

# EMAC STUDIOS

LONGEVITY  
IN LONDON

BY JEFF TOUZEAU

EMAC Studios, an acronym for Electronic Media Arts Corporation, opened its doors in the spring of 1979 in London, ON. The studio, which records and mixes a range of diverse commercial music releases (recent clients include Pixar Studios and The Cranberries' Dolores O'Riordan), is also a hub for lucrative film and advertising work. EMAC has come quite a long way since its humble origins, when co-founders Rob Nation and Joe Vaughan were college students operating their studio out of a basement.

Initially fueled by London's robust punk and new wave scene in the late seventies, EMAC was a magnet for bands that had the creativity and drive to get their music out, but alas, didn't have the money for the "big time" studios. Back in those days, EMAC was also finding its way with limited funds – but practically unlimited ambition and drive.

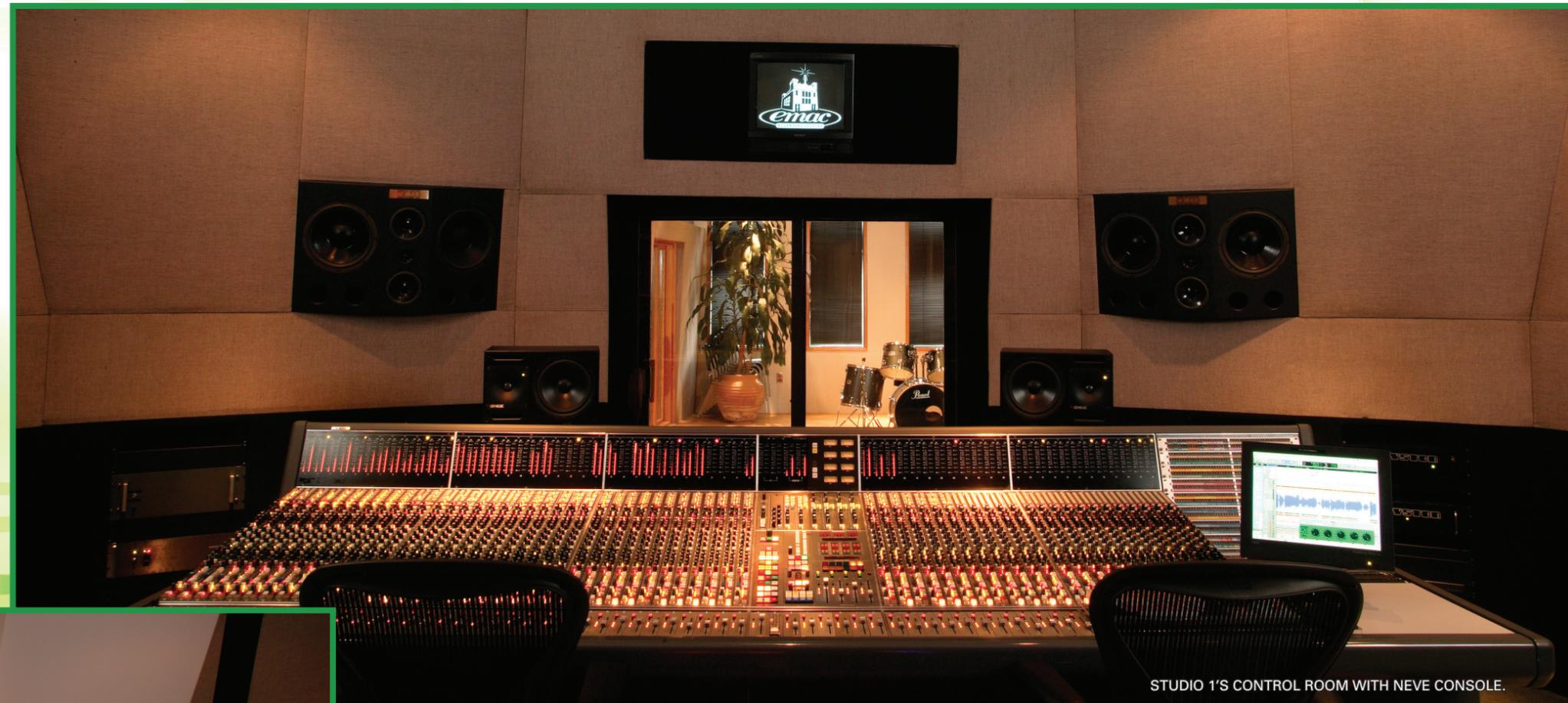
EMAC became an important resource for indie artists of the day and mutually beneficial relationships ensued with many of them, well before the term "indie" became chic. "It was really an affair between these bands and our studio; we were in the same situation," recalls Vaughan. "We were running a small studio, charging a very small rate, recording people who didn't have any money (laughs)."

