

LEARNING IN THE GASWORKS

Queensland University of Technology's new recording facility is dedicated to teaching more than just ProTools

QUT music production student Brianna Campbell during Big Jam.

By **STEPHEN BRUEL**

A Guinness World Record attempt in non-stop recording and performance was recently undertaken at the Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) new Brisbane-based recording studio QUT Gasworks Studio (QUT is still waiting for official confirmation from Guinness). Located in Newstead near an old gasworks tower, the studio hosted the QUT Big Jam, which involved a roster of 900 musicians improvising across a number of genres, performing and recording non-stop for 150 hours. With such a unique and creative launch and led by a highly respected international team of academics/music producers and musicians (including one mentored by Beatles' producer George Martin), the new studio is an impressive set up featuring both analogue and digital recording options that closely models 'real world' practice.

Gasworks Studio was originally known as Jumpstart Productions, a music production and film & television post facility. QUT acquired the studio in early 2009 to serve as the home of the Independent Music Project (IMP), a research and development arm of QUT's Creative Industries department, and was conceived and founded by Professors of Music at QUT Andy Arthurs and Julian Knowles, and Professor of Media and Communication Phil Graham. The studio is central to the A & R Lab, the part of the IMP that focuses on developing artists



and creativity among those artists.

Arthurs' background reads like a who's who of the English contemporary music scene. After becoming one of the first people in the UK to graduate with a Bachelor of Music with Honours (Tonmeister) in recording back in the early 1970s, Arthurs began a four-year stint at AIR London studios, where George Martin mentored him leading Arthurs to produce and engineer artists and bands including Paul McCartney, Bryan Ferry, Marc Bolan, Harry Nilsson, Cat Stevens, ELO, Tod Rungren, and Peter Sellers.

"History has shown that if you put creative people with creative people with more creative people sparks will fly," said Arthurs. "We are still developing the site to include more studios and rooms where creative people can collaborate. We hope all these sparks at the QUT Gasworks are going to mean some big explosions of talent and music."

Knowles has been involved in the independent music scene in Australia and the UK since the mid 1980s having played with and produced records for a number of bands and labels including Even As We Speak. The band had three top 10 hits in the UK charts and was one of five

Australian bands to be invited to record sessions for legendary Radio 1 DJ John Peel. Graham has a 20-year background as a professional musician and composer in Australia

"We are interested in supporting original music and connecting with audiences in the 'new' music industry environment," said Knowles. "I have just led the development of a new Bachelor of Music degree that focuses on the nurturing of new original talent. Students will connect with other creative people under expert development mentorship. The students get the kind of critical perspectives on music that you would expect from a university level course."

To complement the new course with a 'real world' teaching environment, Knowles and Graham designed the studio around a model able to undertake teaching, research and commercial activity at the same time while maintaining meaningful relationships with one another. And that includes providing state of the art equipment for students also.

"I have lost count of the number of these 'teaching' studios built around a control surface, ProTools and minimal hardware/outboard – all of which ignore the lessons learned from the history of



Andy Arthurs.



Julian Knowles.

music production and which simply don't model the way in which people approach serious music production in 2009," said Knowles. "Many of the studios look to me like overblown project studios, rather than the kind of studio that a professional might want to use."

Studio A has AMEK Media 5.1 console with a modified backplane to lower the noise floor and another modification to allow full equalisation to be applied to a flipped input at the direct output stage of a channel. It has a two-inch 24-track tape machine running from the buss outputs of the console so they can track to tape and take advantage of reactive analogue media. They then run 32 inputs and outputs into a ProTools HD3 system (with Aurora Lynx interfaces) from the direct outputs of the console so they can dump tracks to and from tape or select an analogue or digital recording medium with minimal patching. The AMEK console also has VCA automation and channel snapshot facilities if needed, full 7.1 monitoring capability and Rupert Neve designed pre-amplifiers and equalisers. For Studio B, QUT recently purchased a fully reconditioned 32 channel 24 buss MCI 600 series classic console complete with wood panelled sides.

"As far as possible, we retain traditional media approaches along with the new," said Knowles. "We have valve equipment alongside solid state equipment at all points along the signal chain from microphone to tape/disk so that a maximum range of colours and qualities is available. The signal path can be used to really shape the sound from the source and each user of the studio can define how they want to work and not have the studio dictate that back to them."

