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VOL. XIX NO. 5



PRINTED IN CANADA \$3.95

PRODUCTS AND PROFILES FOR THE AUDIO PROFESSIONAL

METALWORKS

FORGING AHEAD FOR 30 YEARS & COUNTING BY JEFF TOUZEAU · PHOTOS BY ROY TIMM

METALWORKS: AN AGILE COMMUNITY OF RECORDING PROFESSIONALS

With all the technology debates swirling around the world of professional audio, one thing everyone can agree on is that success in the recording studio business can be very difficult to achieve and indeed, sustain. Metalworks, located in Mississauga, ON, has not only sustained its success, but has evolved into three diverse business lines. Its three decades of success are the culmination of many things – including a staunch refusal to be a one-dimensional operation. Since founding the recording studio, Metalworks has added Metalworks Institute (the educational division) and Metalworks Production Group (the sound and lighting division). It is the symbiotic relationship of these three companies that has enabled Metalworks to thrive into the new millennium.

EARLY FOUNDATIONS

Metalworks originally had its start as a sound and lighting company. Triumph drummer Gil Moore founded the business in 1975 and, over time, his band would come to rely on the capabilities of the company more and more. By 1978, the members of Triumph had set up a demo studio and just months later “professionalized it” so they could cut their own records there. Soon after that, the band helped catapult the studio to become one of the first 48-track recording facilities in the world.

“Back in those days, MCI was one of the big players in audio equipment,” Moore recalls. “It gave us a proposal to put in the largest console that it made, and they it had

an auto-locator that would synch two JH 24 machines. Being the gear nut that I am, I convinced [Triumph bandmates] Mike [Levine] and Rik [Emmett] that we could have the biggest and baddest studio on the planet. So in less than a year, we went from demo studio, to professional studio, to ahead-of-the-curve studio.”

By 1979, Metalworks was a world-class commercial facility not just available to the members of Triumph, but to many recording artists – Canadian and otherwise – who lined up at the door to access its leading-edge capabilities. “It was built initially as a private studio, but after a while it was attracting all this attention from other artists,” recalls Moore, “so it became a ‘partially commercial studio.’ It was our space, but we had a studio manager, an assistant manager, staff engineers, and all the stuff that commercial studios have.” In 1988, when Triumph “disassembled its rock machine,” Moore took on full ownership of Metalworks and never looked back: “It was a new phase of my life. I was sick of playing, and didn’t want to go on the road anymore,” he says.

The studio’s cumulative technical achievements, knowledgeable staff, and sonic excellence soon put Metalworks squarely in a class by itself. Multi-platinum music was recorded for artists like Prince, Tina Turner, David Bowie, The Cranberries, Guns N’ Roses, Bruce Springsteen, and N’Sync. The studio was recognized time and again with the Canadian Music Industry Awards’ “Recording Studio of the Year” award – an unprecedented 11 times in a row to be exact. Metalworks also developed loyal relationships with Canadian artists like Barenaked Ladies, Tom Cochrane, Rush, Billy Talent, Bachman-Cummings, Anne Murray, and many others.

A NEW AGE OF CLIENTELE

In 2005, Paul Gross was recruited as Studio Manager and would help make the facility more approachable to a new generation of clientele following the vast studio market and recording industry contraction. “I wanted to influence how Metalworks looked at the industry,” says Gross. “Even though we were a ‘mega-studio,’ I thought we could develop a more friendly, professional atmosphere.”

His passion for fresh, independent music helped keep both the tracking and mix rooms booked for months in advance. “One of the things I love the most is working with young bands,” he says. “The number of calls you get from major record companies these days is simply not what it used to be. I thrive on getting that call from an independent – I can spend a half-hour on the phone with that person and suggest ways to get the results he or she is looking for.” This kind of personalized client focus and attention has given Metalworks a solid foundation in the independent market.

“It’s funny how you get clients, but the bottom line is that you have to treat people with care, dignity, and respect,” says Gross. “If you treat them properly, do the job, and if you’re professional, they’re going to come back. A year-and-a-half ago, we had Bob Clearmountain in mixing Barenaked Ladies, and while he was here, he got a call from Bruce Springsteen to mix a track, so we did a couple of Bruce Springsteen mixes.”

One of Metalworks’ current producer clients is David Bottrill, who is currently working on tracks for the new Placebo album. He finds Metalworks Studios, and especially Gross’ hands-on approach, particularly accommodating: “I’ve worked there a lot, and Paul has always been very helpful to me. He was able to put together a situation where we could work in the drum recording room for the first part of the project, and then move to a smaller room for the second part. Both rooms are of excellent quality, so I knew I was going to get a good sound. For me, I think it’s the people there that make the difference.”



ABOVE: Assistant Studio Manager Giancarlo Gallo at the mastering controls.



