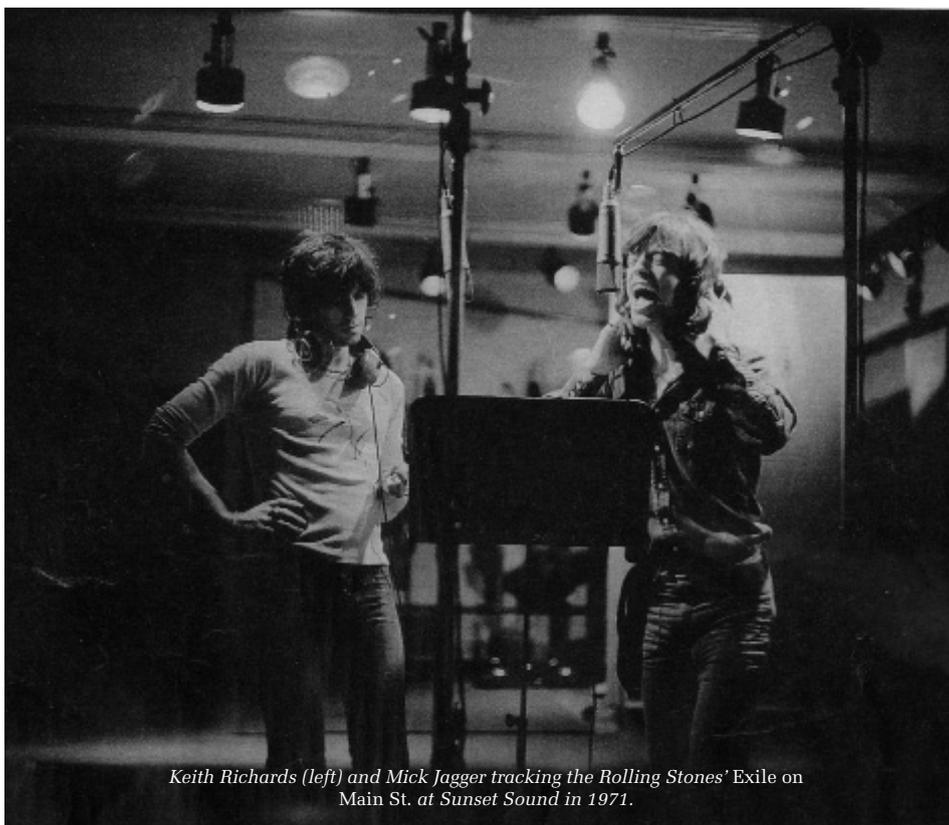


# SUNSET SOUND

## 50 YEARS OF STUDIO MAGIC

BY BUD SCOPPA | ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUNSET SOUND



*Keith Richards (left) and Mick Jagger tracking the Rolling Stones' Exile on Main St. at Sunset Sound in 1971.*

**T**he breezeway that bisects Sunset Sound Recording is a bona fide rock 'n' roll walk of fame, considering all the legendary artists, producers and engineers who have traversed it over the years. You can't stand in this hallowed spot and not sense a palpable aura of accumulated greatness. Oh, the stories these nondescript beige walls could tell! This isn't merely a studio, it's a shrine deserving of a pilgrimage—so here we are at 6650 Sunset, to soak up some history.



*Original Sunset Sound owner Salvatore "Tutti" Camarata (left) with Bing Crosby.*

Sunset Sound is celebrating its first-half century of continuous operation this year—a milestone few studios can claim. The Hollywood landmark on the corner of Sunset and Cherokee has been owned by the Camarata family since Salvatore "Tutti" Camarata started making records here in 1962. His son Paul has been running the place since the 1980s, studio manager Craig Hubler has held the job since 1983 and chief tech Mick Higgins has been here since 1994. Indeed, continuity is one of Sunset Sound's defining aspects, as are the facility's status as an analog bastion and its obsessive emphasis on maintaining the equipment to the extent that downtime has been virtually eliminated.

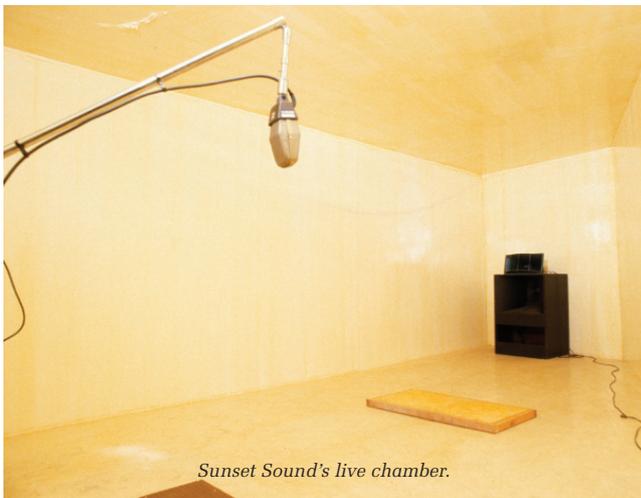
"The most common remark I get from our clients is, 'God, it's nice to come into a place where everything works,'" Hubler says.

