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Opus Audio Labs

CHRIS GELIN ON BUILDING A PRO-LEVEL MODERN HOME STUDIO

Interview by Paul Vnuk Jr.

Tucked away in a house in an unassuming suburban Chicago neighborhood sits a studio that perfectly reflects the modern state of professional audio production. From the outside, there is little indication that behind its doors, down the steps and past a rather normal children's playroom lies a highly refined recording, mixing and mastering environment responsible for a growing catalog of work with major artists, including studio and live recordings, cutting-edge remote production collaborations and even high-end studio design consultation.

That contrast is exactly what makes Opus Audio Labs and its owner, Chris Gelin, so compelling. The studio is not built around spectacle, endless racks of boutique gear or the latest trendy toys. Instead, the room reflects years of real-world experience in live sound, studio production, venue design, touring, broadcast and collaboration with high-level artists and engineers.

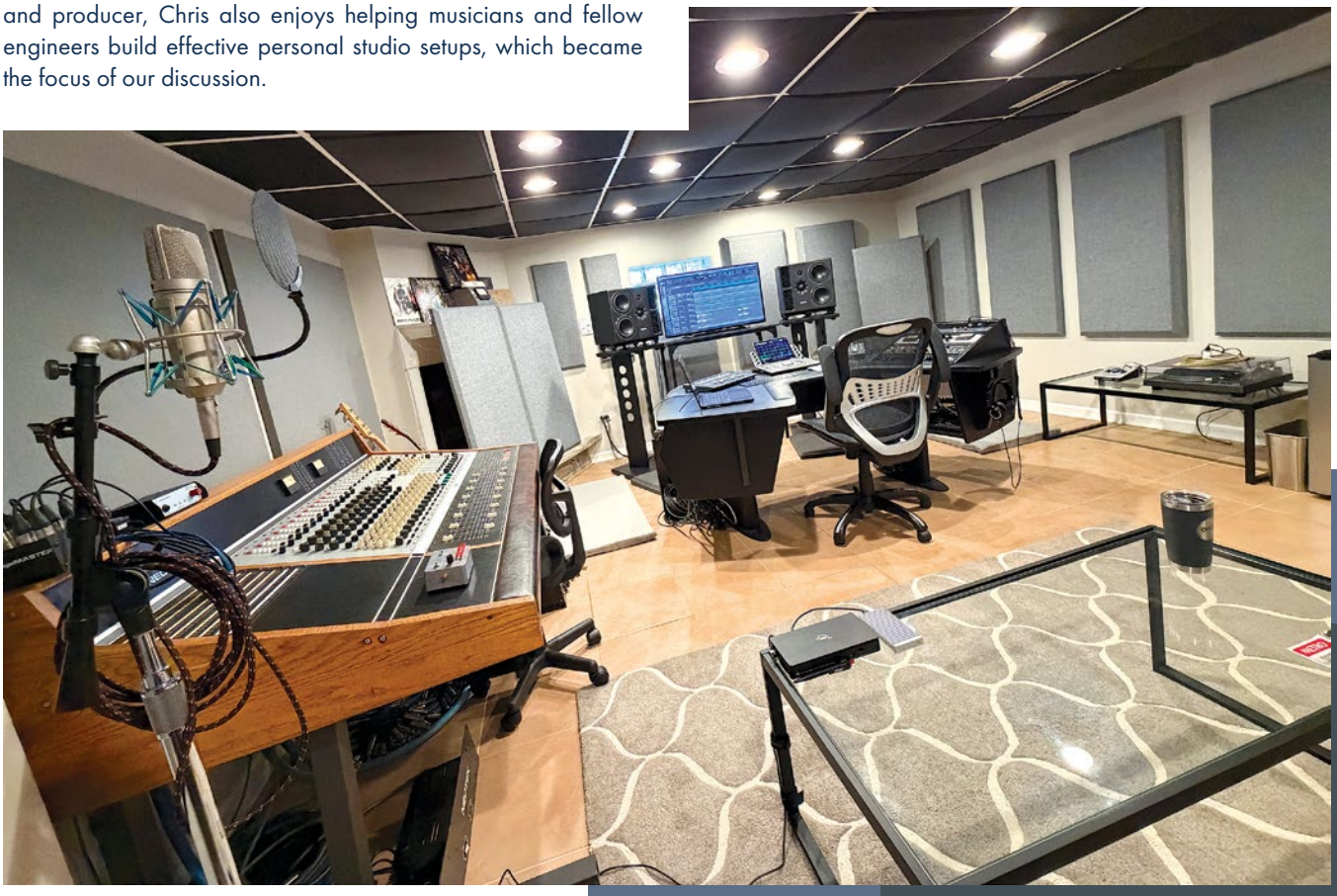
Over the years, Chris has worked with a wide range of talent, including Jimmy Chamberlin, Chuchito Valdes, Matt Walker, Smashing Pumpkins, Korn, Mk.gee, John Mayall, Los Lonely Boys and countless other artists.

