

# THE SWEETWATER EXPERIENCE

**A studio complex with everything a musician needs—from cutting-edge gear to recording expertise and inspiration**

One of the most prominent instrument and pro-audio retailers in the nation began rather modestly nearly 35 years ago as a makeshift mobile recording studio, pieced together with gear that musician and audio buff Chuck Surack installed in his 1966 VW bus. He recorded anything he could, from concerts and church services to speeches and weddings.

Dubbed Sweetwater, Surack's company has expanded many times over since then. As the business blossomed, president and CEO Surack moved the studio from his home and into a series of ever-larger buildings in Fort Wayne, Ind. He launched a retail division in the 1980s, which has grown into the third-largest gear and instrument retailer in the U.S. Even as Sweetwater's business boomed, the studio has remained a cornerstone of the company's mission, and the recording arm—known as Sweetwater Studios—is now housed in a state-of-the-art recording complex tucked into the company's 44-acre campus in Fort Wayne.

It's far more than anything Surack envisioned when he started. "I was just trying to stay alive and get enough money to live," he says.

Surack's interest in pro audio is longstanding—he learned to record on a reel-to-reel his father gave him when he was a kid. When he started playing in bands, he was the one who knew his way around the soundboard. "I was always the technical guy in the band, running the sound from the side of the stage, building PA systems, customizing mixers, making live recordings," he says. "I was on the road for several years, and we were always making demo tapes, either from the live recordings, visits to radio stations, or in the few studios there were. I was always the guy with the most experience."

That experience formed the core of the customer-oriented approach that guides Sweetwater, whether in the studio or in the retail business. "Our whole mantra is 'Take care of the customer and do the right thing,'" says Mike Ross, Sweetwater's vice president of marketing. "People do business with those they trust and like. People they know are watching their backs, helping them achieve what they want to achieve."

Pairing the recording business with a retail operation made sense from the customer



Mike Ross

service standpoint as it offered studio clients the opportunity to use gear under the guidance of those with hands-on expertise. "One of the greatest benefits was that Chuck was actually using the gear that he would choose to sell to his customers," says Ross. "He could say, 'I know what that microphone is good for

and how it sounds because I have it in my own studio.' Our onsite retail store and the studios still serve that same purpose. Our sales engineers go in there all the time to listen and work with the equipment."

Sweetwater Studios has amassed an impressive collection of technology over the years, shared among three interconnected studio suites and a performance theater. The complex was designed by the Russ Berger Design Group, which has also steered acoustical projects and studio setups for MasterMix, Paragon Studios, Lakewood Church, NPR and many others.

"I love listening to the Yamaha C7 in our piano room because it's spectacular," says Ross. "I've listened to that Russ Berger room where I hit C one octave down from middle C and hit the sustain pedal. I can listen to the ringing and overtones for what seems like two and a half minutes. It's ridiculous how inspiring it is."

Ross also points to a mint early 1960s Hammond B3 organ that Sweetwater acquired a few years ago ("One choice piece of gear," he says admiringly), along with a vault overflowing with nearly 100 high-quality microphones. "They don't all fit in the vault," Ross says, laughing. "That mic vault is filled with the best of the best microphones that we also sell. It's not like we're using something that customers can't purchase."

Gear is just one facet of Sweetwater Studios' appeal—there's also the team running it. Last year the company hired Nashville producer and engineer Mark Hornsby as director of music production and artist relations. Hornsby oversees a full range of production services from recording to mixing and mastering. Artists



Chuck Surack

also have access to a fitness center, game room, restaurant and more—all onsite. "When you're there you realize that the studio is part of a much bigger beehive of activity," Ross says. "There's this whole Google-esque vibe going on that is so much more energetic and bigger than just a studio."

It's a package that's attracted a wide variety of artists including Sara Bareilles, REO Speedwagon, Jars of Clay, Collective Soul, Ingrid Michaelson, Landon Pigg, Jon McLaughlin, progressive rock bassist Tony Levin, songwriters James House and Danny Flowers, Australian alt-pop artist Lenka and the Gin Blossoms.

What's more, the studios' staff has more than 100 years of combined

experience working with acts including Garth Brooks, Steve Winwood, the Dixie Chicks, Alison Krauss, George Strait, Foreigner and others. Ross credits Hornsby for deepening the studio's customer service

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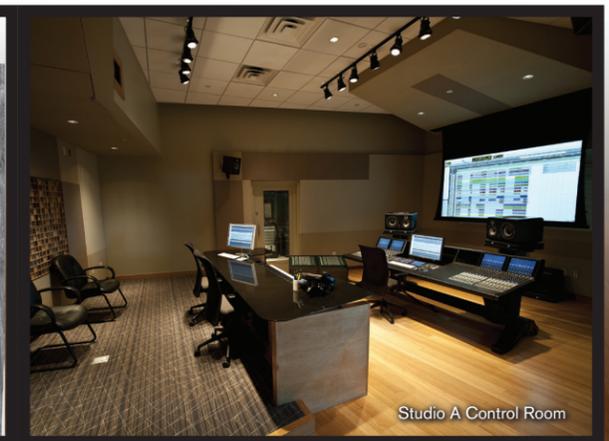
experience. "It's like, 'OK, we've got a great place and you've got a great skill set, what happens if we put those two things together?' And it's just been magic," Ross says. "Mark's got an amazing set of ears, he's a great producer and engineer—but he's also very customer-focused."

Great ears and a customer-focused approach—it's a combination Sweetwater has honed since Chuck Surack was running cables in the back of his VW bus. All that's changed, apart from advances in technology, is the scope and scale.

"Chuck is one of those guys who never had a plan B," Ross says. "He is a plan A kind of guy, a big thinker who doesn't let things get in the way. There might be a stumbling block here or there, but he tends to figure out how to step over them. And I think it's as much through perseverance as passion. Ultimately, it comes down to helping people achieve something rather than just buying something or renting studio time. That's the core of who we are." —Eric R. Danton



In the early 1980s



Studio A Control Room