

Definition of sound and vision

Set up to run in tandem with Sydney's Basement nightclub, Bulletin Place HDTV produces high-definition recordings of live music. **Stephen Bruel** looks into the future of broadcast

SITUATED IN CIRCULAR QUAY, neighbouring Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House, resides The Basement. Opened in 1972 as a jazz club, The Basement developed over time into a venue offering an eclectic mix of musical styles six to seven nights a week. Hence, many famous artists from different genres have performed here including Muddy Waters, Dizzy Gillespie, Herbie Hancock and James Morrison, country stars Keith Urban, Kasey Chambers and Jimmie Little, as well as contemporary rock and pop favourites Jimmie Barnes, The Whitlams, Tex Perkins and Neil Finn.

In-line with its musical transformation, The Basement venue has continued to evolve technology wise as well. The Basement Studio, now known as Bulletin Place HDTV, is a high-definition television production facility focused on capturing live music events from the stage of The Basement nightclub. Australian recording engineer Keith Walker manages the business side of Live At The Basement (LATB) as well as undertaking the in-house engineer and music producer roles for all LATB HDTV productions. As a live engineer, his credits read like a Who's Who of the rock and pop world including AC/DC, The Police, Elvis Costello and Frank Zappa. Mr Walker received the ARIA award for Best DVD for his work on Midnight Oil's Best of Both Worlds production. 'Bulletin Place HDTV is a production company focused on capturing artists with a small but dedicated fan-base in Europe, Asia, the Americas and here in Australia,'



At work in Bulletin Place HDTV's control room

he says. 'We negotiate long-term agreements for broadcast television in all its forms.'

Keith Walker's career spans 40 years as a producer/engineer in radio, television and music production credits on both CD and DVD releases. During his 20-year association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), he produced live radio broadcasts for JJ Radio in the 1970s and Triple J in the 1980s, the ABC's youth radio network as well as jazz artists Benny Goodman, Cleo Lane and Dave Brubeck for ABC Radio. He has also opted for jazz artists for the HDTV project due to their wider appeal

and greater marketability. 'Jazz is versatile as it is easy to look at and listen to, and can also sit way out in front or in the background,' he explains. 'It's also a better fit for our European market aspirations.'

Having worked for all major networks, Mr Walker has set high standards for live music on television in Australia, and continues to do so at The Basement. 'To my knowledge it's one of the few clubs in the world with a HDTV production facility directly connected to the club,' he says.

'We chose HD because if you look at our productions in 10 years time, they will still feel fresh. We have signed artists to 10-year contracts, and if we had gone with standard definition the product would have a short shelf life.'

The studio was designed and built by Michael Fronzek, co-director of Sound Spaces Australia. As the

previous engineering manager at Sydney's iconic Rhinoceros Studios and a background with Studio 301, he is well experienced to design studios, however not with a HDTV element attached. 'This is the first HD studio I've been involved with and the optical-fibre cabling route proved challenging as it needed to go from the club through car parks, high voltage feeds and air conditioning plants to the control studio,' he says. 'The risk of earth loops and interference was extremely high, but the fibre removed those fears and provided us with a pristine audio feed from the club.'

The control room has a Digidesign Icon D-Command 24-fader mixing console as its centrepiece, controlling a pro tools HD 3 system. 'We needed 24 faders to make the mixing easier, and Icon fitted the bill well and was within budget,' says

Keith Walker. 'It is designed to use with pro tools and that's what we use.'

To complete the audio set-up Mr Walker uses Studer D21m analogue microphone preamps, an SSL Alpha-link for AD/DA conversion, and has a huge selection of plug-ins and array of analogue outboard gear. The studio also offers a range of studio microphones from Neumann, AKG, Røde and beyerdynamic, while monitoring is through a Genelec 5.1 surround system.

'Personally, my choice is to mix inside Pro Tools using plug-ins – I love it,' Mr Walker says. 'However there is available a choice of analogue gear for clients who feel they can do their best by using our range of external analogue processors.'

The typical workflow for a Bulletin Place HDTV production involves capturing and splitting all stage microphones from The Basement using a dedicated passive microphone splitter system into the Studer D21m microphone preamplification system and AD converter. These feeds are then sent to the control room via a Madi fibre cable. This digital signal is then converted to a Pro Tools format using an SSL XLogic Delta Link Madi-to-Pro Tools HD converter. 'We tested a number of solutions,' Mr Walker offers. 'However, the combination of the Studer D21m and the SSL Delta and Alpha link products offered better quality, efficiency and cost savings. Also, the ability to directly convert Madi into our HD3 rig with support for up



Intimate performance – The Basement



Keith Walker in the studio's main control room

to 64 track sessions with multiple stereo mix returns to the club, covered both our control room monitoring needs as well as the external patching of analogue out-board equipment.'

'The Studer D21m front-end is beautifully engineered, robust and very musical,' adds Mr Fronzek. 'The SSL Delta-Link flawlessly passes the 64-channel Madi data stream straight into the Pro Tools HD3 core card – it's a very simple and elegant signal path with minimal processing.'

These Pro Tools sessions typically have anywhere between 12 and 42 tracks, depending on the number of musicians. In addition there are four tracks for the audience and a live stereo microphone. Finally, the session files are time-stamped with time-of-day time code to match the HD video files and gen-locked from the master sync pulse generator. For Mr Walker, a typical live video capture includes up to six cameras. Canon XL-H1 cameras capture the vision live into two Final Cut Pro (FCP) rigs using time code. They backup the live vision cut in ISO format using HDV tapes from cameras gen-locked with tri-synch and time code. The live audio mix is also routed to the two FCP systems with return feeds sent back to the club. This live vision cut and the stereo audio file is captured in full-HD using the Apple ProRes 442 codec. 'This system allows other producers using flyway video rigs to use our time code, gen-locked and live stereo mix,' says Mr Walker.

Sydney-based Amber Technology provided the Icon console along with the SSL interfaces so that the studio could connect

via Madi to the venue. Product manager for Amber Technology's video and audio post division Julius Chan was excited to be involved in such a pioneering project. 'Keith's reputation precedes him, so when he had the idea of using an Icon console for both live and music mixing/post work, it was great to play a role to be the first in our region to prove this concept,' he says.

Sound Devices, also Sydney-based, are proud to have Keith Walker as a long-term customer, and co-owner Michael Horn was happy to be involved in this set up. 'This was quite a unique project and what made this special is the quality of the equipment that was selected for the facility,' says Mr Horn. 'Many live venues use simple front of house recording feeds to capture performance, but The Basement offers a truly HD experience.'

Mr Walker, and his team are presently focusing projects for clients needing HD and/or SD postproduction for documentaries, television commercials, long and short television programmes as well as other corporate and entertainment needs. 'The Basement nightclub can be made available for corporate work and record labels needing to capture artists live in HD with great sound and pictures,' offers Mr Walker.

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Video monitors in the studio control room



Digidesign Icon D-Command at the heart of the audio operation

1/2 vertical