

The Philly Sound is Gold

PHILADELPHIA, PA—The ancient 1/4-inch tape winds through an old tape machine, sitting aside the SSL 4048E/G in the Augspurger-designed Studio A. The small tape box, list-

ing a New York-based advertising agency, rests on the console.

From the monitors, one very funky soul workout positively leaps out: Teddy Pender-

grass, with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, implores listeners to "Come on up to the Kool taste." A jingle, a long-ago banned radio or television advertisement for cigarettes, is a most unexpected and irresistible track, all present agree.

This anecdote is peripheral to the business at hand, serving only to remind that the Sound of Philadelphia is quite a bit more than a slogan. Here at The Studio, a large, multi-room facility (Studio J features a 72-input SSL J Series console), owner Larry Gold continues a long and brilliant career. A Philadelphia native and onetime member of Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's instrumental outfit MFSB, Gold's talent is clearly in great demand: Recently, he has arranged songs for Kanye West, N.E.R.D., Amos Lee, Ne-Yo, Justin Timberlake, John Legend, the Roots and James Morrison, among others.

Indeed, The Studio is a nexus of Philadelphia's music community. Roots drummer Ahmir Thompson, a.k.a. Questlove, has a personal studio onsite, while the diversity of artists represented by the gold and platinum records lining the walls mirrors the varied arrangements Gold brings to them.

"Growing up in Philadelphia, I met the contractor of what eventually became the 'Philly Sound,' which was Cameo Parkway in those days, and whatever else was around at the time," says Gold. A cellist and guitarist, Gold studied at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, but was already playing gigs and sessions before he was 16.

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"I like my generation an awful lot," Gold offers. "I didn't like the strictness of classical music per se, even though I do—this morning, I had my cello out and played Bach for an hour. I love the foundations of all music. But the looseness of this group of people, the early blues bands—I was in a blues band with Todd Rundgren for a short while—and the camaraderie was a lot different than Curtis Institute was. That appealed to me. But I've been fascinated with making records since I was very little. I remember listening to Motown records thinking, 'What's going on here?'"

Gold learned engineering through hands-on experience and observation of

top engineers such as his friend Don Murray, who, with producer Thom Bell, crafted revered recordings by the Spinners, the O'Jays, the Delphonics and the Trammps, among others.

Gold writes with a Synclavier, and still uses score paper, to bring his inspiration to life, as heard to dramatic effect on tracks like "Friends" by Mary J. Blige and "You Got Me" by the Roots and Erykah Badu.

In the contemporary climate, though, The Studio may not exist, he admits, without his voluminous arranging gigs. But this, he adds, is part of the business of music. "The future is a little cloudy, because the business of music is a little cloudy now," he says. "Owning a studio is not what it was at one time. Anything in business changes, but life goes on. This year, I've had a very busy year as an arranger. I don't question it, I just think that at my age I know an awful lot of people and people know a lot about me, so I tend to get a little more work than I might have gotten 20 years ago.

"You have to adapt, and I was good at adapting," he adds. "That's why the Roots have been here practically since the place opened; I think they showed up about a year later. I was already having a lot of success out of the place by that time, but they certainly helped give it a push. Brandy and Monica was already No. 1 with a big string arrangement ["The Boy is Mine"], and Rodney Jerkins, who grew up about 60 miles from here, was using the facility.

"I'm always trying to figure out how to stimulate more business for the studio," Gold continues. "You try to expand your reputation. My love for rock 'n' roll is still as avid as my love for classical and R&B. Yet I grew up in a town like Philadelphia, which was an R&B town, so in order to really make a good living I had to become an expert at rhythm & blues more than rock 'n' roll."

—Christopher Walsh

The Studio

www.myspace.com/thestudio215philly