

*laidback*

# LOCATION, SERIOUS SOUND

SINGHAMPTON, ON'S **VILLA SOUND**

By Kevin Young

**When it comes to laidback locations, Villa Sound has it down.**

Located in Singhampton, ON, just about 20 minutes south of popular skiing haven Collingwood, the studio is a destination recording facility with an old school vibe and cutting edge capabilities that reflect the current state of the industry.

Owned and operated by Tim Thorney and Adam Fair, Villa Sound is a great space for artists looking to get away from it all and dig into their work. After all, it's about the furthest thing from an urban jungle imaginable. "There are four buildings in Singhampton," Thorney states – "two restaurants, a gas station, and the studio."

"For a long time, [what's now] the studio was a general store," Fair adds. "I've met people who used to come here as kids for ice cream."



Live floor

Leaving his former digs in Toronto and relocating to this more remote part of the province, Thorney says, was an easy decision. Previously, he was the owner of Tattoo Sound + Music in Toronto and, after selling the business, worked in his apartment before moving into a project-specific space at King West and Spadina. At the time, he was in no hurry to get back into the studio business full-on, but he also wasn't ready to completely give up his creative work, and found himself in need of both gear and a space.

Enter Adam Fair, who Thorney initially hired as, Fair says, "his personal broker" to first outfit Thorney's apartment studio, then the King and Spadina space, and, finally, Villa Sound, where they ultimately became business partners.

Thorney was fed up with outfitting studios and dealing with salespeople and gear by then, his partner explains, and having Fair as a go-between for gear and trades was ideal.

Over the next two years, Thorney and Fair recorded and produced several albums together out of the apartment and, later, the production room before relocating to Collingwood. "Tim was like my mentor, but we went from a mentorship to a partnership. I've learned a ton of things from him and, I think, I've sort of kept him interested in the business as well."

Thorney is originally from Winnipeg and started out with "basement bands" and basic recording in the mid-1970s. He also played in the "new" Guess Who, wrote with Burton Cummings, and moved to Toronto in 1979. From there, he began working at Toronto's famed but now-defunct Manta Sound. He's also spent time collaborating with Alanis Morissette and other artists in studios in L.A. and Nashville.

"I've been doing this forever," Thorney says, "in a bunch of different roles – producing, songwriting, session playing... I like to say I'll play whatever nobody else is playing – piano, guitar, bouzouki, mandolin, banjo... Anything with strings on it that doesn't look like a violin."

Fair, a drummer, started out playing in high school, but was always more interested in recording and the studio side of the business. "I got a four-track recorder when I was 14 years old, bought some cheap mics, and taught myself." After briefly studying

Recording Arts at the Toronto Film School, Fair interned at Toronto's Phase One Studios, where he first met Thorney.

Upon leaving Toronto, they set up a space in Thorney's Collingwood basement and ran it until three years ago, when Fair found a 150-year-old farmhouse in Singhampton better suited to their needs. "So we bought it, moved the studio in here, and this is its new, happy home," Thorney says.

"All my friends were moving east, which generally made me feel confident about moving west," Thorney continues, explaining the choice of Collingwood and, later, Singhampton as bases. While the Collingwood location – a bungalow with the studio in the 1,500-sq.-ft. basement – was fine for their purposes, the newer space in Singhampton is far better, they say. "It wasn't the specific location that prompted the choice," Thorney adds. "We had to start somewhere quiet, new, and relatively close to Toronto."

Since moving from the Collingwood space, Villa Sound has upped its game substantially, and Thorney believes it's a far better space in which to make music than either Tattoo or his previous smaller studio. "This building is just unbelievable," he says. "To have wood that's 150 years old with no resonance, it's amazing. This is the space we were going for all along. It sounds great, and if a room sounds great, you don't have to do much to it."

Of course, the commerce of the music business has changed radically in recent

years. "In this new economy, are you going to spend \$300,000 [on construction] getting the sound of the city you're in out of your microphones so you can bill an \$800-per-day session? No."

Tattoo, Thorney says, was a giant cinderblock factory – "and it sounded like it. This is more like a place I worked at in Nashville – an old house, really comfortable, with a fireplace in the live room." He sees it as a return to old-school recording studios, from as far back as the 1950s, in places like Nashville and Memphis, "Where real estate was cheap and musicians could afford to live."

"Just buying the place was the first step in upping our game," Fair puts in.

