

February 2016
Vol.XXVII No.1

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GRAEME JUDD IN THE VOICEOVER BOOTH OF ZONELESS STUDIO

The spectrum of spaces that can reasonably be defined as studios is as wide as it's ever been. On one end are the detached garages and cramped basements where engineers call their home and workplace one in the same.

At the other are the large-scale studios built from the ground up as professional and pristine acoustic environments, often with heavy consideration given to décor and overall aesthetic.

Walters-Storyk Design Group (WSDG) has built a global reputation specializing in the design of the latter type of facility. With over 3,500 studio designs to its credit, WSDG maintains offices in major cities around the world and has spawned such revered spaces as Jimi Hendrix's Electric Lady Studios in New York City to more recent achievements like NYC's Jungle City Studios, Miami's Dream Asylum, and private recording spaces for the likes of Jay Z, Bruce Springsteen, and Alicia Keys.

Thanks to some of WSDG's recent work, Calgary-based voiceover artist and musician Graeme Judd's new Zoneless Voiceover Studio gives him the best of both ends of the recording studio dichotomy. Zoneless is a purpose-built recording space in the basement of Judd's new Calgary residence that lets him produce a top-quality product for his major clients – CBS, E!, and Lifetime among them – just steps from where he and his family share their meals and relax in front of the TV.

Ock Working Smarter At Zoneless Voiceover Studio



By Andrew King

PHOTOS BY NATHAN ELSON
PHOTOGRAPHY.

FINDING HIS VOICE

Judd has amassed an impressive array of voiceover credits over the years, especially considering his relative youth. Having started his vocal career in his teens as a member of Canadian boy band Off Limitz, Judd was given an early opportunity to work in some of the most renowned studios around the world, including the iconic Capitol Studios in L.A., and collaborate with top industry talent like Canadian music mogul David Foster. As he explains, "I've held onto a love of music production and being in those environments. That's really my happy place. I've loved

being in recording studios even before I knew about the acoustic properties and isolation and all of those things."

When Off Limitz disbanded, Judd decided to indulge his interest in audio and pursued a college education in broadcasting. Following that, he learned the trade of audio engineering at one of Calgary's top recording and post studios, The Forge Audio Company. It was there that, with some coaxing from local commercial producers and voiceover clients, he decided to get behind a mic and give voiceovers a try.

In the ensuing few years, his collection of credits swelled remarkably quickly. He became the brand voice of Nickelodeon just a few weeks after becoming a client of a top New York talent agency. Now working with a team of agents and managers in both NYC and LA, Judd can be heard doing promos for major U.S. networks like CBS, E!, Lifetime, MTV, and a slew of others. He's also the voice of CTV, the highest-rated Canadian network, and has lent his talents to commercials for national brands like Molson and Proactiv. Lately, he's taken on a still-growing number of feature film trailers.

"These are purpose-built facilities," Judd explains about the various studio environments in which he's been working over the years. "As I morphed more into the voiceover stuff, which was a side thing for a long time, especially for the type of work I do – TV promos and such, where the turnaround is almost instant – it became apparent that, in the new production regime, I didn't have time to travel to and from studios."

Largely a product of tightening production budgets, Judd explains that the evolving paradigm for voiceover and post work often meant he'd get called at 9 or 10 p.m. to do as little as

five minutes of work – "So I realized I needed to be closer to home."

Judd set up a freestanding vocal booth in his previous residence and started recording himself with a basic set-up. "It did the trick," he says, "but it wasn't perfect in terms of isolation." While his deliverables were up to the standards of his major clients, his two-bedroom condo wasn't invulnerable to a barking dog or nearby lawnmower.

"It sounded fine in the right circumstances," he explains, "but with the nature of my work, I do live sessions with people via ISDN or phone patch where someone is listening in and directing me over various technologies, so I can't wait until it's quiet enough to record."

Judd told himself that if he ever had the opportunity, he'd build a home from the ground-up in order to integrate a custom recording space that would cater to his unique and specific set of needs. In 2013, that opportunity presented itself. "I figured I'm going to spend the money and do it properly, so I want to be advised by the right people." That's what informed his initial call to WSDG.

ZONELESS

"Years of following pro audio and broadcast trade publication profiles on Walters-Storyk Design Group projects had fixed WSDG on my radar," Judd explains. "This investment was a critical decision, and WSDG was the first – and last – point on my design firm search."