"At that time, I wouldn't say that our customers had a lot of money," Nation concurs. "By the time we went to eight-track, our rate was \$35 an hour, but we were still cheaper than the 24-track facility that was outside of the city, and we basically got the business because we had that middle ground and we knew what we were doing. We were passionate about music and recording."

While many of the bands with which EMAC cut its teeth have since disappeared, broken up, or moved on, EMAC firmly established its roots in London and would remain there, gradually expanding the scope of its clientele and achieving impressive growth along the way.

## From College Chums To Business Partners

Vaughan and Nation met serendipitously while attending Fanshawe College's Music Industry Arts program, which was among the first of its kind in Canada. "We became friends right at the beginning," recalls Nation. "In fact, Joe was the first guy I met walking around the halls, trying to figure out where I was supposed to go my first day of college. We kind of walked into class together."



STUDIO 1'S CONTROL ROOM WITH NEVE CONSOLE.



STUDIO 1'S CONSOLE & OUTBOARD OPTIONS.

Since Vaughan and Nation met, they were determined to make their studio successful, and there was almost no looking back once they started. By December of 1979, following their graduation, they amassed enough money to rent their own space in the core of London, whose punk music scene was bursting with energy at the time. Their newly-found space had previously been an audio/visual facility and was big enough to record four- to five-piece bands, soon becoming a home for local music. "London's punk scene was as strong as larger centres' like Toronto," recalls Nation. "That's what we really cut our chops on back then."

While there are no guarantees in this business and successful careers with longevity are very rare indeed, Vaughan and Nation at some point decided that they could make a living running a commercial studio. The defining moment came as they paid that first month's rent. "At that point, we were engineers, and we were really passionate about what we were doing. We thought we could attract business, and we just did it," says Nation.

"To be perfectly honest, there was not a real sound business plan put together; we just kind of went for it," he continues. "We were two single guys without kids and our cost of living was really low." Drastic times called for drastic measures: "At that time, we were living in a house that was inexpensive and we shared it with three other guys. Our overhead was low and we were able to get by week to week, basically." Equipment wise, they started out with a Chilton QM1 console, a simple four-track deck (later replaced by an Otari 1" eight-track), and would mix down to a Revox A77.

Vaughan says that, while they considered London a perfectly-suitable location, they never imagined that they would remain there all these years.

"Going to college here is what attracted us to London originally. We never planned to stay here, but we set up shop here and stuck it out; things worked out." Both Nation and Vaughan had an almost immediate attraction to the city and its people. "I liked the fact that we were right downtown and that we had a suite on the third floor of a building. Our studio looked out over Richmond St., which is one of the main streets here in London. It had a really nice downtown vibe to it; our building was a little older, from about the 1800s."

## Growing Roots & Branching Out

Once settled in and after developing a good commercial business, EMAC made some renovations around 1985. This was right around the time the studio began developing its reputation for advertising and jingle work, which in those days, had been carried out mostly in the back rooms of local radio stations.

To attract more ad work, EMAC pounded the pavement and knocked on the doors of local businesses: "We had a couple of people working with us at that time that went out and made cold calls to the local advertising agencies, saying 'We are EMAC recording studios; we produce commercials and can cast the talent for you.' We basically offered a full-service production capability to the agencies," says Nation.

The fact that EMAC was able to not only provide the recording capability, but also could cast the talent proved to be a true differentiator. After all, the ad agencies wanted "one stop shopping" and wanted a single, talented source that could pull everything together and execute commercials in their entirety. "Our advertising clients didn't just want the microphone and a tape

# EMAC STUDIOS

recorder; they needed someone to deliver the finished product that their client was going to like, and produce it properly," recalls Nation.