"We built our reputation on very high-quality discrete components," Paul Camarata explains. "We never went the SSL route or went into the IC/chip world for the audio path. We either built our own consoles or purchased the vintage Neve 8088 that's in Studio 2." Studio 1's control room has a custom discrete console with Flying Faders and API 550A EQ modules on every channel, while Studio 3 is based around an API DeMedio custom console, also with API modules. What's more, the facility boasts one of the most well-stocked mic lockers on the planet, and there's every piece of outboard gear an engineer could possibly want.

Tutti Camarata was a Julliard-trained musician who played trumpet in Jimmy Dorsey's big band before launching the American wing of British label Decca in the U.S. He produced numerous artists for the label, includ-



The Studio 2 live room.



Sunset Sound's live chamber.

ing Billie Holiday. When Paul was five years old, his dad got a call from Walt Disney, and the family moved from New Jersey to L.A., where Tutti launched Disneyland Records. He produced soundtrack albums and children's records for the label, but at that point in the early '60s there weren't that many recording studios to choose from. He suggested to Disney that he build a studio for the company's projects, but Walt wasn't interested.

Paul picks up the narrative: "My dad then said, 'What about if I build a studio? Can we funnel all the business through there?' Walt said, 'Sure.' So that's how Sunset Sound started. My dad found a garage that had been converted into a photography studio, gutted it and then put this studio in here. It was not open to the public; it was a personal-use studio—pretty much like everyone has now," Paul says. [Laughs.] "He produced Annette Funicello records, *Bed Knobs and Broomsticks*, *Bambi*, *Mary Poppins* and *101 Dalmatians*; he introduced the Sherman brothers to Disney, and they went on to write some of the biggest songs for those movies.

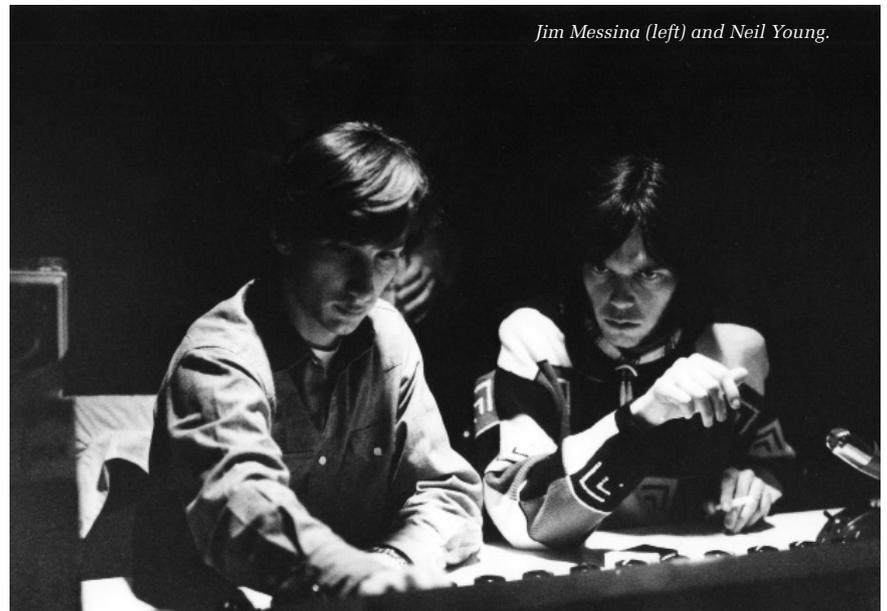
"The studio's first outside client was Herb Alpert," Paul continues. "He was bringing all his projects in here—the Baja Marimba Band, Brasil '66, all this early A&M stuff. Then, I remember my father saying, 'Herb wants to buy the place.' But he turned Herb

down, so Herb went down the street and bought the Chaplin lot. If he'd sold the place to Herb, this would've been A&M Studios and I wouldn't be standing here. So we lost him as a client. But then we started getting other ones."

Did they ever. Among the acts that recorded here during the second half of the '60s were the Beach Boys, Sam Cooke, the Ventures, Sonny & Cher, Love, the Doors, Buffalo Springfield, Tim Hardin, Richie Havens, the Monkees, the Turtles, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, the Lovin' Spoonful, Captain Beefheart, Three Dog Night,

Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention, Neil Young, Joe Cocker, Judy Collins, Etta James, Randy Newman, Arlo Guthrie, Delaney & Bonnie and James Taylor.

"I started coming here when I was eight years old," Paul recalls, "so I grew up with the changes. The Disney stuff didn't mean anything to me—they had me do narration on some of the kiddie records—but when I became a teenager and they started doing the pop stuff, I was like, 'Wow, we're doing The Doors? Can I come down and meet them?' 'No, you can't do that. Those guys are too out of control.'"



Jim Messina (left) and Neil Young.



The Doors in session in 1967.

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Photo: James Fortune



The Studio 3 control room.

Paul kept pestering his father to let him observe one of these cool new bands in session. After rebuffing him time and again, Paul finally got his chance, thanks to staff engineer Jim Messina.

