

IN THE VAULT

NEVILLE ISLAND STUDIO IS THINKING BIG WITH GRAMMY-WINNING PRODUCER AND VINTAGE NEVE CONSOLE

By Scott Mervis
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When Jimmy Hoyson and Bob McCutcheon gaze upon the big glowing console that now dominates the room at The Vault Recording Studio, it's a look of love.

What is it about a vintage Neve 8058?

"Neves are known to be warm, punchy, big, not aggressive and nasty in the high mid-range — just a big fat sound. It's hard to put it into words sometimes," says Mr. Hoyson.

As Pro Audio Europe describes it, "think Fleetwood Mac and most of the classic UK recordings of the 1970s."

The Neve can also be described as the piece of equipment that has moved the six-time Grammy-winning producer/engineer to set up shop back here in his hometown.

Mr. Hoyson, a Green Tree native and University of Pittsburgh graduate, launched his career in LA in 1986 at Village Recorders before moving to the legendary Capitol Studios and eventually breaking out on his own. The list of artists he's worked with includes Michael Jackson, Green Day, Iggy Pop, B.B. King and Ben Harper. Over the past few years, he's been spending time here caring for his mom while using Pittsburgh as a base for recording projects in other cities.

His common thread, he says, is "I specifically book studios in search of vintage Neves." They can usually be found in music hubs like LA, New York, Nashville and Muscle Shoals, Ala.

Now there's a vintage Neve here, one with an impressive history. It originated at Ocean Way Studios in Southern California, owned by engineer/producer Allen Sides, who recorded more than 500 albums by everyone from Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington to Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston.

It was then sold to Scott Litt, who produced the first six R.E.M. albums, along with working with Bob Dylan, Nirvana, The Replacements, Patti Smith, New Order, Liz Phair and many more.

It was installed last month at The Vault on Neville Island, where Mr. Hoyson has signed on as chief engineer.

He has partnered with the Franklin Park-based McCutcheon, who's had a business career with Price Waterhouse but is also a guitarist who produced local punk and metal bands back in the '80s in his garage studio. He completed The Vault two years ago in a small, tidy red-brick building on Grand Avenue that once housed a PNC Bank. There's still an actual vault in the basement (no money in it). One of his first moves was signing Chris Jamison, the finalist from "The Voice," to the associated label, Vault Records.

"I built this as a personal passion proj-



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Jimmy Hoyson, left, and Bob McCutcheon with the Neve 8058 at The Vault Recording Studio.

ect," Mr. McCutcheon says. "Up until now, I hadn't considered running this commercially to any big extent."

That changed earlier this year when he met Mr. Hoyson through mutual friend Hermie Granati, of the Granati Brothers. The seasoned producer began advising him on details like the installation of a piano booth and the best microphones to use.

"A couple months ago, I said, 'Bob, this is probably the best studio in Pittsburgh, but that's all it's going to be unless you have something special,'" Mr. Hoyson says. "I said, 'Now, if you had a vintage Neve ...,' and, luckily, he had seen the 'Sound City' documentary that Dave Grohl had done on the [LA] studio and the Neve console there and the history of it."

"The irony," Mr. McCutcheon says, "is that the 'Sound City' documentary [released in 2013] was actually the inspiration for me building the studio. I saw the movie on a trans-Atlantic flight. I pushed 'Documentary' and just picked a random movie, and I was entranced by it. It brought everything back to me that I always wanted to do."

With a bit of nudging, Mr. McCutcheon was sold on the idea, so Mr. Hoyson reached out to associates in LA and said, "Hey, keep an eye out for a Neve console."

"It was literally a week later," the producer says, "I get an email like, 'URGENT:

Financing fell through on a refurbished Neve 8058. It's available now.'"

"I had said, 'If we're going to do this, I need a little time,'" Mr. McCutcheon says laughing. "It was a week later."

This was in March, and they hit the road right away to visit Detroit's Vintage King Audio, which refurbishes recording equipment.

"When we first walked in there," Mr. McCutcheon says, "there was another 8058 that was not yet rebuilt, and that's the first thing we saw — and our hearts sunk."

"They said, 'No, this is yours over here,'" Mr. Hoyson says.

It was the beautiful, polished one that now resides in the studio. They did not disclose the price, but there was one listed on Reverb this year for \$304,000.

"Studio B at Capitol has a Neve 8068, so it just feels so right to me to be sitting in front of this after years of doing that," Mr. Hoyson says.

Incidentally, Rusted Root recorded its 1994 multiplatinum breakout album, "When I Woke," on a Neve 8058 with producer Bill Bottrell at his studio in Northern California.

The first act to break in The Vault's Neve is The Borstal Boys, a new Pittsburgh "supergroup" made up of seasoned guys who have played in Torn & Frayed, Rusted

Root (Patrick Norman) and the Houserockers. Vault Records has also signed singer-songwriter Jesse Denaro, and Mr. Hoyson is working on music for the local film "116 MacDougal," about the iconic Greenwich Village club The Gaslight Cafe.

"The whole idea behind this is about the Pittsburgh music scene," Mr. McCutcheon says. "We're all native, we all love the great musicians in this city, but we always felt like we were missing that sort of catalyst or that incubator, that community space. We have a label, we have the studio, we're talking about a recording school."

There is also a nonprofit, The Rhythm19 Fund, to work with kids and support music education in schools. It was established in memory of Mr. McCutcheon's son Ryan, who died last year in a car accident at 19.

In addition to working with Pittsburgh musicians, they feel confident that a refurbished Neve and Grammy-winning producer can attract national artists, including bands on the road, into the studio.

"Having Jimmy here takes us to a whole new level," Mr. McCutcheon says.

As for settling back here, thousands of miles from the California sun, the producer says, "I finally accepted that ... giving it a run here in Pittsburgh."

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