

## Off to meet the Wizards... Proof that pros really do care

by Richard S. Foster

Trying to get the bottom of some of the sampling rate and conversion issues that surround DSD (and the lesser known DXD) I'd come into contact with the genial and super-informed Bert van der Wolf of Northstar Consult. And very helpful and enthusiastic he was too. Little did I know that the enthusiastic response I'd received was only the tip of the ice-berg. "Oh boy," I heard again and again, "wait until you see his studio!" Uhhh, just one small problem guys; his studio is in Holland and that's not exactly on my way home.

But, it's strange how things come around, and with a trip to the UK (for the Northern Sound & Vision Show in Manchester) in the planning stages, I was too close to give up the opportunity. For all those who believe that the pro side of the industry has descended into a mere post production sausage machine, here was a real, working example of a studio that demonstrably cares about quality. In fact, two examples, because Bert was taking me to see Galaxy Studios too...

I flew into Eindhoven and was met, early in the morning by Bert. It was great to put a face to the voice. Bert had kindly offered to be my guide during this whirlwind trip. We spent the hour it took to drive from the airport to Galaxy Studios near Mol, Belgium, talking about things digital and how the high-resolution formats have really changed and enhanced the recording engineer's bag of tools.

At Galaxy we got to meet Ronald Prent, resident engineer. Prent has been with Galaxy approximately seven years and has worked with groups and individuals as high-profile as Elton John, The Police, Sade, UB40, Robert Palmer and David Bowie to name just a few. According to the Galaxy website, "He was very much involved in the development of the DSD & SACD technology by Philips & Sony and the development of the API Vision Dedicated Surround Console and a special mastering console by SPL for multi-channel mastering." He's a very knowledgeable and interesting person to talk to and as you can imagine he really knows what he's doing. A highly creative engineer, he's worked some magic on many a project and continues to be recognized for his work on a worldwide basis. I got the whole guided tour, but as a poor substitute I would advise any of you with internet access to go to <http://www.galaxystudios.com> and spend the time looking at their set-up. This is no small-time audiophile studio; Galaxy is serious and seriously mainstream.

The studio started in 1982 in an old garden shack in Mol. The brothers Wilfred and Guy Van Baelen established themselves a solid reputation in the studio business and have grown and developed Galaxy into a highly professional recording venue. Approximately eleven years ago they built, with the help of some highly skilled engineers and technicians, Galaxy Hall which was followed in three years by their new offices and the beginnings of the studios.



The stunning Galaxy Hall

Galaxy hall is itself, a unique structure. It is an eight-metre high studio with a total space of 330 square meters. It boasts a reverb time of 1.6s up to 2.6s making it outstanding for all types of live recording – from solo piano through orchestral.

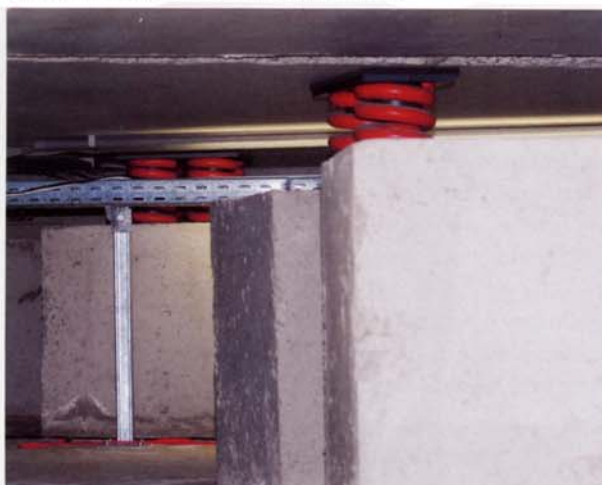
There are actually four separate control rooms that all have visual access to the hall. In order to achieve a low noise floor, the whole damn place has been built on springs and each of the rooms and studios floats as an individual element. Just stop and consider the architectural implications of that for a moment! As a result, the hall and studios are unbelievably quiet. It is actually quite disconcerting hearing your breathing quite so clearly. Galaxy can actually house the entire creative process, from recording through post-production.

Prent took me through all the different studios and we discussed the capabilities of each. While on this tour I saw the way everything was "incorporated together" from the basement up through the studios and into the ceilings



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Doesn't every studio come with suspension?

► where the air conditioning units are always on and are phenomenally quiet. While crawling through the basement or looking down from the 'attic' you can see that each room is actually a separate structure. If you can imagine, control rooms one, two and three weigh 252 tons each and have 78 springs per studio for support. Prent said that as the springs continue to settle, Galaxy Hall will become even quieter than it is now.

loudspeakers. The sound in the room was excellent.