After a call with the firm's co-founder and namesake, John Storyk, Judd says he realized the relatively humble size of his project wasn't as relevant as its acoustic and design challenges. "I was also pleased to learn that my budget was sufficient to make this happen," he shares.

Matthew Ballos was ap-

pointed as WSDG's project manager for Zoneless. As he explains, "The prospect of fitting a control room, a comfortable client area, and a compact voiceover booth within a 200 sq. ft. space was tempting – particularly as small project studios are trending right now," he says, noting that the firm had recently created a recording, mixing, teaching, and broadcast studio inside a 140 sq. ft. Airstream trailer. "It's amazing how much gear and workspace you can fit into this compact of an environment."

WSDG was engaged before ground was broken for the Judds' new home. Ballos says that his client offered a very clear idea of what he wanted and needed for the space and, just as importantly, what he didn't. "That's extremely helpful for me," Ballos says. "Because he'd been working in his own space before, he knew to take the HVAC into consideration – to provide enough cooling so he's comfortable while recording."

Zoneless is comprised of a control room with a critical listening/client area on an elevated platform at the rear and an isolated voiceover booth to the left of the custom-made control room desk.

Both Judd and Ballos report that their collaborations were virtually seamless despite the former being in Calgary and the latter based at WSDG's NYC office. "Communications were very smooth," Ballos attests. "I went through a lot of photos and could walk around the site via videoconference. It's about as close as you could possibly be, considering the distance."

Kurt Westergard of Harmony Home Projects was contracted to oversee the studio build as WSDG's work came to being, while the house was built by Stephens Fine Homes. Work began in the fall of 2013 and was completed by the same time the following year, with the studio

Ballos explains that the floor beneath the studio was lowered an additional two feet compared to the rest of the basement to provide extra ceiling height and enhance the sense of spaciousness. The studio is fully isolated from the structure of the home, sitting on a floating concrete slab with the walls and ceiling fitted with isolation clips and covered with layers of gypsum board, essentially sandwiching the plywood to complete the room-within-a-room isolation.

As for the control room, Ballos says that whether it's an entire fourth floor in a Manhattan high rise or the basement of someone's residence, WSDG's approach is very similar. "We modeled the room, and then based off of the dimensions, we do a low frequency analysis before it's built to predict how the room will react with these dimensions, these materials, and this set of speakers at this volume."

The acoustic treatments are specifically based on those calculations. The side and rear control room walls feature custom perforated wood membrane absorbers while acoustic cloud and lighting fixtures were installed overhead in both the control room and voiceover booth. A two-level platform in the critical listening area at the back of the control room doubles as a low frequency absorber while the rear wall side diffusers also mask some mechanical ductwork and wiring cable trays.

"Because there was no space for a separate machine room, we fitted a tremendous amount of gear within ventilated sound-proof racks in the custom control room desk," Ballos says, adding: "I collaborated with the millwork firm on the equipment and layout requirements, and we ended up with a very impressive solution."

Similarly in-depth considerations were necessary for the HVAC system and ductwork. "You have to get really creative," Ballos says about working in such an environment, where the idea is to maximize the use of available space. "We have ductwork coming into the iso booth from

below the staircase that goes back from the basement to the first floor, and then we also have ductwork coming in the back wall of the control side, coming down the wall outside of the acoustic boundary that then pokes through the platform in the back half of the room."

The ducts are oversized in order to keep the airspeed below 250 ft. per minute at the grille face despite the entire system being in the ballpark of 500 ft. per minute. The ducts are also lined with an acoustic absorption material – "so there's quite a bit of special care taken," Ballos attests.

HOME WORK

Several design ideas for Judd's new space were informed by his experiences in his previous space – first and foremost, the location of the voiceover booth directly to the left of the control room desk.

"One of the things that frustrated me about my previous set-up was that I had no control from within the booth," he explains. "Engineering on the fly for myself, delivering files for broadcast over FTP and things, it's challenging when you're the talent and want to focus on the performance, but also have to make sure your machine is running properly through the whole take."