When it came to producing ads, their location paid off in spades and then some: "At that time, we had some good actors in town, because Second City had a theatre here. A couple of actors actually lived in our building, and as a result, we were able to put together some pretty cool spots," he continues. "Also, many of the sales awards took place here in London, and over the years we've won numerous advertising awards." EMAC was the big fish in a small pond, and couldn't miss in the local and regional advertising markets.

"We did quite well, but still needed to concentrate on both music and advertising work to survive and that's the approach we took." Nation says the revenue split in those days was about 60 per cent advertising and 40 per cent music. This would ebb and flow over the years. During this period, EMAC's success with advertising work enabled it to tackle some renovations. They also made strategic equipment acquisitions. They built a new control room, added a new console, and migrated from the 1" 8-track to 2" 16-track, then shortly after to 24-track.

## New & Bigger Digs

After experiencing growth in the advertising and music segments as well as the charm of being downtown, Nation and Vaughan eventually knew they would have to leave their Richmond St. location for a larger space. They had been running for 10 years at the Richmond location, and finally realized that the original studio location had run its course.

One of the catalysts that led to this decision, says Nation, was when a Motley Crue-scale project would come in, they often found themselves relying on the advanced features of larger, neighboring studios. "We didn't have automation on our console at the time, so we would have to take a few of our projects to a larger facility in Toronto to do some finished mixing on the larger automated consoles," explains Nation. While they could have "made due" on their own gear and possibly made a little more money, they never wanted to compromise quality. "We were passionate about our work and knew when we had to raise the overall quality of the finished product. Being aware of this sort of thing actually helped us in the long run," Nation says.

At this point, many of their initial equipment loans were paid off and they had to make a decision that would have serious financial implications. The choice was between going off and buying new gear (including a more sophisticated console), or trying to get into a new facility that more closely matched their growth requirements.

## The Right Place At The Right Time

They found an old Salvation Army Church that was outside the core, a little farther to the east in London. Since the location was outside of the shopping district, real estate was a little cheaper. "The building had the specs we were

looking for," recalls Nation. "The only thing we were concerned about was that the studio would have to go on the second floor as opposed to the first floor, so we were a little concerned about isolation and other issues."

Ten years earlier, Nation and Vaughan had the pressure of signing a rental agreement. Purchasing a building, though, was a completely new level of pressure. "We took a risk — there's no doubt about that," says Nation. "We've never had anybody hand us a chunk of cash, so we had to borrow the money to do it ourselves. When we built this place, we knew we were in it for the long haul. There was no chance that we would do this then get out of it in even 10 years." Since it was the most lucrative revenue-wise, the advertising business would become more important than ever before.

The church was purchased in February of 1990 and design and renovations began immediately. While the facility was undergoing construction and undergoing its transition to become a state-of-the-art recording studio, Nation continued to run EMAC out of the Richmond location. Vaughan worked full-time at the church, supervising the construction. Construction lasted until the end of the summer, and by August, they were ready to transition all the equipment since all the wiring was in place. They were down for just a month and a half before re-opening, and would continue with minor construction jobs for the remainder of the year.

the front of the recording floor. During construction, we went through a lot of grief putting multiple layers of glass over these to get the proper sound isolation while also isolating the studio's second floor with sand fill and isolators." While a lot of effort and expense went into achieving this, both partners believe it was the right decision. "To this day, I'm glad we did this instead of taking the easy way out and sealing it all up. It lends a nice atmosphere to the recording floor and clients appreciate it."

At the end of the day, the facility had a main recording floor with one booth and a large control



SOME TOYS FOR GUITARISTS.



STUDIO 2

## A Room Of One's Own

The new studio gave them the ability to accommodate many more musicians. The new control room — and indeed the entire facility — had much higher ceilings and was acoustically superior to their old space. The facility, which was designed by Andy Condon to the requirements of Vaughan and Nation, featured RPG diffusers on the rear wall of its control room and was one of the earliest RFZ (reflection free zone) rooms in Canada.

Nation talks about some of the aspects that were emphasized in the design: "We went for the higher ceilings and spent a ton of money on diffusion. Also, we designed a day-lit recording floor, since there were really long church windows on



RECORDING FLOOR & ISOLATION BOOTH.



EMAC'S ORIGINAL CONTROL ROOM CIRCA 1979.



