. 'I'd phone up my gear supplier in the UK (Jim St Pier) and get him to ask around and see if my evaluation and take on it was the same as that of others. I look for confirmation that my choice is good and that I haven't missed anything.'

The decision making process is all the more vital because nothing could be bought locally. Even the studio glass had to be imported from Germany. 'I bought everything from overseas and everything was flown in,' states Ralph. 'Even my PA rig flew in, which amounts to tons over the course of the years. Another problem is manufacturer support, and the reality is that we have to be very self-sufficient here.'

Very briefly...

Euphonix CS3000 fitted 96 faders in 104 fader frame, 64-channels ES108 dynamics, MX 464 centre section expander, Cube (8 bus), Machine Controller.

48-Track Euphonix R-1 Hard Disc System, AM 713 analogue to MADI convertor(2), MA 703 MADI to analogue convertor (2); Tascam 16-track 1-inch with DBX; Alesis XT ADAT(2); Akai DD1200 Digital 12 Track(4).

Akai DD 1000; Tascam DA45; Technics 360; Technics CD-RW 2000; Tascam CD-D4000; Denon DCD-485; Technics SL1210; Revox B215; Marantz SD4050; Z Systems 8-channel digi patch.

PMC BB5 with XBD Sub Bass Driven by Bryston; JBL 4330; Yamaha NS10.

Lexicon 960L with Larc; Lexicon 480L with Larc; Lexicon PCM70; AMS RMX16; AMS 1580S DMX; Eventide H3000SE; TC2290; Yamaha SPX 1000; TC D2; Amek



Medici EQ; KT DN410; TLA 31115; Tube Tech EQ1A; BBE 862; Drawmer DF320; TC 1140; TC Finalizer; Purple Audio MC76; DBX 160A; TL Audio Fatman; Valley People Keepex II; Valley People Commander; Valley People Leveller; Valley People Gain Brain; Valley People DSP De-essers; Aphex Dominator; Aphex Expressor; KT DN6000.

The way I always got around it with the PA was to buy a lot of spares, and I still do that, so it doesn't scare me.'

This is supported by the existence of a number of rooms dotted around the complex that house sections of PA and everything from drivers, cabinets and circuit boards to extra channels of splitter, crossover and even mixing console. Ralph prides himself on owning stock that includes obsolete parts.

Against such a back-to-basics approach to redundancy, the choice of the 96-fader CS3000 Euphonix console could be regarded as an interesting one. 'What excited me about that desk was the complete recall of all desk parameters,' he says adding that reliability has never been an issue, sound quality is superb, and that operationally the studio will have to try and work hard to even approach the desk's limits.

There's a variety of recording formats because nothing is wasted at Black City. The Tascam 16-track 1-inch dates back to the original studio and now sits alongside MDMs, Akai ADAMS, and a Euphonix R1 digital multitrack.

'The R1 is a high-end machine and I had to investigate it,' says Ralph. 'Pro Tools is beautiful but I'd be worried about losing things on it out here and, to me, the R1 is a safer bet. I don't want anyone travelling all the way out to here only to lose their stuff. I've always been motivated to get the best that was available each time I was buying. The thing about the R1 is that it will become a classic one day and I will be able to work on it forever.'

The studio has been fully operational since the beginning of the year and Ralph sees the first task as producing local talent and getting Ghanaian music out on to the international market. It is largely unknown as a music nation because it lacks the required industry behind it and Black City aims to redress this. 'It also gives an opportunity for all the musicians on the West Coast of Africa to come in



here and record,' he adds. 'Most of the Francophone countries travel to Paris to record but I don't have to tell you that it will be cheaper and more authentic to record here.'

Ralph is starting a Black City record label but he doesn't believe the local currency or local sales will be strong enough to support its ambition, which again points to an international perspective. In this respect, Ghana holds something of a trump card as it is regarded by many black Americans, in particular, as a spiritual ancestral home.

'The style of music we have here, the local drumming patterns, for example, are largely unknown and new to the rest of the world. Now that there's a world class studio here there's an opportunity for other musicians to tap in to that'.

Ralph is looking towards US\$100 per hour for the studio and believes that there will be a need to negotiate to convince clients, at least initially, but adds that the best way to demonstrate the studio's capabilities to the outside world is through the recording and release of local talent.

'For a long time now, nobody's wanted to come to Africa because we didn't have the technology and it's been difficult for many of them to believe that there could be anything worth coming out here for. Well, we have news for them,' he continues.

'I won't spend my money on something if I can't see it working. I'm also very determined and, if I really want to do something, I don't stop until it's done and finished. And I can't be swayed to branch off. I had a lot of contact with people about putting together a radio station - which, incidentally, is much cheaper to do than a recording studio - but I had a job to finish and I wasn't interested in starting a new project.'

The completion of the studio is the first step towards world-wide recognition for Ghana as a recording and musical centre. 'This is not the end of the road,' Ralph says, 'this is just the beginning.' □



Footings were dug 15 years ago but building has never really stopped. Black City's ambitions go beyond the studio.

A second entrance to the complex accesses an amphitheatre style venue, which is still in the process of construction. Other floors with rooms are completed but are yet to be allocated a function although there is strong talk of a video edit suite for artist videos and a small audio preproduction room to feed and free up the main studio.



The current top floor offers panoramic views over the district and may become a club or part of future client accommodation. Until that time, it has all the makings of an astounding reverb chamber.



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