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55TEC Studios, Beijing

*Walters-Storyk Designs World-Class Studio
for China's Booming Music Industry*

By Gary Eskow and Tom Kenny / Interior Photos by Mills Xu

Of course China has recording studios, lots of them. Bedroom studios, garage studios, demo studios, personal studios, rehearsal studios, producer-owned studios, broadcast studios, scoring stages and high-end, well-designed, commercial recording studios. It's a country of 1.2 billion, with advanced tech and a booming entertainment sector. There are lots of studios.

Even so, 55TEC Studios in Beijing—now two years old, with two dozen number one hits recorded and/or mixed there—represents something new. The four principals, all veterans of the music, recording and production industries, with a few side roles in tech and telecom, set out to build something of extreme quality, a space that would compete with the best of the best. They did their research, embraced the analog/digital model and now run a world-class, WSDG Walters-Storyk Design Group designed, NAMM TEC Award-nominated recording studio.

Despite boasting the world's second largest

economy and experiencing a decade-long rise in disposable income, with a concurrent rise in entertainment outlets, the Chinese recording industry is still largely in its infancy. Until recently, most studios were at universities, state-run broadcast facilities or entertainment venues. The rise in demand for rock and pop artists made it clear that a new standard was needed.

"Over the past ten years a number of major artists have developed tremendously loyal followings here," says studio owner and Golden Melody Award-winning recording engineer Li You. "China's appreciation of recorded music is enjoying phenomenal growth. As our discretionary income increases, and as talented new artists create music that appeals to large numbers of fans, this time in our history appears ideal to establish a recording studio and record label to meet this demand."

So about four years ago, Li You teamed up with China's top drummer and record producer Wu Yongheng, aka "Bei Bei," and leading pro

audio executive Lizzy Zhou to develop plans for a high-end studio and companion label, with an emphasis on pop and rock. Other partners include recording engineer/studio manager Li Yang, and Mills Xu, a consultant with a background in telcom, sales and pro audio distribution who now seems to simultaneously serve the role of marketing, business consultant and promotion. It was Xu who first contacted *Mix*; he also served as spokesman for the group for the purposes of this article.

With no real references in the country to draw from, and with no competitors on the level that they wanted to attain, the group began their research by looking at the great studios of the U.S. and Europe. Yes, the right package of vintage and modern gear would be important, they all believed, but to really stand out and to produce the type of sound they envisioned, they had to start with the studio itself—the walls, ceilings and floors. Primary money and time would be spent on a professional acoustic design.



A front to back look at Control Room A, featuring an API 1608 console and Quested and Barefoot monitoring, with side glass into the live room.

“We spent almost a whole year investigating the pro audio market and asked for advice and recommendations from lots of pro engineers, musicians and studio owner friends,” Xu explains. “We contacted the owner of Blackbird Studios, the owners of Ocean Way Studio, Sunset Studios, as well as information from Capitol records and Abbey Road. We did many, many hours of research from the internet, evaluating the quality of designs.

“And definitely Electric Lady Studio—the Jimi Hendrix legacy was a factor,” he adds. “The original three partners all loved Jimi’s music. Jimi is widely regarded as one of the most influential electric guitarists in the history of popular music and one of the most celebrated musicians of the 20th century; his personal recording studio is recognized as a holy grail of music production place no matter where you come from! As we researched Electric Lady, we became aware of John Storyk and WSDG, and then gradually more aware the capability of the company and its reputation. And now we’re also extremely happy to end up as a very close friend rather than just a client.”



The 55TEC logo greeting artists in the lobby.

THE STUDIO DESIGN

The Walters-Storyk Design Group is a worldwide operation, and 55TEC Studios became something of a pet project in-house, drawing resources from around the globe.

WSDG partner/project manager Joshua Morris coordinated the project; WSDG partner/director of design Renato Cipriano traveled from Brazil to perform the final room tuning; and WSDG partner/director of business development Sergio Molho was there from the drawing of the initial plans to opening night, and still visiting two years later.

