

IN BUSINESS

Where Pop Icons Tested the Mikes

Bronxville Recording Studio Draws Musicians, the Famous and the Wannabes

By SAXON HENRY

BRONXVILLE
BRITNEY SPEARS recorded a demo here. Christina Aguilera, Mandy Moore and Jessica Simpson recorded tracks for their first albums here. JC Chasez of 'N Sync recorded vocals for "God Must Have Spent a Little More Time on You" here.

And Al Hemberger, the self-described Grand Fromage of the Loft Recording Studios in Bronxville, where all these MTV darlings have tested the mikes, has some advice for musicians who want to record their own music: don't open a recording studio. "If you do, the last thing you'll get to work on is your own music," said Mr. Hemberger, who owns the studios.

Before the Loft was a recording studio, it was a children's film and theater center, founded in 1968 by two students from Sarah Lawrence College and two Bronxville mothers. "I got involved in the Loft in 1969 when I was 16," said Mr. Hemberger. "My brother played drums and I had a light show for his band. I also wrote music for the shows. That evolved into recording."

The theater center eventually faded away, and Mr. Hemberger gradually took over the space.

There are now three recording studios at the Loft, outfitted with analog and digital recording equipment. An eclectic mix of music — from pop, rock and rap to jazz, blues, folk and reggae — is recorded in the soundproof rooms. Mr. Hemberger — an engineer and producer, credits the long list of artists who have recorded at the Loft to the independent producers who make these studios their base of operations. Carl Sturken and Evan Rogers, co-owners of Syndicated Rhythm Productions, are among those who have brought a number of young pop performers to the Bronxville studio. "The Loft is unlike any other studio environment in the New York area," said Mr. Sturken. "It's the antithesis of the Manhattan studio: it's relaxed and homey. We feel like we're part of a big family here, and none of us is watching the clock."

Those who assume that the laidback atmosphere means the end product will be inferior, Mr. Sturken added, are quickly proven wrong. "Technically we're operating at the same quality as the high-end recording studios," he said. "The artists we work with are surprised that something like this is so close to Manhattan. They love the idea that they can hop on the train and come out here and be in another world."

True, many of the pop icons who hopped that train were unknown when they did, and few of them have returned.

"These young pop stars are all over the place," said Mr. Hemberger. "We didn't know what level of success they would achieve when they were here. People get all excited about the pop stars, but you don't have to be famous or have a large project to record here." Flexibility is important to the growth of his business, Mr. Hemberger said. Digital technology has changed the recording industry in the last several years, making it possible for more musicians to afford to own their own recording equipment. Although he records some work start to finish, Mr. Hemberger also helps musicians or producers complete projects begun elsewhere. Studio time and the other services at the Loft are billed by the hour, so recording some of the music in advance and then mixing it or laying down additional tracks at the professional studio can cost musicians less, especially if they are recording on his or her own equipment.

With overhead expenses lower in Bronx-

At Loft Recording Studios, Southside Johnny listens to a taping with Matt Noble, above at left. Artists who have worked there are, clockwise from top right, Britney Spears, Doreen Shaffer of the Skatalites, Pete Seeger, Sue Foley, Mandy Moore and Christina Aguilera.



ville than in Manhattan, costs can come in lower, said Mr. Hemberger, though it depends upon the studio and the project. The basic fee for studio time at the Loft is \$100 per hour, but that cost can rise depending upon the project and the engineer. The staff includes two full-time personnel, 10 part-time employees and a number of freelancers. "Between this and the other things I do in the music industry, I've made a living, sure," Mr. Hemberger "but it's also a labor of love."

Matt Noble, an independent producer and songwriter has returned to the Loft after

owning his own studio in Manhattan for several years. He pointed out that digital technology is decreasing the cost difference from studio to studio in many cases because the equipment is now standard, easy to install and readily available.

Mr. Noble is currently working with Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes in Studio A. He has brought projects large and small to the Loft, from scoring the 1994 film "Jason's Lyric," to recording an alternative rap group, Son of Eve.

Southside Johnny said he comes back to work with Mr. Noble, and because of the scale of the place. "The great big studios can be very expensive," he said, "and they make you think you're supposed to come in and get it done and get out. Small studios like this are very friendly and the people are nice. You feel like you can relax and the real music comes out of you."

Each studio at the Loft contains a live room for recording, a lounge, a control room and a pre-production room, where clients can compose music. "We've always used the tried-and-true equipment, upgrading only when it was clear that we should," Mr. Hemberger said. "When we were losing work to other studios because we didn't have 24-track equipment, we upgraded from 16-track; but we waited until the time was right to go digital. Now we have the best of both worlds."



Chris Maynard for The New York Times, top left, and clockwise from top right; Reuters, Rahav Segev, Ruby Washington/The New York Times, Stephen Wild and Reuters (Moore and Aguilera)

The Loft's latest inductees into the music business are young interns from local colleges who have been training with the veteran engineers there for the last two years. With these additional engineers and a new studio set up for live bands, Mr. Hemberger hopes to entice more bands to the studios. He said the musician recording at the Loft to watch is now is a singer-songwriter named Javier, who, Mr. Hemberger said, has just signed with Capitol Records.

Established performers also occasionally record at the Loft. Pete Seeger, Taj Mahal, Sue Foley and Procol Harum have worked here; the Skatalites recorded their 30th anniversary album here. Though Mr. Hemberger doesn't reap financial rewards when the performers who come through his studio make it big, he feels their successes help his reputation, and help draw others to the studio.

Mr. Hemberger's love of music and gregarious personality keep musicians coming back to the Loft, he said. "Artists come in with stories of producers who didn't even talk to them," he remarked. "Under those circumstances, nothing is fun and the whole thing is a drag. Everybody got into the music business because they thought it was going to be fun, so we try and make sure it's fun."