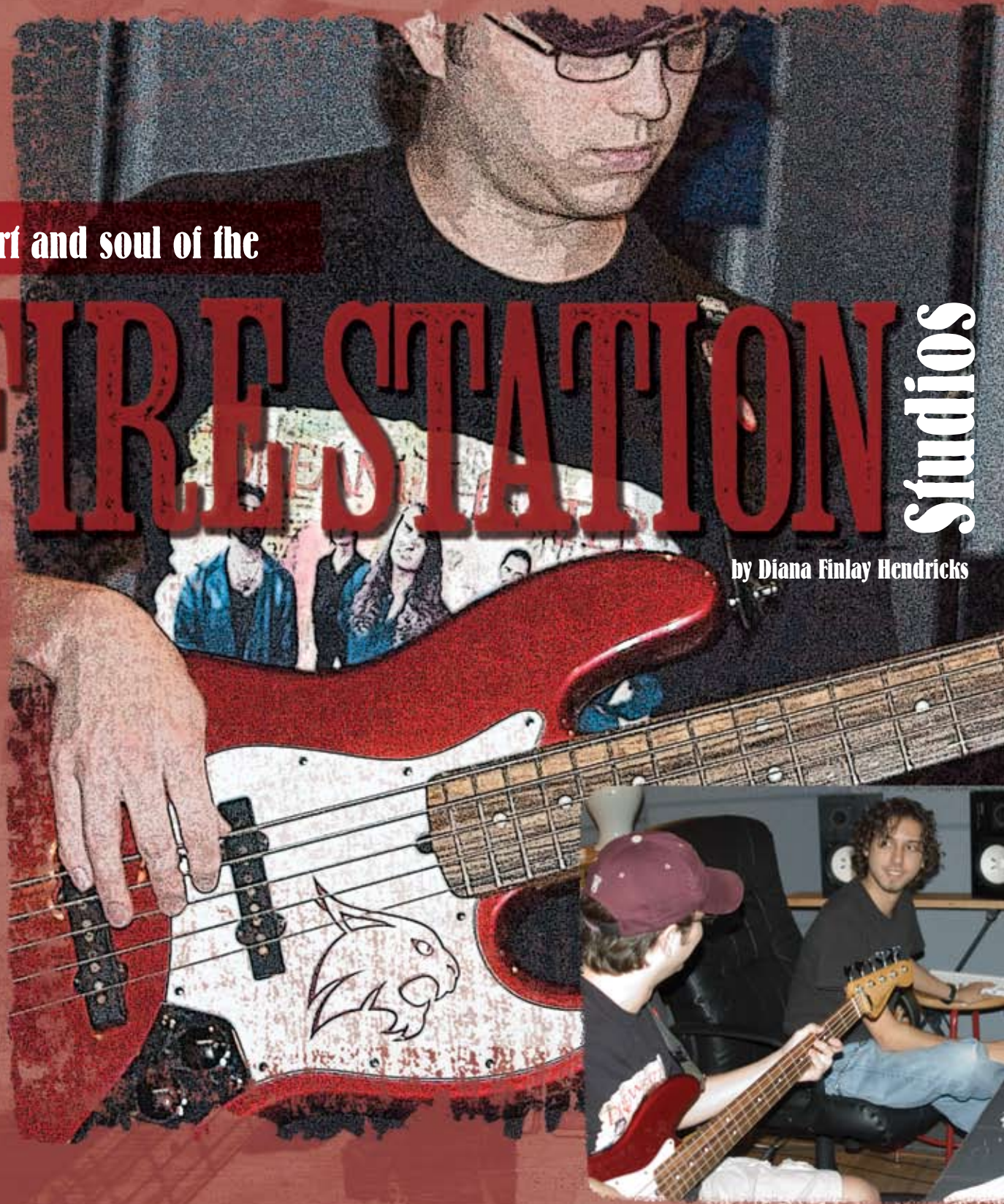


the heart and soul of the

# FIRE STATION Studios

by Diana Finlay Hendricks





Step into the historic Fire Station Studios in downtown San Marcos and climb a couple of flights of stairs. Then, wend your way through a couple of doors and down a hallway or two. You will find yourself in a dimly lit, albeit state-of-the-art digital recording studio. This multi-million-dollar facility has played host to countless award-winning musicians, producers and artists, and is steeped in Texas music history.

Blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughan recorded some of his most influential work in the Fire Station Studios. Doug Sahm, Freddie Fender, Augie Meyers and Flaco Jimenez came together to create their Grammy-winning Tex-Mex rock and country Texas Tornados sound here. Newcomers, award-winning musicians and legends in practically every genre have laid down tracks in this studio on the road to fame.

