

OVASEN *Music*

Ovasen originally opened its doors in 2002 as an audio for video house specializing in independent feature films. While its offices were extremely small, its location – on 14th Street in the heart of New York City’s downtown area – was unbeatable, lying right at the heart of New York’s independent film community. It didn’t take long before the studio’s Owners, Composer/Sound Designer Mark Garcia and Sound Designer/Re-Recording Mixer Eric Offin, built an extremely tight network of aspiring film producers looking to add a sonic sparkle to their visual creations.

From the beginning, Ovasen developed a reputation of delivering more for less. Their sensitivity to client needs, imaginative sound design, and cost-effective mixing capabilities earned loyalty from many folks within the independent film community. Within weeks, independent producers such as Adrienne Shelly (*Waitress*), Phil Morrison (*Junebug*), and Todd Solondz (*Palindromes*), even groups like *Yo La Tengo* and *The Pixies* counted themselves among Ovasen’s growing list of satisfied clients, and the word kept spreading.

WITH SUCCESS COMES GREAT CHALLENGES

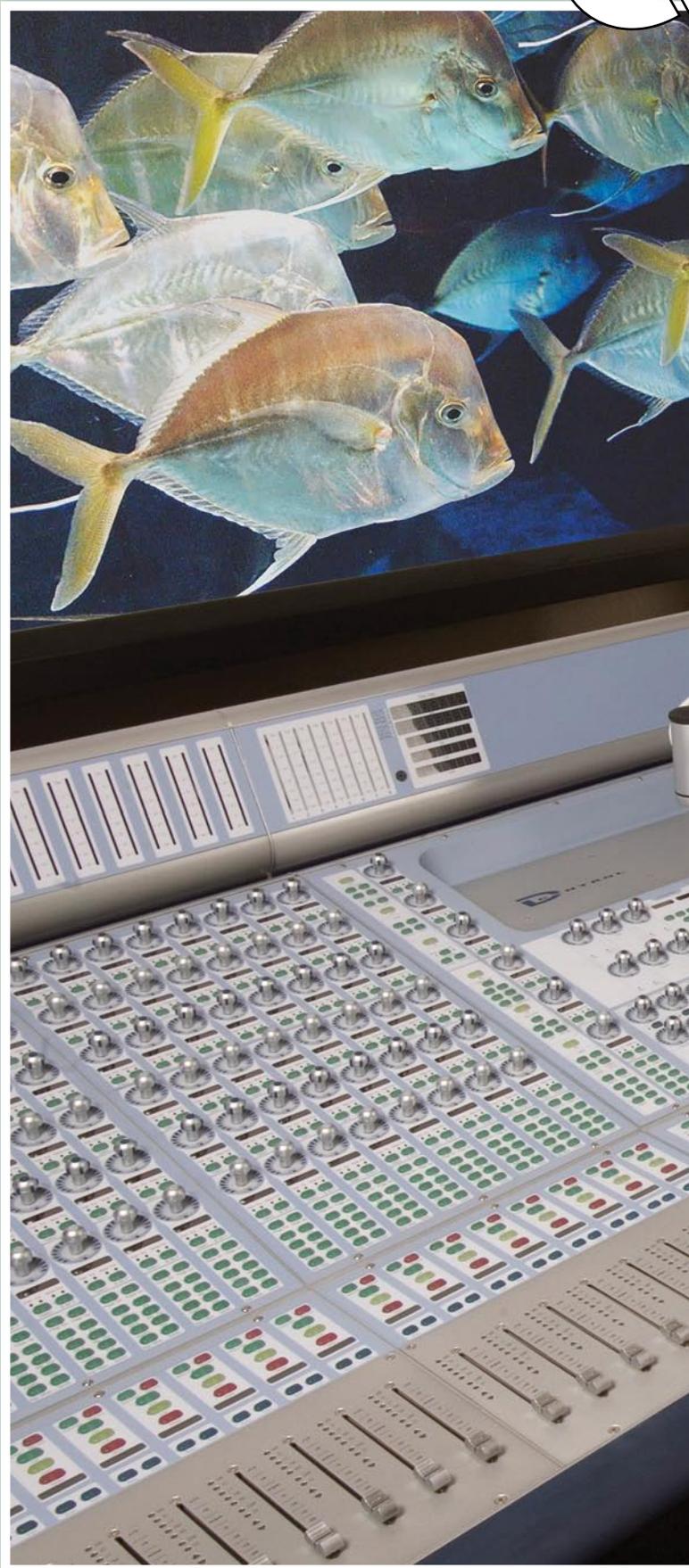
One of the biggest “problems” Garcia and Offin encountered early on in the life of their business was having a healthy amount of satisfied customers and repeat clients. What had started out as something just slightly beyond a home studio operation in a smallish fourth floor room of a non-descript Greenwich Village building suddenly had a chance to blossom as a real business. Garcia and Offin had developed the relationships and proven their abilities to help their clients differentiate themselves. However, they were at a point where their current facility would prove to be an impediment to their success unless they provided a substantial aesthetic and sonic upgrade.