In addition to his day-to-day work as an audio engineer and producer, Chris also enjoys helping musicians and fellow engineers build effective personal studio setups, which became the focus of our discussion.

Gelin speaks with a refreshingly straightforward production philosophy that cuts through much of the noise surrounding modern recording culture: great records are built on collaboration with talented, driven artists, along with preparation, workflow, monitoring, acoustics, power and performance—not endless gear acquisition or chasing one "magic" plugin.

In fact, Gelin's gear list centers squarely around only a handful of companies, including multiple Rupert Neve Designs devices, Avid MTRX conversion, PMC monitors, Equi=Tech power conditioning, OWC hard drives and docks, a well-specced Apple MacBook Pro, Universal Audio DSP, Pro Tools and a surprisingly limited collection of plugins.

His only true vintage gear indulgences are a classic silver-face Manley Labs Vari-Mu—which he loves for the sound it imparts even when it is not compressing—and a vintage Neotek Series I console, which he primarily uses for the preamps.



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> You need the right tools, a workflow you trust and a room that tells you the truth.

One of the things I immediately love about your space is that from the outside, it just looks like a normal suburban home. There is no giant sign outside saying, "Killer studio here!" Then you walk through the house, past the family spaces and suddenly you are in this beautifully treated room.

That was always part of the appeal to me. I never wanted this to feel disconnected from real life. It is a working studio, but it is also part of a home.

And the room itself feels really balanced. It is controlled, but not dead. You have the right amount of gear without it feeling excessive.

You need the right tools, a workflow you trust and a room that tells you the truth. I do not want clutter, failure points or equipment that interferes with my day-to-day work. Sometimes I have as little as an hour to tweak mixes for an album, or I may be jumping between projects from multiple artists, and I find the more gear you involve, the slower the process becomes.

How did you first get into audio?

I am a second-generation engineer. My dad was involved in sound and audio was always around me. I originally came up more through live sound than studio work. I have fallen into a lot of unorthodox and really cool situations over the years but I have been obsessed with music production and recording studios since I was about 14.

With live work, I got pretty burned out moving scalding hot 400-pound boxes of gear in and out of vans and trucks night after night. When I discovered this other side of live production, I quickly fell in love with venue work. Everything is already installed, you walk in and turn it on, and there is air conditioning.

Around 2008, I was hired to help design the audio system for the old Morse Theatre in Rogers Park in collaboration with a mentor of mine, TC Furlong. The venue eventually became The Mayne Stage and is now known as the Rhapsody Theater. It was a fantastic high-end audio system designed for live sound, live recording and broadcast work on both WFMT and WTTW.

That experience introduced me to a top-tier production system for live sound, studio work and broadcast: an Avid VENUE Profile and MixRack, a Pro Tools HD system, a D-Command ES, and a Meyer PA—all installed in a 300-capacity club. It was insane.

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How did you transition from live sound to studio sound?

I had just done a live show and recording of a band and they mentioned that someone would be stopping by to pick up the files. So this guy named Jim Tullio shows up. He introduces himself and while we are transferring the files he looks at me and says "You should come see my place. It makes all this look like Hot Wheels." Now, we had a Pro Tools HD rig, major consoles, Genelec monitoring, Meyer sound reinforcement and all this world-class equipment. So my first reaction was, "What?" But then I thought maybe I should go check out this guy's studio, which was—and still is—called Butcher Boy Studios in Evanston, IL.

Over the years, Jim has worked with artists including John Martyn, members of The Band such as Levon Helm, Jimmy Weider and Rick Danko on their solo projects, along with artists like Mavis Staples, Dave Mason and many others.

So I went, and I had never seen anything like it. Massive Neve console. Vintage Neumann microphones everywhere. Incredible outboard gear. This guy had my whole venue budget in just mics. It was overwhelming in the best possible way.

For about the next 10 years, I would show up every day with coffee and just try to be of service to the situation.