TOP: Studio 1 Live Floor.
ABOVE: Studio 6 Live Floor. Full band tracking set-up.

Metalworks Studios consists of seven distinct studios, offering everything from traditional tracking and mixing to DVD authoring and mastering. Let's take a brief look at each of them:

Studio 1, which was Triumph's original studio, is a classic tracking room featuring a vintage 32 x 8 x 32 Neve 8036 console and an acoustically versatile 24' x 50' live room with maple floors, and a combination of stone/wood walls. **Studio 2** is a "large-format mix room," featuring an 80-input SSL 4080 G+ console as well as a full Pro Tools HD3 system loaded with plug-ins. Its live room measures 14' x 20' and is often used for vocals and overdubs. **Studio 3** is a smaller-scale production suite, featuring a 40-channel SSL and an adjacent overdub booth. **Studio 4**'s core capabilities are video editing and DVD authoring, while **studio 5** is a completely dedicated mastering suite - handling stereo, 5.1, and DVD projects. **Studio 6** is a very large-scale 5.1 control room featuring an 80-input SSL 9000 J series console. This control room handles a lot of Metalworks' sound for picture work and has a drop down screen/projector. Finally, **Studio 7** is the relatively new graphics and animation department, which presently has two workstations (a third is on the way).

METALWORKS

Gross says that the tracking and facilities at Metalworks are better than ever before: "We have a great studio floor. The Neve console in Studio 1 is still the best tracking board there is and all the mics have been kept up-to-date." One cannot underestimate the importance of a solid basic track, and Gross considers this aspect critical in the construction of a great recording: "If you are building a house, that is the foundation. Once you've tracked it properly, you can move on from there and be successful."

At Metalworks, clients can choose among the best of old- and new-world technologies. "I call it 'morphing technology.' We might get a hardcore metal band in that doesn't want to know about an analog tape machine," says Gross. "The act might want it to be hard and may actually like the digital stuff. You use the bullet that you need to make the best sound for a given project. It's kind of like a carpenter's tools - you might need a hammer with a small head for finishing, but you might need a sledgehammer to get a spike into the plywood."

THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

While it may seem like Metalworks had a master plan to evolve in such a perfect way from the beginning, Moore suggests that it was really more a case of making the right decisions at the right times. One of these critical decisions came in 2000, when the company was trying to create new revenue opportunities and was thinking of expansion. Moore recalls: "I looked at building a second studio in another location, but finally decided that recording studios were much like restaurants and there's no way to have a chain of great restaurants. Most of the other studios I admired, such as Abbey Road, Record Plant, and Electric Lady, didn't have multiple locations." After much consideration, he finally realized that it wasn't so much about building new studios or even entering new markets. It was about building communities.

Somewhat underwhelmed with the quality of graduates coming out of the top audio schools, Moore spotted an opportunity: "We felt like the training and the comprehension on basic audio principles was declining. I figured out that it had to do with the changes in technology - the cost and complexity of training people in the digital domain had leapfrogged ahead of the budgets of the institutions that were teaching this stuff." The staff at Metalworks soon realized how important it was to begin passing along its audio knowledge to the coming generations. "I had some fantastic engineers and studio

management on our staff, as well as people who worked at our studio a lot. We had this great reservoir of information and history right at our fingertips," Moore says.

Metalworks ran with the idea and designed a curriculum that would focus on both the fundamental principles and new technologies. In 2004, a separate educational facility was constructed (directly adjacent to Metalworks) that would focus on core subjects like audio production, broadcasting, and post-production and would eventually become Eastern Canada's only authorized Digidesign Pro School® - no small achievement.

In 2005, Metalworks made an acquisition that would broaden the education curriculum, as well as bring it full-circle back to its roots: performance. Metalworks Production Group was formed and would become an important new revenue stream and a brand new knowledge base for Metalworks Institute. "Now we are doing 10 to 15 shows per week and we have a fantastic interface between that company and our school - just like we have a fantastic interface between our studio division and the school," observes Moore.

STUDIO INNOVATIONS

Looking at Metalworks' accomplishments in the studio over the years, it's easy to see that innovation is in its DNA. "We were absolutely the first studio in Canada to get into video," according to Moore. "The only other studios that had audio and video capabilities were in the post-production industry - none were in the music industry." Metalworks was also an early adopter in the DVD medium - for both audio and video. While the film industry obviously embraced the DVD, the music industry at large seems to have missed the boat. "The music industry had a bigger opportunity to embrace DVD technology than it chose to do. The record companies got mired in defending the CD and worrying about copyright infringements, and as a result they completely blew harnessing DVD technology to their own advantage, which was a shame. The film industry pioneered this technology for them and it was basically handed to them on a silver platter."