Galaxy is clearly one of the World's leading studios with extraordinary facilities. It was a very interesting day and it gave me a sobering understanding of the extremes at least some engineers and artists go through to get their product to market.

The next morning I was picked up again by Bert, but this time it was going to be a visit to his studio, Northstar Consult. Bert has a very interesting website: <http://www.northstarconsult.nl> and again I would strongly suggest that those interested spend some time looking around his very informative venue.

Bert's a very busy guy. His website gives us only a partial insight into some of his duties. Bert is a practicing recording engineer/producer based in The Netherlands and has run NorthStar as Audio Recording Services – and Consulting, since 1999. He trained in Electronics at the Higher Technical School in Enschede and after that Music Recording, Piano and Classical Guitar at The Royal Conservatory in The Hague, where he gained the internationally recognized Tonmeister qualification in 1990.

He worked for the Dutch recording companies Channel Classics from 1989 to 1996 and Kompas CD Multimedia from 1996 to 2000, making several hundred recordings for numerous international record labels. He also works as a consultant for many recording studios



Ronald and Bert at work and play – be afraid, be very afraid!

While on our travels through this extremely impressive complex, I met Darcy Proper, a DSD engineer in the Reference Master studio working on some SACD releases for Donald Fagen. Proper has done everything from restoration, editing and mixing to having been an SACD/DSD engineer for Sony. She was working in an impressive (and for the pro world, unusual) studio equipped with high-end audiophile equipment, cabling and five impressive Ecclestone Works

and professional audio equipment manufacturers.

He has been making High Resolution recordings since 1996, starting initially with the 24/96 formats and then moving on to 24/192 and DSD. He engineered the world's first 24/192 recordings in 1996. He specializes in acoustic recording techniques and has numerous award winning recordings to his credit. The most recent was an Edison Award, received in 2001 for recording the Dutch Bass player Tony Overwater's SACD *Op*, for the Turtle Records label, of which he is a co-founder. ►



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▶ When Bert is not recording or into post production work, he also represents various companies in Europe for the European studio market. Included in this list are dCS Professional, Sonodore microphones, Avalon Acoustics, Nagra, Pass Labs, Siltech Cables and Spectral.



The system at Northstar

His post production studio is absolutely out of this world. When you visit his website you'll see what I mean. The Avalon Eidolon speakers installed here were voiced especially for Bert, a project he and Neil Patel worked on together. There are also three of the small (but extremely expensive) Avalon Mixing Monitors as well as a sub-woofer in this room, allowing full surround mixing. Cabling is by Siltech and amplification comprised modified Spectral mono-blocks. We listened to a variety of material that Bert has recorded. Source material had been dumped to hard drives and we listened not only to 16 bit/44.1kHz, but all the way up to the 352.8kHz of DXD. I can tell you that there are components to sound that I heard in this studio I've never heard anywhere else. Of course I realize this is a studio environment, and it's impossible to create this set-up at home, but what it showed me was what the digital medium, at various sampling rates, can really sound like.

Bert has really gone overboard to create astonishing sonic quality in his studio, and it's not just the quality of the source material; the system has got to let that through. One of the things that really impressed me was how he has matched and set up the components in this studio exactly as the most demanding audiophile might. What I'm realizing now, having done the rounds of Sound/Mirror in Boston, Emil Berliner Haus in Hannover, Galaxy in Belgium, Northstar in The Netherlands and Alchemy in SOHO with Ray Staff – is that not all studios are created equal. Not everyone is spending the money required to put not only first class studio equipment in, but also a first rate playback chain to hear what has been recorded – and it shows in t

heir results. My biggest disappointment was what I heard at Emil Berliner, and what is reflected all too clearly on the Mercury SACDs that they've mastered. Sound/Mirror and Galaxy both have superb rooms with Galaxy having the advantage of more post-production studios due to its size. Meanwhile, Northstar has only this one studio, but it was, in my opinion, in a league all by itself.

I heard playback of digitally recorded works, up-sampled to DXD that were so real, you could reach out and touch the instruments! The equipment, the whole replay chain, totally disappeared in this studio, leaving just the performers and their instruments. A few hours of this and I was left totally in



There's analogue –  
and then there's Pro-Tools

awe of what I was hearing – and somewhat chastened too. (Don't worry Richard, I'm sure that's purely temporary. Ed)

But there's more; I spoke at length with both Ronald Prent and Bert, and this lightning tour serves only as a taster. Next time round we'll be getting down to the digital nitty-gritty, the techniques and processes that helped produce those stellar recordings. Believe me, people who go this far with their studios do it for a reason.