And it was just incredible. One day we would be recording a song for Phil Collins, and another time I would stop by randomly and Jim would be setting up and say, "The Swell Season is coming. You have to stay. There are like 12 of them, and John Giblin is sitting in on upright."

Other times he would be heading out to dinner with Sam Butler of the Blind Boys of Alabama and Donald Fagen. It was just an unbelievable experience and an education I never would have gotten anywhere else.

So Jim really became your mentor in the studio?

Oh, absolutely. What Jim really taught me was how to hear the emotion—or lack of it—in a performance. He taught me that proper balance is critical, but if the parts are wrong, you are never going to get there.

He showed me that equipment is ultimately just equipment. It is the performance, instinct and interpretation that make the song. The quality of the equipment matters because it shows respect for the performance, but in the end, it is all about the performance.

And... he was also the only person who would tell me when my mixes sucked.

How did you feel when he told you that?

Actually, it was a relief. It felt like I had finally found my North Star. One of the greatest gifts he gave me was honesty, and the first time he ever told me one of my mixes was "great," the album ended up being nominated for a Latin GRAMMY. It was my first commercial release. It is hard to argue with that kind of outcome.

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Let's talk about your space, which by modern standards is pretty minimal.

There is this misconception that tons of expensive gear automatically equals professional results. It does not. People see photos of famous mix engineers with walls of compressors and assume the gear created the career or the song they love. That completely misses the point. Those engineers know their tools intimately. They built workflows around them.

That said, you do have four or five pieces of really great high-end gear.

For me, it is absolutely about quality over quantity. When you are just starting out, get things, try things and get your hands dirty. I know this can sound harsh, but I think people also need to understand context. There is a huge difference between building a hobby studio for fun and trying to operate professionally every day.

If your gear fails during a session, the entire momentum of the room collapses. That is why reliability matters so much to me. My equipment has to work instantly and consistently.

But still, you also have to remember it is not just about price. The equipment does not write or perform songs for you. It is intended to support the vision that comes from within you. These tools can lead you astray just as much as they can lead you to the promised land. Some of my favorite projects were done on absolute garbage and they still stand tall because the content is real, human and impactful.

Again though, it is all about context. If you reach the point where you are working with people making songs that buy castles, the dynamic changes. You are expected to have this stuff because they have this stuff. Nobody wants a surgeon using budget tools.

So when you advise someone on setting up a studio, where do you start?

Absolutely with a good computer. Today, most of my favorite engineers are 100% in the box, and that is actually lucky for you, because if they can figure it out, it is there for you to figure out too. If you get a solid working computer, that puts you 60% across the finish line. If your computer turns on and operates properly, the only real difference between you and your favorite engineer is talent and experience.

So regardless of budget, I always recommend putting everything you can into the computer. The full weight of your ability to work rests on this singular piece of equipment and if you are dealing with crashes or buffering from underpowered performance, it becomes an absolute showstopper.

Then focus on room acoustics, monitoring, stable power, quality preamps and file storage.

That was the first thing that struck me about your space, how well and purposefully it is treated.

The space I mix in now is amazing. I prefer it to any studio in Chicago, but it sounds horrible without the treatment. For real. People underestimate how dramatically acoustics affect everything. You can spend thousands on gear and still make poor decisions if your room is lying to you.

When it comes to monitors, there are many choices and there is no perfect speaker. Just the perfect speaker for you and your room. I am all in with my PMC 6-2 monitors. At this point in my life, I do not care who else makes what. I could never upgrade and be perfectly fine—unless I eventually move into a room requiring bigger PMC monitors.

Let's talk interfaces.

For many people, today's interfaces contain your preamps, converters, clocking and monitoring. That represents a considerable portion of the modern studio signal chain and if you start breaking those pieces apart into premium modular components, it can get astronomically expensive very quickly.

When you think about it that way, a $3,000–$5,000 interface is actually pretty economical. I use Avid MTRX Studio which is extremely full-featured, sounds unbelievable and is rock solid. These units are made for broadcast and are incredibly stable. For my setup, it has all of the inputs and outputs I need for occasional tracking in my room, and more importantly, it has 16 analog outputs to feed my Rupert Neve Designs 5057 Orbit Summing Mixer.

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What are the other two main pieces I see in your rack?

Again, my main work in this space is mixing and mastering, so my gear choices are focused on accomplishing that at the highest quality possible.