Offin and Garcia knew they had to remain in New York City. While there was plenty of real estate available in mid-town Manhattan, there were also many competitors. Moving into that area of New York City, just 40 or 50 blocks north, would place them directly beside dozens of post facilities. Not only would Ovasen sacrifice an extremely charming location, but they would also risk losing the identity that they had worked so hard to build. Serendipitously, a modest-sized space opened up in their existing building – even though it wasn’t very large, the pair didn’t waste any time deciding. They took the space and called on New York design firm Walters-Storky Design Group (WSDG) to help bring them to the next level. “We’ve known about John Storky for years,” says Offin, “but he was also recommended by Dale Pro Audio. They’re very pleased with a showroom complex WSDG did for them a while ago.”

STRETCHING LIMITED RESOURCES TO THE MAX

John Storky, Co-Owner and Principle of WSDG, has worked on well over 2,000 facilities during his 40 years of experience in this business. He has created top-notch recording environments – large and small – all over the world, from San Francisco to Russia to Malaysia. In his travels as a studio architect, he has learned something about packing efficiency into a design: especially by having completed dozens of studios in New York City, where space is always a challenge given the local real estate market. For this project, which called for two fully-functional 5.1 control rooms, a Foley/iso booth, a central machine room and a host of client amenities in just 800 sq. ft., it would take all the experience he and his team could muster. The WSDG team was led by NY-based Project Manager Josh Morris.

“They needed better rooms and more rooms because they had a legitimate expansion issue,” says Storky. “They wanted to take Ovasen to the next level of acoustic professionalism, equipment professionalism, and client services



TANDEM *Sound*

• BY JEFF TOUZEAU



**ERIC OFFIN (STANDING) &
MARK GARCIA (SITTING).**

OVASEN Music & TANDEM Sound

professionalism, but wanted another floor in the same building because they loved the area." But the space WSDG had been given, two floors below Ovasen's original digs, was extremely tight. "You're not supposed to have two film mixing control rooms, an ADR/Foley room, a corridor, a kitchen, a bathroom, a CMR, and a place to hang your coat inside 800 sq. ft. — that's just really not enough space. But that's all that they gave us and we accepted the challenge." Storyk called on longtime contracting partner Chris Harmaty of Technical Structures to assist with construction.

THE BRIEF

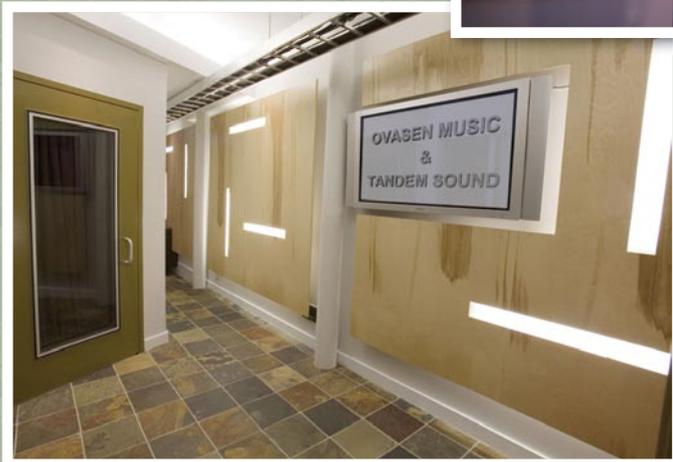
"What we really wanted at the end of the day was assembly line efficiency," recalls Garcia. "We had to move out of the mom and pop state of creating one piece at a time. Since the new facility has been completed, we have workers and editors, each focusing on a different aspect of the job."

One of the directives that Garcia and Offin had given WSDG was that they didn't want the facility, including the control rooms, to be visually overstimulating. Garcia and Offin were well aware that their clients were constantly bombarded by visual information every day — therefore they wanted a place that offered absence: a neutral, minimalist environment. Inside the control rooms, they didn't want a lot of equipment clutter either. This wasn't a problem, given the fact that WSDG had allowed for a central machine room where equipment could be racked and stored. Also, it wasn't a problem because powerful technology solutions often comes in smaller packages these days: "New gear is much more compact today," Storyk says. "The Digidesign Icon D Control consoles Eric and Mark selected are incredibly powerful and take up a fraction of the space of an SSL desk. Speakers, outboard equipment, even Sub Zero refrigerators are built to be much more efficient with space these days."