And today, Texas State students come through this real-world studio on their way to achieve their own dreams of careers in the recording industry.

This former City Hall/Fire Station, built in 1915, was purchased and restored by attorney Anthony “Lucky” Tomblin in 1984. Texas State purchased the recording studio from Tomblin in 1993 and established the first sound recording technology program in higher education in the Southwest. To date, Texas State is the only university in the Southwest to offer a bachelor’s degree in sound recording technology.

This year, as the Sound Recording Technology program at Texas State celebrates its 16th year as part of the university’s School of Music, *Hillviews* looks beyond the bricks and mortar, the towers of computer systems and electronics that make up the studios, and focuses on two engineers who are the heart and soul of the Fire Station Studios.

Jared Goldsmith, May graduate from Waco, tunes up his Bobcat guitar as Russell Tanner, sound recording technology senior from Houston, prepares to record him in Texas State’s Fire Station Studios, located at 224 N. Guadalupe in San Marcos. (Photos by Diana Hendricks)

Gary Hickinbotham and Bobby Arnold work with students in the Sound Recording Technology (SRT) program and serve as engineers at the Fire Station Studios. Their discographies and vitas are a virtual Who's Who of recording projects.

Hickinbotham literally started on the ground floor of the Fire Station Studios. While he began his tenure there as a carpenter, he quickly advanced to recording engineer and today finds himself passing along real-world skills to the top-tier of Texas State students selected for this unique and popular program.

Arnold is the chief engineer at the Fire Station. He comes to Texas State from Willie Nelson's Pedernales Studios, where in the 1980s, he engineered and recorded Willie Nelson's most prolific decade.

Both Hickinbotham and Arnold divide their time between mentoring SRT students and recording commercial projects in the Fire Station Studios. They share fond memories and shake their heads when recalling the paths that led them into this business.

How did people become leaders in the sound recording technology industry before there were formal training programs and degree plans? Baptism by fire, Hickinbotham and Arnold agree, and these men – the heart and soul of Texas State's SRT program – are proof of that.

**Where you put a microphone and how the sound travels through wire are important aspects of this profession, but so is dealing with stress, nerves, and learning to troubleshoot on the fly.**

When Gary Hickinbotham set foot in what would become the Fire Station Studios, he was working a day job as a carpenter. The year was 1984, and Lucky Tomblin was restoring the historic fire station to house law offices downstairs and the recording studio upstairs. While Hickinbotham had been dabbling with recording projects and

sound recording had been his passion since childhood, carpentering was a day job that paid the bills. Building bookshelves and framing steps leading up to the bathrooms may have seemed a far cry from the high tech world of recording, but he had his foot in the door.

"Lucky had hired Southwest Pro Audio to install and operate the state-of-the-art recording system in his new studio. Southwest Pro Audio's crew was wiring the studio, and I was hanging around. When they found out I knew how to solder wires, they offered me a job helping with the install in the evenings," Hickinbotham said.

Ricky Mullens, the top recording engineer in Austin at the time, was hired to run the Fire Station Studios. Southwest Pro Audio completed the installation of the first completely digital recording studio in Texas, and Mullens hired Hickinbotham as his second engineer. "And I never looked back," recalls Hickinbotham, with a smile. He worked on a myriad of successful projects during the "Lucky" years (referring to the years Lucky Tomblin owned the studio) and developed a name for himself in the industry, recording Tish Hinojosa,





Gary Hickinbotham, opposite page, and Bobby Arnold, above with Jared Goldsmith, work alongside students in the Sound Recording Technology program in actual recording sessions with a variety of musicians.

Los Lobos, Omar and the Howlers, B. W. Stevenson, Doug Sahm and others.

Bobby Arnold came into this profession in a similar way. Armed with a B.A. in economics from Georgia Southern, he moved to Texas, seeking work on the fringes of the music industry. Hired as a security guard at Willie Nelson's Pedernales Country Club, Arnold found his way into the front offices by proving his prowess as a janitor. "When they found out that I could – and would – clean toilets, they promoted me," he laughed. Then came a lucky night when he was hanging around in the studio. The staff engineer had just been fired, and Willie came around the corner and asked Arnold if he would run the board for an impromptu project. "Sure," Arnold said. "I got in there and figured out where the knobs were, and we started that night on Willie's *Tougher Than Leather* concept album."

From there, Arnold had a front row seat in recording history, working with a Who's Who of American Music as they made their way through Willie's studio. Arnold engineered a long string of solo and duo projects pairing Willie with everyone from Roger Miller to Julio Iglesias, and from Ray Charles to Neil Young.