The stereo outs of the summing mixer run into a vintage silver-face Manley Variable Mu compressor. This particular unit came from Butcher Boy so it's very sentimental to me. Luckily, I get to use it here in my studio everyday (Thank you Soren!).

From there, I mix through the Rupert Neve Designs Portico II Master Buss Processor. With that, I can add a bit more compression when needed and also shape the width and depth of the stereo image.

One thing that I like is that you also stress clean power.

As important as your room treatment, your electricity is the fuel your studio runs on. People spend thousands on microphones but ignore unstable power and that makes no sense to me. Power quality directly affects reliability, noise floor, transient response—everything.

You might think the power in your house is good because your lights, microwave and television turn on and off, but dirty power is real. Clean power is real. Most people do not look into this because it is invisible, but it is foundational to both your daily experience and the overall sonics of your studio.

Plus, the more things you need to plug in, the greater the potential for EMI, ground hums and headaches.

There are a few great options out there, but I think some of the best are the various solutions from EQUI=TECH. They are not cheap, but just like room treatment, I would not want to work in this room without clean power.

I know you are a big proponent of proper backup and digital storage solutions.

Here, OWC (Other World Computing) has been huge for me. In addition to being a hard drive and computer upgrade company, they are very focused on the recording studio and creator market and they make what I would call the invisible infrastructure side of studio work.

Once again, people obsess over microphones and compressors, but modern production relies heavily on storage, transfer speeds, connectivity and backup systems. I use several OWC docks and drives throughout my workflow. The build quality is excellent and reliability is everything.

I am always curious about infrastructure. What OWC pieces are you running?

Right now I am using a constantly growing collection of various OWC SSDs. Perhaps my favorite is the 4 TB Elektron that you can literally drive a car over. They have been working great for my current workflow, but I am looking into one of the company's NAS options as a more long-term storage and archival solution.

The best practice is to keep your computer's internal hard drive as free as possible, work from external drives and always maintain some sort of backup.

At minimum, you should have two backups, and ideally one of those should be offsite or cloud-based—that gives you three copies of your files.

Storage is simply too important to treat casually. We are talking about years of creative work and the ability to fully access that work in the future.

In addition to hard drives, another thing people often forget is that you need to have available ports, and they should be easily accessible for both you and your clients to plug in drives for loading and backing up files. OWC also makes a number of great docks and connectivity solutions that have made my world far more expansive.

When it comes to mixing in the box, I assume you are a Pro Tools guy.

Yes, and even in the box, I keep things simple. Once again, a great mix is more about performance, balance and arrangement than whatever plugins you put on it. If a sound source needs more top end or a bit of dynamic control, there are endless options that will do that.

Aside from the effects already built into my standard mix template (mainly Soundtoys and UAD), most of the time I am not using much more than FabFilter Pro-Q 3 and some Universal Audio plugins. Honestly, I try not to do any more than necessary, which becomes much easier when you start with great recordings.

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This is a great place to segue to the way you work with clients like Los Lonely Boys and Jimmy Chamberlin. You literally helped them set up studios that are almost mirrors of yours.

Each situation is completely unique. Jimmy already had a studio and was actually the one who turned me on to the PMC 6-2 monitors. He was looking at new options for his tracking setup at the same time I was redesigning my entire studio, so we ended up selecting similar and complementary pieces for both spaces with the overall workflow in mind. In that case, I was equally mirroring some of what he already had. It was a very collaborative process.

With Los Lonely Boys—which consists of brothers Henry, Jojo, and Ringo Garza—Henry called me in February of 2020 and asked if I could put a studio together for him.

Of course, as soon as it was finished, COVID happened, so I was not able to fly down for sessions. Instead, I began looking into streaming options and was eventually introduced to AudioMovers' remote collaboration, mixing and mastering tools. Using that for audio, along with Zoom, allowed me to literally take control of Henry's studio and run it remotely from Opus.

That really became the foundation of how I now mix and even record. I can stream the output of any Pro Tools system—or even my Neve chain—wherever I need, and everyone is hearing the same monitoring chain. It is incredibly efficient and can take as little as one second.

What are your thoughts on the recording chain?

The big thing is they are musicians and they need to focus on being musicians more than audio engineers, so once again, keeping things straightforward and extremely reliable matters.

The first thing I recommend to them—and honestly to almost anyone—is that after a great computer and a great interface, they should invest in a really good high-end microphone preamp.

One thing people rarely think about is the impedance and loading relationship between a proper dedicated high-end preamp and a quality microphone. That is where depth and detail really start to reveal themselves.