THE FACILITY'S NEVE CONSOLE NEEDED TO BE TAKEN APART TO MOVE INTO ITS NEW HOME.

room. About a year later, another studio was added which essentially served as an overload, workhorse room for editing. "Even though we were getting a lot of clients, we didn't have the money to build two large rooms, so that's the reason that the second studio became strictly editing."

## The Buzz About Town

EMAC was no stranger to London, and had already developed many loyal clients in and around the region. Word was out for a long time that, once completed, the new facility would be amazing. When it was finished, the studio hosted a massive opening party and invited the local media, ad agencies, and city officials. The studio immediately fell into its groove and EMAC never missed a beat.

In 2000, EMAC brought on a new partner, Dan Brodbeck. Originally a competitor from nearby dB Recording Studios, Brodbeck brought his existing clientele and used his skills to establish a closer working relationship with many newer artists. As a result, EMAC established a working rapport with labels such as BMG and ended up with many projects as a result. Brodbeck is now pursuing other opportunities in teaching.

## Equipment Upgrades

Bigger clients led to the need for better, more advanced equipment. The studio had a Sony MXP 3000 console, which Nation says was clean, and reliable; however, the need for upgraded automation beckoned, so the decision was made to purchase a 60-input Neve V3 with GML automation.

While owning a Neve was naturally a very welcome evolution in the life of the studio, it by no means replaced the raw talent that was already there. "We were already established engineers. We knew what we were doing; we knew we had a great sound and people were impressed with what was coming out here in London," says Nation. "People didn't start ringing the doorbell just because we had a Neve."

It did attract additional business with outside producers, however, and while EMAC has since gone mostly "in the box," the Neve is used on a regular basis for tracking, overdubs, summing, and other tasks. It is also appreciated for its sonic quality and monitoring facilities.

Nation explains EMAC's migration "into the box": "The reason we do all the moves in the box is because it's all total recall. For awhile there, we were getting phone calls from the A&R guys saying things like, "Can you bring the snare up by

a 1/2db in the chorus? If you can imagine having your assistant being tasked with recalling the EQ and other moves on the console every time to this degree, forget it."

Some of EMAC's more recent investments have been around instruments and amplifiers, says Nation: "We've got a great console, lots of mics and outboard gear, a great facility, and great atmosphere. For a while, the biggest challenge was people showing up with good equipment, so we made sure that we had the Ampeg bass amps and the Marshall guitar amps. We also bought a couple of boutique guitar amp heads that help us get a better sound. You can come up with some pretty great sounds with a guitar splitter, and the bands dig this."

## The Keys To Success

EMAC was able to sustain its growth over three decades, despite a tumultuous and unpredictable roller coaster of a music market. Its success can be attributed to a few basic principles: a sound financial approach, maintaining a manageable growth rate, keeping a diverse client base, and the most important ingredient in any business — passion. Here are the keys, in their own words:

### A Sound Financial Approach

"We never leased any equipment; we only bought what we could afford," says Vaughan. "When we acquired gear, we always bought very high-quality equipment. I can't remember ever doing a spec deal for an artist. It's something I never believed in. If you can't afford to record, then why are you recording? We never fell into that trap."

### Maintaining A Manageable Growth Rate

"One of the keys for us business-wise was just a smooth, steady growth — with ups and downs thrown in there too, of course," says Nation. "We always tried to get the most out of the limited budget we had and we were able to get the best track widths we could with the different formats we went through. When we had a 1/2" four-track, which was all we could afford at that point, we didn't know whether or not we would make it, so we didn't run out and buy a 1" eight-track. It was the same thing with the 2" 16-track and 2" 24-track," he adds.

### Keeping A Diverse Client Base

"Being open-minded to most any kind of music was very important to our longevity," says Vaughan. "I never believed in pigeonholing myself into one style, because one style is always going to run its course. We made sure we had ourselves covered so if one area wasn't as strong as the other, we could hopefully rely on the other. That's the way it worked out."

### Passion

"We treat our clients properly," concludes Nation. "I'll work on a song until it's the best I can cut it. This has helped us get clients to come back." ■



Jeff Touzeau is a frequent contributor to Professional Sound. As an author, his most recent books are Home Recording Studio Essentials (Cengage, 2009) and Artists on Recording Techniques (Cengage, 2008).