“In my 30-plus years in the studio design field, I have worked in and on hundreds of studios, and 55TEC is one of the most outstanding facilities I have ever encountered,” Molho says. “For a studio that is barely two years old to have produced over two dozen number one hit records is an incredible accomplishment. They are the ‘Motown of China.’”

Located at in No. 55 (hence, the name), East 3rd Ring Road in Beijing, in the basement of a residential building, the 5,000-square-foot 55TEC complex houses the record label, business offices, a lobby, a lounge and, of course, the two studios.

Control Room A is 430 square feet and houses a prized 32-channel API 1608 analog console

that goes with Quested Q412D, QSB118 and Barefoot MM35 speakers, Burl B80 Mothership, Pro Tools HDX and a host of outboard gear housed in a custom-built producer's desk.

Fabricated with extensive perforated wood and slotted metal wall and ceiling paneling, and highlighted by a custom rear wall diffuser, the control room includes a striking, glass-framed image of a vintage Teletronix compressor/limiter tuning knob positioned on the wall to the left of the console, to balance the 7- by 6-foot soundproof window into the 500 square-foot live room.

"Originally we were aiming for a vintage Neve 8014 console, one that had been taken really good care of and been upgraded with automation faders by a famous engineer," Xu says. "But we had



The long view of the Studio A live room, with the window into the control room on the left. Inset: Set up for standup bass in the studio.



Control Room B.



The large Control Room B iso booth, a comfortable space for voice or instruments.

concerns on the reliability over the long

hours we were planning on working day by day—the maintenance cost and the service. So we sought advice from good friends abroad, like Niko Bolas and Ryan McGuire, as well as Dan Zimbleman and Larry Droppa from API. We seriously considered a 32-channel Legacy AXS in 2016, right before they had been announced, and then we ended up going with a 32-channel 1608, as our budget wasn't unlimited, and we had already planned on pursuing the best acoustic design. For modern recording, API was the right choice, and it may be the only choice left for us in the end."

Studio B, at 230 square feet, serves primarily as a mastering/post suite (many 55TEC projects are tracked, mixed and mastered all-in), with companion 150-square-foot iso booth. It features an Apogee Symphony 64, Grace Design M905, Meyer Sound HD-1 and B&W Nautilus 801 monitors, and Jeff Rowland amplifier. No console, though one can be rented easily if the project requires.

"Producers or musicians/artists will often do the composing and arrangements in a project studio or their own home studio, which they'll use to make demos by themselves," Xu says. "And then they take it here to us, and talk with us about the song or the music from their understanding. Then we will help them record, mix and master it, and then they submit the work to record companies or media companies."

Many of the top artists in China have passed through 55TEC Studios in the first two years, many of them drawn through connections



The playful and relaxing 55TEC artist/producer lounge.

with Li You and his years playing guitar and engineering/mixing with Cui Jian—known as “The Father of Chinese Rock”—and his band. Bruce Liang, the first winner of *The Voice of China*, recorded his entire new album at 55TEC. Other top artists and producers to work there include Li Yuchun, Karen Mok, Lay

Zhang Yixing, Wang Feng, Faye Wong, Lee Shih Shiong, Lee Wei Shiong, Zhang Yadong and Chen Weilun. One of the 55TEC team’s favorite recent projects was a big new Jackie Chan song, complete with philharmonic orchestra.

“The goal from the beginning was to become the production center of Chinese music,” Xu

says. “But we believe it will draw influences from the entire Asia-Pacific area, including Japan and Korea. China has become the second largest economy in the world, and its cultural productions would naturally radiate globally. For example, Alex Al, Steve Jordan and Michael Beardon just left two weeks ago after they worked here with Chinese artists for 16 days. So, we have a small dream in the beginning to make the number one recording studio in China, and then to spread our Chinese culture throughout the Asia-Pacific region, and gradually to the world. Like the old saying goes, ‘music without borders.’”

“Beijing is clearly one of the world’s most vibrant and forward-thinking cities,” says WSDG’s Molho in summation. “And the music scene here has developed an extraordinarily talented new generation of artists, producers and engineers. They are telling Chinese stories with Chinese music, and helping to establish China’s contemporary music as an invaluable factor of the international culture scene. I look forward to seeing many global hits by Chinese artists in the future.” ■