In determining how to outfit the studio, Thorney and Fair decided to go lean and functional. "We ended up getting a bunch of mic pres, converters, good speakers, and an SSL Matrix that connects all of it," Fair explains.

In all, the studio occupies roughly 2,000 sq.-ft. of the two-storey, 4,000-sq.-ft. house, with the live floor being about 1,000 sq. ft. "There's actually a kitchen in the middle of that, which is interesting, and it has really high ceilings," Fair notes. "Then, just off of that, is the roughly 300-sq.-ft. control room with total isolation from the live room and an isolation booth." Having a kitchen in the live room, while unusual, makes the space even better for a casual hang in



---

## “Not being in the big city is a big deal. We find people come here, settle in, and get into the thing. There are no other distractions.”

---

tandem with songwriting and recording. “It’s a great space with a great vibe and just sounds very organic.”

The studio takes up the entire main floor and overlooks the half-acre lot’s backyard and a forested area. The house also boasts multiple guest rooms for visiting clients.

Very little construction was required to convert the space, given its large, open concept main floor; that said, there have been upgrades to the infrastructure, including a complete redo of the electrical, as well as the installation of soundproof doors, minor soundproofing and acoustic treatments primarily in the isolation booth, and some cosmetic improvements.

In terms of sound and atmosphere, it’s warm and natural sounding. “There’s no harshness in the upper mids,” Thorney says.

“The diffusion of sound is also excellent,” Fair adds, citing the original oak flooring and a 6-ft. space below that, which enhances the diffusion.

The various spaces, including the sole isolation booth, are visually connected via video cameras and large displays instead of windows, providing total isolation while maintaining a line of sight that, owing to the sophistication of the video gear, is still highly functional. By extension, that presents unique opportunities for clients in terms of content creation, utilizing the system and programs including Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere, and Adobe After Effects to generate high-quality and great-sounding video content.

“That’s one of the biggest changes I’ve seen [in the industry],” Thorney says. “We do that with pretty much everybody. You have to do it now. Back in the day, there was a producer and two assistants. Now, you only need one guy – who also has to be a video guy.”

As for gear, Fair says: “The studio came together organically. As we needed things, we went out and got them. We really paid attention to each thing we got. Basically, we have Neve preamps, 1073s, API and SSL channel strips, Tree Audio stuff... The big thing was getting good monitors, so we have the Barefoot [Micro Main 27] speakers

and others – but the SSL is what ties everything together. For a long time, we had the preamps and this outboard stuff and then we had Dangerous summing mixers. We took our time because we weren’t sure if we wanted to get an analog console or what was the right thing to do.”

Essentially, they bought preamps and compressors as needed. “Initially, we were using Pro Tools and would patch things to our patch bay, but we took that as far as we could. We didn’t know what we wanted. We considered analog, but at one point, I was talking to staff at Studio Ekonomik in Montreal, which is the place we got the SSL board, and it turned out to be the perfect console. You connect to your outboard gear and basically have a customized SSL with exactly what you want to use.”

Villa Sound treads the line between an old-school and new-school environment, offering digital recording utilizing a Mac Pro (8 Core with 12 GB RAM) running Pro Tools 10/11 and HD 3, Aurora Lynx 16 VT AD/DA Converters, and a Burl B2 Bomber AD Converter with the SSL Matrix 2 40-input analog console/DAW controller as the heart of everything.

“It’s kind of an interesting console,” Fair says. “It doesn’t have any preamps or EQs or compressors like a normal SSL would; it’s just all the routing. You patch in your preamps and compressors and sort of build your own SSL.”

Behind the console is a programming rig comprised of a Mac Mini (2.3 GHz i7 with 16 GB RAM) running Logic Pro X and Pro Tools 11, interfaced via an MBox Pro 2 and two 24-in. Apple displays.

On the instrument side, Villa Sound has some decidedly cool pieces in its collection: a Heintzman Grand, ’73 Fender Rhodes, Roland JU-06 (Boutique Juno 106), as well as multiple guitars and amps, an Ayotte drum kit, and more. They’re currently in the process of adding a variety of hard synths to their inventory.