Judy Elliot Brown, Systems Design Engineer for WSDG elaborates: "They wanted a minimal amount of equipment in each room, so we gave them patch bays, preamplifiers, and possibly a playback device in each room: that was pretty much it except for the Icon controller. They didn't want to see anything else and wanted it completely away in a closet but completely addressable from the room if they needed it. All the computers, the digital audio router, amplifiers, and EQs were all located in the central machine room." Each of the control rooms has access to the machine room and can swap or interchange files as the need arises.

THE ROOMS

Once you pass the entryway, there is a very long hallway with three doors. Cabling along the ceiling of the hallway is efficiently packed in an "open ladder" configuration, making it a visible, aesthetic asset in combination with artfully placed pocket



Digidesign Icon D and a "neutral, minimalist environment."

lighting against the side walls. The two outside doors provide entry to the two identical 5.1 control rooms, roughly 250 sq. ft. each, which Garcia describes as "half octagons." The door in between provides access to a 120 sq. ft. ADR/Foley room, which looks into each control room.

Each control room features Digidesign Icon D Control consoles, Genelec surround monitoring, and Avalon preamps — which are used almost exclusively throughout the facility. Interestingly, there aren't so many "flavours" of preamps available: "In the world of film post production, you can get away with a lot less — just one or two units," explains Garcia. Each room also contains a giant flat screen video monitor.

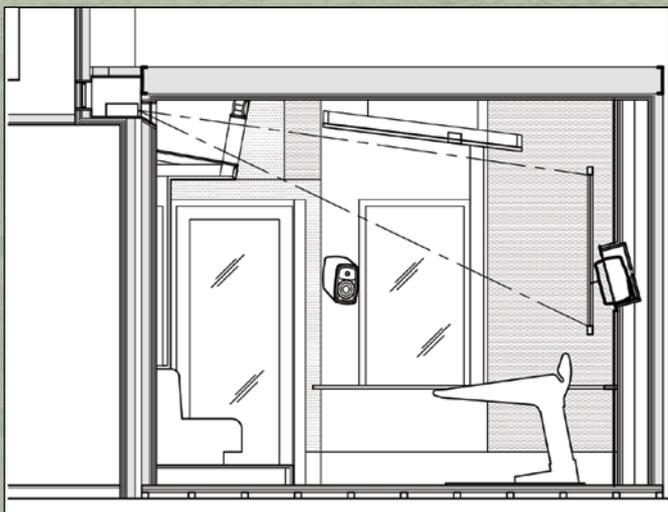
Of particular interest was the extensive use of glass in the rooms. Since the spaces were so small, WSDG employed as much glass as possible into the design — in doing so, extra care had to be taken with respect to the geometry of the rooms since glass creates reflections, and reflections typically create more acoustic problems. The obvious benefit of

having so much glass is that the post engineer(s) and talent have much better visibility of one another.

One of the most important aspects of post-production sound is Foley, in which artists create background sound effects. The iso booth has a fully functional Foley pit with concrete, marble, and wood surfaces so designers can create sounds to suit their individual taste. It also functions as an ADR booth and loop group, an effect in films where indecipherable background talking is audible to create atmosphere. Garcia notes that the iso booth fits about five people comfortably and that he has recorded everything from commercials to strings inside.

The central machine room, which is located directly off of the north control room, contains the Pro Tools HD rig with two sets of 48 audio channels. The

Hallway leading to two 5.1 control rooms and ADR/Foley rooms.



Layout of control room. Go to www.professional-sound.com for complete floor plan details.

machine room is completely networked and accessible so all three rooms work in harmony.

TACKLING MONITORING CHALLENGES FOR DIFFERENT LISTENING POSITIONS

Inside each of the control rooms, one of the very important technical requirements was to have accurate monitoring from the rear couch listening position. From this couch, directors, producers, and other influencers would be making decisions on audio content and sonics and there was no room for compromise. This presented a special acoustic challenge, given the extremely limited physical space available. John Storyk describes the extent of the problem, considering the constant flow of low frequency information that was being generated: "They are dealing with film, which means they are dealing with the absolute fullest range of frequencies required in the pro audio world. In 5.1 surround, the ".1" by definition is a 10th of an octave – it goes all the way down to 5 Hz."

"Unfortunately, if you look at the plan, there was simply no room for rear wall trapping. The couch was literally right up against the room boundary, which had to be stiff because the rooms needed to be isolated. There was no way, without some kind of electronic assistance, to get listeners in that seating area to have a near duplicate sensation that the mix position would have. It was just impossible – that's physics."