The studio has a comprehensive set of microphone preamplifiers covering both solid state and valve paths. Some highlights include Chandler Germanium 500s, Abbey Road TG2s, eight channels of AMS Neve 4081s, six channels of Vintech X73s (Neve 1073 preamp/eq copies) and A-Designs P1 Quad Eight copies. Additionally, they have a whole suite of Joe Malone's (Brisbane audio designer) range including JLM Audio TG500, Dual 99v, a rack of TMP8s and their VMP2 dual valve model. They also use complete channel paths including

marantz

PROFESSIONAL

PMD661

Professional Field Recorder

Large, easy-to-read OLED display

WAV (Broadcast WAV File) or MP3 recording format



Uses stable, reliable SD or SDHC memory cards

Ergonomic, one-touch transport controls & More

Digital recording at 44.1/48/96 kHz fs at 16 or 24-bit quantization

Based on the innovative design of our hugely popular PMD660, the rugged and robust Marantz PMD661 incorporates a wide range of technical advances and convenience features that help it excel in virtually any application. Big enough to accommodate dual XLR microphones and light enough for handheld use, the PMD661 offers exceptional recording quality in literally any location.

marantz

PROFESSIONAL

audioproducts

Group

FOR YOUR NEAREST DEALER:
 Australia: Call 1300 13 44 00 or visit www.marantzpro.com.au
 New Zealand: Call 0800 111 450 or visit www.marantzpro.co.nz



Mike Howlett in the control room.

AMEK Pure Path Channel in a Box units and Universal Audio LA610 MkII tube channels.

They also have a wide selection of microphones including standards such as Neumann U87s and KM184s, AKG414s and 451s, DPA 4006 omnis, Sennheiser 421, Beyers M88, Beta 57s and EV RE20s. Furthermore there are more specialist microphones available including Schoeps Collettes, Royer R121 ribbons, and valve microphones SE Electronics Geminis and Rode NTKs.

For dynamics processing the studio is equipped with a number of the classic re-issue units such as Purple Audio MC77s (Urei 1176), Teletronix LA-2As and an Empirical Labs ES8 (a Fairchild 660 valve limiter clone). There are also Retro Instruments Sta-Level valve compressors (a reproduction of the original Gates model) and a Vintech 609CA – a class A version of the classic Neve 33609 class A/B stereo compressor/limiter available. Modern dynamics processors consist of a pair of Focusrite Red compressors, an Alan Smart C1 buss compressor, and a pair of Empirical Labs EL8X distorssors with British modification. Outboard effects include a TC Electronics System 6000 multi-fx, a Fulltone Tube Tape Echo and a Thermionic Culture 'Culture Culture' valve distortion processor.

"We chose this combination of gear to represent and gather in one place the very best aspects of the various eras of music and sound production," said Knowles. "It's a place where you can experience first hand the differences between different signal paths and media and appreciate the various debates which are alive and well in the industry. The reality is that the average university student these days is way too young to have encountered a two-

inch analogue tape machine. Every decent audio program talks about analogue processes, so having high end analogue gear allows students to experience the medium first hand and learn about it in practice."

For Knowles, audio production at a tertiary level differs from on-the-job training in that it explores the deeper, more conceptual aspects of the work at hand as opposed to the more immediate, utilitarian objective of training. Having been involved in both, Knowles is in a good position to debate this topic.

"I don't think teaching audio production is very useful when it is divorced from the act of creating content, and say that from the perspective of considerable time spent teaching in this area," said Knowles. "I think we have well and truly reached an age when producers need to be 'creative' and play a role in originating content, especially when the music 'value chain' is turning into the music 'value web' and all the traditional industry roles are being redefined.

For Knowles, there is also a significant difference in the role of tertiary education as opposed to private colleges.

"We differ from private providers in that we don't have the same pressures to run an immediately profitable business, and this provides us with an incredible freedom to focus on some unprofitable, but powerful educational outcomes," said Knowles. "At a university there is an obligation to expose students to the conceptual underpinnings of the subject of study as well as the more functional skill aspects."

For Arthurs, the role an education facility's recording studio plays, as compared to a commercial studio, is vastly different. Away from the financial pressures associated with commercial

operations, education facilities and campuses can focus purely on the creative process, practice and outcomes.

"It is not merely a studio for hire, it attempts to add value for all participants by including internships for QUT students as engineers, producers and other creatives (in time we hope to broaden this to non-tertiary students) and become a creative hub for other artists," said Arthurs. "We focus on creative practice and use this as the driver of all activity. Tomorrow belongs to the creatives, and those who are driven by enquiry and creativity tend to not only know the rules but also break them for artistic excellence."

Apart from the QUT Big Jam, which according to Arthurs involved "...10 million notes played over 9000 minutes," the IMP is about to commence a vodcast project with Internode - a major internet service provider - which will take the form of an online music show featuring emerging acts and touring bands 'in session' at the studio. They are also in the process of planning some producer master classes with some of the biggest names in this area in the country and from overseas.

The IMP team are also currently working with a range of other highly talented people at QUT including new QUT Head of Music Mike Howlett (Grammy Award winning producer whose credits include Martha and the Muffins, Flock of Seagulls, OMD and many others) and local legend John Willsteed (the Go-Betweens and AFI award winning sound designer). Furthermore, the IMP has a range of partnerships with organisations including Sounds Like Brisbane (a collective comprising all the main independent record labels in Brisbane), Chaos Music, QMusic and the Music Council of Australia. 