Basically, a premium preamp can make an SM57 sound incredible. A bad preamp built into a cheap interface can make a luxury microphone sound really, really bad in regard to the microphone's potential. Give the mic the fuel it needs and hear how it actually sounds. Then make sure your song is worth singing.

Do you have preamps you recommend?

Right now in my studio, as you mentioned earlier, I am using the preamps in an old Chicago-made Neotek console. However, for most of my clients—and I am sure you will not be surprised by this—I usually recommend they consider one of the preamp options from Rupert Neve Designs.

Again, it comes down to quality and reliability. An artist may have a small room at home, but if we create a reliable recording chain there, it becomes an extension of my studio and serious workflows can happen. But I do selfishly put these preamps in most rooms I design because I know I will get the sound I want to start off with, at the beginning of the mixing stage.

Talk a bit more about how you work with clients remotely, I think it is fascinating.

Oh absolutely. I am completing a double album right now with Matt Walker (Morrissey, The Smashing Pumpkins, Garbage, Filter), which should hopefully be released at the end of this year, much of which was mixed and mastered collaboratively with Matt while he was in hotel rooms all over the world.

For Los Lonely Boys, while working remotely with Henry during COVID, we needed to create some sort of baseline to ensure we were all listening to the exact same thing. So, in addition to mirroring my setup with Rupert Neve Designs mic preamps and my mix bus chain, we also made sure everyone was using Rupert Neve Designs RNHP Stereo Precision Headphone Amplifiers and the same model of Audio-Technica ATH-M50x headphones. That helped create a unified Rupert Neve Designs console-like experience between all of us.

So how does that all work?

Aside from adjusting analog preamps or moving microphones around, I am essentially taking control of Henry's studio remotely via AudioMovers and Zoom. For tracking sessions, I send the output of his Pro Tools system to my room in Chicago, where I can monitor and record everything in real time. Then, during mixing sessions, I send the output of my analog mix bus back to him.

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When tracking, I can also run headphone mixes alongside the actual session, which allows Henry and the band to simply focus on being artists. He has the more elaborate setup, with four monitoring stations, and the entire room is mic'd up and ready to go at all times. A large portion of the record was done there.

For Jojo's studio, he runs that space himself and does a tremendous amount of tracking on his own. He and I serve as the production team for all of the Los Lonely Boys material, as well as any solo projects, so there is a different dynamic when we work together.

The important thing is that because of busy schedules and bustling family homes on both sides, the need to be able to work from anywhere has become incredibly apparent—not just with Los Lonely Boys, but with everyone.

Let me elaborate. Through an absolutely insane set of circumstances, we found ourselves incredibly under the gun on the last Los Lonely Boys record, *Resurrection*. Their father was very ill—and sadly passed shortly afterward—and a tour had already been booked, leaving very little time to hit deadlines for mastering at Sterling Sound with Chris Gehringer.

So suddenly we are in a situation where I am receiving new parts for seven of the album's 10 songs the day before everything has to be submitted. Jojo and I effectively have one day for production and final mixes.

Then, it turns out Jojo is driving his family to California on the only day we have available to finish the record. So now I have to figure out how to stream my studio to his cellphone to play in his car so we can mix the majority of an album that is going to be reviewed by one of the greatest mastering engineers in the world the next morning.

So we do it.

At the time, I was also running two Chicago venues and mixing five nights a week, so I was already exhausted going into this. Jojo was still in Texas when we started, and I was still mixing while they were arriving in California almost 20 hours later. Throughout all of this, I was constantly receiving new parts, jumping between songs to push anything forward that I could, and intermittently hopping into Henry's studio to prep mixes for him to record to while Jojo reviewed mixes remotely.

And somehow, we made it. The album was uploaded right at the deadline—6:00 a.m.

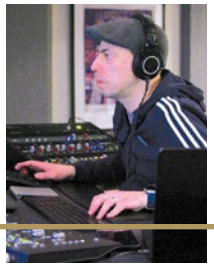
That is what this technology and workflow can do.

And now, I have artists calling me from parking lots between appointments wanting to work on mixes remotely. That level of accessibility simply did not exist 20 years ago.

But if you think that is cool, shout out to the great Timothy Powell. He mixed the Freddy Jones Band live recording of "In a Daydream" that was used to wake up the astronauts on Artemis II—100,000 miles from Earth. So, he wins!

Chris, this has been great, thanks for inviting me down to your studio.

Hey, thank you, stop by anytime.



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