While Metalworks was able to deflect broader pressures facing the studio market in recent decades, Moore admits that innovation has been key to its survival: "Staying ahead of the game has been incredibly important to us. Everyone looks at it like there was this big demise of the studio business, but in reality, it was incredibly overbuilt. It got ridiculous in markets like Los Angeles and New York, where there were these gigantic SSL rooms on every street corner." Now that the proverbial bubble has finally burst, he says the survivors have persevered. "It's not a game for amateurs; it's not a game for poseurs. This is a game for serious players, and most of them are still in the business and making records. They may be whining, but they are still viable one way or the other."

STILL ROOM AT THE TOP

Metalworks has claimed its space among "top tier" studios in Canada that provide both the high-end gear and services that professional clients demand. "In Toronto, you have seven or eight 'serious' music studios," Moore observes. "There are 50 other 'cottage industry' studios in the city of Toronto that all say they are 'residential' or 'semi-commercial' that have a minimum of \$100,000 in equipment. Then you draw another line at \$50,000 worth of equipment. There are probably 200 of these. This goes on and on, down to a home studio where a guy has, say, \$10,000 worth of equipment. He might have a Mac with Pro Tools on it, a couple of preamps, and two microphones in his parents' basement. There are about 1,000 of those rooms." He asserts that this trend has led to a more or less obvious effect: "The amount of recording that is going on today and the amount that was going on 20 or 30 years ago is not even remotely comparable. There is an exponential amount of recording taking place."

How has all this affected Metalworks' business? For one thing, the typical client profile has changed to some degree. Metalworks records many more independent bands and also has many more video clients than it did 30 years ago. While the studio may have lost some work here and there due to clients choosing to overdub in their home studios, the facility's Studio 1 is busier than ever with bands laying down bed tracks that simply can not be captured at home. Its SSL mix rooms, meanwhile, are humming for largely similar reasons: bands have integrity and simply don't want to have their records mixed in sub-standard environments.



ABOVE: Cam LeBlanc editing in the DVD video/authoring suite.

A TRIUMPHANT RETURN TO HIS PAST

ON THE SURFACE IT MIGHT APPEAR THAT MOORE'S LIFE IS MORE OR LESS CONSUMED BY METALWORKS, AND THIS MAY ONLY PARTIALLY BE TRUE. HE STILL FINDS TIME FOR HIS BANDMATES IN TRIUMPH AND INDEED WAS ABLE TO MAKE TIME FOR HIS FANS, TOO: "I REALLY ENJOY PLAYING WITH MIKE AND RIK. WE HADN'T PLAYED IN ABOUT 18 YEARS, BUT THIS YEAR WE PLAYED TWO BIG FESTIVALS: THE SWEDEN ROCK FESTIVAL AND ROCKLAHOMA IN THE US."

THESE WERE NO SMALL ONE-OFF GIGS - BOTH WERE MASSIVE AND ATTENDED BY UPWARDS OF 100,000 CONCERT-GOERS OVER THREE-DAY PERIODS. COULD MOORE BE LURED BACK INTO BEING A ROCK STAR? DON'T BET ON IT. "IT WAS GREAT TO HANG OUT WITH THE GUYS AGAIN AND SEE SOME OF THE FANS, BUT I AM VERY BUSY WITH WHAT I'M DOING, AND I LOVE WHAT I'M DOING EVERYDAY. I WORK AT DISNEYWORLD - THAT'S WHAT I WOULD SAY."

STUDIO 2

Control Room: 25' x 24'

Studio: 15' x 20'

Console

80-Input SSL 4080 G+ Series With Total Recall And Ultimatum - 48 G EQs & 32 E EQs

RECORDERS

Pro Tools HD3 Accell

24 In/64 Out (Expandable To 96) (Digidesign 192s)

Sync I/O

Lucid Ssg192 Wordclock Generator

G4

Studer A800 Mk III 24-Track Analog (X2)

Studer AB20 Ctc 1/4" Or 1/2" 2-Track (Available Upon Request)

HHB CDR-850 CD-R Recorder

REVERBS

Lexicon PCM 70

AMS RMX-16 Digital Reverb

EMT 140 Tube Plate Reverb

EMT 240 Goldfoil Solid-State Plate Reverb

KlarkTeknik DN780 Digital Reverb

Lexicon 480I Digital Reverb

Roland SRV2000 Digital Reverb

Yamaha Rev1 Digital Reverb

Yamaha Rev7 Digital Reverb

COMPRESSORS & LIMITERS

Teletronics LA-2A

Avalon AD2044 Compressor

dbx 160 Compressor/Limiter (X2)

Brooke-Siren DPR-402 De-Esser

dbx 160x Limiter (X2)

Drawer DS201 Dual Gate

Urei 1176LN (Silver/Blue) Limiter (X2)