Previously, he'd have to hit record on his system, run into the

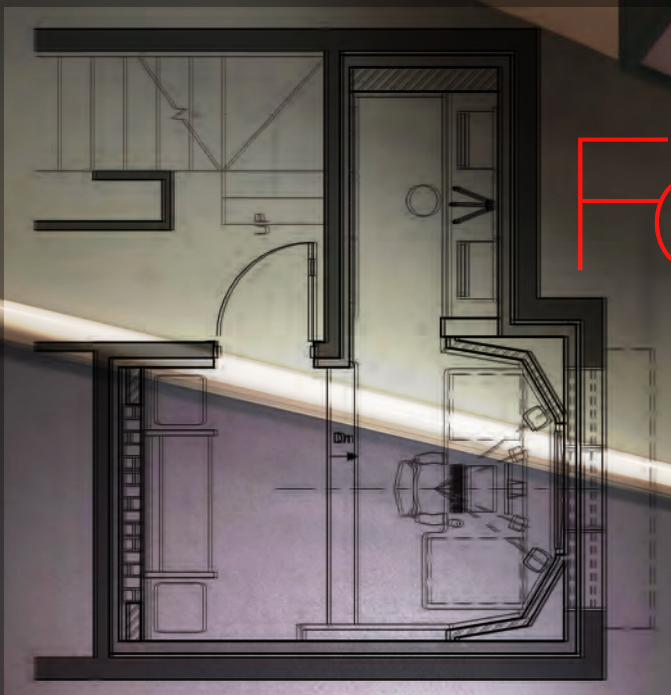
booth to record, and "keep fingers crossed" that everything worked properly. Now, the racks in the booth enable him to easily see his levels and make adjustments as needed via a satellite keyboard and mouse that give him control over any parameters he needs from right in front of the mic. He can do on-the-fly editing in the booth without having to leave the microphone. "And the performance gets better, because you're less worried about the other side; the technical side becomes more automated and takes a back seat to the performance, whereas before, I had to wear both hats at the same time."

The majority of the equipment occupying the new studio made the move with Judd from his previous space. His rig is based around Avid's Pro Tools platform and accompanying hardware.

As he explains, his collection might be considered "overkill" for voiceover work, but Judd had other intentions for his space. "Of course, I have a music background and I wanted to be able to accommodate a friend with an acoustic guitar who might want to lay down a demo," he shares, noting that the control room was designed with the intention of comfortably hosting a few musicians.

Specifically pointing to pieces like his two-channel

Forget



The Clock

CLIENT/CRITICAL LISTENING AREA
IN CONTROL ROOM

Chandler TG2 and pair of Telefunken ELA M 260 small-diaphragm tube condenser mics, he says a lot of his acquisitions are more for music than his voice work – and he isn't done collecting yet. "Now I have racks," he says excitedly, "and I want to fill them."

Judd says that since he's been working out of Zoneless, his delivery speed has vastly improved and he's subsequently seen his business grow over the past year. He's quick to credit Ballos and WSDG for helping him do so. "I was blown away that I even got them on the phone," Judd says candidly. "That was the coolest thing to me – just knowing they're accessible and willing to take on a project as small as mine, even though they're known for massive multi-million dollar facilities. I never felt that my project was valued any less."

He says it's long been a dream to work in a Walters-Storyk-designed studio, and now he has one of his own – one that he proudly says sounds as good as any studio he's ever been in. ■



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IN THE POCKET

DAW & CONTROL

Avid HD OMNI
Pro Tools HD Native PCIe
Avid Artist Mix
Mac Pro
Samsung Displays

OUTBOARD

Avalon Vt-737sp (2)
Rupert Neve Designs Portico II
BAE 1073
Retro Instruments 176
Chandler Limited TG2
Chandler Limited Zener Limiter
Telos Zephyr Xstream (ISDN)
Telos Z/IP One (IP)

MONITORING

SPL MTC 2381
Genelec 8030 (pair)
Genelec 7050 (sub)
Genelec 6010 (pair)
Behritone (mono)
SPL Auditor (Headphone Amp)

MICROPHONES

AKG C214
Neumann M 149 Tube
Neumann TLM 102
Neumann U 87 Ai
Sennheiser MKH-416
Telefunken ELA M 260 (2)

PLUG-INS

Antares
Avid
FabFilter
iZotope
Softube
Source-Connect
UAD
Waves

STUDIO WIRING

Mogami Cables