“My dad says, ‘I talked to Jimmy, and he says you can bring a friend and come down for a little while.’ So my friend and I walked through the door of Studio 1, and we realized Buffalo Springfield were in there. Jimmy introduced me to Stephen Stills and Dave Crosby. I’m friends with Dave, and when I told him this story, he went, ‘Yeah, like I remember anything about those years.’ Stephen was

are you doing? Why are you in here playing guitar?’ but she was like, ‘Don’t bug me, kid.’ She didn’t want to have anything to do with some teenager. Finally I got it out of her—she said her name was Joni Mitchell. They played us another tune and then kicked us out.”

The facility expanded in 1968, when Studio 2 opened for business. “My father hired Bill Robinson, who’d been the head engineer over at Capitol,” Paul points out. “Bill also built studios—he built the echo chambers at Capitol—and he came in and did a lot of upgrades, including building

okay, but Dave was more engaging. They played us a couple of tracks, and then I noticed this girl in the echo chamber playing guitar. I said, ‘Who’s that?’ and Crosby said, ‘Just a friend.’ But I was curious, so I went in and tried to talk to her. ‘What

us a couple of more echo chambers above what is now Studio 3.”

In July 1968, according to the studio log, the Rolling Stones hunkered down in Studio 1 to record overdubs for *Beggars Banquet*, after which they worked on the mix. They’d return in November 1971 to finish recording *Exile on Main St.*, including a number of vocals, as well as mixing, commandeering both Studio 1 and the even more spacious Studio 2, which had been completed in 1967. In February of the same year, Led Zep- pelin made to the drive from the Riot House a few miles to the west to work on their fourth album, recording a version of “Stairway to Heaven,” which engineer Andy Johns has said was the version that became a massive hit and all-time classic, although no one seems to know for sure. Two years later, the four ex-Beatles were here working on Ringo Starr’s *Ringo*; it was the last time all four would be in the studio together.

The joint kept rockin’ through the ’70s, as Sunset Sound cemented its status as a high-end facility, drawing the likes of Janis Joplin, Rita Coolidge, the Faces, Little Feat, Linda Ronstadt,



Tom Waits, the Doobie Brothers, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, Alice Cooper, Kris Kristofferson, Boz Scaggs, Elton John, Warren Zevon and Neil Diamond. The studio log also shows that Van Halen began work on their first album with producer Ted Templeman on Aug. 29, 1977. For a decade, Toto's Steve Lukather and Jeff Porcaro were fixtures, sometimes working on different projects in all three rooms during a single day.

Sunset Sound got a second major upgrade in 1976 from George Augspurger, who essentially built his reputation with the innovative work he did here. "We were George's first client when he started his design company, Perception Inc.," Hubler says. "He still comes in here and voices our mains." Adds Camarata, "George helped us with all the rooms. He expanded the Studio 1 control room, he tweaked the acoustics in Studio 2 and he completely designed Studio 3. So he's been our right-hand guy for nearly 40 years."

During the '80s and '90s, the high-end clients just kept coming: Michael Jackson, Paul McCartney, the Bee Gees, Prince, Whitney Houston, Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, Richard Thompson, the Bangles, Sheryl Crow, Smashing Pumpkins, Matthew Sweet, Alanis Morissette, Robert Palmer, Crowded House, Elliott Smith, Social Distortion, k.d. lang, the Wallflowers and Stevie Nicks. The list of clients at Sound Factory, which the Camaratas purchased in 1981, is just as long and star-studded.

Since the turn of the century, a new generation of top-flight artists has chosen to record at Sunset Sound, including Ben Harper, My Morning Jacket, Dixie Chicks, Wilco, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jakob Dylan, Justin Timberlake, Kings of Leon, Maroon 5, Brandi Carlile, Norah Jones, My Chemical Romance, Avril Lavigne, Weezer, Josh Groban, Beck, Kid Rock, Jason Mraz, Foster the People and Band of Horses.

While recording 2011's *Ashes & Fire* here with longtime client Glyn Johns, Ryan Adams grew so fond of the place that earlier this year he took up tenancy in a compact studio space in the main building once occupied by producer Rick Neigher. A hip-hop writer/producer leases the house on the south side of the parking lot where Tutti once had an office. Dick Marx, father of Richard, composed film scores in what is now Camarata's office.

When asked about the changes that have taken place in recent years, Camarata replies, "Our clients are no longer the record companies—maybe 20 percent now, whereas it was practically 100 percent in the old days. These days, we're billing management companies more often than not. And in the past, we did projects pretty much from

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start to finish, but now it's less and less of that, for multiple reasons. One is budget, another is the fact that people have their own facilities at home so they just come here to track or mix.

"What hasn't changed is we still provide the quality of service that we're known for. And we have longevity with our core clients as well as our personnel. Loyalty is a huge factor for us. Hopefully, it will continue to be that way."

As for what's next, Torrance-based PMI, which manufactures gear for Tone-Lux and Trident, among others, will soon begin turning out a branded Sunset Sound 50th Anniversary mic pre identical to a design that was created here three decades ago and has been in constant use ever since. "Because this mic pre is so closely identified with Sunset Sound, we thought hard about what to name it, and we came up with a good one," Paul says. "It's going to be called The Tutti." ■