In 1992, Arnold applied for the job at Texas State as chief engineer for the Fire Station. Hickinbotham had taken a sabbatical and was working on another project in the industry at the time. Arnold had a wife and son, "and the idea of health insurance and benefits offered by a state job sounded pretty sweet," he admits.

The idea of helping Mark Erickson, the director of the SRT program, to develop a hands-on program in recording technology was a dream-come-true for Arnold, and when Hickinbotham came to be a part of the program, he agreed.

"We have the best boss in the world in Mark Erickson. He has masterfully created a program that combines the laws of physics with human behavior and teaches our students a combination of both," said Hickinbotham. "Where you put a microphone and how the sound travels through wire are important aspects of this profession, but so is dealing with stress, nerves, and learning to troubleshoot on the fly. And we are able to combine lessons in physics and psychology and build upon those skills in the studio with real-world applications."

SRT students learn in the studio. They work on real recording projects with real musicians, dealing with the real everyday challenges that studio professionals face. Upon completion of the program, these students are prepared for multimedia recording careers ranging from live performances to recording commercial music projects and meshing soundtracks with video. Student success stories are commonplace

as major studios come back time and again to Texas State's SRT talent pool for interns, apprentices and new hires.

SRT accolades are stellar. Premier New York rock engineer Michael Brauer (Rolling Stones, Cold Play, Bob Dylan) said, "My two best assistants came out of the Texas State SRT program. My expectations for an assistant are very high, and it was obvious to me they must have had great training because their fundamentals were so advanced. All I had to do was have them adapt to my way of working. For me it was a relief because it reminded me of the way I was trained."

Hickinbotham and Arnold spent the afternoon swapping stories and sharing tales about the "early days" of the Fire Station Studios: how great a clean and sober Stevie Ray Vaughan sounded when he came into the studio, just weeks after rehab...or how fragile Tish Hinojosa was when she came in to record "Something in the Rain," for what was to become her Grammy-winning Folk Album of the Year, *Culture Swing*...or the 36-hour, nonstop session with producer Bob Gallarza, who has been called "the Quincy Jones of Tejano Music." (Arnold

says, "That was a night that never ended!")

But nothing in their collective experiences and story-telling tops Arnold's recollection of the Newton Street Irregulars recording project. The Irregulars were a group of professorial folk-music aficionados who came together while on faculty at State University of New York in Fredonia. Among the Irregulars was premier clawhammer banjo picker Jerry Supple, who eventually left the group (and the faculty of SUNY) to become president of Texas State.

In the fullness of time, Jerry Supple and his wife Cathy contracted with the Fire Station to reunite the Newton Street Irregulars for an 11-song recording project called *Not Oppressively Formal*. Dulcimers, guitars, flutes and banjos in hand, the old friends traveled from all corners of the country and gathered upstairs in the Fire Station Studios for the week-long recording project that would include much laughter and, yes, a few tears.

They had a fabulous time, and when they had finished the recording project, everyone — about a dozen people — gathered around the sound board as Arnold was adjusting

the final mix. He recalls: "Someone said, 'That banjo is too loud.' This was immediately followed by a full chorus of agreement — 'Too much banjo...,' 'Yeah, turn the banjo down...,' — at which time, I rolled my chair back and moved my hands away from the soundboard. I was *not* going to be the one who turned down the banjo music

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on *this* project when the banjo was played by my boss. I said, 'When the president of this university tells me to turn down the banjo, I'll turn it down!'"

On a more somber note, Arnold added, "When Dr. Supple was in remission, I was diagnosed with the same kind of cancer that he was battling. I just picked up the phone and called him. I asked if I could talk to him about it. He said, 'Absolutely,' and shared his experiences and knowledge with me and went on to check on me regularly through my treatments." Arnold looked down the hall. "Yeah, there are some great stories, songs and memories here. Some good old friends have walked these halls. I'm glad I got to share those stories about Dr. Supple." [President Emeritus Supple died in 2004.]

And somewhere amid the spools of old recording tape and the disks of digital music, upstairs and down the hall from the main recording studio is a cluttered office with precariously balanced dinosaurs of recording technology leaning against university policy manuals and stacks of trade publications.

"When we built the studio, Lucky named this 'The Dream Room,'" explained Hickinbotham of his makeshift office, as he smiled and continued our tour of this dream-come-true for students and faculty alike. ★



Jimmy McNeal, senior sound recording technology major from Waxahachie and recent "American Idol" contestant, works with some of the state-of-the-art recording equipment in the Fire Station Studios.