ENTER A NEW IDEA: BAG END

Since WSDG was not able to deploy any physical solutions to the problem, they had to find an alternative. Bag End, a well-known loudspeaker designer, debuted its electronic, tunable bass trap, called the eTrap, at the AES convention in San Francisco last year. WSDG, who had been aware that this product was under development for some time, worked with Bag End President Jim Wischmeyer to get a prototype for testing in a controlled environment. "The eTrap is essentially a speaker and a microphone that is picking up modes through the microphone and re-installing them out of phase with phase changes based on certain positioning," Storyk explains.

"Based on our testing and positioning we were able to determine that two of these devices per room would do the job," he continues. "We were limited as to where we could put them given the dimensions of the room – we ended using them in the front corners." Storyk says that by using the eTrap, WSDG was able to get an 8-10db change in the rear listening position, allowing listeners in that area to hear what the mix position was hearing, particularly at the low end. "This was the first time WSDG used a solution like this and it was very successful. In fact, we are now installing them in a second room in a few weeks in another studio based in Ocean City, NJ which has a similar acoustic problem." Dirk Noy, WSDG's Acoustic Engineer based in Basel, Switzerland, tuned the devices for each room.

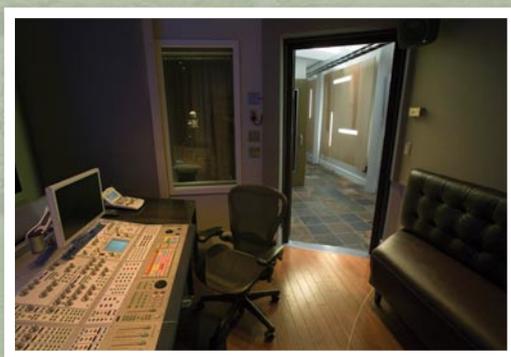
CLIENT AMENITIES: NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT

While they don't make much of a difference when it comes to the sonics, client amenities were no less important to Garcia and Offin. Since they originally came

from a relatively crowded fourth floor with which they share with other production companies, it was very important for the post-production team to integrate no-holds-barred client amenities – such as a "five star" bathroom and a full kitchen complete with a deck. The idea was to make clients feel as comfortable as they would be at home.

Garcia is particularly keen on the bathroom: "We over compensated on the bathroom, which is very personal and like your own personal palace. Oddly enough, its one of our biggest selling points – its very much like a five star restaurant bathroom with marble to the ceiling. All in all, the client amenities have given Ovasen a very professional face. "These kinds of things are important for directors. Filmmakers like to have control over their environment; the 'boutique' feeling that Ovasen has affords them that to a large degree. At a larger facility, a big director can be just a number. When clients come here they pretty much have the carte blanche."

The kitchen was no exception to the overall efficiency of the design – it is compact and functional. One way WSDG made the kitchen seem larger was by creating a small deck off a large window, adorned by various plants and vines. Other examples of the compact functionality included the electric panel, which was artfully hidden behind acoustic treatment. Since there was no space for a mechanical room, the air conditioning was tucked up over a ceiling, utilizing every possible inch.



Control room showing rear couch position.

AN ENVIRONMENT SUITED TO THEIR WORKING METHODS

Ovasen's design lends itself to the natural workflow of Offin and Garcia, who balance each other's work: one may be mixing effects and dialog while the other is tracking a voice over or doing ADR. With the new facility, Offin and Garcia are remaining true to the original philosophy they had on the fourth floor of staying efficient. Offin's primary technical background is in mixing films while Garcia has had success composing for TV commercials and mixing films as well.

ADDING IT ALL UP

"The amount of power that is packed into this place is amazing," concludes Garcia. "It is a very efficient use of space and WSDG maximized every inch. They also took care of difficult aspects like building codes and zoning: it's not easy to build in New York City. In the end, it came out exactly how we wanted it." Ovasen is now in the process of expanding its footprint on the fourth floor, where it will be integrating advanced picture edit capabilities as well as handling sound via another Digidesign Icon D-Control.

The most important accolades come from clients, and Garcia says that the response has been spectacular: "People really respond to the place really well – they love it. They tell friends who become future clients about the whole package. They appreciate not just the quality of work and the efficiency, but also the space, the atmosphere." When you walk inside Ovasen, it doesn't seem like you are in an 800 sq. ft. facility – but simply put, the plan doesn't lie."

Ovasen Music and Tandem Sound are located at 104 W., 14th St., New York, NY 10011. ■



Jeff Touzeau is a New York-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Professional Sound. His recent book, *Making Tracks: Unique Recording Studio Environments* is available at www.studioenvironments.com.