

Nashville's Unsung Heros Are Its Studio Engineers



Glen Snoddy, right, president of Woodland Sound Studios, is Nashville's leading engineer. With him is Don Fryer, SSI's vice president.

Few people outside of the record industry have heard such names as Mort Thomasson, Bill Vandevort, Chuck Seitz, Charlie Bragg, Charlie Tallent, Ernie Winfrey, Jim Williamson, Tom Sparkman, Ronnie Gant, Gene Eichelberger and Lee Hazen. Those in the record industry in Nashville know them well. These are the master mixers, the cream of the engineering crop, the unsung heroes of recording sessions upon whose trained ears and fingers rest the quality of any phonograph record.

Nashville is blessed with great engineers. Many of them did their apprenticeship at WSM long before the music industry became such a factor in the city. Others came from all parts of the nation, and found a home. No recording could be done without them.

Yet their names do not appear on most records: they are generally little known.

With a delicate movement of a finger they can splice a tape and make it salesworthy. With their incredible knack for sound they can mix the tracks and get perfection, something which may have been lacking in the original session. They are creative and inventive. In their hands is the final procedure (prior to pressing), and on them rides the millions of dollars which the industry invests in the product.

There are button-pushing engineers, of course, who are not mixers. And while they perform an extremely important function, it is the mixing that is the mastery, which sets apart—as they say—the men from the boys.

At Monument, two of the finest engineers in the business are in residence. One is Mort Thomasson, who has a string of credits which would fill a book. Another is Tommy Strong, one of the finest. At RCA the class list includes Bill Vandevort, Les Ladd, Al Pachucki and Chuck Seitz. At Columbia, top-notchers are Charlie Bragg, Neal Wilburn, Ed Hudson, Lacy O'Neill and Mike Figlio. Charlie Tallent at the Clement Studios is unsurpassed. The same is true of Scotty Moore at Music City Recorders. Out at Owen Bradley's Barn one of the finest is Jim Williamson. Ernie Winfrey, who spent considerable time at Woodland, now is at Sounshop. Rick Horton, Tommy Semmes and Rex Collier are now the Woodland mixers. Tom Sparkman at Metro has to be listed among the greatest anywhere. Gene Eichelberger at Quadrafonic has shown his great abilities. Ronnie Gant at Hickory is a leader. So are freelancers Fred Cameron and Lee Hazen.

But perhaps the greatest engineer of all is the man who now is president of the Woodland Sound Studios, Glen Snoddy. He has done it all.

Snoddy spent his first 10 years in Nashville as an engineer for WSM, five of those with the "Grand Ole Opry." Then, in the early 1950's, he installed the first Chet Atkins "studio," a garage affair, for the man who eventually would become vice president of RCA. After that, he put the consoles and other equipment into the first Owen Bradley Studio, and then into the famous quonset hut which later became Columbia's sought-after Studio B. He also did the initial design of Columbia's large studio. Then he installed the modern studio at Hickory Records, and finally built the two at Woodland. He also served as consultant to studios in St. Louis and Atlanta. And all the time he engineered and mixed.

In his earliest days, Glen worked with Brown Radio Productions, which handled the first Eddy Arnold show.

In the past year alone, at Woodland, he has: redesigned two control rooms for a more modern sound; acousti-voiced a studio to achieve true quality; installed a computerized mastering lathe for pitch and depth; added motion picture film technical equipment, with 35mm and 16mm projection systems, including closed circuit and television facilities; installed a digital metronome system and film sync generators; installed an isolated drum booth; and put in a lighting system unique to Nashville.

The light system is controlled by sound, with the system on the various tracks, divided into three frequency bands. The primary colors are red, blue and green. The sound controls the dimming of lights so that a psychedelic effect is obtained while sessions are underway. The three colors blink at different times, according to the sound fed into the system. This, many artists say, creates a great mood for recording.

In recognition of some of his achievements, Snoddy was elected a director of NARAS, and then made a trustee of the Academy. He holds many other honors, all of them well deserved.