“A big step for us was when we separated all of the software synths out of the Pro Tools system. Now, we have a totally isolated

---

### Recorders

SSL Matrix 2 40-input Analog Console & DAW Controller

Mac Pro (8 Core, 12 GB RAM)

Avid Pro Tools 10, 11 & HD 3

UAD Quad Core DSP Accelerator

Aurora Lynx 16 VT AD/DA Converter (x3)

Burl B2 Bomber AD Converter

### Programming System

Apple Mac Mini (2.3 GHz i7, 16 GB RAM)

Apple Logic Pro X

Avid Pro Tools 11

Digidesign MBox Pro 2

### Outboard Gear

Alan Smart C2

API 512 Preamp (x2)

API 550B EQ (x2)

BAE 1073 Preamp w/Neve Power Supply (x2)

Custom X12 Preamp (x2)

Dynacord CLS 222

Dynacord DRP 15

Echoplex EP-4

Empirical Labs Distressor

Eventide Eclipse 2.0

Lexicon 300

Line 6 Bass POD

Line 6 Echo

Line 6 Filter

Line 6 Mod

Line 6 POD

SSL Alpha Channel (x4)

Summit DCL 200

Sytek MPX 4Aii (x4)

Tree Audio Branch Tube Channel Strip (x2)

Universal Audio 1176LN

Yamaha Rev 7

### Software & Plug-Ins

Acoustic Samples Wurlie

Addictive Drums

Arturia V Collection

Ivory Pianos

iZotope

Kush

Massey

Melodyne Studio/Editor

MOTU Electric Keys



Isolation booth



Adam Fair



Tim Thorney

system, which is run by a Mac Mini, and we have all of our software synths as well as our hardware synths all connected there and we treat that whole unit as an instrument, which we patch into Pro Tools, but it's totally on its own."

All connectivity between the live and control rooms has been run through the basement, floor, and walls.

What sets Villa Sound apart from its counterparts in major centres? "For starters, location, location, location," Thorney enthuses. "Not being in the big city is a big deal. We find people come here, settle in, and get into the thing. There are no other distractions."

While in the project space in Toronto, it was necessary to utilize other facilities to finalize recordings. Here, they have a full-service space for production and recording, mixing in stereo and 5.1, mastering, post-production, sound design, dialogue editing, and voiceovers. They also provide consulting services and original music for a variety of film, TV, commercial, and corporate projects.

"We realized we wanted to do everything in-house, which is why we got the gear and space that we did," Fair says.

He and Thorney each produce projects there and have provided original content for a variety of high-profile clients such as *Sports Illustrated*, EA Sports, and Moët, among others. And they oversee the entire operation themselves, although they do collaborate with a variety of other artists regularly, including Hill Kourkoutis, Joey Landreth, Danny Weis, and Randy Cooke.

They also run an independent label out of the space, Villa Sound Records, which represents Shawnee, Kate Todd, and Thorney's own musical output. "The label is still pretty new," Thorney adds, "so we haven't had the chance to fuck it up yet," he says, laughing. Far from it, in fact; they're currently adding more artists to their roster and growing their list of services.

"We're always expanding," Fair sums up, "and we like it that way."

Kevin Young is a Toronto-based musician and freelance writer.

MOTU Ethno  
Native Instruments Komplete 8  
Output Exhale  
Output Rev  
Output Signal  
Slate Digital  
Slate Drums  
Sonoris DDP Creator  
SoundToys  
SSL Duende  
TC Electronic VSS3 Reverb  
Trilian Bass  
UAD (various plug-ins)  
Waves Mercury

### Microphones

AEA R84  
AKG 414 XLS  
AKG D112  
Apex 435 (x2)  
Audio-Technica 2020  
Audio-Technica 2021  
Neumann KM 184 (x 2, matched pair)  
Peluso 2247 LE (x2, matched pair)  
Peluso P-12  
Sennheiser M421 (x2)

Shure 520 DX Bullet  
Shure SM57 (x6)  
Shure SM7B

### Video Equipment

JVC ProHD GY-HD110U Camera  
Nikon D5100 Camera  
Canon Vixia HF R700  
Neewer 7-in. Camera Display  
Apple Final Cut Pro  
Adobe Premiere  
Adobe After Effects

### Monitoring & Headphones

Barefoot Micro Main 27s  
JBL LSR 4326Ps & 4312SP subwoofer (5.1)  
K&H 110  
Yamaha HS7s & HS8S sub  
AKG 141 (x 4)  
Beyerdynamic DT 150 (x2)  
Grado SR60e  
Hear Tech Personal Monitors (x5)  
Nady QH-560 (x4)  
Sennheiser 280 HD