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NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE: In the late 1970s John McBride was a young engineer who dreamed of owning his own studio. Maybe it was Wichita, maybe the times, but for whatever reason, McBride's first shot at financing a facility failed, and he ended up in the live sound business.

It's been quite a run for McBride, who sold MD Systems, his live concert sound company, to Clair Brothers in 1997. He still runs the Nashville division for Clair Brothers, but his interests have fanned out considerably. For one thing, he's actively involved in the career of his superstar wife, Martina McBride, who walked away this year with the "Top Female Country Artist" from the Academy of Country Music Awards, the CMT Flameworthy Awards, the Country Music Association Awards, and most recently the Billboard Awards.

McBride's also putting the finishing touches on a dream. Blackbird Studios (John's a huge Beatles fan, and references to the Fab Four are sprinkled throughout the facility), scheduled to open to the recording public in January 2003, has been host to several projects already. His aim, says McBride, is to put together one of the finest recording environments in North America.

"I've spent a lot of time on the road with some great acts, including Garth Brooks. But the studio's always has been my favorite environment. It's where you get to experiment and create art. Fortunately, my wife's success has given us the ability to get into the studio business properly. I'm fanatical about having the best equipment. We have definitely gone to the nth degree on equipment at Blackbird!"

In 1977 George Augspurger designed Creative Recording. This facility, now the home of Blackbird Studios, was completely renovated when the McBrides took ownership of the property. Augspurger was brought back to expand and redesign the A room, and Michael Cronin was brought in to re-design the B room. Under Augspurger's direction all new equipment was installed in Blackbird's two recording studios.

McBride chose ATC (Acoustic Transducer Company) SCM 50ASL Pro Mid Field Monitors for both Studio A and Studio B and the ATC SCM 300s as main monitors for Studio B and as alternate monitors for Studio A. Why? "Well, I always try to buy the absolute best equipment on the market - period. When I was thinking about what main monitors I should put in B I called about six or eight engineers I really respect and asked for their input. As I was looking for a cross section of opinions, I called engineers in L.A. and New York as well as here in Nashville. The ATC 300s kept getting rave reviews. Now that we've had them in B for awhile, I can really understand why. I loved them initially, but over time they sound even better. They stay accurate at high volume, (remember, I'm a live sound guy!) and they sound great at low volume as well. When you pump it up the accuracy of the monitors is really outstanding. I know that some people add EQ between their console and the monitors, but I have to assume that that's because they don't have great rooms or the right speakers. We add no EQ at all and the 300s sound great. The stereo image is incredible. When you mono them up, that image is splitting you right down the center of your face! Actually, I don't even like calling our second, smaller room Studio B. It's a great room. "We had such success with the 300s," continues McBride, "that the 50s were an obvious consideration for near-mid fields. They're also fantastic. Obviously, they don't have the horsepower of the larger monitors, but that's the only real difference between the two sets. I got lots of requests for the 50s from engineers I respect, partly because the mixes you create on them translate extremely well from the control room to home and other environments. Based on their popularity with engineers alone, I feel like the 50s are a great sales tool for the studio."

Those great mixes you hear emerging from Studio B just might have something to do with the custom built API Legacy Plus console that McBride installed. "I haven't heard one engineer ever say anything bad about an API board, particularly the Legacy Plus. I have a long history with Larry Droppa, who now owns the company. We got together and figured out a way to get 96 inputs into a console that's only 75 inches wide. Not an easy job! Plus, the board has eight compressors, 48 mic pre's, eight gates, and four DI's.

"We were really paying attention to the engineer who worked our first session in that room. I won't mention his name, but he is a very, very critical listener! This guy described the sound as 'glorious', and that's just the way we feel about the board. The space and dynamics of the console are outstanding, and the way the stereo buss sums the image is just beautiful. It's just easy to get a great sound on the Legacy Plus. I don't know of a better way to put it. You plug in 48 tracks that were recorded somewhere else and the client immediately asks what we did to improve the sound! I was also impressed with the fact that API sent a couple of their head techs to help with the install. These guys didn't leave town until they knew that the board was working perfectly."

McBride talks a good game, but something's fishy. Could it be that this talk about thirsting for the perfect sound is all a ploy, and getting the pretty girl's been his real concern from day one? His laugh, both proud and self-effacing, comes tumbling out. "I guess you could write that. But I think it applies to guitar players more than studio owners!"

The ATI Group is the parent company of Audio Toys Incorporated, API Audio, Uptown Automation and the newly formed ATI Group Distribution Division, which now distributes the full line of Audient products including the newly introduced Aztec console. Audio Toys manufactures the industry leading Paragon II monitor console, the Paragon II production console and associated rack mount gear. Uptown Automation manufactures and installs moving fader and mute automation for analog mixing consoles. API remains the leader in analog recording gear, such as the famed Legacy console, the TEC award-winning 7600 channel strip, and the acclaimed 2500 stereo bus compressor.