Urei LA-3 Limiter (X2)

Urei LA-4 Limiter (X2)

EQUALIZERS

API 5502 2-Ch. Equalizer (X2)

Pultec EQH-2 Tube EQ (X2)

EFFECTS

Roland Dimension D Chorus

AMS DMX 15-805 Delay/Harmonizer

AMS DM220 Phaser

Aphex Type C Aural Exciter

Audio Designs Panscan Auto-Panner

Eventide H3000 SE Ultra-Harmonizer

Eventide H-910 Harmonizer

Lexicon PCM41 Delay

Roland SDE3000 Delay

TC Electronic 2290 Digital Delay

Yamaha SPX1000 Multi-Effects Processor

Yamaha SPX90 Multi-Effects Processor

MONITORS

KRK V8

Yamaha NS10m

Westlake TM-3 (Custom) Main Monitors

Auratone (Available Upon Request)

SYNCHRONIZATION

Adams-Smith 2600



STUDIO 2

PHOTO COURTESY OF METALWORKS STUDIOS.

And while there is less interaction with major labels as they reassess business directions, bands with larger budgets do still exist; Moore refers to these as "almost superstar" acts. What makes these clients particularly interesting is that many times, they may have reasonably-equipped home studios, but they make no bones about where they will record their tracks. "They could probably do it cheaper at their home studios, but they choose not to because they don't want the grief and aggravation," Moore observes. "They want to work with professionals who they know will get it right in a pro environment."

While many clients undeniably recognize the value of tracking, mixing, and mastering at a facility like Metalworks, it's not as common these days for an artist to hole up and do a multi-week lockout as he or she might have done in the past. Recording longtime client Anne Murray's *What A Wonderful World* was a most welcome and delightful exception to this: "It was her most successful record ever - it went platinum in the US. She wrote us this incredible letter that will always stand out to me for the rest of my life - it was a framer." Metalworks had the record covered from alpha to omega. "We did all of her bed tracks, we did all of her overdubs, we did her mixing, and we mastered it," recalls Moore. "That is extremely unusual. Typically, projects move from studio to studio, and you get bits and pieces."

A CRYSTALLIZED VISION: METALWORKS INSTITUTE

Of all the twists and turns in Metalworks' illustrious existence, one of the most rewarding experiences for Moore and the rest of the staff was when they started to see the fruits of the labour in Metalworks Institute. "When we started graduating students from our school, that was a very gratifying moment for me."

Some of the times leading up to that were perhaps less than fulfilling for Moore, who ultimately stuck it out and persevered: "I almost thought our company was mature - we had been in business for 25 years and had won all the awards. I thought, 'You know, I'm really kind of bored with this,'" he says. At times, the future didn't appear to be so bright and sunny. "I had run out of juice creatively, and I knew I didn't want to go back to playing. I was not at the studio a lot, and I didn't have any direct role in running it since I always had managers. I asked myself, 'Is this all there is with this thing?'"

Sure enough, the way forward for Metalworks became crystallized: "You have these recipes, but you have to be able to pass them on. It is a strange feeling. I thought the school could be a great legacy for the studio. We could take all we've learned from all these years, create a curriculum, and pass it on to the next generation." The more they considered the idea of a school, the more it became a realistic and achievable vision. "We wanted it to be broadly-based, and the connections we had in the business would help us do this. We worked with the entire music industry: every manger, every record company, and every publisher. Each of these people were either clients or affiliated with us in some way. We were able to get that program up and running."

Metalworks Production Group, meanwhile, was a throwback to the heritage that Metalworks was built on, and represented a predictable, repeatable income stream. Metalworks' reputation and expertise enabled it to build ongoing relationships with diverse acts like Blue Rodeo, Gordon Lightfoot, and Alice Cooper, as well as attract corporate clients in both Canada and the US.

A SYNERGISTIC COMBINATION

While Metalworks' "bread and butter" is still in the recording facilities, the synergy among its operations is obvious. The studio's longstanding brand has only served to strengthen and extend this synergy, and has also made the company much more agile. Very often, clients of one entity will become the client of another, and knowledge gained in one area can in turn be applied to another. Metalworks is no one-trick pony: "I don't know of any studio anywhere in the world that has the business model that we have," says Moore.

He's decidedly modest when asked to put his finger on why Metalworks has been so successful over the years: "This is very much a community. I'm in the lobby and I will often hear an artist say, 'Thanks for this great studio.' I say, 'No, thank you.' We are just a reflection of the artists and engineers that have come and done work in our facility. Our reputation is a result of their work - not any more or any less than that." ■



Jeff Touzeau is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to Professional Sound. His latest books are *Careers In Audio* and *Arists On Recording Techniques*, both on Cengage (2008).