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RECORDING

The magazine for the recording musician

SOUND ADVICE FOR YOUR STUDIO

How To

- Build Out Your Room
- Control Noise
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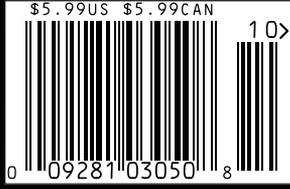


Inside Abbey Road

Tracking with Ace Engineer Mark Hornsby



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New Products Reviewed:

Alesis PalmTrack • Cakewalk V-Studio 20 • AKG Perception 820 Tube
Lexicon PCM Native Reverb Plug-In Bundle • Waldorf Largo
SM Pro Audio P-Control, DiDock, and CT-3 • Cockos REAPER
Acoustica Mixcraft 5 • Sonnox Oxford Transient Modulator and Inflator



A Basement Conversion The Borla/Mouse Basement Studio

*Can a walk-out basement become
a suitable recording environment?
Read on!*

— Interview by Angela Bender —

Janice Borla and Jack Mouse have a variety of musical credits to their names, including recording numerous jazz CDs; they are founders of a vocal jazz camp, and both are pioneers in jazz education, currently on the faculty at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. As a husband-and-wife team they designed a basement to function as a place for writing, rehearsing and teaching, and as it turned out it became the place where they recorded Janice's highly acclaimed CD *From Every Angle*.

When they purchased the home, which sits by a pond in Naperville, the "English-style" walk-out basement (a basement that is only partially below ground) was unfinished. While they planned to make it into a place for their work, the ability to record there was never on their minds. Little did they know...—AB

Let's start at the beginning. Tell us about the basement!

Jack Mouse: We loved the back entrance to the basement. It was just an unfinished basement, a cement floor, open beams, no walls, and an open basement stairway. We didn't have to knock anything down or redo anything. We started from scratch. We were looking for a space where we could work simultaneously.

By chance, Janice and I met designer Jessica Todd of Casa by Charleston in Naperville and had a quick meeting of the minds.



Did the designer understand what you wanted to achieve in the space?

Janice Borla: I drew plans of what I wanted to do, and was totally floored when we got hers, hers and mine were almost identical. We were on the same wavelength in her sense of colors, sense of materials, as well as design.



What structural work have you done and what special materials were needed to achieve this space?

JB: Nothing structurally, and not much by way of acoustics. The 9-foot ceiling here is unusual and helps a bunch. The large windows and glass doors were a matter of convenience and not closing everything up. We wanted things compartmentalized, but we like the feeling of open space. We said early on that we wanted to be able to work simultaneously, so the designer used materials that enabled Jack to close his door and practice his drums and I could practice here and teach here without really interfering.

JM: We weren't thinking about a recording studio. We have a cork floor in the drum room and bamboo floor in much of the rest of the basement to contain sound. Drywall is a reflective surface, where as this (tile ceiling) is an absorbing surface, so it does help. The windows are double-paned.

What made you decide that recording here would be a good idea?



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The Borla/Mouse Basement Studio



JM: Even when it was finished we still thought we'd need studio space elsewhere to go record. Then John Larson, a recording engineer and friend of ours, came and checked all the corners and hummed and said, "If you don't record here, you're nuts." We've been in and out of recording studios our whole lives, so we had a subliminal thing that said "Let's make it look like a recording studio." But I told him we hadn't built it as a recording studio. He said, "Good. You'd have probably screwed it up."

So musicians from Dallas to Kansas City gathered at our home over four days, lived in the five bedrooms and played on Janice's jazz album *From Every Angle* while John recorded them!

Engineer John Larson on the sessions for *From Every Angle*

What equipment did you bring to the sessions?

John Larson: I brought a couple of ProTools HD boxes, with Mytek A-to-D converters and TRUE Systems Precision 8 mic pre-amps. The piano was in the main room, as were the guitarist and trumpet player. I placed Lucite panels around the piano, about 2' x 5' and hinged together, to serve two purposes: to reduce the bleed into the piano, and to redirect the piano's sound back into the piano mics.

I also had tube traps in the corners, and more tube traps near Janice, who was standing near a window in the same room where I was recording. I monitored and mixed on headphones while they were playing, and I listened back on Genelec 1030s. I set up several headphone mixes for everybody, using Pro Tools buses.

Jack with his drums was in a separate space he had built as a rehearsal space, not as high-ceilinged as I would have wished, but it has an angled door so it is workable.

What mics did you use?

The drums were miked with a spaced pair of Shure KSM32s for overheads and toms, an AKG D-112 on kick, and a DPA 4007 on snare. The bass was miked with a Lawson L-47, piano with DPA 4003s, horn and guitar with beyerdynamic ribbons, and Janice with a Lawson L-251.

How would you rate the room on a scale from 1 (unusable) to 10 (perfect)?

Jack and Janet's basement was not acoustically perfect by any means, but it is an extremely pleasant space with lots of natural light and just felt good. We looked out over a lake, watching swans, it was very relaxing. So acoustically I'd give it a seven, but for ambiance a ten!



JB: The ambiance of the room itself is a nice mixture. It's not too dead. It's not too live. This was the smoothest album we've ever done. It was so relaxed.

JM: If you record in a studio you go into the city, get set up and you're tired. You feel like you've already done one job... and you're beat up by the time you play. It nails your creative process.

Everyone loves the sound of their own instrument down here. About an hour into the session I walked into the booth and asked, "How's it going?" John said, "We're getting sounds that are as good or better than what we were getting in my studio in the city." He was glad that there weren't a lot of parallel walls. There was so much luck involved.

What adjustments had to be made to record in your basement? And what acoustic and visual isolation is provided in the room, especially when recording?

JB: John set up his control board in the office and positioned me right in front of the window with my microphone. I was in the same space as he was and then he ran cables under the door to all the microphones and Jack had his own cable with the door closed to the drum room. John suggested we have a Lucite three-panel. It surrounded the piano. The bass was in the corner. We had some old sound panels and built him a cubbyhole. They were five feet tall so he could see above them. And then John put the guitar and trumpet in the room together and they were sitting side by side but he had the guitar amp behind the stairs, which enabled him to separate guitar fully from trumpet. There were four people (in one room) but they were all separated somehow. And we were all connected by earphones. Instrumentalists are very interested in sight lines when recording, so they can see one another. Where as in a lot of other music they may never meet

each other, for jazz music it is really important that everyone plays at the same time and communicates with one another. The visual cues and communication is very important.

How do you use the space on a daily basis?

JM: We both practice daily. Janice uses it to write music. I use it to write—I'm finishing a book. We use it for video presentations. Janice had a mini-vocal jazz retreat here. If we're rehearsing for a tour, we can rehearse here before we go.

What does the future hold for the use of the space?

JM: This is a great place to do video clinics from. Eventually we want to be able to do some educational videos. It's going to be more of a multimedia space than we had planned on—a little more income generating than we thought it was going to be.

JB: And all that wasn't even on the horizon when we first did this! ☺

Hear some of their music and find out more about Janice Borla and Jack Mouse at www.janiceborla.com and www.jackmouse.com. Contact John Larson via larson@recordingmag.com.

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